

# Is there any defence for matricide? A juridical reading of Sophocles' *Electra*

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**ABSTRACT.** Based on an analysis of *Electra* by Sophocles, it is proposed that the central concern of the dramatist is not the matricide of Clytemnestra itself. Sophocles invites the audience to reflect, as though they were the jury in a law court, on the legality of the actions of *Electra*. The play is thus a contribution to the debate on Justice in Greek society initiated almost two centuries previously.

**Key words:** *Electra*, Sophocles, matricide, justice.

**RESUMO.** Matricídio tem defesa? Uma leitura jurídica da *Electra* de Sófocles. Baseado numa análise da *Electra* de Sófocles, propõe-se que a preocupação central do dramaturgo não é o matricídio da Clitemnestra em si. Sófocles convida a platéia a refletir, como se fosse o júri num tribunal, a respeito da legalidade das ações da *Electra*. Desta forma, a peça é uma contribuição ao debate sobre a Justiça na sociedade grega iniciado quase dois séculos antes.

**Palavras-chave:** *Electra*, Sófocles, matricídio, justiça.

## Introduction

In all Greek tragedy there is only one surviving example of three dramatists working with the same raw material. The matricide of Clytemnestra by Orestes provided the subject matter for plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. This article is principally concerned with Sophocles' *Electra*, but it is impossible to consider his tragedy in isolation. We can understand many aspects of the dramatist's artistic intentions by means of comparing his tragedy with the other two. If the original myth is the same, what differences in focus can be discerned in the three points of view? In other words, to make use of Socrates' metaphor, if the sun and the sky are the same, what are the differences between the three mirrors? However, there is a problem in relation to the dating of Sophocles' tragedy. Aeschylus (1948) dealt with the story first, in *Choephoroe* (Libation Bearers), the second part of his *Oresteia* trilogy, which was first presented in 458 BC. It is more difficult to be certain about the dates of the two plays entitled *Electra*, by Euripides (1966) and Sophocles (1906). Recent studies suggest that Euripides' version may have been performed as early as 420 BC, with Sophocles' *Electra* being first staged in 413 BC<sup>1</sup>. Whether or not Sophocles could have

been aware of Euripides' play when he wrote his own *Electra*, it is clear that both the later plays adopt a markedly different angle on the story from that chosen by Aeschylus<sup>2</sup>. For the purposes of this article I shall therefore emphasise significant differences between the versions written by Aeschylus and Sophocles. After an initial mapping of the terrain of the original myth, which will highlight the particular landscape of Sophocles' play, I intend to demonstrate that *Electra* is far more than a psychological portrait of a woman's suffering; the tragedy is a reflection on the concept of Justice, in both the juridical and ethical senses of the term; matricide as such has only a secondary importance.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle describes six component parts as being essential in the composition of tragedy. Of these, he argues that the plot is "the source and (as it were), the soul of tragedy", since tragedy is "an imitation of an action" (ARISTOTLE, 1996, p. 12). He goes on to cite precisely the murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes as the kind of traditional story most suitable for tragic treatment, stating that the dramatic poet has to discover for himself "how to use even the traditional stories well" (ARISTOTLE, 1996, p. 23). In order to understand

<sup>1</sup> John Jones was a minority voice when he argued that Sophocles' *Electra* was posterior to the version by Euripides (JONES, 1962, p. 177n). However, in the commentary to her own translation of the play, Jenny March reveals that this is now a matter of growing consensus (MARCH apud SOPHOCLES, 2001, p. 21-22).

