

The Aeschylean Electra

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THE AESCHYLEAN ELECTRA has been the subject of less inquiry into character than the other fifth-century tragic Electras, and those scholars who have commented on Aeschylus' tragic heroine have shown little sympathy: she is colourless, weak, and manipulated by a chorus of slave women. Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones, for example, says in his commentary: "Aeschylus has no interest in character for its own sake, and this fact is especially easy to perceive here. Electra, who in Sophocles and Euripides will be a dominating figure, has the conventional qualities of a princess in the heroic age."¹ He uses Electra as evidence for the lack of interest in character that is frequently attributed to Aeschylus.² Professor Podlecki lowers her status to that of "normal": "Of Electra little need or can be said. Aeschylus' conception here is much closer to that of a normal if somewhat colourless girl."³ Professor Conacher is of the opinion that: "What we notice about this Electra is the gentle and tentative nature of her approach to the grim situation."⁴ Alain Moreau finds that Electra is really not very bright: "Far from wanting to kill, she does not even understand the advice of the chorus when they summon her to vengeance."⁵ One is given the impression by these critics that

¹ H. Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus: Oresteia. The Choephoroe* (London 1979) 5.

² J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London 1962), is the major study to be cited here, though Jones does not discuss Aeschylus' Electra in detail. This paper is not intended to promote the idea that the characters of Aeschylus are close studies of particularized individual psyches, but that Electra in this play deserves much more attention as a strongly motivating factor in the revenge than she generally receives.

³ A. Podlecki, "Aeschylus' Women," *Helios* 10 (1983) 23–47, at 36.

⁴ D. J. Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia: A Literary Commentary* (Toronto 1987) 105.

⁵ A. Moreau, "Naissance d'Électre," *Pallas* 31 (1984) 63–82, at 70.

in the Aeschylean Electra, we have a rather boring character, and one wonders why such a person did not just quietly disappear from drama, which, as we know, is far from what happened.

Helene Foley has emphasized the obligation of a woman in Greek culture to lament a family member's death and especially to keep alive in public memory any outrage against male kin, and she has used this insight as a base from which to delineate the powerful character of the Sophoclean Electra.⁶ Leaving aside Aristotle's notion of the "type-dominated aesthetic" in ancient tragic characterization,⁷ we are still faced with a dramatic puzzle: how could the Electra of *Choephoroi*, who was after all under the same social pressures and in the same dramatic circumstances as her later manifestations, have assumed such a different, indeed opposite character? Certainly playwrights can alter the mythic characters they choose to portray, but is it not more reasonable to ask whether Aeschylus should not have portrayed an Electra that had fundamentally more in common with those of Sophocles and Euripides, and perhaps created in his Electra an equally powerful and dominating figure, who laments and promotes revenge? This study asserts that Electra forges a conspiracy with the chorus, a *stasis pankoinos* in Aeschylus' words (at line 458), which will exert the necessary moral force on a reluctant Orestes. Not everyone will agree that Orestes is reluctant, or that Electra is determined, but these are two aspects of the same problem that is the focus of this study. Electra is not the boring girl next door, but a Greek heroine seeking revenge and justice, and this should be seen as a more reasonable hypothesis from which to understand this tragic character. She, after all, functions in the same way, bitterly and formidably pushing her brother towards vengeance. It certainly seems an interpretation worth exploring,

⁶ H. P. Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton 2001) 145–171. For the anthropological background see M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*² (Lanham 2002); G. Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (New York 1992); C. N. Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago 1991).

⁷ As expressed by Jones, *On Aristotle* 40.

particularly in view of the recent research into the role of mourning women in Greek society. Only the text can provide an answer.

The interpretation that views Orestes as decisive axiomatically makes Electra weak and unimportant. So it was understandable that Wilamowitz, following on the ideas of O. Müller, considered Electra an important force in the action of *Choephoroi* because he thought Orestes was indecisive.⁸ Most critical attention to this play revolves around two central points of contention, and both of these involve Orestes and his intentions. Orestes does express a desire for revenge, but does that demonstrate that his speech shows that he is in fact totally determined, and that he understands that this also means killing his mother? And related to this, does the *kommos* simply express the lyric reaffirmation of his resolve, or does it lead Orestes to action instead of the mere expression of wishful thinking? The present critical view generally favours Schade-waldt: that Orestes has early in the play expressed his resolve and determination, and the *kommos* is a lyric working out of this expression of determination.⁹ The obvious objection to this, as Schade-waldt noted, is that the *kommos* does not move the action forward at all, despite the fact that it is the longest and most complex lyric that survives in Greek tragedy, and displays the most intimate fusion of actors and chorus.¹⁰ Orestes was

⁸ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Aischylos: Interpretationen* (Berlin 1914) 205–210; K. O. Müller, *Kleine deutsche Schriften* (Breslau 1870) 473 ff.; K. Sier, *Die lyrischen Partien der Choephoren des Aischylos* (Stuttgart 1988) 70 ff. Sier gives the best available history of the interpretations of the opening and *kommos* of *Choephoroi*. It is notable that Sier (71 n.5) confidently accuses Wilamowitz of an anachronistic Hamlet-inspired view of Orestes (“bedarf kaum eines Beweises”), seemingly unaware that Goethe’s romantic-inspired view of Shakespeare which he quotes as probative is itself anachronistic. Wilamowitz in fact never speaks of Hamlet, and though he was born in a century steeped in romanticism, was able to understand Orestes as something less than a romantic hero.

⁹ W. Schade-waldt, “Der Kommos in Aischylos’ *Choephoren*,” *Hellas und Hesperien: Gesammelte Schriften I* (Zurich 1970) 249–284 (= *Hermes* 67 [1932] 312–354).

¹⁰ A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus: Choephoroi* (Oxford 1986) 124.

determined at the beginning and determined at the end.¹¹ The critical literature talks about invoking Agamemnon's aid,¹² which is obvious enough, but Agamemnon ultimately plays no part in the revenge. If the murdered father simply contributes to the resolve by virtue of being prayed to, then that resolve needed heightening. To understand the role of Electra, we must understand the lack of resolve of Orestes. For without Orestes, nothing is going to happen, and the revenge will not take place, as Electra knows.

Paul Friedländer writes: "Electra comes on insecure [*unsicher*] at the beginning and lets herself be driven by the maidens. Then, it is true, she begs her father for vengeance, helps her brother to his decision, and knows that she has inherited a wolf-temper [*Wolfsinn*] from her mother and cannot fawn before the ruler." But immediately afterwards: "Orestes is from the very beginning determined [*entschieden*]." ¹³ However, a young woman who is insecure is not likely to enter shouting for vengeance. And if Orestes is determined, why does he need help to make up his mind from someone who is unsure of herself?

