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THE PALACE DOOR IN SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA*

Some of the critics who have discussed the end of Sophocles' *Electra*, have argued that when Orestes enters the palace to kill Aegisthus, Electra remains on stage, silent and alone; in their opinion, this contradicts an entirely optimistic interpretation of the play¹. However, there is no consensus among critics as to when Electra makes her final exit².

The aim of this note is to offer an interpretation of the brief exit of Electra after v. 1383, following Orestes and Pylades into the palace. For this purpose I shall endeavour to show the changing significance of the palace door in the visual stage action³, and this may throw new light on how we may visualise the concluding scene of this play.

Let us first consider how critics have interpreted Electra's exit after v. 1383.

G. Kaibel⁴, referring to vv. 1105 ff.⁵, believes that Electra departs in order to guide Orestes and Pylades into the palace, and also to report to the Chorus (and the spectators) what is happening inside (vv. 1398 ff.). One might wonder why Sophocles chose to assign this role to Electra who

¹ See, for example, J. T. Sheppard, *The Tragedy of Electra, According to Sophocles*, CQ 1918, 12, p. 88; idem, "Electra": *A Defence of Sophocles*, CR 1927, 41, p. 9; C. P. Segal, *The "Electra" of Sophocles*, TAPhA 1966, 97, pp. 523, 528 f., idem, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1981, p. 250, n. 9, pp. 266 f.; H. F. Johansen, *Die Elektra des Sophokles*, C&M 1964, 25, p. 32.

² E.g. G. Kaibel, *Sophokles Elektra*, Leipzig 1896, p. 301, on 1508, believes that Electra follows Orestes and Pylades into the palace. W. M. Calder III, *The End of Sophocles' "Electra"*, GRBS 1963, 4, p. 215, argues that the heroine does not exit after v. 1507 but she remains on the stage.

³ For a similar examination in Euripides' *Alkestis* see R. G. A. Buxton, *Euripides' "Alkestis": Five Aspects of an Interpretation*, „Dodone”: *Philologia* 1985, 14, pp. 75 ff.

⁴ G. Kaibel, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁵ Χο. ἦδ', εἰ τὸν ἀγχιστόν γε κηρύσσειν χρεῶν.

Ορ. ἴθ', ᾧ γύναι, δήλωσον εἰσελθοῦσ' ὅτι

Φωκῆς ματεύουσ' ἄνδρες Αἰγισθόν τινες.

I quote from the OCT (H. Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson).

has occupied centre stage since her early entry at v. 86⁶. At vv. 1307 ff. and 1368 (after the recognition scene) Orestes is informed that Clytemnestra is alone in the palace and after all, he lived there until the age of about ten; thus, he does not need any guide. As for Electra's role as an *exangelos*, my opinion is that Clytemnestra's cries from inside (vv. 1404 f.) would be sufficient for us to understand what is happening inside; but it is dramatically very effective to have her cries punctuated by her daughter's vicious comments. Electra's preceding lines (1398–1403), in fact, contribute nothing to the plot⁷. On the other hand, after Orestes' and Pylades' exit, her duty was indeed to watch for Aegisthus' return which is expected at any moment. In other words, there is no compelling reason for Electra to enter the palace⁸. I. M. Linforth⁹ wonders why Electra goes in at this crucial moment of the action and he admits that it is not easy to answer this question; in his opinion, the heroine's exit "marks the end of the dramatic dominance she has maintained since her first appearance in the prologue". But this play is about Electra and as S. M. Adams remarks¹⁰ "Orestes comes but the play remains very much Electra's. It is her qualities that dominate to the end". Linforth also thinks that the poet needs an *exangelos*¹¹ (but see above).

