

The End of Sophocles' *Electra*

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ENDS OF TRAGEDIES are peculiarly susceptible to neglect. One thinks of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, or of the *Trachiniae*: who *does* speak the final words? There is already a useful dissertation "On Ends,"¹ but the subject is by no means exhausted. The exodus of Sophocles' *Electra* is one of the dramatist's finest efforts. The scene centers on Aegisthus, who enters alone at verse 1442. He is egotistical, unfeeling, and cruel (notice especially the thrice-repeated σέ in 1445). Only in Creon of *Oedipus Coloneus* has Sophocles created a more complete villain. A preliminary dialogue with Electra is meant to reveal the character of Aegisthus and provides opportunity for some memorable ambiguities on the part of Electra. Then, at 1465, the central door of the *scaenae frons* is opened to reveal the deuteragonist, Orestes, and the *parachorēgēma*, Pylades, with the shrouded corpse of Clytemnestra on the *ekkyklēma* or, as Pickard-Cambridge would prefer,² on "a simple bier . . . not any elaborate machinery." Aegisthus instructs Orestes to remove the veil and expose the corpse. Under a terrible guise of respect Orestes replies (1470–71):

αὐτὸς σὺ βιάσταιζ'· οὐκ ἐμὸν τόδ', ἀλλὰ σόν,
τὸ ταῦθ' ὄραν τε καὶ προσηγορεῖν φίλως.

So the Laurentianus, approved by Kaibel and Jebb, and there is a tradition³ for the impossible φίλος. Purgold's φίλους, approved lately by Dain-Mazon, is preferable. Palaeographical daring is minimal. φίλους is neatly parallel to ταῦθ' and provides a fine chiasmus. The irony is all the better. φίλους is plural under the influence of the parallel ταῦθ' and because φίλην would give all away, while φίλον would be untrue. For Aegisthus, φίλους is the generalizing plural masculine; for

¹ F. Mayerhoefer, *Über die Schlüsse der erhaltenen griechischen Tragödien* (Erlangen 1908). The following editions will henceforth be cited by author's name: L. Campbell, *Sophocles, edited with English Notes and Introductions*, vol. II (Oxford 1881); A. Dain and P. Mazon, *Sophocle*, vol. II (Paris 1958); R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles, the Plays and Fragments, Part VI: The Electra* (Cambridge 1924); and G. Kaibel, *Sophokles Elektra* (Leipzig 1896).

² A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens* (Oxford 1946) 110–111.

³ φίλος ΦAL^a (Dain-Mazon).

those that know, it means Orestes and Pylades. Aegisthus agrees: "Why, you give good advice and I shall follow it."

Then a problem (1472-3).

σὺ δέ,
εἴ που κατ' οἶκόν μοι Κλυταιμνήστρα, κάλει.

Without argument Kaibel interpreted the words as addressed to Orestes ("verlangt er von Orest"), rather than, as regularly, to Electra. Adams has independently revived this view.⁴ One is tempted. It is Orestes who answers the command. It is Orestes who reasonably would be expected to be informed on the matter, for he has just entered from the palace. Yet the emphatic use and position of σὺ followed immediately by antithetical δέ imply a change of the person addressed. Is it likely that even Aegisthus would address an unknown man, presumably a companion of Orestes and a foreigner, so abruptly? Adams' English softens the Greek ("And you, sir, if Clytemnestra is perchance within, summon her"). There is no difficulty in Orestes' interrupting to answer a question put to his sister. Sophocles uses the device again in spirited dialogue at *Trachiniae* 431, where Lichas has addressed a question to the queen, Deianeira; but the old man rudely interrupts and answers for her.

Campbell was regrettably wrong in holding at 1474 that Orestes withdraws the veil and not Aegisthus. Such an interpretation not only emasculates one of the finest scenes in Greek tragedy; it is methodologically intolerable. At 1470 Aegisthus was ordered "You lift the veil yourself." Nowhere in the text is the command either remanded or refused. A critic must not assume a stage action which contradicts the words of the text, and for which no independent evidence exists.

οἴμοι, τί λεύσσω; cries Aegisthus. Then, not by an answer but by two other questions, Orestes replies with the vexed τίνα φοβεῖ; τίν' ἀγνοεῖς; literally translated by Jebb, "Whom dost thou fear? Who is it that thou dost not know?" As Kaibel well observes, τίνα φοβεῖ; answers οἴμοι; τίν' ἀγνοεῖς; answers τί λεύσσω;. The problem is, to whom does the interrogative pronoun τίνα refer, Clytemnestra or the speaker, Orestes? It is normal to apply the pronoun to the queen, but Campbell's contrary view deserves defense. Unhappily, he simply stated it without argument, and after Jebb it has been uniformly discarded. Yet it is superfluous to inquire "Do you fear Clytemnestra? Do you

⁴ S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (Toronto 1957) 79.