The section of the play in which we are introduced to Electra as she speaks and interacts with the chorus for the first time is key to an understanding of her character. Professor Conacher's assessments of Electra are representative of the interpretations of Electra's words and actions as ignorance, innocence, and tentativeness in the first scene of the play:

The ultimate horror of the matricidal intent which underlies this "perversion" of Clytemnestra's perverse offerings and the steely

¹¹ Schadewaldt justifies his argument by appealing to a general rule he had formulated about lyrical *Auswirkung* of earlier dramatic action. But Sier, *Die lyrischen Partien* 73, following Lesky, has cast doubt on this rule, and indeed it is little more than a *petitio principii*. Something does happen in the *kommos*, as Lesky shows in "Der Kommos der Choephoren," *SBWien* 221.3 (1942). But the question is: what?

¹² For example, Garvie 122: "The present κομμός, whose ostensible purpose is to invoke Agamemnon's aid against his murderers (456 ff.), forms the culmination of all the earlier prayers to Zeus, the chthonic powers, and Agamemnon."

¹³ P. Friedländer, *Studien zur antiken Literatur und Kunst* (Berlin 1969) 125.

resolve it will require for execution will, in due course, receive greater emphasis—all the more so for being all but suppressed by the *minor key* of Electra's first utterances. For *what we notice most about this Electra is the gentle and tentative nature* of her approach to the grim situation thrust upon her. Her first speech opens with *a series of timid questions to the Chorus*, culminating in the question whose fearful irony *she hardly dares express* ... So too, in the dialogue that follows, it is to the Chorus that Electra turns for the *words she hesitates to say herself* ... The particular form of Electra's prayers continues *the tentative, almost innocent, approach* we have already noted.¹⁴

In Tarkow's comments on the early exchange between Electra and the chorus, we see again a naïve, hesitant Electra in this scene:

On this particular occasion it is her *friends and trusted advisors comprising the chorus who must solve the problem of the libations by choosing the words and tone* for her to adopt as she turns the offerings against Clytemnestra. It is the choral members who must urge her to pray for revenge, and to implore the gods for the arrival of some mortal or immortal to accomplish the deed. Most surprisingly it is the *chorus which must exhort* Electra to add the name of Orestes to her prayers ...¹⁵

These quotations could be easily multiplied, and from them the modern reader gains an impression that the ancient audience must have expected heroic tragic princesses to have more emotion in their makeup than this. Electra has never been alleged to be a *Kontrastfigur* like Chrysothemis.

Electra does not speak from the moment she arrives on stage near the beginning of the extant lines of the play until line 84. When she does speak, her request to the chorus is in the form of the question "What am I to say?" She understandably does not yet perceive the chorus of slaves as trustworthy allies, and she carefully asks them how she should phrase the prayer that accompanies her libation. The question is several times re-

¹⁴ Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia* 104–105 (my italics).

¹⁵ T. A. Tarkow, "Electra's Role in the Opening Scene of the Choephoroi," *Erano* 77 (1979) 11–21, at 12 (my italics).

peated and reformulated.¹⁶ However, in this important passage of character composition, it is not inexperience and innocence that we are meant to see in Electra. The error of the critics is to equate a question with hesitation, and this is an unjustified simplification. If our reaction to her first words is to think of her as a naïve, hesitant princess, our views will soon change. She knows exactly how to formulate a prayer, and she knows exactly what she wants to express in it.

Electra's address to the chorus contains aspects of ritual prayer and rhetorical leading questions. The "What am I to say?" or "What prayer shall I make?" formula in literary prayers (e.g. Pindar *Ol.* 2 "What god, what hero, what man shall I celebrate?") often used as a self-addressed question is here used dramatically as a series of questions posed to the chorus rather than to herself, and has its origin in the Greek concern with making the right prayer in the correct language. The scenario is not a prayer, but is leading to a prayer to a powerful and potentially dangerous dead hero, and Electra's address to the chorus is appropriate to the antiphonal nature of the mourning context. She speaks not only about proper language, but also about appropriate ritual. The ancient concern for correct language is demonstrated, for example, in Plato's *Laws* cautioning that one must be very careful in the formulation of prayers, otherwise one may get what one does not want if terms are not carefully defined. In discussions of ὀρθότης or "correctness" first in a political context, Plato has his Athenian interlocutor say (*Laws* 688B): "I declare that to make use of prayer without careful thought is a precarious thing, and that the opposite to what is desired will be obtained" (ὅτι δὴ φημι εὐχῆ χρησθαι σφαλερὸν εἶναι νοῦν μὴ κεκτημένον, ἀλλὰ τάναντία ταῖς βουλήσεσιν οἱ γίγνεσθαι). And then, in a discussion of "correctness" in a literary context, the same speaker says (801A–B): "The third law, I believe, must be that the poets, knowing that prayers are [men's] requests of the gods, should be exceedingly careful lest they ask for a good thing, unaware that it is a bad thing [they are requesting]. For

¹⁶ τί φῶ (87, 118); πῶς εὐφρον' εἶπω, πῶς κατεύξωμαι πατρί (88); πότερα λέγουσα (89); οὐδ' ἔχω τί φῶ (91); ἢ τοῦτο φάσκω τοῦπος (93); and ἢ σίγ' (96).

it would be a laughable mistake, I believe, if such a prayer were made” (τρίτος δ’ οἶμαι, νόμος, ὅτι γνόντας δεῖ τοὺς ποιητὰς ὡς εὐχαὶ παρὰ θεῶν αἰτήσεις εἰσὶ, δεῖ δὴ τὸν νοῦν αὐτοὺς σφόδρα προσέχειν μὴ ποτε λάθωσι κακὸν ὡς ἀγαθὸν αἰτούμενοι· γελοῖον γὰρ δὴ τὸ πάθος, οἶμαι, τοῦτ’ ἂν γίγνοιτο εὐχῆς τοιαύτης γενομένης).¹⁷ All bases must be covered when praying to gods or heroes.