<sup>2</sup> In his commentary upon the myth, Robert Graves writes, "The wide variations in the recognition scene, and in the plot by which Orestes contrives to kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, are of interest only as proving that the Classical dramatists were not bound by tradition. There was a new version of an ancient myth; and both Sophocles and Euripides tried to improve on Aeschylus, who first formulated it, by making the action more plausible" (GRAVES, 2001, p. 391).

the particular contribution of Sophocles, therefore, we must be aware of the original myth upon which he based his play. David Raeburn summarises the traditional story as follows:

Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, led the expedition to Troy to recover Helen, the wife of his brother Menelaus, who had eloped with the Trojan prince Paris. So that his fleet could sail, Agamemnon was compelled to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis. On his return home from the sack of Troy ten years later, he was murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover Aegisthus, who then became rulers of Mycenae. Agamemnon's young son, Orestes, had escaped into exile at the time of his father's death. Grown to manhood, he returned to Mycenae on the orders of the Delphic oracle, to take revenge on his father's murderers, first making contact with his unmarried sister Electra. After killing his mother and Aegisthus, Orestes was pursued by the Furies to Delphi, where he was purified by the god Apollo, and then to Athens, where he was tried and acquitted by a court of citizens (RAEBURN apud SOPHOCLES, 2008, p. 127).

It is interesting to note that, in Homer's epic version of the story, Electra is not mentioned, and he is also reticent about unequivocally categorising the killing of Clytemnestra as being a case of matricide. However, he is very clear about the involvement of Clytemnestra in the murder of her husband when Agamemnon gives us his version of the story:

I heard Priam's daughter Cassandra scream as Clytemnestra killed her close beside me. I lay dying upon the earth with the sword in my body, and raised my hands to kill the slut of a murderess, but she slipped away from me; she would not even close my lips nor my eyes when I was dying, for there is nothing in this world so cruel and so shameless as a woman when she has fallen into such guilt as hers was. Fancy murdering her own husband! I thought I was going to be welcomed home by my children and my servants, but her abominable crime has brought disgrace on herself and all women who shall come after – even on the good ones (HOMER, 1948, XI, 421-34, p. 247).

Homer prefers to cloak the identity of Clytemnestra's murderer in mystery, limiting himself to saying that her death was commemorated together with that of Aegisthus:

Meanwhile Aegisthus here at home plotted his evil deed. For seven years after he had killed Agamemnon he ruled in Mycene, and the people were obedient under him, but in the eighth year Orestes came back from Athens to be his bane, and killed the murderer of his father. Then he celebrated the funeral rites of his mother and false Aegisthus by

a banquet to the people of Argos [...] (HOMER, 1948, III, 307-311, p. 196).

Although Homer avoided the delicate and painful subject of matricide, Aeschylus had no such scruples. *Choephoroe* (Libation Bearers) is the second play in a trilogy dealing with the murder of Agamemnon and its repercussions. The third tragedy in the sequence, *Eumenides* (Kindly Ones), describes the consequences of the matricide, with the judgement and absolution of Orestes of the crime. It is precisely the circumstances surrounding Clytemnestra's murder that are of most interest to Aeschylus. Orestes, as the murderer of his own mother, is the central character of *Choephoroe*, but he also receives the moral support of his sister Electra. Aeschylus adds other details to the original myth too. He tells, for example, of Clytemnestra's dream, in which she gives birth to a snake, which bites her breast drawing blood. This dream is no mere embellishment: as Adélia Bezerra de Menezes demonstrates, it is the central metaphor of the play, by means of which Orestes takes on the responsibility for killing his mother:

Orestes appropriates his mother's dream, as though he had dreamed it himself, and the development of the play is neither more nor less than the realisation of this dream – which he imposes upon himself as a mission (DE MENESES, 1993/1994, p. 101)<sup>3</sup>.

In the tragedy by Aeschylus, then, the principal objective of Orestes is the death of his mother. The murder of Aegisthus is undertaken first, as though it were the aperitif to the main dish, the matricide. However, as one might expect at the end of the second play in a trilogy, Aeschylus indicates that the feast of revenge is not the end of the story. At the final curtain, with his mother's bloodstained dress in his hand, Orestes is on the verge of madness, and exits in the direction of the follow-on, hotly pursued by the Furies.

