

# THE CHARACTER OF ELECTRA

## IN THE PLAYS OF AESCHYLUS, SOPHOCLES AND EURIPIDES

Greek mythology has exercised a deep and unparalleled influence upon Western culture. Dramatists, artists and philosophers from Roman times have been inspired by the thrilling legacy of Ancient Greece. The origins of these myths are impossible to determine and there is no one true version of any myth. However, owing to the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, whose plays drew almost exclusively upon the Greek myths, it is possible to have a profound insight into the content of the myths. Furthermore, it is much easier to comprehend the account when the same myth is retold by each of the three dramatists. On the other hand, each of the playwrights had to add different elements to approach the story in an original manner. One of the retold myths is the account of Orestes' vengeance, where Aeschylus in *Orestia*, Sophocles in *Electra* and Euripides in his *Electra* adopted different approach and point of view to revenge<sup>1</sup>. Among different characters which can be compared, Orestes' sister, Electra, deserves close and meticulous attention and the aim of this paper is to show both how the three playwrights saw the traditional myth and what their approach to the tradition was through Electra's attitude towards matricide.

It was Aeschylus in 458 BC who first dramatized the legend of Electra in the second part of his *Orestia* trilogy called *Choephoroi* (*The Libation Bearers*). Although his Electra plays only a subordinate role in the whole story of revenging the murdered father (she appears in the Act One, but completely disappears from the scene at line 584), Aeschylus created Electra as necessary and useful character for the preparation of the vengeance (Dukat 1996: 36). Electra appears at the very beginning of the play, silent, dressed in black, bearing libations to the grave. The libations are from Clytemnestra, Electra's mother, who, after a horrible nightmare of a snake biting her, has sent the offerings to the grave of her dead husband. Though Electra goes to the grave of her father to pour the libations, she believes it is not righteous to do so, as they are sent by the murderous wife. She asks the chorus for help, to "guide and instruct" her, and after a short dialogue, Electra changes her prayer and starts demanding murder for murder and revenge for her father. However, it is important to note that Electra shows her human character precisely

with her hesitation and asking questions, she does not simply pray for someone to kill in return (Goldhill 1986: 23). She asks whether it is pious to pray for revenge, but the chorus provides a simple and direct justification of it which she accepts.

ELECTRA	Pray on them what? expound, instruct my doubt.
LEADER	This: Upon them some god or mortal come
ELECTRA	As judge or as avenger? speak thy thought.
LEADER	Pray in set terms, Who shall the slayer slay.
ELECTRA	Beseemeth it to ask such boon of heaven?
LEADER	How not, to wreak a wrong upon a foe? (Aeschylus 1991-93: 12) <sup>2</sup>

The next important scene is the recognition scene between Orestes and Electra, where Electra recognises Orestes by the lock of his hair and his footsteps. Although rather unconvincing, this scene is necessary for the plot that continues with the siblings' lament over their father's fate with the refrain that blood must pay for blood. Both the chorus and Electra recount the aftermath of Agamemnon's murder, driving Orestes to deliver his strongest cry for vengeance. This is the most important role that Electra has in this play: she openly calls for matricide and urges her brother to commit such a terrible act.

Aweless in hate, O mother, sternly brave!  
 As in a foeman's grave  
 Thou laid'st in earth a king, but to the bier  
 No citizen drew near,  
 Thy husband, thine, yet for his obsequies,  
 Thou bad'st no wail arise! (Aeschylus 1991-93: 34)

It is almost unbelievable that a woman would forget the murder of her child, and that is what Electra completely puts aside. She forgives her father the sacrifice of her sister Iphigenia; still she craves for blood of her mother. She condemns Clytemnestra for killing her king and her husband, as if this were the closest family tie one can have. By openly renouncing her mother and supporting her brother, Electra defends the new patriarchal order that is to come. I would agree with Erich Fromm who in *Symbolic Language in Myth, Fairy Tale, Ritual and the Novel* gives the illustration of Bachofen's analysis of *Orestia* and says that it is

... a symbolic representation of a last fight between maternal goddesses and the victorious paternal gods... Matriarchal culture is characterised by an emphasis on blood ties, ties to the soil, and a passive acceptance of all natural phenomena. Patriarchal society, in contrast, is characterised by respect for man-made law, by predominance of rational thought, and by man's effort to change natural phenomena. (Petrović 2004: 245)

In the XX century, an American playwright Eugene O'Neil also retold the myth in his play *Mourning becomes Electra* where he emphasises that the myth

could not be read only individually but also culturally, through the whole cultural context in which it was created, and it is the story of the two principles where only patriarchal principle of the Father and Logos triumphs (Mitić 2004: 70).