Clytemnestra’s request has caused an overwhelming response of gloom and terror in the slave women, vividly described by them at 32–41. Electra expresses no fear. For the moment, however, she understandably holds back from a strong expression of her revolt until she can be sure of the collective support of these slave women. The first words of Electra, particularly lines 84–101, have been the subject of much debate:¹⁸

δμοαὶ γυναῖκες, δωμάτων εὐθήμονες, ἐπεὶ πάρεστε τῆσδε προστροπῆς ἐμοὶ	85
πομποί, γένεσθε τῶνδε σύμβουλοι πέρι· τί φῶ χέουσα τάσδε κηδεῖους χοάς;	
πῶς εὐφρον’ εἶπω, πῶς κατεύξωμαι πατρί; πότερα λέγουσα παρὰ φίλης φίλῳ φέρειν	90
γυναικὸς ἀνδρί, τῆς ἐμῆς μητρὸς πάρα; τῶνδ’ οὐ πάρεστι θάρσος, οὐδ’ ἔχω τί φῶ	
χέουσα τόνδε πέλανον ἐν τύμβῳ πατρός. ἢ τοῦτο φάσκω τοῦπος, ὡς νόμος βροτοῖς, ἴσ’ ἀντιδοῦναι τοῖσι πέμπουσιν τάδε	95
στέφη, δόσιν γε τῶν κακῶν ἐπαξίαν, ἢ σίγ’ ἀτίμως, ὥσπερ οὖν ἀπόλετο	
πατήρ, τὰδ’ ἐκχέασα, γάποτον χύσιν, στεῖχω, καθάρμαθ’ ὡς τις ἐκπέμψας, πάλιν	
δικοῦσα τεύχος ἀστρόφοισιν ὄμμασιν, τῆσδ’ ἔστε βουλῆς, ὦ φίλαι, μεταίτιαι.	100
κοινὸν γὰρ ἔχθος ἐν δόμοις νομίζομεν.	

¹⁷ S. Pulleyn, “The Power of Names in Classical Greek Religion,” *CQ* 44 (1994) 17–25, discusses the Greek concern “Do I have the right name for the power I want to address?” Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos*⁴ (Stuttgart 1956) 143 ff., has demonstrated the prevalence of the εἴτε ... εἴτε feature of Greek prayer language, which is paralleled here by Electra’s repetition of πῶς and πότερα ... ἢ ... ἢ.

¹⁸ The text is as in Murray’s *OCT*, which follows the manuscript **M**.

Servant women, who order the house's cares,
 since you are present here to attend me in this rite
 of supplication, give me your advice touching this.
 What should I say while I pour these offerings of sorrow?
 How shall I find gracious words, how pray to my father?
 Shall I say that these are from a beloved to a beloved,
 from a wife to her husband, from my own mother?
 I haven't the boldness¹⁹ for this, and I don't know what to say
 as I pour this offering on the tomb of my father.
 Or should I say these words, as is normal for mortals,
 that to those who send these funeral honours,
 may he send in return with good—a gift to match their evil?
 Or, in silence and dishonour, just as my father
 died, should I pour them out for the earth to drink,
 and then retrace my steps as one carrying away refuse from a rite,
 hurling the vessel from me with averted eyes?
 Friends, join with me in making the plan.
 For we practice a common hatred in the house.

Electra's speech is manipulative, and the precise rhetoric does not allow us to feel it as tentative. In this passage, Electra proposes three alternative actions that she might adopt: the first, that she carry out the ritual while speaking the words her mother wishes; the second, that she carry out the ritual while speaking words that suggest a different meaning, that the offerings be repaid with evil to those sending it; and third, that she carry out the ritual in silence. The passage has been called inelegant, illogical, and inept, and there have been attempts to "repair" it. Garvie (67–68) summarizes some of the debate, as does Diggle who argues for a transposition of lines 91–92 to follow line 99.²⁰ The debate has focussed on the placement of the "What shall I say?" formula throughout the passage. The repetition at 91–92, οὐδ' ἔχω τί φῶ χέουσα τόνδε πέλανον ἐν τύμβῳ πατρός, has troubled many commentators, including Diggle, who argues for the transposition not only because of the flatness of the repetition, but on the grounds of the logic of Electra's argument as well. Garvie (68–69) agrees with Diggle's

¹⁹ θάρσος has the sense of "impudence" or "insolence."

²⁰ J. Diggle, "A Transposition in the *Choephoroi*," *CR* 20 (1970) 267–269. His suggestion is followed by Page in the 1972 *OCT*.

assessment that the formula's repetition at 91 is inelegant and on this basis should be moved elsewhere. Garvie however does not agree with the second half of Diggle's argument, which is based on the supposedly problematic θάρσος of line 91, that when Electra says that she "does not have the courage for this" she must be referring to her final alternative rather than her first one, since the only course of action she need fear is the dishonour accorded to Agamemnon in performing the ritual in silence. The lines, as Garvie asserts, should remain where tradition has placed them, but this is because he interprets differently the logic of Electra's argument, because of her expression of θάρσος. He interprets the first proposal as the most fear-producing option for her. But the ritual will not be carried out as Clytemnestra has commanded because Electra knows that the intent is wrong. Her first proposal tells us this immediately, in strong language, with θάρσος indicating her hostility to this option. She would not dare to do this. She is suggesting to the chorus that to carry out Clytemnestra's command is not an option at all. The second proposal is very suggestive and indicates to the chorus that she might be willing (because this is ὡς νόμος βροτοῖς) to pray for repayment for the funeral honours, but to change the words to bring harm to "those who are sending" these honours. The final option indicates, by the negative terms in which it is framed (ἀτίμως, ὥσπερ οὖν ἀπώλετο πατήρ) and its reference to the ritual disposal of polluted house sweepings (καθάσμαθ' ὡς τις ἐκπέμψας), that this is hardly an action that she would choose to carry out.

Proposals A and C are formulated as outrageous by Electra. Proposal B contains the suggestion (that she pray for harm repaid to the murderers) that will eventually lead to a fourth option, left unspoken here by Electra: a prayer for an avenger. Her speech is not to be seen as logical argumentation, but rather as an attempt to establish a collectivity that, once brought together (the *stasis pankoinos* of line 458), will do what she wants it to do. Electra is attempting in a way that is both diplomatic and manipulative to bring the chorus on board, rather than asking for advice in her ignorance; but she does not manipulate in a manner that would be too obvious if her speech were straightforwardly rhetorical. She gains the confidence of the chorus as she establishes a collectivity of effort.

She asks them at the beginning and the end of her speech to be her allies and fellow counsellors, to join with her in making the plan (γένεσθε τῶνδε σύμβουλοι πέρι, 86; τῆσδ' ἔστε βουλῆς, ὦ φίλαι, μεταίτιαι, 100).