D. Seale¹², referring to W. Steidle¹³, considers it a dramatic exit: "The waiting is over. The 'passive' sufferer takes an active and influential role in the new momentum"¹⁴. However, when Electra reappears a few moments later (v. 1398) she makes it clear she is not directly involved in the action indoors¹⁵:

Ηλ. ὦ φίλταται γυναῖκες, ἄνδρες ἀδελφάκια
τελοῦσι τοῦργον ἀλλὰ σῖγα πρόσμνε.
Χο. πῶς δὴ; τί νῦν πράσσοσιν; Ηλ. ἡ μὲν ἐς τάφον
λέβητα κοσμεῖ, τῷ δ' ἐφέστατον πέλας. ε

⁶ It is significant that Electra does not leave the stage during the two stasima at 472–515 and 1058–1097. In both the Chorus address her directly (ὦ τέκνον 478, ὦ παῖ 1084).

⁷ For a different interpretation, see R. W. B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies*, Oxford 1980, p. 218, who, nevertheless, argues that "So far as her role of 'messenger' is concerned, Electra confines herself to the barest details" and does not relate deeds done within "in a long speech like the Nurse in *Trachiniae* who acts as an ἐξάγγελος to report Deianira's suicide (899–946)".

⁸ See also G. Gellie, *Sophocles. A Reading*, Melbourne 1972, p. 126.

⁹ I. M. Linforth, *Electra's Day in the Tragedy of Sophocles*, UCPCP 1963, 19, p. 108 f.

¹⁰ S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright*, Toronto 1957, p. 74.

¹¹ See also R. C. Jebb, *The Electra of Sophocles*, Cambridge 1908, *ad loc.*

¹² D. Seale, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*, London and Canberra 1982, p. 74.

¹³ W. Steidle, *Studien zum antiken Drama*, Munich 1968, p. 93.

¹⁴ A similar view has been expressed by R. W. Minadeo, *Plot, Theme and Meaning in Sophocles' "Electra"*, C&M 1967, 28, p. 132. Seale did not notice Steidle's note that the heroine's exit is also symbolic (see below).

¹⁵ Cf. G. Gellie, *loc. cit.*, C. P. Gardiner, *The Sophoclean Chorus. A Study of Character and Function*, Iowa City 1987, p. 161.

A. M. Dale¹⁶, considering vv. 1309 ff.¹⁷, believes that Electra follows Orestes into the palace to help him kill their mother. It is true that in the text we find hints that Electra will enter the palace with Orestes, see vv. 1103–1105, 1296 f., 1331–1337. But when the crucial moment comes, both the Paedagogus and Orestes seem to ignore her, see vv. 1367 ff., (cf. vv. 21 f.), 1372 ff.

A sound argument about the heroine's exit is offered by T. W. Woodard¹⁸: "Her alliance now is with *tourgon*", and "Her final attitude toward *logos* and *ergon* is equivalent, in fact, to that of Orestes in the Prologue".

Finally, P. E. Easterling¹⁹, referring to the Chorus' following song, argues that Electra enters the palace as one of "the hounds of vengeance" (v. 1388), and she comes out as their agent. This is an attractive view.

In what follows I shall endeavour to interpret Electra's exit on different grounds.

Chrysothemis' and Clytemnestra's first words to Electra make it clear that the daughter of Agamemnon often comes out, in front of the palace door, both to mourn her father and to denounce the crimes of her mother and Aegisthus in public, see vv. 328 f., 516 ff²⁰. The two women's criticism does not refer to the normal seclusion of women indoors in Athenian society²¹. In her monody Electra declares that she will not cease mourning and this, as we know, always turns into a diatribe at the palace door:

μη οὐ τεκνολέτειρ' ὡς τις ἀηδῶν
ἐπὶ κωκυτῷ τῶνδε πατρώων
πρὸ θυρῶν ἤχῳ πᾶσι προφωνεῖν.
(107 ff.)

Today, she tells the Chorus, she has emerged at the door because Aegisthus is away:

μη δόκει μ' ἄν, εἶπερ ἦν πέλας,
θυραῖον οἴχνεῖν· νῦν δ' ἀγροῖσι τυγχάνει.
(312 f.)