Sophocles's version of the Electra story was written around 410 BCE, and it is difficult to read it without thinking of Euripides's *Electra* and Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*. When Aeschylus told the story, he did so with an eye to the ethical issues associated with a blood feud. Sophocles, however, addresses the problem of character — namely, he questions what kind of woman would want so keenly to kill her mother. The play opens with Electra where she can be seen chanting and lamenting over her father's death and waiting for her brother-avenger. She is contrasted to her sister Chrysothemis in a dialogue which is very similar to the dialogue between Antigone and Ismene. Chrysothemis mourns for her father and brother as well, but she stoops before the ones who have the power (Dukat 1996: 40); on the other hand, Electra does not want to accept the present condition and Sophocles depicts "the passionate intensity of Electra's hatred" (Goldhill 1986: 269). Her hope is completely destroyed when she learns from the false messenger about Orestes' death and says: "Oh, miserable that I am! I am lost this day! [...] I am lost, hapless one, I am undone!" (Sophocles 1991: 35)<sup>3</sup> However, her hatred is so intense and she is so determined to avenge her father that she even thinks about murdering Aegisthus alone:

Behold these two sisters, my friends, who saved their father's house; who, when their foes were firmly planted of yore, took their lives in their hands and stood forth as avengers of blood! [...] I must do this deed with mine own hand, and alone; for assuredly I will not leave it void.

In the dialogue between Electra and Clytemnestra, Electra accuses her mother of killing Agamemnon in cold blood and reveals the true reason why Clytemnestra committed such a crime. Although Clytemnestra tries to explain her action by saying:

Thy father – this is thy constant pretext – was slain by me. Yes, by me – I know it well; it admits of no denial; for justice slew him, and not I alone, – justice, whom it became thee to support, hadst thou been right-minded; seeing that this father of thine, whom thou art ever lamenting, was the one man of the Greeks who had the heart to sacrifice thy sister to the gods – he, the father, who had not shared the mother's pangs. (Sophocles 1991: 27)

Electra explicitly and unemotionally states it is not true, and the real motive is adultery of her mother with Aegisthus: "But I must tell thee that thy deed was not just; no, thou wert drawn on to it by the wooing of the base man who is now thy spouse." (Sophocles 1991: 29)

What is more, Clytemnestra does not behave as a mother to Electra and Orestes and has done wrong to them: "For tell me, if thou wilt, wherefore thou art now doing the most shameless deeds of all, – dwelling as wife with that blood-

guilty one, who first helped thee to slay my sire, and bearing children to him, while thou hast cast out the earlier-born, the stainless offspring of a stainless marriage.” (Sophocles 1991: 30)

It can be concluded from this short episode that Sophocles wanted to present Electra as a heroic character who has suffered a lot because of a guilty mother-adulteress. Although matricide is a terrible crime, the sympathies of the reader are somehow with Electra whom Sophocles puts on the stage as great and heroic.

The climax of this version is when Electra recognises Orestes. Her ultimate despair transforms into unbelievable happiness, and they plot the murder of their mother first, and then of Aegisthus. While in Aeschylus Electra disappears from the stage when the murder takes place, in Sophocles’ story Electra not only does conspire against her mother but also takes part by urging Orestes to hit their mother once again while she is on guard in front of the house: “Smite, if thou canst, once more!” (Sophocles 1991: 81) Kovačević in his study on Greek tragedy believes that the real murderer here is Electra (1932: 43). However, Dukat says the difference between Aeschylus and Sophocles is in treating the moral problem: is it allowed for a son to kill his own mother in order to avenge his father? Aeschylus’ solution was to introduce Furies in the end that drive Orestes into madness (although he was acquitted of the matricide), while Sophocles’ play ends with chorus that is appalled but says the murderers have to be punished: “The curses are at work; the buried live; blood flows for blood, drained from the slayers by those who died of yore.” (Sophocles 1991: 81) And concludes in a kind of reconciliation: “O house of Atreus, through how many sufferings hast thou come forth at last in freedom, crowned with good by this day’s enterprise!” (Sophocles 1991: 89)

Euripides similarly focuses on the issue of character, but Euripides’s Electra is ultimately psychically destroyed by her situation. Euripides makes Clytemnestra’s murder appear a horrible act, since Electra cunningly leads her mother to death. In the beginning of the play, there is a different setting than in Aeschylus and Sophocles: the scene is set before the hut of the peasant to whom Electra is married. This extraordinary change of dramatic scenario is explained in the peasant’s prologue<sup>4</sup>. He informs the audience of the present situation (how he got Electra as a wife) and also tells about the incident when Aegisthus wanted to kill Electra but her mother saved her life: “But when e’en thus there seemed some room for fear that she might bear some noble lord a child by stealth and Aegisthus was minded to slay her, her mother, though she had a cruel heart, yet rescued the maiden from his hand.” (Euripides 1991: 5)<sup>5</sup>

