

Helen's Eidolon: Learning and Suffering in Euripides' *Electra*

A work of tragic poetry is organized by its teleology of suffering, by the sense it gives of why humans suffer. The chorus of Argive Elders in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* tells the audience that "Zeus, who brought men to think...has laid it down that learning comes alone through suffering." (Ag. 177-8) and also "justice so inclines that those only learn who suffer" (Ag. 250-1). We suffer for the sake of learning, and moreover, there is no other way to learn. The *Oresteia* as a whole seems to bear this out. We follow the house of Atreus through intense suffering: adultery, child murder, cannibalism, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, a decade of war, the murder of Agamemnon, the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and finally, the guilt of matricide. Yet in the end justice is not only done, it is established on earth for the first time in an institution, the Areopagus. Law is born from violence. The furies are transformed to Eumenides. We have learned. We have become more civilized.

Euripides' plays do not support this teleology of suffering. In fact, Euripides inverts the Aeschylean formula in his *Electra*. Orestes says to his sister, Electra, before she recognizes him, that "there is no pity in ignorance, but [pity is present] in the wise among men. But too wise knowledge in the wise is not harmless." (El. 294-6) While suffering can bring learning according to Aeschylus' chorus, learning brings new suffering born of pity for Euripides' Orestes. In other words, we do not transcend suffering through learning, we simply acquire more of it. For Euripides, there is no threshold beyond suffering, no end to redeem it. As we will see, suffering does not educate Electra or Orestes, it harms and deludes them.

I.

When we meet Electra, our titular character, she bears a heavy water pot on her head and laments dramatically, "O night, black night whose breast nurses the golden stars/ I wander through your darkness," (54-55) We know at this point that she has been cast out of the royal house and is married to a farmer. Now she seems to be reduced to menial labor and we begin to feel pity. But this pity is undermined immediately: as she says, "I am not forced, I chose this slavery myself" (57) She is soon spotted by her new husband, the farmer and he asks her why she insists on doing heavy labor. The orders do not come from him. Electra does not have to bear the heavy water jar but chooses to: the action of the play opens with a self-pitying stunt. As she says herself, she wants to make Aegisthus' arrogance visible by making her situation look worse than it actually is. Strange logic. Electra refuses to attend the festival of Hera on account of her clothes and even refuses the chorus' offer of loaned garments to enforce her image of suffering (167-174). Later, Electra insists on showing herself as a slave to her mother, Clytemnestra, by offering to help her out of her carriage when her own Trojan slaves are suddenly absent (1004). Electra compares herself to the Trojan women brought back as slaves. Yet her situation is actually much different. She is still on Mycaenean soil, still able to live and die there and to worship the gods of her people. She is poor, but she is as free as she was before. She freely chooses to engage in conspicuous labors. Throughout, Electra willfully refuses to see anything in her situation but misery. She takes actions to make her situation look worse, to make things appear to others as they appear to her.

By contrast, Sophocles' Electra is portrayed as a victim with great inner strength. Her hate may terrify us, but it is understandable: she is trapped in a house with her father's killers and subject to daily abuses. Euripides' Electra may feel exiled and trapped in her poverty but

ultimately, her complaints appear shallow and materialistic. She is removed from any ongoing abuse and allowed a simple, honest life, the sort that Socrates' Odysseus chooses for himself in the Myth of Er. The fact that she is constantly trying to make her rustic situation look like slavery is the surest proof that it could be borne more easily. Electra's desire for revenge springs from two places, both delusions: her sense that the loss of her royal wealth harms her and her idealized love for the father she hardly knew, Agamemnon. These two causes are similar insofar as both are what we, after Marx, might call fetishes.

When Electra mentions Aegisthus, the man who deposed her father, she says "[I] cry my pain to father in the great bright air" (59) She will mention Agamemnon again and again, idealizing him and stoking her rage for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. But always her rage strikes a hollow note. Euripides systematically withholds a good reason for her point of view. She has been forced out of her house and married to a farmer, a great indignity that seems to have no precedent in the other tellings of this story. Yet what seems like a brutal blow that might presage her inevitable revenge is in fact an oddly good turn of fortune. Her farmer husband, despite his poverty, is a thoughtful, upright man who will not touch her and cares for her like a father. In fact, he cares for her better than the father she lost and now idealizes, Agamemnon. She notes how the farmer is "equal to the gods in kindness" (67) but when alone she laments her situation in high tragic tone. This introduces us to a dissonance that runs throughout the play between the way Electra and Orestes view the situation and the circumstances themselves. Euripides steadily erodes any clear moral imperative to revenge that the two children might have.