At line 101 she stresses their common suffering and sentiment, that they have a shared hatred in the house (κοινὸν γὰρ ἔχθος ἐν δόμοις νομίζομεν). This statement is an implied expression of her hatred for her mother. At 105 she attempts to get the chorus to suggest a better way of conducting the offering at the grave: λέγοις ἄν, εἴ τι τῶνδ' ἔχεις ὑπέρτερον.²¹ She asks whether she should include them along with herself in the prayer (ἐμοί τε καὶ σοί τᾶρ' ἐπεύξομαι τάδε, 112). She is working on their emotions: “We all hate the same people in this house; now let us do something about them. Are you with me?” Her control of the direction of the exchange is masterly as she turns to these older women (παλαιά, 171; they frequently address Electra and Orestes as “child” and “children”) and invites them, and repeats her invitation, to speak: λέγοις ἄν, a polite optative, appears at the beginning of both lines 105 and 108. By her use of the technical term ἐξηγουμένη (118), she refers to the chorus as *exegetes*, her advisers in ritual. In answer, they consent to speak from the heart (τὸν ἐκ φρενὸς λόγον, 107) and to become her advisers—in other words, to join with her as she has asked them to do.

Electra's method is similar to a standard technique employed in epic, which is to ask several, sometimes ironic, questions that are false, and to end with a question that leads to what the speaker knows is the correct answer. Janko illustrates this in Achilles' offensively ironic speech to Patroclus at *Iliad* 16.7–19, where Achilles poses the double question, affecting not to know why his friend is upset: “Have you or I had bad news concerning our fathers from home?,” answering himself in the neg-

²¹ Garvie 71, on ὑπέρτερον, translates “Please tell me, if you have anything better than this to say.” He explains that this line restates the positive idea expressed at 100, after having expressed her understanding that the chorus may be fearful of someone (102). Line 105 may be seen as an invitation to the chorus to make a proposal hostile to Clytemnestra, one that matches Electra's statement of implied hatred of her mother at 101.

ative, and ending with the question that leads to the truth: “Do you grieve for the Greeks?” Janko calls this a “focussing device,” and Electra is doing something similar here.²²

In the ensuing stichomythia, it is the chorus that are most hesitant, not always given a chance to complete their thoughts (117, 119), before Electra, ever pressing, poses another question. She first draws out of the chorus those names for whom she should ask a blessing, continuing to press them until she has heard from them a recommendation that she include herself and all who hate Aegisthus, as well as Orestes. Lines 119–120 are most revealing. The chorus suggest that she pray for a god or a mortal, and Electra interrupts them with “Which do you mean—a judge or an avenger?” She wants the recommendation closely defined, and points to the obvious answer, the only one possible. The chorus’ answer makes it clear that her allies recommend vengeance: an avenger of her father who will kill in return (ἀνταποκτενεῖ, 121; τὸν ἐχθρὸν ἀνταμείβεσθαι κακοῖς, 123). There are alternative ways of performing lines in a play, placing stress on certain words more than on others, playing with timing of the delivery of words and phrases, but stichomythia generally involves rapid exchange that would be an unproductive way to portray hesitation and unsureness in Electra as interlocutor. This is rapid-fire speech in a play that tends throughout to be quick-moving, with short, fast-paced scenes (with the exception of the *kommos*) succeeding one upon the other. Electra quickly asks a series of short, leading questions that pilot the more hesitant chorus directly to the answers she wishes to hear spoken aloud. Thus it is difficult to agree with Lloyd-Jones when he says of the stichomythic lines that “here the Coryphaeus gradually convinces Electra to accompany the libation with a prayer very different from that which Clytemnestra would have wished.”²³ By the end of the stichomythic exchange, she is assured that the chorus sympathizes with her and that she has established a reliable collective support in them.

It is through this drawing out of the “what shall I say? what

²² R. Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary* IV (Cambridge 1992) 316.

²³ Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus: Oresteia* ad 108.

prayer shall I make?” formula with its affinities to the concern for proper language and procedure in Greek prayers, and her rapid, leading interrogation of the chorus, that Aeschylus establishes the basic traits of Electra’s character in her introductory scene. Electra’s purpose in the libation ritual is to alter its intention. She is the one who is to perform the prayer and pour the libation, and thus she is the central figure in organizing it. She as a character acts out of her own will, having far more personal motivation than the chorus of slaves have to carry out the change to Clytemnestra’s instructions.²⁴ And it is a strong character with strong personal motivation that Aeschylus carefully lays out for us. It will be about 250 lines after the libation ceremony, in the course of the *kommos*, that Electra will proclaim that she has a wolf-like *thumos* inherited from her mother, on which Wilamowitz comments that the Aeschylean Electra is just like the Sophoclean.²⁵

Wilamowitz maintained that Orestes was not determined from the beginning and that the function of the *kommos* was to lead him to the decision of matricide (see n.8). This is criticized by Schadewaldt, who recognizes that Orestes becomes more emotional and “breaks out” in 434 ff. as a result of the description of the *maschalismos*, but he thinks that Orestes was determined (*entschlossen*) in 297 ff. He admits the helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*) of the children at the beginning.²⁶ He also admits throughout that the *kommos* is supposed to whip the participants up emotionally into achieving the murder. He maintains against Wilamowitz the determinedness of Orestes from the beginning, and stresses the importance of the climax of the *kommos*, the evocation of the nether powers to help Orestes in

²⁴ E. T. Owen, *The Harmony of Aeschylus* (Toronto 1952) 89 asserts: “Both the chorus and Electra are of the same mind, but are feeling their way, being cautious not to commit themselves too soon. Certainly, it is clear that the chorus would not have taken the step of themselves. They need the incentive of Electra’s misgivings, but once she has expressed them they encourage her to carry out what is plainly her own aim.”

²⁵ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Aischylos Orestie II Das Opfer am Grabe* (Berlin 1896) 200.

