WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Elektra

by Sophocles
Translated and adapted by Timberlake Wertenbaker
Original music by David Lang
Directed by Carey Perloff

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COVER Olympia Dukakis (front) and Annie Purcell (back) in Elektra at The Getty, 2010 (photo by Jeff Ellingson)

OPPOSITE Costume rendering for Elektra. All costume renderings by costume designer Candice Donnelly.
The distance from Mycenae to Aulis is approximately 70 miles over land.
Characters, Cast, and Synopsis of *Elektra*

*Elektra* was most likely written between 420 and 410 BCE. Timberlake Wertenbaker workshopped her new translation/adaptation of the play at A.C.T. in 2009. Directed by Carey Perloff, *Elektra* received its world premiere at The Getty Villa's outdoor theater in Los Angeles in September 2010.

Characters and Cast of *Elektra*

the tutor .................................................... Anthony Fusco
orestes ....................................................... Nick Steen
pylades ....................................................... Titus Tompkins
elektra ....................................................... René Augesen
chorus ........................................................ Olympia Dukakis
cellist/music chorus ................................. Theresa Wong
chrysothemis .............................................. Allegra Rose Edwards
cltytemnestra ............................................. Caroline Lagerfelt
aegisthus ..................................................... Steven Anthony Jones
guard ............................................................ Patrick Alparone

**Before Elektra**

After Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, the kings of Greece were called upon to bring her back. To appease the goddess Artemis and call the winds that would carry the fleet from Aulis to Troy, Menelaus's brother, King Agamemnon of Mycenae, sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia. After leading the Greeks to victory during the Trojan War, Agamemnon returned home, only to be murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. Agamemnon's son, Orestes, just a boy at the time, was saved by his older sister Elektra, who gave him to their Tutor to raise in the region of Phokis, where he befriended Pylades. Elektra was reduced to a slave and beggar in her own home as she alone publicly mourned her father's death. Neither she nor her sister, Chrysothemis, were allowed to marry. From exile, Orestes promised to come home to help Elektra seek justice.
Setting of *Elektra*
Outside the Mycenaean palace, the seat of the House of Atreus.

Synopsis of *Elektra*
Just before dawn, Orestes returns home to Mycenae with the intention of avenging his father’s death. He is accompanied by his friend Pylades and his Tutor. As advised by the Oracle of Apollo, Orestes arrives not with an army, but by stealth. His first act is to visit his father’s grave to pay his respects.

With her chorus of well-born ladies, the openly rebellious Elektra impatiently awaits the return of her brother. Meanwhile, Chrysothemis (who has remained in favor with the current king and queen) has learned that their mother intends to send Elektra to some faraway prison unless Elektra immediately discontinues her insubordination.

Taking their mother’s offerings to their father’s grave, Chrysothemis shares this information with her sister and recounts the dream their mother had during the night. In the dream, Agamemnon planted his staff in a hearth, and it grew into a great shoot that overshadowed all of Argolis. Elektra interprets this dream as an omen sent from their father, and she convinces Chrysothemis to toss out Clytemnestra’s offerings.

Clytemnestra finds Elektra and tries to convince her that she acted justly when she killed Agamemnon as retribution for sacrificing Iphigenia. Her words fall on deaf ears. The Tutor, keeping his identity secret, tells the women that Orestes has died during a chariot race at the Delphian games. This news quiets Clytemnestra’s fears that her children will one day murder her.
Elektra is devastated, but she decides she must avenge her father without the help she has been waiting for. She attempts to recruit Chrysothemis, but her sister is unwilling to risk her own life.

Orestes, hiding his identity, arrives with an urn that he says contains his own ashes. Elektra takes the container and laments. Orestes realizes who she is and, at first taken aback by her fallen state, consoles his sister and confesses that he is alive. He cuts their celebration short, however, so they can focus on their vengeful purpose, and the Tutor reports that Clytemnestra is in the house alone and unprotected.

With Elektra shouting encouragement from outside, Orestes enters the house and kills his mother. He returns covered in blood. Just then, Aegisthus returns. Orestes slips back inside as Elektra delays her stepfather. Orestes drags the corpse of his mother from the house to show Aegisthus, and then escorts him inside to kill him in the exact spot where Agamemnon was murdered seven years ago.