Sophocles, on the other hand, was not writing a trilogy. His *Electra* is an autonomous play, which must resolve any doubts it has raised by the end of the action. The very title of the play reveals Sophocles' change of focus. Orestes is no longer the centre of attention, and nor indeed is the matricide itself. It is interesting to note that Sophocles inverts the order of the two murders in order to diminish the importance that Aeschylus attached to the matricide. The climax of the tragedy comes with the

<sup>3</sup> Orestes se apropria do sonho da mãe, é como se ele o tivesse sonhado, e o desenvolvimento da peça nada mais será que a realização desse sonho – que ele se imporá como uma missão. (The translation of this and other quotations from Portuguese and French into English has been undertaken by the author of the article).

death of Aegisthus. Throughout the play *Electra* and Orestes speak of their objective in terms of punishing the murderers of their father: Clytemnestra is thus portrayed more as one of two murderers rather than as a mother assassinated by her own son. The focus of the audience's attention is upon *Electra*. In the introduction to his own translation of the seven tragedies, Lewis Campbell states that the theme of *Electra* is:

[...] the heroic endurance of a woman who devotes her life to the vindication of intolerable wrongs done to her father, and the restoration of her young brother to his hereditary rights (CAMPBELL apud SOPHOCLES, 1906, p. xxii).

However, the differences between the two plays go beyond this fundamental change of focus. John Jones draws our attention to other features that serve to illustrate Sophocles' intentions. Comparing the composition of the Chorus in the two tragedies Jones argues that Sophocles is interested in exploring the weakening of the *oikos* (household) in Greek society. According to Jones, instead of family solidarity, Sophocles depicts "individuation and (in a vague provisional sense) personalising of consciousness" (JONES, 1962, p. 145). Jones goes on to identify an element in Sophocles' play that is entirely absent from Aeschylus' version of the story, the presence of private or personal motivation:

In her personal grief, *Electra* accuses her sister of a personal 'betrayal' of their dead father, and she leans upon her brother's personal promise to come home (JONES, 1962, p. 146).

In addition, Jones also highlights the presence of a sexual element in Sophocles' version of the myth. By means of this Sophocles directs the attention of the audience towards the question of motivation: what is the real reason for the murder of Agamemnon and what, then, is the real reason for the hatred that *Electra* feels for her mother? If the Chorus is correct in asserting that lust was responsible for the death of Agamemnon (SOPHOCLES, 2008, l.197, p. 142), an affirmation echoed by *Electra* herself, how should we interpret the desire of *Electra* for vengeance, and what is the impact of this desire on *Electra*'s appeals for Justice? These questions are part of Sophocles' reflection concerning the concept of justice, because they focus on an interference in the objectivity of the Law by the will of the individual.

Nowadays it is hard to discuss mother-daughter relationships without invoking the name of Sigmund Freud. Although I have no intention of subjecting *Electra* to a process of psychoanalysis, a reference to

Freudian concepts may serve as a springboard in establishing a perspective on the character's motivation. It is a widely held misconception that Freud developed the term *Electra complex* as a feminine correlative to the *Oedipus complex*<sup>4</sup>. However it was in fact Jung who coined the term in his *Versuch einer Darstellung der psychoanalytischen Theorie* (Essay on Psychoanalytical Theory) in 1913 and, seven years later, Freud explicitly rejected the concept: "I do not see any advance or gain in the introduction of the term 'Electra complex', and do not advocate its use" (FREUD, 1955, p. 155n). In 1931 Freud was even more categorical in rejecting not only the term itself but also the notion that there might be any female correspondence to the *Oedipus complex* in the male:

We have an impression here that what we have said about the *Oedipus complex* applies with complete strictness to the male child only and that we are right in rejecting the term 'Electra complex' which seeks to emphasise the analogy between the attitude of the two sexes. It is only in the male child that we find the fateful combination of love for the one parent and simultaneous hatred for the other as a rival (FREUD, 1961, p. 228).

Terminological questions aside, however, Freud recognises, in the same essay, that the normal female attitude would be to adopt the father as an object of affection, accompanied by a rejection of the mother. Returning to the subject in 1933 Freud argued that this rejection of the mother would normally be accompanied by hostility, which could easily be transformed into hatred:

The turning away from the mother is accompanied by hostility; the attachment to the mother ends in hate. A hate of that kind may become very striking and last all through life [...] (FREUD, 1964, p. 121).