²⁶ Schadewaldt, *Hellas* 276–277.

the act of vengeance.²⁷ However, lines 297 ff. can only with great difficulty be seen as a sign of his *Entschlossenheit*:

τοιούσδε χρησμοῖς ἄρα χρὴ πεποιθέναί;
 κεί μὴ πέποιθα, τοῦργον ἔστ' ἐργαστέον.
 πολλοὶ γὰρ εἰς ἓν συμπίτνουσιν ἕμεροι,
 θεοῦ τ' ἐφετμαὶ καὶ πατρὸς πένθος μέγα, 300
 καὶ πρὸς πιέζει χρημάτων ἀχηνία,
 τὸ μὴ πολίτας εὐκλεεστάτους βροτῶν,
 Τροίας ἀναστατήρας εὐδόξω φρενί,
 δυοῖν γυναικοῖν ὧδ' ὑπηκόους πέλειν.
 θήλεια γὰρ φρήν· εἰ δὲ μή, τάχ' εἴσεται. 305

Are such oracles not to be trusted?
 Even if I do not trust them, the deed must be done.
 For many desires fall toward a single goal:
 The god's demands and my deep grief for my father,
 My lack of money oppresses me,
 And my desire that the citizens, most glorious of men,
 Of courageous heart as destroyers of Troy,
 Might not be subjects like this to two women.
 For he is womanish; and if not, he will soon know.

Schadewaldt claims that ἕμεροι at 299 indicates Orestes' expressed determination.²⁸ ἕμερος, however, does not indicate determination, but a longing, or wanting something that is not present. Himeros is the personification of erotic desire and an attendant of Aphrodite,²⁹ often portrayed in art along with Eros and Pothos,³⁰ and what we see in this passage is the kind of generalization by which Orestes throughout the play demonstrates his unwillingness to face the reality that the revenge will mean the murder of his mother. To “want” or “long for” something does not denote resolution.

Many commentators have been of the view that before re-

²⁷ Schadewaldt, *Hellas* 249 n.2.

²⁸ He offers parallels from *Prometheus* 649 and 865, *Agamemnon* 1204, and *Suppliants* 87 (in the latter, indicating the “will of Zeus,” according to Schadewaldt, though Zeus’ “wanting” something as king of gods might well be called his “will”).

²⁹ Hesiod makes Himeros present, along with Eros, at the birth of Aphrodite, and afterwards a member of her train (*Theog.* 201–202).

³⁰ *LIMC* V.1 425–426, V.2 299–300.

turning to Argos, Orestes had already made his decision to kill the murderers of his father, and that he had in mind specifically the deaths of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.³¹ This strongly held interpretation has led to opposition by those who argued, on the one hand, that the purpose of the *kommos* is to have Orestes overcome his revulsion at the notion of matricide, and those who, on the other hand, argue that the *kommos* is designed to bring the spirit of Agamemnon and the powers of the underworld to their aid. Both views lead to the conclusion that there is no real change in Orestes either in the *kommos* or indeed throughout the whole play.³² Most recent commentators (Garvie, Käppel, Sier, Lloyd-Jones) continue to choose one of the opposing sides as the better interpretation.³³ As an example, Käppel remarks that Lloyd-Jones was the first to see that the importance of the *kommos* is to invoke the aid of the dead Agamemnon.³⁴ Lloyd-Jones says:

Modern critics whose minds have been dominated by the unconscious presuppositions dictated by modern drama have tried hard to show that Orestes can kill his mother only if he is spurred by the stimulus afforded by the conjuration scene. Their attempt is not successful. The poet's words make it unambiguously clear that the purpose of the conjuration is to secure the all-important assistance of Agamemnon's ghost ... To grasp its import it is necessary to remember that the poet assumes belief in the power of the dead to influence events on earth. It is all-important for Orestes and Electra to establish contact with the

³¹ K. Reinhardt, *Aischylos als Regisseur und Theologe* (Bern 1949); Lesky, *SBWien* 221.3 (1942); Schadewaldt, *Hellas*; H. W. Smyth, *Aeschylean Tragedy* (New York 1969). As one example, Smyth says: "Orestes' intention to kill his mother and her lover was not formed in the course of the dramatic action; it was fixed at the very beginning of the play ... The tenacity of Orestes' purpose was not relaxed when he stands nearer to its accomplishment" (200). These scholars generally reject Wilamowitz's view that Orestes comes to a decision under the influence of Electra and the chorus.

³² Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia* 108–110, provides a survey of the conflicting interpretations and arguments. He aligns himself more closely with the "getting Agamemnon on board" view (113).

³³ Garvie; Sier, *Die lyrischen Partien*; L. Käppel, *Die Konstruktion der Handlung der Orestie des Aischylos* (Munich 1998); Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus: Oresteia*.

³⁴ Käppel, *Die Konstruktion* 208.

departed spirit of Agamemnon and to secure its aid in taking revenge upon the murderers.³⁵

Lloyd-Jones was of course not the first to see this. The γόος ἔνδικος has always been seen to include both of these functions. The *kommos* is a lyrical working-out of the appeal to Agamemnon, but it must be understood that without the cooperation of Orestes nothing is going to work.³⁶ However, debating the notion of the “decision” of Orestes, and when it occurs, is perhaps unhelpful. To solve this problem, the most important question to ask is: When is it made clear to the audience that Orestes realizes that killing the murderers means killing his mother? The text up to the beginning of the *kommos* does not show Orestes with any clear awareness that he will be committing matricide. His youth and inexperience and his consequent inability to understand the task that lies ahead of him are implicit in a text that never shows him articulating exactly what the vengeance entails. He is nowhere shown to be aware of the full implications of the Delphic command, but only of the consequences of disobeying it (ironic since we know what the consequences of obeying it will be), and the playwright’s delay in making specific reference to Clytemnestra as his victim is not only a very effective tension builder, but a key to our understanding of the characterization of Electra and Orestes. Anne Burnett says of Orestes, rightly, that he “enters as a youth called to play a part for which he is not prepared, but he walks directly into a complex ritual that both *empowers and instructs*” (my italics). Nonetheless, Burnett does not believe that the *kommos* is directed at him.³⁷

Schadewaldt claims that as the *kommos* begins, Orestes’ behaviour is not at all desperate (“Orestes Haltung ist durchaus nicht verzweifelnd”).³⁸ But Orestes’ words are a string of questions about what he should do, and indeed sound very despair-

³⁵ Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus: Oresteia* 6, 26.

³⁶ In Aeschylus, at least. Sophocles (*El.* 947 ff.) toys with the idea that Electra might carry out the revenge herself, and Euripides (*El.* 1225) places Electra’s hand on the sword as Orestes kills their mother.

³⁷ A. P. Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley 1997) 106–107.