**Director Carey Perloff on the Costume Design of Elektra**

“"The costumes are ancient-Greece-meets-haute-couture. The shapes are really important because Greek tragedies are very physical plays. These are not intellectual plays that people sat around and parsed, they were incredibly kinesthetic, danced dramas.""
I started my tenure at A.C.T. with a Greek tragedy, Antigone, also translated by the extraordinary Timberlake Wertenbaker. That’s how we met, and we’ve been on a rich and remarkable journey for 20 years. She’s a Greek scholar and a wonderful playwright, and most of all an amazing lover of actors and a generous collaborator. She never digs her heels in, and she is always game for rethinking and reimagining, but she’ll argue to the mat if a word really means something to her. I sat down last night to prepare for rehearsal and read two bad translations of Elektra, and I thought, “Boy, Timberlake is really something.”

Much of my long love affair with the Greeks has been informed and shaped and changed by Olympia Dukakis, whom I first met when I was directing Ezra Pound’s Elektra in New York. I was 26 years old, and I was sort of terrified of Olympia, but I called and asked, “Would you like to play Clytemnestra?” She said to me, [yelling] “I’m not going to be part of that patriarchal interpretation of that character!” Then she explained why she thinks Sophocles got it wrong. I said, “Well, maybe we should have lunch.” So we had lunch, and this began 30 years of conversation about the Greeks.

One of the first things Olympia said to me, which has stayed in my mind, is that the question Greek tragedy asks us is, “How should we live our lives?”—which is about the most basic question we could ever ask. How do we live? Sophocles asked this of Athenians when they were in the middle of a terrible war of attrition, when their empire was in the throes of a new democracy trying to articulate its sense of justice while it was doing rather despicable things around the globe. (You can imagine why these plays continue to be resonant to us as Americans.) This play asks: What is the nature of justice? Is it possible for individuals to get justice if they don’t have power? Who represents us when we are thwarted? What happens if we stop believing in the law?

The nature of democracy, of trial by jury, of laws that protect the public as a whole—that was incredibly new when Sophocles was writing. It was the beginning of the notion that one doesn’t solve problems by vendetta. But look at the universe that we live in right now. Why are we having such an unbelievably wretched time wrestling with the Middle
East? Democracy, which is supposedly trying to take hold of these countries, is butting up against 5,000 years of vendetta.

Vendetta is blood for blood. They called it *philos-aphilos*—love and hate, colliding together. When blood was spilled, more blood had to be spilled in revenge. The cycle went on forever. That’s the image of the double-headed axe: you swing it one way and somebody gets killed, and then revenge swings the other way and the other side gets killed. Revenge is a very satisfying emotion. We long to avenge in the spirit in which we have been harmed. The tragedy of vendetta, as we’ve seen around the world, is that it never stops.

Clytemnestra watched her husband, Agamemnon, murder her daughter Iphigenia. Why did he do this? Because he had to appease Artemis so she would change the winds so that the Greeks could set sail for Troy. From his point of view, this seemed justifiable. But this woman has watched her daughter be killed, so what does she do? At the end of the Trojan War, when Agamemnon comes home, she spreads a purple carpet on the ground, he walks on it into the palace, she gives him a big feast, he climbs into the bathtub (be very careful of bathtubs with the Greeks!), she throws a net over him, and Aegisthus and the double-headed axe come out. Agamemnon is slaughtered in the bath.

Who hears all this? Elektra, as a teenager, and the child Orestes. Elektra spirits Orestes away. He’s taken by his Tutor and he grows up in another part of the world, in Phokis, where the Oracle at Delphi is. Orestes is raised to do one thing: to murder his mother to avenge the death of his father. Is this a good thing? From Elektra’s point of view, it must be done. Her father’s murder must be avenged.

Elektra’s perspective is extraordinary. It shows us what happens to a human being who cannot forget. Numerous studies have been done about memory. Forgetting is, in fact, very healthy. If we lived with all the terrible things that happen to us, we’d never get through the week. Time makes things recede. But they don’t recede for Elektra. Her action is to remember, relentlessly, until the deed is done.