Thus, in the case of Sophocles' *Electra*, it can be argued that the hatred felt by her towards Clytemnestra, and commented upon by the Chorus and her sister Chrysothemis, is no more than normal female behaviour.

However, Clytemnestra can scarcely be considered a normal mother. Fortunately the majority of mothers, outside the cannibalistic world of the praying mantis, do not kill their husbands. If hatred for the mother, accompanied by the adoption of the father as an object of affection, is normal female behaviour, what emotional response should

<sup>4</sup> An example of this misconception may be seen in the feminist novel, *Fear of Flying*, in which the central character satirises her husband, a Freudian psychoanalyst, by means of listing all the Freudian concepts comprising his *modus operandi*: "Bennett knew about part objects and whole objects, *Oedipus* and *Electra*, school phobia and claustrophobia, impotence and frigidity, patricide and matricide, penis envy and womb envy, working through and free association, mourning and melancholia, ... etc." (JONG, 1974, p. 127).

we expect from a daughter whose mother kills the object of her love? Freud offers a reply to this question when he cites the case of the lesbian girl who substituted her father with her elder brother (FREUD, 1955, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", p. 155n). Electra does more than this – she transforms her younger brother into a son. She denies the maternity of Clytemnestra throughout the tragedy:

My father's murderer sharing my father's bed  
With that brazen mother of mine – if it's still proper  
To call the woman who sleeps with him my mother,  
[...] (SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 272-4, p. 144).

and,

You're constantly sounding off that I'm bad-mouthing  
My mother. In fact, I reckon you treat me more  
As a mistress would than a mother (SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 596-8, p. 154).

and,

That fraud of a mother of ours [...] (SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 1153, p. 174).

and,

My so-called mother – more like a monster  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 1194, p. 176).

In the face of such a denaturalised mother Electra assumes the role of mother herself and makes Orestes her son:

You were never your mother's child. You were mine,  
I was your only nurse, not one of the servants,  
And I was the one you always called your sister  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 1145-7, p. 174)

In the words of Jean-Pierre Vernant:

Electra is not only the sister so closely linked to her brother that their two lives are fused into a single soul, she is also a mother, in fact, the only mother of Orestes. As a child she cherished, protected and saved him [...] As an adult, she exhorts him to vengeance, supporting and guiding him in the execution of the double murder which will make them 'the saviours of the paternal home' (VERNANT, 1969, p. 110)<sup>5</sup>.

Unmarried and virgin, Electra-as-mother seeks, through Orestes-as-son, revenge for the death of Agamemnon-as-husband. In this transmutation of roles Clytemnestra becomes merely the lover of

Agamemnon-as-husband, and the motive for revenge becomes linked as much to jealousy as to a desire for justice.

This line of reasoning casts some doubt over the genuineness of Electra's quest for justice. If Freud had written about *Electra* he would have had no hesitation in discarding any claims to sincerity in the central character's references to Justice. In one of his more chauvinist moments he pronounced that:

The fact that women must be regarded as having little sense of justice is no doubt related to the predominance of envy in their mental life; for the demand for justice is a modification of envy and lays down the condition subject to which one can put envy aside (FREUD, 1964, p. 134).

For Freud, then, there could be no doubt that Electra is driven by jealousy, and any discourse concerning Justice could be no more than a mask, whether donned consciously or unconsciously.

Sincere or not, Electra's references to Justice, both direct and indirect, are a leitmotif of her presence on the stage. From her opening speech onwards she demonstrates her obsessive concern with just retribution; she invokes the three Erinyes, or avenging spirits, who "personify the whole retaliatory and retributive process in a peculiarly sinister way" (RAEBURN apud SOPHOCLES, 2008, p. 282):

And you, the dread Furies of vengeance,  
Who spy the shedding of kindred blood  
And robbing of beds in secret lust,  
Come to me, succour me, punish my father's  
Murder most foul (SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 112-16, p. 139).