³⁸ Schadewaldt, *Hellas* 254.

ing; these are questions very unlike those of Electra earlier when she was attempting to manipulate the chorus. They are not leading questions and not manipulative. Schadewaldt then contradicts himself when he says that there is no word of Orestes' "innere Entwicklung" or "psychologische Vertiefung" envisioned by Wilamowitz;³⁹ though he himself has made clear that Orestes was *hilfflos* (see n.26) and is then in the corrupt lines 435–438 "determined" (followed by Garvie 162). Wilamowitz, on the other hand, says of the intentions of Electra and the chorus in the *kommos*: "What they wanted [in the *kommos*], and the only thing they could do, was to bring the boy to make up his mind."⁴⁰ It is in the *kommos* that the decisiveness of the chorus rises to meet the decisiveness of Electra, and we shall see how closely focussed on Orestes they and Electra are, and remain throughout. There is ultimately a change in Orestes as the play progresses, though Wilamowitz' "psychologische Vertiefung" is too strong a description for what happens to him. The young man learns things from Electra and the chorus during the *kommos* that push him towards action, though this does not constitute a psychological development or "deepening."

Orestes has returned to Argos for something. He has said that he wants his house and property returned to him, but lying between regaining his property and killing his mother is the need to bring him to the point of both full knowledge and complete commitment that he does not express before the *kommos*. Orestes' "decision" is limited neither to his declaration at 18–19 and his statement of motives at 297–305, nor even to the *kommos*, but is continued and elaborated throughout the play up to the very moment of the murder of his mother. And we shall see that Electra's behaviour in the *kommos* is entirely consistent with what we have seen in her earlier interaction with the chorus.

The four opening triads of the *kommos* are compositionally regular, each beginning with a strophe sung by Orestes, followed by the chorus and then Electra. To separate the triads,

³⁹ Schadewaldt, *Hellas* 270.

⁴⁰ Wilamowitz, *Aischylos Interpretationen* 208 ("Was sie wollten, allein wollen konnten, war den Knaben zum Entschlusse bringen").

the chorus sing anapaests. In their introductory anapaests before the first triad, the chorus introduce the gnomic statement that will be their thrust throughout the *kommos*, that the “doer will suffer” (δράσαντι παθεῖν, 313), and they then define the purpose of the lament in this speech, particularly at 327–331:

ὄτοτύζεται δ' ὁ θνήσκων,
 ἀναφαίνεται δ' ὁ βλάπτων.
 πατέρων τε καὶ τεκόντων
 γόος ἔνδικος ματεύει
 τὸ πᾶν ἀμφιλαφῆς ταραχθεῖς.

The dead man is lamented,
 The criminal is produced.
 For fathers and parents
 A lament with justice hunts down
 On every side, once stirred up.

The present lament, with justice on its side, will hunt down the guilty (γόος ἔνδικος ματεύει, 330).

The second triad ushers in a new tone to the lament. Orestes and then Electra in turn utter the unrealistic wishes typical of lament expression. The nature of the wishes made by each is indicative of character. Orestes wishes, with epic reminiscences noted by commentators, that Agamemnon had perished at Troy, achieving glorious renown for himself and his children.⁴¹ Electra, on the other hand, would not have wanted Agamemnon's death at all, and she expresses the bitter wish that his murderers had themselves been murdered earlier. She is closely in tune with the chorus, who have introduced the notion of the justice of seeking out the murderers who must suffer in their turn, as well as the notion of victory. The chorus respond to Electra's wish by saying that it is better than gold (372). Garvie (142) believes, along with the scholiast, that the chorus' response, δύνασαι γάρ (374), is sarcastic, expressing the idea that Electra cannot seem to do anything other than make wishes. The chorus, however, do not say that all Electra can do is wish. Her wish is better than gold because it focusses on the deaths of the murderers, so that in her wish she is thinking along the

⁴¹ Similar to Achilles' unrealistic wish for Agamemnon (*Od.* 24.30–33) and Telemachus' for Odysseus (*Od.* 1.236–240).

right lines. The chorus prefer her wish to Orestes', and they tell her so. The corruption of the text at the end of the chorus' statement (378–379) renders it impossible to know with any level of certainty with what words they end. Garvie (143) reviews the various conjectures of commentators, and West offers further speculation in justification of his Teubner text (1991).⁴² The important thing for us in an exploration of character is Orestes' reaction to the chorus' words. They have goaded him deeply, since he says in emotional reaction: “This has pierced through my ear like an arrow” (380–381). He exhorts Zeus to send up retribution from the underworld, and although it is late-avenging (ὑστερόποιον, 383), nevertheless it will be accomplished. The generalizing plural of τοκεῦσι (385) has generated debate over whether it is Agamemnon (“for my father”) or Clytemnestra (“against my mother”) to whom the text refers. The original audience might have understood either one. Orestes is not specific; to read the father or the mother specifically here is not to follow the text. He is full of emotion, but he does not actually proclaim his own role, nor does he name his mother, and this continues to be very important.

The chorus then build on Orestes' emotion with a wish that it might raise the female cry of victory over “the man who is struck” (ἀνδρὸς θεινομένου) and “the woman who is being undone” (γυναικὸς ὀλλυμένης), the two participles appearing with emphasis at the beginnings of lines 388 and 389. Electra elaborates the sentiments of the chorus, that mighty Zeus might perform some head-splitting by bringing his hand down upon someone who continues to be unnamed. The theme of the γόος as justice tracking down the guilty is repeated by Electra as she follows the request for the splitting of heads with a demand for justice out of unjust things (δίκαν δ' ἐξ ἀδίκων ἀπαιτῶ, 398). The chorus' anapaests take up Electra's train of thought with a repetition of the theme of the natural law of vengeance, that drops of blood spilled on the ground demand other blood (400–402).

By the beginning of the fourth triad (405 ff.), Orestes is in

⁴² M. L. West, *Studies in Aeschylus* (Stuttgart 1990) 243–244.

despair. Wilamowitz describes him as “ratlos.”⁴³ Schadewaldt criticizes this interpretation, saying that since Orestes has already made up his mind to do the deed, he cannot be experiencing despair, and his expression of ἀμηχανία (407) simply refers to the desperate situation in which he and Electra find themselves.⁴⁴ However, as Garvie notes (151), his cry of πᾶ τις τράποιτ’ ἄν, ὦ Ζεῦ; (“Where can I turn?,” 409) cannot be simply a call to Zeus to help. The cry comes from a very young man who is confused and terrified at the situation in which he finds himself. We know this because his expression of ἀμηχανία is an exasperation to the chorus, who, not in despair (Garvie and others) but in a take-charge attitude, tell Orestes that when he talks like this they lose hope and become anxious (καὶ τότε μὲν δύσελπις, σπλάγχνα δέ μοι κελαινοῦται πρὸς ἔπος κλυούσα, “then I am without hope, and my feelings darken over at your words as I hear them,” 413–414). However, *on the contrary* (ἀντ’, 415), with a different attitude on his part, their distress is put away.