While Aeschylus presents us an Orestes who is reluctant because he understands how serious his task is, Euripides presents Orestes as confused and lacking resolve. Aeschylus' Orestes finally acts out of a deep piety, an understanding that the will of the gods, presented in the oracle, cannot be evaded. Hard as it is, he recognizes a greater plan at work. By contrast, Euripides' Orestes acts when he is hounded into it by his deluded sister. He doubts the oracle, insisting that no god could ask him to kill his mother (970, 981). Electra insists the oracle must be true, but not out of any piety, for we have seen none in her, but because it serves her end. Orestes is driven to act when Electra accuses him of cowardice and forces him, out of petulance, to disprove her. No line better indicates Orestes' combination of cowardice and blind trust in Electra than when he says, "what is our action now toward our mother? Do we kill?" (967) Even when he strikes, Orestes cannot face his mother, so he covers his eyes with his cloak (1221). He demands someone else deal with the corpse, wrapping it in the same cloak he used to cover his eyes from the deed (1227). Electra then wraps the corpse. All this underlines that he is ultimately presented as a tool of Electra's hatred which, as we have seen, is hardly justified by the events and people of the play. Whatever obvious status the matricidal revenge had within the mythic canon has been wholly dispelled: Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are presented as flawed but reasonable, the murders as unmotivated.

To drive this home, Euripides has both murders appear exceedingly cruel and impious.¹ Aegisthus is killed while attending to a sacrificed bull. As he leans over and sorts through the organs, Orestes smashes his spine with a sword blow from behind. Clytemnestra is lured through a false rumor that Electra is giving birth. She shows genuine maternal interest in Electra and the

¹ Froma Zeitlin, explores Euripides' inversion of religious rites throughout the play: "Celebration has proved an illusion and ritual sacrifice has become murder." [Zeitlin, F. "The Argive Festival of Hera and Euripides' Electra." In: *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*. Vol. 101, (1970) p. 659.] Most readings of this strange play (Conacher, Denniston, Pohlenz, Spira, Barlow, Thury) struggle to fit it into standard ideas of tragedy and so ignore some aspect of the unforgiving portrayal Euripides offers us.

baby. She begs for her life. Both victims are vulnerable and have tried to explain themselves and their actions in reasonable terms. We do not have the intense, gloating Clytemnestra or tyrannical Aegisthus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. We know that, according to the story, they must be killed. Where both Aeschylus and Sophocles build the case for the murder slowly and build the tension so that the act becomes inevitable, Euripides slackens the dramatic tension so that the murders appear not as revenge but as horror.

Several signs indicate that the murders might have been avoided, perhaps not ultimately, but at least on these terms and by these means. Had Electra recognized that her situation was not as bad as she desired it to be or had Orestes the coward not been stung by the accusation of cowardice to abandon his justified doubt in the oracle, the murders would not have happened or would have waited on better motivations and perhaps been achieved by less brutal means. Castor and Pollux, gods and Orestes' and Electra's uncles, appear at the end of the play to resolve the action and remark, provocatively, that Apollo "knows the truth but his oracles were lies." (1246) and that "Justice has claimed [Clytemnestra] but you have not worked in justice." (1244)." Euripides presents the murders more as a result of Electra's self-deception than any greater justice. The events of the play hinge on Electra's greedy self-pity. Here, Zeus and Apollo weave their fate through such strange means that divine necessity appears like a bizarre mistake issuing from one person's damaged psyche.

II.

Euripides' treatment of the subject confuses the effect of the tragedy considerably. August Wilhelm Schlegel called Euripides' *Electra* "a singular monument of poetical, or rather unpoetical, perversity."²

Consider how Euripides handles the Aeschylean trope of Electra recognizing Orestes from his footprint's similarity to hers. An old man tries to convince her that Orestes has returned but she stubbornly refuses to believe it: "You make me angry. How could rocky ground receive/ the imprint of a foot? and if it could be traced,/ it would not be the same for a brother and for sister, a man's foot and a girl's- of course it would be bigger." (534-537) Euripides invites us to think about the unrealistic nature of the Aeschylean trope and even to laugh at it.³ An uncomfortable comic self-awareness bursts through the tragic artifice. This and moments like it are surely the target of Schlegel's critique. And he is right, the *Electra* is a perverse play and barely resembles classic tragedy. But this does not mean it fails to achieve its intended effect.

Because the character portrayals erode any self-understood moral high ground which might generate clear feelings of pity and fear, it must fail to satisfy the idea of tragedy as catharsis. The play is unfulfilling when judged as catharsis. But Aristotle, in his *Poetics* does not rest on the idea of cleansing or purification but builds, dialectically, toward "ekplexis" - astonishment by knocking away what we think we know. Euripides' *Electra* does this admirably, in that we steadily watch our ideas about the story and the tragic theater crumble away. We are

² *Lectures on Dramatic Art*, Lecture IX. Schlegel also notes that in the *Electra* Euripides initiated the decline of "not only this or that genre, but [of the Greek's] entire existence, in all arts, in constitution and laws, in private and public customs and actions."

³ Electra recognizes Orestes by a scar instead, a nod, perhaps, to Eurykleia's recognition of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Homer's world is broad enough to embrace the serious and the comic, the fated and the incidental. If Euripides rejects Aeschylus, perhaps he does not reject Homer. Perhaps he means to pick up another, neglected thread in the *Mythoi*.

brought to question the characters and their motives and to wonder if there was any greater reason, plan, justice or purpose driving the action at all.