The Furies are described as

[...] spirits of punishment avenging without pity wrongs done to kindred and especially murder within the family. [...] They also punished perjurers and those who violated the laws of hospitality and supplication, and came to assume the character of goddesses who punish crimes after death [...] (HOWATSON, 1989, p. 240-241).

Typically depicted as carrying scourges and torches, and wreathed in snakes, they were the terrifying beadles of Justice of Greek mythology. Virgins like Electra herself it is entirely appropriate that she should invoke them in a sisterhood of retribution. Throughout the play Electra's discourse is punctuated with references to punishment and the meting out of penalties appropriate to crimes committed. According to Robert Graves the Erinyes "were personified pangs of conscience" (GRAVES, 2001, p. 396), and it is certainly in this guise that

<sup>5</sup> Électre n'est pas seulement la sœur si étroitement liée au frère que leurs deux vies se fondent en une âme unique, elle est aussi une mère, au vrai, la seule mère d'Oreste. Enfant elle l'a choyé, protégé, sauvé [...] Adulte, elle l'exhorte à la vengeance, elle le soutient et le guide dans l'exécution du double meurtre qui doit faire d'eux "les sauveurs du foyer paternel".

they pursue Orestes after he has killed his mother. However, one of the problems faced by Electra is that Clytemnestra is apparently not assailed by any feelings of guilt whatsoever. For this reason Electra feels obliged to take justice into her own hands, irrespective of the specific means:

With evil all  
Around you, nothing but evil is left to do  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 308-9, p. 145).

The central encounter between Clytemnestra and Electra has all the semblance of a court of law in which two lawyers are debating the responsibility of the accused for crimes committed. Michel Foucault interprets *Electra* as being "a kind of theatrical ritualising of the history of the law" (FOUCAULT, 1974, p. 41). Thus, Freud notwithstanding, it is worth paying serious attention to Electra's claim that hers is a just cause.

In order to understand Foucault's interpretation of the play it is necessary to provide some contextual information concerning classical Greek law. Sophocles wrote *Electra* almost two centuries after the publication of the poems of the great statesman Solon in 594 BC. Solon was responsible for the first radical reform of the social and political institutions of Athens, at a time when the state was on the brink of a revolution due to the tyranny of its aristocracy. In terms of law one of his most important contributions was to open up access to the annually elected position of archon – the nine magistrates who exercised judicial and executive duties in the council of the Areopagus. These officials, recruited from the aristocracy, controlled the operation of the state in an autocratic manner. Solon broke the tradition of hereditary power, and established four social classes based on annual income. Although only members of the wealthiest class were eligible for highest office under the new system, Solon granted to members of the lowest class the right to vote in the *ecclesia*, the assembly and sovereign body of Athens, which became a court of appeal from the decisions of the magistrates. While it is not correct to say that Solon invented democracy, he certainly created the democratic institutions which formed the basic structure of Athenian society and which were maintained intact despite the tyranny of Peisistratus and subsequent despots. Solon's reforms were consolidated in 507 BC by the legislation of Cleisthenes, who is considered to be the founder of Athenian democracy. In Foucault's words, the changes instituted by Solon may be considered as "one of the great conquests of Athenian democracy": for the first time the people:

[...] became empowered with the right to judge, the right to tell the truth, to oppose the truth of their own overlords, to judge those who governed them (FOUCAULT, 1974, p. 41)<sup>6</sup>.

It is precisely this "great conquest" which Sophocles dramatises in the encounter between Electra and Clytemnestra. Clytemnestra herself says that Electra is forever publicly criticising her mother as "a harsh and oppressive tyrant" (SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 521, p. 152), which is scarcely surprising given the conditions of her life at home, described by Electra as follows:

I work as a slave in the house of my father,  
As though I were just a contemptible foreigner.  
I wear mean shabby clothes  
And eat standing by myself at mealtimes.  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 189-93, p. 142).