The fourth triad ends with Electra’s words which also end the first section of the *kommos*, important in that here she speaks of her own character. Her speech is important as a conclusion to this section, and also for a correct understanding of her character (418–422):

τί δ’ ἄν φάντες τύχοιμεν; ἦ τάπερ
 πάθομεν ἄχεα πρὸς γε τῶν τεκομένων;
 πάρεστι σαίνειν, τὰ δ’ οὔτι θέλγεται·
 λύκος γὰρ ὅστ’ ὠμόφρων
 ἄσαντος ἐκ ματρὸς ἐστι θυμός.

Garvie translates (156): “She may fawn, but they (the ἄχεα) are in no way soothed; for like a savage-minded wolf my angry heart is implacable because of (as a result of) my mother.” He comments that “it would be wrong to exclude entirely the idea that Electra has *inherited* [his italics] her savage θυμός from her mother and the idea that crime is the parent of still further crime.” Wrong it would be indeed, and in fact this is precisely

⁴³ Wilamowitz, *Aischylos Interpretationen* 205.

⁴⁴ Schadewaldt, *Hellas* 268 n.70.

the idea. Most translators correctly understand that Electra is saying here that her own fierce nature comes from her mother.⁴⁵ The literal translation of *πάρεστι σαίνειν* is “it is possible to fawn.” The verb suggests dog-like behaviour, with an underlying moral condemnation. At the same time, the word denotes flattering behaviour with a purpose to coexist comfortably. Electra suggests that in this context she could just go along, as Chrysothemis recommends as a sensible alternative to what the Sophoclean Electra does. She is saying that it is possible, i.e. it is within her power, to go along with either her mother, or with “them,” since the words are left unspecific. But she will not do this, for these things are not to be dealt with by “going along” on Electra’s part, since she has a vicious nature *ἐκ μητρός*. She will claim that she “lives a dog’s life” (445–447), though she is no lap dog, and the wolf image better suits her temperament.

θέλγεται is equivalent to the preceding verb *σαίνειν*, as is shown by Electra’s use of both in 420. Hence “it is possible to go along,” but the idea is quickly dispatched by *οὔτι θέλγεται*. That is, “these things are not to be appeased by nice words.” Schadewaldt (see n.44) translates *οὔτι θέλγεται* as “laesst nicht beschmeicheln,” but *θέλγω* is more precise. Pindar at *Nem.* 4.2–5 uses it of the effect of the song of the Muses and of hot water on weary limbs, “soften, mollify,” and at Aesch. *PV* 865: *ἕμερος θέλξει τὸ μὴ κτείνειν*, “desire will persuade her not to kill.” These things will not be appeased by fawning or going along because her spirit is like a wolf’s (inherited) from her mother, unappeasable (*οὐ θέλγεται*) and unappeasing (*ἄσαντος*).

In this string of assertions, *σαίνειν* and *ἄσαντος* belong together. *σαίνειν* is generalized and *ἄσαντος*, as Wilamowitz saw, is active rather than passive, though this is denied by many (e.g. Garvie 156). Electra, according to her words, has been ken-

⁴⁵ Burnett, however (*Revenge* 108), deviates from the usual interpretation: “What Electra says, however, is that the aggressive spirit of their mother is implacable and savage and that she suffers from it.” A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Washington 1971) 122, does not take a stand, preferring to understand from the “confusion” that “they may fawn, she may fawn; theirs is her nature which will not fawn, cannot be fawned upon.” Sier, *Die lyrischen Partien* 60, loses an important key to Electra’s character in assigning these lines to Orestes.

neled away like a dog, so she is not referring to herself as unappeasable, but rather as unappeasing. Garvie asserts that Electra “could never, even for a moment, imagine that her troubles would abate if she were to flatter her mother, and it is pointless to suggest the possibility.” But a character may well, and very plausibly, raise a possibility in order to deny it. It is a technique similar to what she did in her first speech, in which she raised three possible modes of action, and through her manner of speech guided the chorus to the response she wanted. Wilamowitz translates *πάρεστι σαίνειν* as “dulden und ducken?,” “to suffer and submit?” *ἄσαντος* understood as active indicates that Electra rejects this possibility, and he says of Electra here: “Das ist die sophocleische Elektra.”⁴⁶ Garvie (157) interprets Electra’s statement as “a significant hardening of Electra’s character since 140 f.,” though we have seen that this is not the case. Electra is a hard character from the outset, a reflection of the mother who, once wounded by an outrage against a family member, nurses a grudge that festers for years as she plots destruction for the family member who inflicted the wound. Those commentators who see an innocent, hesitant Electra tend to misinterpret this passage, and to be puzzled about her role in the revenge and therefore in the play.⁴⁷

The structure suddenly changes at the beginning of the next section (423), when the chorus now sing the first strophe of the triad, followed by Electra and then Orestes, the chorus replacing Orestes’ earlier role. The altered structure tells us that something has happened. The roles of Electra and Orestes, parallel in the first section, now become disorderly. The

⁴⁶ Wilamowitz, *Aischylos Orestie* 200.

⁴⁷ For example, T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Art of Aeschylus* (Berkeley 1982) 243–244: “Aeschylus starts her out on a note of uncertainty ... she wonders how to approach the gods and how to do the sacrificing Clytemnestra has asked her to undertake. She even wonders whether it is right to ask the gods to punish the villains. Altogether there is something peculiar about Electra’s approaches ... Why the introductory series of addressees? Safety in numbers? Uncertainty to whom to appeal ...? Under the impact of memories, she turns into a promoter of vengeance. Finally her new confidence occasions thoughts of marriage: a far cry from the hesitations and humiliations of the initial scene.”

females take over in this narrative section of the *kommos*, where the function of witnessing and recounting the family *mythos* by Electra and the chorus is directed at Orestes. It is particularly here that we see the impressive power and decisiveness of the chorus. They, wailing their Cissian grief, describe their actions as they beat their breasts and heads. Electra follows, apostrophizing Clytemnestra, and beginning the narration of her mother's indignities against Agamemnon after his death, that he had not been properly buried and lamented (429–433). Orestes' response to Electra's apostrophizing Clytemnestra is generally interpreted (e.g. Garvie 161) as an acceptance of the act of matricide (434–438):

τὸ πᾶν ἀτίμως ἔλεξας, οἴμοι.
πατρὸς δ' ἀτίμως ἄρα τείσεις
ἕκατι μὲν δαιμόνων,
ἕκατι δ' ἀμᾶν χερῶν·
ἔπειτ' ἐγὼ νοσφίσας ὀλοίμαν.