Is this just? Was the murder of Iphigenia just? Was the murder of Agamemnon just? If neither or both are just or unjust, what stops the bloodlust from continuing? *Elektra* is an amazing trial, in a sense, and an emotional conflagration within a very complicated family. This play would have been one of three, because the Greeks wrote trilogies for their festivals. We don’t know where in the trilogy this play fell. Maybe the Furies arrive after the events of *Elektra* and devour Orestes, or maybe *Elektra* was the final play. We don’t know. It’s sort of thrilling and very ambiguous.

The questions the play poses are ours to answer, now and always. We’ve never managed to resolve them, and maybe we never will. We’re debating them right now, in this election: What is the relationship of the individual to the body politic? Are we part of a community, or are we to advance our own interests? The Greeks wrestled with these questions all the time.
Composing Hybrids
An Interview with Composer David Lang

By Amy Krivohlavek

Composer David Lang has created memorable scores for numerous A.C.T. productions, including Timberlake Wertenbaker’s adaptations of Sophocles’ Antigone (1993), Euripides’ Hecuba (1995), and Racine’s Phèdre (2010); Shakespeare’s The Tempest (1996); and Schiller’s Mary Stuart (1998). While at A.C.T. in 2002, he created the hit opera/theater hybrid The Difficulty of Crossing a Field, with a libretto by playwright Mac Wellman.

For Elektra, Lang is not only reuniting with Wertenbaker, but also actor Olympia Dukakis (who starred in Hecuba) and director Carey Perloff, who is celebrating her 20th season as A.C.T.’s artistic director. Lang first met Perloff when they were undergraduates at Stanford University, and their artistic partnership blossomed years later in New York when he composed music for her production of Brecht’s The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui at Classic Stage Company. “I love her intensity and her intense commitment to the text,” says Lang, who specifically requested to be a part of Perloff’s celebratory year.

With concertos and oratorios, operas and chamber music, Lang has created music for a wide range of instruments, voices, and settings—work that has never quite fit into any musical genre. Academics and critics have attempted to describe his experimental style with terms like “post-minimalist,” “totalist,” and “modernist rock.” In 1987, he and two other composers from Yale School of Music founded Bang on a Can, a groundbreaking organization devoted to providing a home for creators, like themselves, of uncategorizable music through commissions and performance opportunities. Over the ensuing years, Lang’s reputation and repertoire have grown, and he is one of our country’s most-performed and sought-after composers. In 2008 his adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s story little match girl passion won the Pulitzer Prize for Music.

For A.C.T.’s production of Elektra, rather than turning to the music of the ancient Greeks for inspiration, Lang relied on his modern instincts. “I don’t really like the idea of trying to match my music with rules for music from the past,” he says. “I know a little about authentic Greek performance practice, but that has much less effect on my music than what I know about being a modern person, in a modern setting.” Before rehearsals began, he answered via email some questions about composing for Elektra specifically and theater in general.
How does the music contribute to the overall tension/horror of *Elektra*?

What is so incredible about this version of *Elektra* is how streamlined it is, how quickly and inexorably it moves from high point to high point on the way to its conclusion. Sometimes music—even beautiful music—can interrupt that trajectory in a way that may make the composer look good, but might make the play and its interior movement slow down. This story is so taut and the language so tense that I have tried to keep the music out of the way.

**In this translation, there is the traditional Greek chorus but also a musical chorus. How do they interact?**

The Chorus, as played by Olympia [Dukakis] in our production of the play, seems to have (at least) two functions. One is to watch over and speak with the characters onstage. The other is to speak directly to the audience, to comment on the actions of the characters. I have tried to use the music as a trigger, so the audience will know which mode of address the Chorus is using.

**How did you start composing for theater?**

Everything I know about music for the theater I learned from Carey. When you are a classical composer, you can get very precious about your work. Thinking that your music is in some mystic connection with the great composers of the past can be inspiring, but it can also be terrifying, and that can dry you up. How can you make a decision about any piece you might write when you have all those great composers looking over your shoulder?

Writing music for the theater can be very liberating from such an attitude—there is a

*RIGHT* Costume rendering for the Chorus
show; it is on its own schedule and has a deadline; the music has a defined job: to get someone from one side of the stage to the other in 12 seconds, or to make a moment feel pensive, ecstatic, mournful. The music either works or it doesn't. That kind of “job-oriented” composition can be relaxing, for a change.