Thus we have the juridical encounter, not between mother and daughter but, rather, between tyrant and slave – the two extremes of the hierarchical society instituted by Solon. Electra is empowering herself with the "right to oppose a truth without power against a power without truth" (FOUCAULT, 1974, p. 42). What is at stake is Clytemnestra's right to kill Agamemnon and, in the process of evaluating this right, we see a microcosmic representation of the "three great cultural forms characteristic of Greek society" identified by Michel Foucault (1974, p. 42). In this court the audience is the jury, and they will be persuaded, or not, as the case may be, by the relative ability of the two lawyers in the three juridical techniques delineated by Foucault:

[...] the rational forms of proof and demonstration  
[...] (the) art of persuasion, of convincing people of the truth of what one is saying [...] (and the) acquisition of knowledge [...] by the process of inquiry (FOUCAULT, 1974, p. 42)<sup>7</sup>.

The juridical setting of a law court is established at Clytemnestra's entrance, with her complaint that her character is being publicly defamed by Electra. Positioning herself both as accused and as lawyer for her own defence, she begins by confessing to the crime, not once alone but four times in a row, linking her fourth confession to the essence of her defence:

If I curse you,  
It's due to the taunts you're always hurling at me.  
Your constant pretext is simply this: I killed

<sup>6</sup> "[...] se apoderou do direito de julgar, do direito de dizer a verdade, de opor a verdade aos seus próprios senhores, de julgar aqueles que os governam".

<sup>7</sup> "[...] as formas racionais da prova e da demonstração [...] (a) arte de persuadir, de convencer as pessoas da verdade do que se diz [...] (e o) conhecimento [...] por inquérito".

Your father. Yes I did. I'm well aware of that  
And won't pretend to deny it. Justice determined  
His death; I wasn't alone.  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 523-28, p. 152).

The principal argument of her defence is an emotionally convincing one: she killed Agamemnon because he had taken the life of Electra's sister, Iphigenia. She admits that the death of Iphigenia was a sacrifice to the gods but, even so, she questions the justification for the sacrifice, arguing that, since the ultimate beneficiary was Helen, it would have been more appropriate if Agamemnon's brother Menelaus had sacrificed one of his own sons. Drawing her argument to a close she invites Electra to reply:

You may believe I'm wrong, but do make sure  
You're right yourself before you criticise others.  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 550-1, p. 153).

However, her use of the word **wrong** lays her open to counter-arguments not only in the juridical but also in the ethical fields.

In her role as prosecuting attorney, Electra begins, just like Clytemnestra, with an introductory preamble setting out her position:

With your permission, might I straighten the record  
In my dead father's defence and my sister's too?  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 554-5, p. 153).

She begins her argument with a reference to the plea by the accused:

You say you killed my father.  
What admission could be more shameful than that,  
Whether or not justice was on your side?  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 558-60, p. 153).

and outlines the direction that her argument is to take:

I put it to you, it wasn't justice that drove  
You to kill him. No you were seduced by the evil  
man,  
Who is now your partner.  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 561-63, p. 153).

What is under discussion, then, is not the crime but the motive for the crime. Clytemnestra's defence was that of mitigating circumstances, with the argument that her act had been a *crime passionnel*<sup>8</sup>, in which she was seeking retribution for the sacrifice of

her daughter. However, Electra intends to show that it was another kind of passion that was at work, and that the principal motive for the murder of Agamemnon was Clytemnestra's lust for Aegisthus. Even so, she analyses the facts mentioned by Clytemnestra and, like any skilful lawyer, transforms the argument for the defence into an instrument of condemnation. For H.D.F. Kitto, Electra's argument here is:

[...] a curiously stiff and frigid passage, an excursion into mythology very unlike Sophocles' usual supple style [...] which shows us Electra, deficient in argument, throwing the blame on to Artemis, just as Electra and Orestes shelter themselves behind Apollo (KITTO, 1939, p. 133-134).