¹⁶ A. M. Dale, *The "Electra" of Sophocles*, [in:] *Collected Papers*, Cambridge 1969, p. 226.

¹⁷ μήτηρ δ' ἐν οἴκοις· ἦν σὺ μη δείσης ποθ' ὡς | γέλωτι τοῦμόν φαιδρὸν ὄψεται κάρα.

¹⁸ T. W. Woodard, "Electra" by Sophocles: *the Dialectical Design*, HSPH 1964, 68, p. 196, 198.

¹⁹ P. E. Easterling, *Women in Tragic Space*, BICS 1987, 34, p. 21.

²⁰ T. W. Woodard (*op. cit.*, p. 167, n. 22) observed, though he did not discuss it further, the symbolic weight which references to Electra's being outside carry: vv. 312 f., 328, 516 ff.

²¹ As J. H. Kells, *Sophocles Electra*, Cambridge 1973, *ad loc.* and R. Scodel, *Sophocles*, Boston 1984, p. 74 believe. On this see R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles and Women*, EH 1983, 29, p. 241 and P. E. Easterling, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

The adjective *θυραῖος* means 'at the door' and also 'ἄλλότριος', not *οἰκεῖος*, one connected with the outside, 'outsider'²². R. Seaford²³ argues that Electra lives like an outsider in the *θάλαμοι* of her father (189 f.), and he discusses the ambiguity of the word *θάλαμος* which is associated both with the tomb and the bridal chamber. Electra, he remarks, does not belong to the *θάλαμοι* of the palace. In my opinion, the poet also exploits the ambiguity of the adjective *θυραῖος* at vv. 517 ff.:

οὐ γὰρ πάρεστ' Αἴγισθος, ὅς σ' ἐπεῖχ' ἀεὶ
 μὴ τοι θυραίαν γ' οὔσαν ἀσχύνειν φίλους.
 [...]
 [...] καίτοι πολλὰ πρὸς πολλοὺς με δὴ
 ἐξεῖπας ὡς θρασεία καὶ πέρα δίκης
 ἄρχω [...]

The heroine is an outsider in the new regime and consequently a threatening adversary, and this irritates the new royal couple who live in anguish inside the palace, cf. Aegisthus' *σωφρονιστῆς λόγος* at vv. 1458 ff. They reject Electra and she rejects them too; she desires to be far removed from them:

ὄπως ἀφ' ὑμῶν ὡς προσώτατ' ἐκφύγω
 (v. 391)

Her mother has expelled her and her brother, they are outcasts: *ἐκβαλοῦσ' ἔχεις*²⁴ (v. 590); this verb has political overtones here and is also used by the queen in her prayer to Apollo:

καὶ μὴ με πλούτου τοῦ παρόντος εἴ τινας
 δόλοισι βουλευούσιν ἐκβαλεῖν, ἐφῆς,
 ἀλλ' ὧδέ μ' αἰεὶ ζῶσαν ἀβλαβεῖ βίῳ
 δόμους Ἀτρειδῶν σκῆπτρά τ' ἀμφέπειν τάδε.
 (vv. 648 ff.)²⁵

Electra and Orestes are deprived of their rights both in the *οἶκος* and the *πόλις*; the latter lives in exile, the former is treated as an *ἔποικος* (v. 189) and a slave:

κάκ τῶνδ' ἄρχομαι κάκ τῶνδ' ἐμοὶ
 λαβεῖν θ' ὁμοίως καὶ τὸ τητᾶσθαι πέλει
 (vv. 264 f.)

²² R. G. A. Buxton, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

²³ R. Seaford, *The Destruction of Limits in Sophocles' "Electra"*, CQ 1985, N.S., 35, p. 318 f.

²⁴ A key word in the Sophoclean tragic vocabulary, often used of the protagonist who is a rebel against the authority of the polis, see B. M. W. Knox, *Sophocles and the Polis*, EH 1983, 29, p. 17, n. 16.