The Difficulty of Crossing a Field was intended to bridge the opera and theater worlds, and it seems like you often make those interdisciplinary connections/collisions in your work. Was that always part of your aesthetic, or did that evolve over time?

I did one grand opera in 1995 for Santa Fe Opera called Modern Painters, which was about the life and work of the Victorian art critic John Ruskin. I enjoyed doing it, but I began longing for the chance to take from opera only the parts that I needed and to mix them with the parts of chamber music I needed, or from theater, or dance, or film. I started thinking that the possibility of “hybridized” opera or theater music might give me the flexibility to take only from each genre what I needed at that moment and leave each field’s baggage behind.

I now look at all my work as a hybridization of some sort—storytelling and passion play/percussion ensemble with stage set/concert music with lighting and video. I got that idea first from working with Carey on The Difficulty of Crossing a Field, which she commissioned—in those years, A.C.T. had a composer in residence (me) and a playwright in residence (Mac Wellman), and Carey decided to put us together. In my discussions with Mac and Carey, I started recognizing that we would gain more strength from taking what was best in each of our disciplines than we would if we only stayed in one of them. I have pretty much lived my life thinking this way ever since.

What is your process like when you compose music for a theatrical production?

I like to have several coffees with Carey and talk about whatever text we are working on. Then I go home and try to solve whatever problems we identified in the least obvious way possible.

The Los Angeles Times wrote about your work: “There is no name yet for this kind of music.” How do you describe the kind of music you create?

I like that my job changes with every piece, that every time I write something I get to think of something new, not just how to fit my music and my career into some neat, already-existing category. Music is capable of expressing so many different kinds of feelings, only a very few of which were interesting to our historical betters. I am checking them all out.

What do you think makes for the most successful mix of music and theater?

I think that theater and music should need each other so much that you can't tell which is supporting the other.
Creating a World Under Siege
An Interview with Scenic Designer Ralph Funicello

By Cait Robinson

Veteran A.C.T. scenic designer Ralph Funicello has designed sets for more than 50 productions at The Geary since 1972. “He was one of the original designers here,” says Artistic Director Carey Perloff. “He really taught me how to use our theater; he showed me where the sweet spots are.” Most recently for A.C.T., he designed the sets for Maple and Vine and Clybourne Park. This season, he is helping move Perloff’s acclaimed production of Elektra from The Getty Villa in Los Angeles, where it premiered, to San Francisco. He spoke with us on the phone from San Diego, where he is the Don Powell Chair in Scene Design at San Diego State University, about the unique challenges of bringing Elektra to The Geary Theater.

What excites you most about designing Elektra?

Well, I’m not sure that I have ever designed an actual “Greek” play written by a Greek! I think the only “Greek” play I’ve ever designed was The Alcestiad by Thornton Wilder. So, working on the real deal is interesting. I am thrilled to work with Carey on a project where she has so much knowledge and experience.

Timberlake Wertenbaker’s adaptation is wonderful. Obviously, because this play has existed for so many thousands of years, there are a lot of adaptations and translations that are almost as far removed from us [as they are from the original] because they were done so long ago. A lot of the translations read in school were written at the turn of the 20th century. They’re very British, and the quality of the language just doesn’t seem contemporary. You don’t connect with them that well. There’s a level of emotional intensity that has to come across. With Timberlake’s translation you can feel it.

This production premiered in 2010 at the outdoor Getty Villa. How have you altered the design for The Geary?

The Getty’s arena theater has a Pompeian building in the background. That was a given—the original production had to use it, so they needed some way of making it work in the contemporary world of this production. What interested Carey was the idea that, in the Western world, all of our palaces (if you want to call them that)—the White House and the capitol buildings and various embassies around the world—are
under siege, or look like they are. They are all defended. Certainly since 9/11, they all have barriers of one sort or another protecting the people inside from the outside world. That resonates with what’s going on in this play. Clytemnestra is in terrible fear of Orestes coming back to kill her, so the palace is protected. At The Getty, they put up a chain-link/barbed-wire fence across the front of the stage with a gate in it. The floor at The Getty is some kind of dark, black marble. Carey was very interested in keeping those elements [for this production].