Where Kitto sees Electra as lacking in rhetorical resources, Jones understands that her argument draws a distinction between Agamemnon's obligations as a statesman and the private concerns of Clytemnestra as a mother (JONES, 1962, p. 157-158).

In either case, Electra's primary objective is not to analyse the reasons for the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Her intention is to prove that the real motive for the murder of Agamemnon was lust:

Look now, isn't your pretext entirely specious?  
Be kind enough to explain the motive behind  
The crowning scandal of your present conduct –  
Sleeping with the assassin whose help you engaged  
To murder my father, and having children by him,  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 584-88, p. 154).

The observation is conclusive – the jury is bound to agree. However, immediately before this victory, in a speech replete with juridical terms, Electra criticises the right of Clytemnestra to kill Agamemnon in such a way as to weaken her own justification for the as yet uncommitted murder of Clytemnestra herself:

Even if it were true, as you maintain,  
That he did it to help his brother, did that entitle  
You to murder him? What was your justification?  
Blood for blood, I suppose. But by laying down  
That law, aren't you making a rod for your own back?  
In all fairness, you'd be the next to die.  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 577-82, p. 154).

As Kitto points out, Sophocles does not mention Cassandra (the additional provocation cited by Clytemnestra in Aeschylus's *Choephoroe* as a justification for the murder of Agamemnon) because he wishes to establish a precise parallel between Clytemnestra and Electra. Despite the adroitness of Electra's argument,

<sup>8</sup> The concept of the *crime passionnel* was described by Plato in his posthumously published *Laws*, written in the years prior to his death in 347 BC: "[...] a deed is done from passion either when men suddenly, and without intention to kill, cause the death of another by blows and the like on a momentary impulse, and are sorry for the deed immediately afterwards; or again, when after having been insulted in deed or word, men pursue revenge, and kill a person intentionally, and are not sorry for the act" (PLATO, 1952, p.749). It is interesting to reflect that Plato, writing less than seventy years after the first performance of *Electra*, might have had the case of Clytemnestra in mind.

The two women are in the same position; the one avenges a daughter upon a husband, the other proposes to avenge a father upon a mother. We can admit if we like that Clytemnestra's crime was the more revolting inasmuch as it was accompanied by adultery, but we do not change the logical basis that if one is right, so was the other (KITTO, 1939, p. 132).

Electra emerges triumphant from the 'law court' at the heart of the tragedy, having proved that Agamemnon's murder was premeditated, and demolished the defence of the *crime passionnel*. However, amidst all the juridical terminology, Sophocles plants the seed of a fundamental question: if Clytemnestra was wrong, what superior law could justify the revenge subsequently carried out by Electra and her brother?

Sophocles returns to this question at the end of the tragedy when Orestes outlines the direction that his own government is likely to take, a route influenced more by Draco than by Solon:

All who presume to defy the law  
Ought to be punished at once like this –  
Kill them! Crime would not be so rife  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 1505-07, p. 189).

It is ironic that, in the fury of their hatred and their thirst for vengeance, neither Electra nor Orestes is aware of any hypocrisy in their position. Is it enough to say that they are protected by the authorisation of Apollo? Perhaps yes, but perhaps no. Without offering a final verdict, Sophocles is at least opening the debate.

A possible conclusion to the debate was to be provided by Plato, approximately seventy years after the first performance of Sophocles' *Electra*. In his last great work Plato systematised the laws of Athens, producing a penal code in place of the flexible laws that had governed the state previously. With his customary methodical reasoning Plato furnished replies to all the questions that Sophocles had raised. Firstly, what would have been the correct procedure to have followed with Clytemnestra?

Whoever shall wrongfully and of design slay with his own hand any of his kinsmen, shall in the first place be deprived of legal privileges; and he shall not pollute the temples [...] (PLATO, 1952, p. 752).