The benevolent peasant also understands bitterness of his wife, though she is not loyal to him in return. Electra craves for her brother, thinking only how to revenge her father. Her brother Orestes, who lives in exile, appears with his friend Pylades, but Electra does not recognise him. In this scene, Euripides shows his particular sense for psychological analysis, especially when Orestes, doubting his further actions, asks Electra, before she has recognised him, what she expects from her brother to do if he shows up. “What could Orestes do in this matter, if he did return? [...] But suppose he comes, how could he slay his father’s murderers? [...] Wouldst thou be brave enough to help him slay his mother?” (Euripides 1991: 19) Electra replies that she would want revenge, and would help her brother “with the self-same axe that drank my father’s blood” (Euripides 1991: 19). She adds that she would just like to shed her mother’s

blood, and then she would not mind to die: "Once I have shed my mother's blood o'er his, then welcome death!" (Euripides 1991: 19)

The climax of Electra's cruelty can be seen in her strong determination to see her mother dead. Even when Orestes has second thoughts, Electra is resolute:

"ORESTES What must we do to our mother? Slay her? ELECTRA What! has pity seized thee at sight of her? ORESTES God! how can I slay her that bare and suckled me? ELECTRA Slay her as she slew thy father and mine." (Euripides 1991: 58)

In Euripides' version of the story, after having deceived her mother to enter the hut, Electra follows her and directly takes part in the murder. The order of murders is the same as in Aeschylus' version: Orestes kills Aegisthus first (hitting him from the back), then his mother, while Sophocles changed it. With this order of events, Euripides puts the Clytemnestra's murder to be the final and terrible act.

The solution to his play is not natural for the reason that Euripides uses *deus ex machina* technique and the Discouri appear on the stage ("from above"). They explain that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus deserved death; nevertheless, the act of their murder is morally unacceptable. The Discouri order Electra to marry Pylades, while Orestes has to defend himself before the Aeropag, the supreme court at Athens, and will be finally absolved of his crime.

Allowing ethic re-questioning in the interpretation of Electra and Orestes' revenge, Euripides is closer to the most traditional Aeschylus' version of the same motive, but at the same time he questions the validity of the Delphi prophecy, which incited the tragedy in the first place, when it nominated Orestes to be the avenger. Though religious, Euripides in *Electra* condemns Apollo who orders the murder and establishes moral laws for others, while he himself demands bloody revenge (Djurić 1998: 342).

To conclude, by dealing with the same motive of revenging father by killing mother, the three dramatists took different approach through the use of the female character of Electra. The execution of mother in Aeschylus is both necessity and crime, which reaches its end on much higher level (Leski 1995: 226). His Electra is emotional, hesitant and restrained. In Sophocles play, Apollo's demand is valid as something sacred, while his Electra is a tortured heroic character who does not accept limitations; on the other hand, her greatness is precisely what makes readers feel uncomfortable. Euripides tries to show that the committed murder falls out from the religious concept and criticises the traditional myth. For him Electra is an antiheroic and pathological character. By criticising and rejecting the traditional myth, Euripides made the tragedy lose both its content and the gist; thus, it was not possible anymore to write tragedies after Euripides, and the playwrights turned to lyrics and comedies which drew upon new sources and found inspiration in everyday life (Dukat 1996: 47).

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1 Robert Graves in *The Greek Myths* (ch. 113) gives different versions of the myth, providing the content for his approach from these three tragedies, which altogether build up a complete picture of what happened in Agamemnon's tragic family.

2 Aeschylus, *The Choephoroi*, electronically enhanced text.

3 Sophocles, *Electra*, electronically enhanced text.

4 This change of setting is typical of Euripides' plays who introduces for the first time in the Greek theatre real and common people. Aristotle in chapter 25 of *Poetics* says that "Sophocles said that he drew men as they ought to be; Euripides, as they are."

5 Euripides, *Electra*, electronically enhanced text.

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## SUMMARY

### THE CHARACTER OF ELECTRA IN THE PLAYS OF AESCHYLUS, SOPHOCLES AND EURIPIDES

Greek myths have always been a rich source of inspiration for many playwrights and one of the most famous myths is Agamemnon's murder and vengeance on the mother who committed it. Among many characters that appear in the myth, Electra deserves meticulous attention and inspired even the Ancient Greek dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, who approached the story in three different ways. Aeschylus regarded the matricide as a necessity and Electra in his play is both emotional and indecisive. Sophocles saw Electra as a tortured heroine who does not have limits. Euripides, the last of these playwrights to deal with the myth, provides a lot of criticism for the traditional myth and in his play Electra is not only anti-heroine but also pathological character. After Euripides, the importance of tragedy fades away in the Ancient Greece and the plays were not written anymore in the manner of the greatest playwrights.

**KEYWORDS:** myth, play, murder, revenge, matricide, tragedy, gods.