Carey and I talked a bit about the building, and she asked, “Have you ever seen the [Lubyanka, the former] KGB building in Moscow?” It’s this gigantic edifice, somewhat based on classical architecture. I became interested in fascist government buildings, and fascistic versions of classical architecture. They seem more like government buildings that we recognize; I didn’t want to create a Greek façade.

**How is your façade different from the one at The Getty?**

The Getty had a real building. You don’t question that it’s a real building. But on The Geary’s stage, the audience knows it’s *not* a real building, and if they think you’re trying to recreate some realistic world—or naturalistic world—then they start to question why the actors are doing things onstage that aren’t naturalistic.

Also, we were nervous about putting a building of that size on The Geary’s stage. Unless you put it far upstage (where the sightlines would be horrible), it would be very dominant. Carey was worried about dwarfing the actors.

I had an idea that Carey really liked: what if we create the whole building, but just paint it all gloss black? It would become an iconographic image, not something “real.” Also, depending on how it was lit, it could practically disappear at times. It’s still a build-
ing with big square columns and a big doorway and big windows, but it is the façade of a building. When the actors go inside, the audience will see an interior, but it’s not a literal palace interior. Something about this shiny, horrible, sinister black building seems right for the place where Clytemnestra lives.

We like the idea that this palace is, I don’t want to say forlorn, but neglected. We used a lot of dead leaves and old branches and things tucked into corners, along with a certain amount of rubble, black stones that look like they’re part of the pavement. These get stacked up and made into altars with flowers. Against this fence, there’s a certain amount of stuff that has collected—maybe blown against the fence and stayed. There will be flowers and other mementos, like the little outdoor shrines you see when someone has died. It’s the ones Elektra has completed that bother Clytemnestra: the fact that her daughter is making these things for her enemy feeds her fear.

How did The Geary’s proscenium influence your design?

In order to make the building the size we wanted it to be, we pulled all the masking out around it, so the set extends offstage in both directions. It extends up pretty high, too—I think 25 feet—and is framed by the lighting equipment around it.

We’ve also decided to extend the apron out and use the thrust, something I haven’t done at A.C.T. since before the 1989 earthquake. Carey really liked how at The Getty the Chorus, played by Olympia [Dukakis], could get very close to the audience. We’re also using the auditorium for entrances, because quite a few people come to this palace from other places—Olympia can actually be in the aisles and be more in contact with the audience. We’re also using some of the boxes [in the mezzanine] for when Orestes and the Tutor arrive so they can look down at the palace.
What are the risks in creating a contemporary design for a classical piece?

There are enormous pitfalls. I think that if you do something that is too specifically related to contemporary events, you basically create something that isn’t supported by the text. If you tried to make a classical play be about 9/11, we’d say, “No! That’s not what they were talking about!” These plays themselves, as Carey says so brilliantly, were written just a few hundred years after the Greeks decided not to be a tribal people anymore. A lot of them deal with what happens when you behave with tribal vengeance as opposed to trying to be a democracy and rising above cyclical retribution. Exploring that impulse in *Elektra* is much more interesting than trying to relate the play to a specific contemporary example. They’re going on in our world right now, these very problems. We don’t have to beat anyone over the head with that.

Carey calls *Elektra* “a thriller, a courtroom drama, a lamentation, and a celebration.” How do you create a design that supports a play that is so multifaceted?

The darkness and the somberness [of the design] can aid in the lamentation, but I don’t know that I was specifically thinking of all those things and asking myself, “How can I support them?” I tried to create an environment in which Carey can make those points. Again, that’s why I didn’t want to put a big fake building onstage, because if you’re creating a world that is more of a metaphor, as I hope this world will be, then everything onstage is easily accepted.
A Brief Biography of Sophocles

By Cait Robinson

More myth than established fact, the details of Sophocles’ life are much contested and marked by fantastical embellishment. Anecdotes describe him as likeable, attractive, and charming, a man of enormous influence in multiple areas of Athenian society. An accomplished politician and military leader, he was twice elected to a generalship, the highest elective office in the city, and later belonged to the proboulos, a temporary oligarchic group created to organize Athens’s recovery from the losses of the Peloponnesian War. Sophocles was also a priest in the cult of the healing god Asklepios and was worshipped as a hero after his death. He is best remembered, however, for his tragedies, which historians estimate numbered more than 120. Today, only seven Sophoclean tragedies exist in their complete form.