not recognize her?" Of course Aegisthus recognizes her—hence his horror. It is Orestes whom he hesitates in recognizing. The antithesis between *τί*, *what*, and *τίνα*, *whom*, is intentional. *τί* refers easily to the neuter corpse, *τίνα* to a living person. David Grene's "Something you fear? Do you not know the face?" does not represent the Greek. Aegisthus' next question shows how he has interpreted Orestes' queries. "Amidst what *men* (*τίνων ποτ' ἀνδρῶν*) have I fallen?" He does not say "What has become of my wife?" which would logically follow if he had understood Orestes as asking "Don't you recognize Clytemnestra?" He continues in this thought; for his next words (1479–80) are, "It can only be Orestes who addresses me." The situation recalls *Trachiniae* 1141–42, where Heracles, once Hyllus has mentioned the name Nessus, never thinks again of Deianeira.⁵ So here, once Aegisthus sees that his wife is dead, he never thinks of her again—only of his own plight, as he confronts the avenger, Orestes. A bit of unrecorded stage action may have made Orestes' questions at 1475 clearer.⁶ Aegisthus may have looked at Orestes (not the corpse) when he said, "Alas, what do I see?" Or he may have put his hand to his sword and so motivated the enquiry "Whom do you fear?" Such an action would have clarified the ambiguity of our written text.

The final lines of the play invite elucidation. At 1507 Orestes follows Aegisthus into the palace. Pylades must go in with them: as *parachorēgēma* he is attendant on the deuteragonist, whose exit provides sufficient motivation for his own, and in the course of the play he is never on stage without Orestes. The *ekkyklēma* presumably withdraws. *Pace* Wunder, Kaibel, and recently Schadewaldt⁷ (who has Electra follow the three in, turn about, and close the door!), the protagonist remains on the stage. There is neither indication nor motivation for an exit. Electra did not witness the first murder and need not the second.

Without ever indicating the protagonist's exit, Jebb renders ὦ σπέρμ' Ἀτρέως (1508) "O house of Atreus" (cf. Grene, "O race of Atreus"

⁵ This passage is well interpreted by A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1951) 88; contrast the sentimentalism of W. C. Greene, *Moirai*² (Cambridge 1948) 153 and C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles* (Cambridge 1951) 119 ("a fantastically gross Heracles, interested solely in himself").

⁶ I owe this suggestion to Dr B. M. W. Knox. The line would become what Denniston-Page (on *A. Ag.* 1264ff) would call "one of the few places in Tragedy where the meaning of the words is obscure without visual aid; and it is not clear what stage-directions should be supplied."

⁷ *Sophokles, die Tragödien*, ed. W. Schadewaldt (Hamburg 1963) 256.

and Pohlenz, "O Atreus' Geschlecht"). If words of this meaning were recited while the protagonist was present in front of the chorus, the effect of delivery could be ludicrous. If the protagonist has exited and the stage is empty, the chorus must be supposed to address actor(s) within the stage building. So Schadewaldt, "O Same des Atreus! Wie bist du . . . hinausgelangt . . .," applying *σπέρμ'* to a single person (whether Orestes or Electra we are not told), Mayerhoefer (p. 33), who specifies Orestes, or Kaibel, interpreting *das Geschwisterpaar*. This would be unusual at the end of a Greek tragedy.

There is a simpler solution. The protagonist remains on scene facing the chorus until 1510, the last line of the play,⁸ and then exits alone into the palace while the chorus and fluteplayer exit down the right parados to the *asty*. The motivation is simply that the play is done. It would never occur to the audience that Electra was hurrying off to watch the murder. One should render *ὦ σπέρμ' Ἀτρέως*, "O Offspring of Atreus" (cf. Wilbrant's "Kind Agamemnon's", possibly to avoid *Same*, not tolerable on the nineteenth century German stage) and restrict to Electra. The singular, "offspring" or "child," applied to persons is common in tragedy,⁹ not least in Sophocles. Compare, e.g., *Philoctetes* 364, 582, 1066, where Neoptolemus is addressed *ὦ σπέρμ' Ἀχιλλέως*. Indeed, there is no instance in Sophocles where the vocative of *σπέρμα* is applied to an actor offstage. *ἐλευθερίας* (1509) is now obvious as well as effective. Earlier Electra had called herself a slave (814, 1192, cf. 189ff). She is no longer. For *μόλις* I prefer Dain-Mazon's *à grand peine* and Schadewaldt's *mit Mühe* to Kaibel's *endlich* and Jebb's *at last*.¹⁰

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⁸ Compare A. Wilbrandt, *Sophokles' ausgewählte Tragödien*, ed.² (Munich 1903) 343, who suggests that Electra remains on stage until 1510 to eavesdrop ("Electra horcht") and then collapses and writhes before Apollo's *Bildsäule*. This romantic staging is curiously similar to the end of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* of 1904: see H. von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5 (Berlin 1924) 178–181. The attempt of F. Ritter, *Philologus* 17 (1861) 430–431, to deny the authenticity of these last verses is not convincing.

⁹ The usage has recently been discovered to be epic (Hes. *Cat.*, PIFAO 322 A 4: see J. Schwartz, *Pseudo-Hesiodica* [Leiden 1960] 273), and the article in *LSJ* must be altered accordingly.

¹⁰ I am indebted for various improvements to R. P. Becker and J. A. Coulter of Columbia University and B. M. W. Knox of The Center for Hellenic Studies.