²⁵ See also OT 399 f.: *ὅν δὴ σὺ πειρής ἐκβαλεῖν, δοκῶν θρόνοις
 παραστατήσιν τοῖς Κροντείοις πέλας.*

Another verb with political connotations is used by Clytemnestra of Orestes:

μαστῶν ἀποστᾶς καὶ τροφῆς ἐμῆς, φυγᾶς²⁶
(v. 776)

and by Chrysothemis of Electra:

ἔξεστ' ἀκλαύτω τῆσδ' ἀποστῆναι στέγης
(v. 912)

In the second case the poet exploits the ambiguity of this verb to show that the heroine is a rebel. As Seale remarks²⁷, the outside of the palace "is an escape from the sights within [...] as well as an assertion of freedom, an expression of defiance"²⁸. The interior of the palace is hateful to Electra, but not so the space outside it; there she can speak freely and find consolation and support.

After the announcement of Orestes' "death" Clytemnestra enters the palace triumphantly with the Paedagogus and shuts the door in Electra's face:

ἀλλ' εἴσιθ' εἴσω· τῆσδε δ' ἔκτοθεν βοᾶν
ἔα τὰ θ' αὐτῆς καὶ τὰ τῶν φίλων κακά.
(vv. 802 f.)

She is not irritated now by the fact that Electra is *θυραία*; she feels safe on her throne. At her mother's mockery (v. 807) the heroine resolves to enter the palace no more, but cast herself down, at the door, until death comes:

ἀλλ' οὐ τι μὴν ἔγωγε τοῦ λοιποῦ χρόνου
ἔσομαι ζύνοικος, ἀλλὰ τῆδε πρὸς πύλην
παρεῖσ' ἐμαντὴν ἄφιλος ἀθανῶ βίον.
(vv. 817 ff.)

With these lines the heroine declares her total alienation from the house²⁹. K. Reinhardt³⁰ noticed symbolic function of the door here: "The scene on the stage becomes the scene of fate, the threshold on the stage becomes the threshold which separates the lonely, despairing woman and the sounds of a jubilation that is alien to her".

Later we shall have a reversal of circumstances. Orestes and Pylades will enter the palace to kill Clytemnestra; the crucial moment has come.

²⁶ C. P. Segal, *The "Electra"...*, p. 498.

²⁷ D. Seale, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁸ P. E. Easterling (*op. cit.*, pp. 19 ff.) discusses the ambiguity of the house and the "inside" | "outside" contrast in Sophocles' *Electra*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

³⁰ K. Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, transl. by H. and D. Harvey, Oxford 1979, p. 154.

Electra finds the door open and she crosses the threshold. She knows what will happen inside. By entering into the palace Electra ceases from being *θυραῖος*, outsider and rebel. The interior is no longer repulsive to her. Until this moment the palace door has been the point of transition between the polluted interior and the non-polluted world outside, the physical symbol of her alienation from the *oikos*³¹. Thus, Electra's entrance into the palace marks the removal of the conditions that required her exclusion³². However, she will not remain inside to watch the murder of Clytemnestra. Her brief exit appears to be symbolic.

At the end of the play we shall watch, with Electra, *τάπιτίμα τῆς δυσσεβείας* (cf. vv. 1382 f.). The dominant emotion of the heroine in the exodos is hatred³³. Her last word is *λυτήριον* (v. 1490) and with this her dramatic role is finished³⁴. In the last lines of the play (1491–1507) Electra, like the Chorus, is a mere spectator³⁵. Then the men go in. It is best to conceive of the play ending with the striking visual picture of the heroine standing silent at the palace door, as the Chorus sum up the whole action. This is dramatically very effective³⁶: the palace door has been the visual focus of the heroine's sufferings and of her deliverance. Segal's view³⁷ that Electra "is left once more confronting the House, alone, standing 'before the doors of her father' exactly as she was at the beginning", does not seem to be sound. The palace door has been the mark of her alienation from the house, as shown above. Now, in the concluding scene of the play, the heroine stands silent at the palace door, but circumstances are reversed: Electra is not *θυραία*; her duty to protest has reached its *τέλος*³⁸, her desolation described in her monody is now reversed, cf. Clytemnestra's words:

³¹ Cf. R. G. A. Buxton (*op. cit.*, p. 76) commenting on the palace door in the *Alcestis*, and see M. Whitlock Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989, p. 154, n. 22.