You've told me of something completely shameful, alas.
You will pay for the dishonour of our father
Through the gods
And through my own hands;
When I destroy [her/you], may I die.

Wilamowitz, who, we have seen, saw the purpose of the *kommos* as entirely directed at Orestes' decision, wished to rearrange the text, placing lines 434–438 after 455, in the hope of making the decision arise later, as Orestes became more decided. Opposing this, Schadewaldt, who held that Orestes had always been decided upon his course of action, suggests that here Orestes does not make a decision (*Entschluss*) but rather he shows openly the decisiveness (*Entschlossenheit*) that was present, unexpressed, all along.⁴⁸ The decision “breaks forth” (“bricht sie hervor”) here. He does recognize that Orestes does not display the decisiveness that should be there, just as he never openly says that he will murder his mother. This passage betrays the hesitation and reluctance of the young man, and not a decision taken or a decisive stance, though he has said something that he has been unwilling to say up to this point.

⁴⁸ Schadewaldt, *Hellas* 276.

In the following set of antistrophic responses, Orestes falls silent as first the chorus and then Electra produce a narrative of the murder. They recount the shame of the killing of Agamemnon and the disgraceful mutilation of his body, in an effort to move Orestes to action. They pound their message home with commands to Orestes to listen and to hear: κλύεις πατρός οὐς δύας ἀτίμους (chorus at 443), τοιαῦτ' ἀκούων ἐν φρεσὶν γράφου (Electra at 450), δι' ὧτων δὲ συντέτραινε μῦθον ἡσύχω φρενῶν βίασει (chorus at 451–452). The chorus sum up by telling Orestes that he now knows the situation, and that “the future is in his own hands” (454–455; Garvie 167).

The appeal to Agamemnon (456–509) is the last section of the *kommos*, and the focus shifts from Orestes to the tomb of Agamemnon. Orestes begins with a direct appeal to his dead father, and Electra follows in support, “bathed in tears.” We have now indisputable evidence that the collectivity that Electra worked earlier to achieve has indeed been established, and in the last part of the *kommos* the chorus describe the group which includes Electra, Orestes, and themselves as a *στάσις πάνκοινος* (“a collective in revolt,” 458).⁴⁹ The chorus express agitation at what the words of lament and prayer are about to unleash. They do not, however, express any doubt, and their words are positive encouragement for Orestes—that it is up to the house of Atreus to cure itself, and to do so with violence (471–474):

δῶμασιν ἔμμοτον
τῶνδ' ἄκος, οὐδ' ἀπ' ἄλλων
ἔκτοθεν, ἀλλ' ἀπ' αὐτῶν,
δι' ὠμᾶν ἔριν αἰματηράν.

It is for the house to apply the dressing as a cure
for these troubles; it cannot come from others
outside, but only from itself,
through savage and bloody strife.

They stress the self-help doctrine that they have propounded

⁴⁹ Garvie (168) translates as “our company all together.” *Stasis* can mean simply “company” or “band” but very often denotes sedition, rebellion, dissent. *Pankoinos* implies a collective as well: “all together/all in common/united.” The phrase implies a group that has come together in rebellion.

throughout the play, that it is up to Orestes to take action, and that he can count on help from the gods.

The plea of Electra and Orestes quickly becomes rapidly paced in stichomythic exchange. That Agamemnon's help is needed is the focus of this section and all efforts are now aimed at bringing him on board, by appealing to his self-interest with promises of future sacrificial offerings by Orestes (483–485), and offerings from her inheritance by Electra at her marriage (486–488). They remind him of the ignominious death he encountered (491–492) and Electra ends by offering Agamemnon salvation through his own children if he will hear their prayer and honour their plea. Her most important job, getting Orestes to act, and, secondly, appealing to Agamemnon to act, is done, and she does not speak again in the play.

Orestes and the chorus now enter into an exchange (514–550). He asks why Clytemnestra had sent a libation to atone for her deed, since “as the saying goes,” it is a useless act to pour out everything one has in an attempt to atone for an act of bloodshed (520–521). The chorus, as reliable narrators (they “were there,” they say, 523, and they knew about it at the beginning of the play), recount the content of her dream. Orestes interprets the snake of the dream as an omen that points to himself as killer of his mother: In the dream “she dies by violence. I, as a snake, kill her” (ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς δ' ἐγὼ κτείνω νιν, 549–550). Once again, as *exegetes*, the chorus approve his words, this time his reading of the omen (τερασκόπον δὴ τῶνδέ σ' αἰροῦμαι πέρι, 551). According to them, Orestes must now take over and give orders (552–553). Apparently the *kommos* has been a success and Orestes understands what he is to do. Or does he, in fact?

Orestes has a plan, but in it there is not a word about Clytemnestra. After the emotionalism of the *kommos*, the appeal to Agamemnon, and the encouragement of Electra and the chorus, Orestes is still only able to articulate the deed as the murder of Aegisthus, a deed which he quickly concludes. The crisis arrives when Orestes fully realizes that he is to kill his mother. This is the moment when he turns to the otherwise silent Pylades to pose the question that constitutes the climax of

the play (899). This moment is not a “decision,” but a realization of what the oracle of Apollo has really involved him in.⁵⁰ Electra and the chorus in the *kommos* revealed what was necessary to propel him onward, and at this moment, he understands that he stands on the edge of a precipice. The only words spoken by Pylades in the play remind him of the divine command and his duty to obey the god. But it is Electra, organizing a solidarity of commitment first with the chorus and then with her brother, who pushes him to the precipice.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Garvie’s comment (293): “The decision that he ‘must’ kill his mother was taken before the play began, but now it has to be taken again, and it remains his own.” We have seen that this claim cannot be substantiated anywhere in the text of *Choephoroi*.

⁵¹ So that it is difficult to agree with A. Podlecki’s assessment that “In Aeschylus’ version *Electra’s contribution to the decisive action is hardly felt*”: “Four Electras,” *Florilegium* 3 (1981) 21–46, at 25 (his italics); but later (39): “In the first part of the play, it is Electra’s function to provide a link between the dead Agamemnon and the living Orestes, to create the contact and energizing charge which can begin to impel Orestes to take the decisive step.”

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