Plato makes it clear that Electra and Orestes are obliged to prosecute Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon. The failure to fulfil this duty would render the two of them just as proscribed and profane as the murderess herself:

And if a cousin or nearer relative of the deceased, whether on the male or female side does not prosecute the homicide when he ought, and have him proclaimed an outlaw, he shall in the first place be involved in the pollution, and incur the hatred of

the Gods[...] (PLATO, 1952, p. 752).

But, at the same time, he stresses the importance of acting within the law, and he carefully explains the procedure to be followed by those in search of just retribution:

And he who would avenge a murder shall observe all the precautionary ceremonies of lavation, and any others which the God commands in cases of this kind. Let him have proclamation made, and then go forth and compel the perpetrator to suffer the execution of justice according to the law ... The cause shall have the same judges who are appointed to decide in the case of those who plunder temples. Let him who is convicted be punished with death [...] (PLATO, 1952, p. 752).

The penalty, then, is death, but neither the judgement nor the execution of the penalty are the responsibility of the victim's relations. The only circumstances in which a relation would have the right to kill the murderer with his or her own hands would be in the case of the murderer attempting to escape or refusing to be judged. Apart from such a situation – which is not the case of Clytemnestra – Plato considers the murder of a parent by his or her son or daughter to one of the worst crimes in the book:

If any one is so violent in his passion against his parents, that in the madness of his anger he dares to kill one of them ... he shall be amenable to the extreme punishments for assault, and impiety, and robbing of temples, for he has robbed his parent of life; and if a man could be slain more than once, most justly would he who in a fit of passion has slain father or mother, undergo many deaths (PLATO, 1952, p. 751).

The punishment of such a nefarious crime would not be limited to the death of the transgressing son or daughter but would be extended on into future lives. In the case of a son killing his own mother, for example, the murderer,

[...] shall of necessity take a woman's nature, and lose his life at the hands of his offspring in after ages; for where the blood of a family has been polluted there is no other purification, nor can the pollution be washed out until the homicidal soul which did the deed has given life for life, and has propitiated and laid to sleep the wrath of the whole family (PLATO, 1952, p. 752).

According to Plato, therefore, Orestes should have made a second consultation at the oracular shrine of Apollo at Delphi before embarking on his journey of revenge. Orestes quotes the words of the Pythia in the opening moments of *Electra*:

Not with the might of shielded host  
Shall Justice see her purpose done.  
By lone deceit and stealthy craft

Must blood be shed and victory won  
(SOPHOCLES, 2008, l. 36-37, p. 137).

However, between this citation of divine will and the double murder, there lies the action of the entire play, and this action is centred not on Orestes but on an Electra, swallowed up by hatred, intent on what John Jones describes as her **personal** quest for vengeance. Sophocles' intention is clear: he wishes to demonstrate the interference of the subjective individual in objective juridical procedure.

Plato's *Laws* marked the culmination of a process which had been initiated by Solon two and a half centuries previously, in what was effectively a redistribution of power by means of the juridical system. In *Un Oeil en Trop*, André Green describes this transformation in Greek society as follows:

Initial power is originally the privilege of gods, with no intermediation with mankind, and of men invested with a quasi-divine power which they assume in all its aspects, creating between these two worlds the support of an absurd, incoherent, unpredictable logic. With the differentiation of juridical and religious powers, a new relationship is established. The Polis takes on the public task of writing laws. Laws take the place of the Law. The Law emanated from the word of a single entity, while laws are the expression of a public will, of the transactional processes of exchange which are the basis of power, instead of the arbitrariness which had ruled previously (GREEN, 1969, p. 86)<sup>9</sup>.

Laws take the place of the Law. In *Electra*, Sophocles was making his contribution to this process with a reflection concerning the relationship between *Dikē*, the mythological personification of Justice, and the individual. Electra and Orestes seek the death of Clytemnestra. Orestes realises this quest, destroying what Freud describes as "[...] the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships" (FREUD, 1964, p. 133), the relationship between mother and son. But it is the ethical and juridical posture of Electra, the accomplice, that Sophocles subjects to scrutiny. Whether she is right or wrong, innocent or guilty, Sophocles does not say – let the jury decide [...]

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