³² See M. Whitlock Blundell, *op. cit.*

³³ V. Leinieks, *The Plays of Sophocles*, Amsterdam 1982, p. 123.

³⁴ A. Machin, has observed that she does not address her enemy and that she does humiliate him; and he concludes: „Electre conserve cette même noblesse au moment où le sort favorable pourrait l'entraîner à oublier la maîtrise du langage et le souci de l'honneur”, see *Electre ou le triomphe maîtrisé* (*Sophocle, Electre, 1483–90*), "Pallas" 1991, 37, pp. 25–37.

³⁵ As usual, the scene ends with a few lines uttered by the avenger, see O. Taplin, *Aeschylean Silences and Silences in Aeschylus*, HSPH 1972, 76, p. 94.

³⁶ I do not think that Orestes dominates the closing minutes, as T. W. Woodard believes, *op. cit.*, p. 226. On the visual side of Sophocles' dramaturgy, see P. E. Easterling, *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 1, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985, pp. 314 f.

³⁷ C. P. Segal, *The "Electra"...*, p. 529.

³⁸ On the ambiguity of v. 1464 *καὶ δὴ τελεῖται τὰπ' ἐμοῦ* see A. Salmon, *L'ironie tragique dans l'exodos de l'"Électre" de Sophocle*, LEC 1961, 29, p. 257; for the use of the significant root *tel-* in this play see T. W. Woodard, *"Electra" by Sophocles: the Dialectical Design*, part 2, HSPH 1965, 70, pp. 203 f.

αἰαῖ. ἰὼ στέγαι
 φίλων ἐρῆμοι, τῶν δ' ἀπολλύντων πλέαι.
 (vv. 1404 f.)

Though the daughter of Agamemnon resolved never to enter the palace again, eventually she enters it and thus she ceases from being alienated from her own house. It is Electra who opens the palace door to Aegisthus to see Clytemnestra's corpse and meet his fate inside (vv. 1464 ff.).

If my argumentation is sound, then Electra's silence in the concluding scene appears to be significant³⁹. In the course of the play all characters, including the women of the Chorus, endeavoured to silence the daughter of Agamemnon⁴⁰. On the other hand, Aegisthus confined her to the palace like a prisoner. According to the Scholia on A. Pr. 436 a character keeps silent ἢ δι' αὐθαδείαν ἢ διὰ συμφορὰν ἢ διὰ περίσκεψιν⁴¹. Electra's silence seems to express something else: emotional satisfaction⁴². And I suggest that the heroine leaves the stage last, following the ekkyklema with her mother's corpse, as it is withdrawn inside. As for the spectators, they are left to react as they feel⁴³.

³⁹ On the significance of silences in tragedy see O. Taplin, *op. cit.*, pp. 57 ff.

⁴⁰ R. W. Minadeo, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁴¹ O. Taplin, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁴² Cf. P. T. Stevens, *Sophocles: "Electra", Doom or Triumph?*, G&R 1978, N. S. 25, p. 119.

⁴³ A note in D. L. Cairns' book, *Aidōs. The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*, Oxford 1993, p. 245, n. 107, may illustrate the reactions which Sophocles might expect from his audience: "Electra is presented sympathetically, and we are on her side; [...] Not only in the theatre, but also in life, we can sympathize with those who commit even the most terrible crimes, if we can understand the circumstances, the pain, and the suffering that drove them to do so".