It is, then, no accident that at the end of the play, Castor and Pollux, Helen's brothers, remind us:

“[Helen] never went to Troy. Zeus fashioned and dispatched a Helen-image there/ to Ilium so men might die in hate and blood.” (1281-3)

Beginning at least with Stesichorus, some ancient Greek authors, including Herodotus, tell the story of the Trojan War with an important variation: Helen never really went to Ilium.⁴ An Eidolon, a likeness of her, went instead while she was kept in Egypt for the duration of the war. Euripides seems to be the only tragedian to take this narrative variation up. In fact, he returns to it again and again. It is a leitmotif for him. It plays center stage in his *Helen* but also surfaces in the *Electra*.

Why mention Helen's Eidolon toward the end of the *Electra*? It seems to me that it serves to underscore the hollowness of human action. If the whole Trojan war was undertaken for a phantom, what of the miseries that come to the royal house of Atreus? Could they also be based on a misunderstanding? All this suffering is for an image, it has no real purpose, no achievable aim. Revenge, like war, is undertaken for a shadow.⁵ Seen this way, the *Electra* is not so much tragedy as black comedy.⁶ In the end, we have a sinking feeling that the whole thing could have been avoided, a feeling that is completely out of place in the tragic theater.

Castor and Pollux tell Orestes and Electra: “Justice has claimed her but you have not worked in justice.” (1244) In the end, justice has been done, but we cannot enjoy it. This is a cardinal sin for a playwright, to refuse us our enjoyment, and Euripides' *Electra* is roundly hated by critics for it. The Dioscuri reveal what Electra and Orestes have in store for them but there is no sense of future triumph in the court decision that will liberate Orestes from the furies. It is telling that the transformation of furies to Eumenides is not mentioned at all. This transformation is the crowning moment of the *Oresteia* and the proof that suffering leads to a better life. Euripides just lets the furies pass without fanfare: in killing Clytemnestra there was no victory to celebrate and there is no future victory to come. There is no Helen to retrieve.

The dramatic work, instead of giving us a convincing, self-enclosed world, leaves us unsure and unsatisfied. It does this, in part, by failing to be a good tragedy. The work does not

⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus* 243a-b. Herodotus argues that Homer knew this variation as well, evidenced by his mention of Paris' detour to Egypt in Book V of the *Iliad*. Homer chose not to use the Phantom Helen variation, according to Herodotus, because it did not fit as well with an epic poem. Herodotus, *Histories* II.116. More, to Herodotus the variation seems to be as old as the event of the Trojan War itself and to have been preserved in this variant form by the Egyptians. Herodotus' reasons for accepting the Phantom Helen story told by the Egyptian priests cluster around the fact that it would have been “insane” for the Trojans to refuse to give her back to Menelaus. Thus they must not have had her. See *Histories* II.120.

⁵ What Euripides highlights, how the particular delusions connected to a situation of violence undermine any justice or moral clarity it might have, offers an elenchus, a refutation, of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. As with the Socratic elenchus the point is not to come to new knowledge but to expose ignorance. And as Socrates' interlocutors learn, the emotions that attend being refuted are unpleasant.

⁶ Schlegel notes what is obvious to most readers, that the *Electra* seems strangely close to comedy: “I could wish that the wedding of Pylades had been celebrated on the stage, and that a good round sum of money had been paid to the peasant on the spot; then everything would have ended to the satisfaction of the spectators as in an ordinary comedy.” (Lecture IX) The blurring of comedy and tragedy was probably deliberate. Euripides undertakes it in other plays as well.

magically transmute its suffering into pleasure, its furies pass away but are not transformed. The *Electra* performs for the theatergoer what Euripides' other plays indicate: there is no redeeming purpose to our suffering.

This is a hard lesson for liberal education to incorporate. If Euripides is right, education will not make our lives better. It will not make us happier or more self-actualized. It will find its own way to contribute to our suffering. Suffering will not teach us or improve us but will only warp our perception of the world.

We could say, looking at the concluding moments of Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae* that suffering, though it has no redeeming cosmic purpose, teaches us compassion for one another. When characters at the close of those plays recognize they have all suffered immensely at the hands of inscrutable gods, they forgive one another. A human community of compassion springs up in response to the absurdity of divine power.

Yet here in the *Electra*, we do not have such a reconciliation. Apollo is blamed, the brother and sister will be pardoned. But they have not learned anything, not even how to suffer well. We are not graced with the benediction of the Eumenides. Orestes runs off, pursued by the furies and the Dioscuri fly away to Sicily to "rescue the salt smashed prows of the fleet" (1348), a reference, perhaps, to the disastrous Sicilian Expedition which Thucydides called "a destruction so complete [the report] was not thought credible."⁷ This gives a reminder to the Athenian audience of contemporary suffering and the fruitlessness of war.⁸ After such a dark reminder, the hollow, programmatic words pronounced by the chorus to close the play seem more like gallows humor than good advice:

"Farewell. The mortal who can fare well
not broken by the trouble met on the road,
leads a most blessed life."

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⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 8.1. See Richmond Lattimore's note on the chronology of Euripides' plays in *Euripides V*.

⁸ Aeschylus, while exploring and probing the Trojan war, gives us a trilogy that ultimately justifies war. Euripides' *Electra*, on the other hand, does not.