Scholars estimate that Sophocles was born around 496 BCE in Colonus, an Attican city just outside of Athens. His father, Sophilos, is believed to have been a merchant or business owner of some means, and it is likely Sophocles would have received an excellent education. There is evidence that Sophocles began his career as a dancer and vocalist in 480 BCE, when he was chosen to lead a paean (choral chant to a god) celebrating the Greek victory over the Persians at the battle of Salamis.

The first undisputed record of the writer comes from 468 BCE, when Sophocles received his first award at the City Dionysia, the annual Athenian festival featuring theatrical events performed in honor of Dionysus. The play, Triptolemos, is widely regarded as his first production, as well as possibly his first completed play. Though today only fragments of Triptolemos survive, its performance at the City Dionysia won Sophocles recognition as one of Athens’s most talented tragedians and a surprise victory over established favorite Aeschylus. Sophocles went on to win the City Dionysia at least 17 more times, outstripping Euripides’ 4 victories and Aeschylus’s 12.

Much of Sophocles’ popularity may be attributed to his theatrical innovations. According to Aristotle, Sophocles was responsible for the introduction of a third tragic actor (previously, tragedies were performed by only two), which allowed for complex plots and far more developed characters. The particularly Athenian predicaments of Sophoclean heroes set them apart from the characters of his contemporaries. Stubborn and independent, his characters reject advice, are isolated from their families, and ultimately fashion their own identities and fates. Their downfalls are often the result of their own failures. Figures like Oedipus, Antigone, and Elektra struck a chord with
Sophocles’ public, whose democratic society was gradually deemphasizing the supremacy of families and social groups and promoting the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Like Sophoclean heroes, fifth-century Athenian men were engaged in a new struggle to define themselves through their own actions and achievements.

Sophocles’ last recorded act was to lead a choral dirge mourning the death of Euripides in 406 BCE. He died the same year, having lived to an unusually advanced age. While the exact cause of his death is unknown, no stories of Sophocles’ life are more varied and colorful than those surrounding his end. Some claim he choked on a grape, others that he died of exhaustion after reading Antigone aloud, and others still that he expired of joy after one of his plays won a competition.

Whatever the cause, the death of Sophocles coincided with Athens’s precipitous decline. Beginning with the plague of 430 BCE and a series of catastrophic military maneuvers in the decades following, the cultural and military supremacy of the city had become increasingly precarious as the playwright aged. Around the time of his death, the Athenian fleet was taken by surprise on the Hellespont (now the Dardanelles in Turkey), and the city was blockaded. Mercifully, its deeply patriotic poet was spared the sight of his city’s surrender in 404 BCE, the final humiliation that marked the end of Athens’s golden age and the classical period.

**SOURCES**

**LEFT** Bust of Sophocles
The Sophoclean Chorus

By Cait Robinson

The chorus in Elektra is extraordinary, different from almost any other in Greek tragedy because it’s very personal. It is deeply invested in Elektra’s safety and in her sense of justice and in her destiny. Either you need to have 40 women play it, or you have Olympia Dukakis.

—Director Carey Perloff

The convention of the tragic chorus was well established by the time Sophocles’ first tragedy was produced in 468 BCE. While the playwright’s exact thoughts on the chorus are unknown (the Byzantine encyclopedia Suda indicates he published a treatise entitled “On the Chorus” that is now lost), his surviving seven plays show significant development from the chorus of previous tragedians. Though Sophocles’ approach to the use of the chorus appears varied and exploratory, taken cumulatively, his changes predict Western drama’s shift away from focusing on collective experience and toward exploring personal psychology.

At the turn of the fifth century BCE, the tragic chorus was comprised of 50 members, or choreutae. Aeschylus likely lowered that number to 12. Sophocles settled on a chorus of 15, a number subsequently adopted by Euripides. While the original function of the chorus has been a subject of debate among scholars, it has been variously suggested that it was created to lend an increased sense of spectacle to the production, to give the actors time for costume changes between scenes, and/or to provide an onstage representation of the perspective of the audience.

The surviving plays of Sophocles display an impressive variation in choral technique, from which we can deduce that his chorus was hardly a fixed convention. Rather it appears to have been in a near-constant state of development over the course of his career. This may have been due to the debut of the poet’s most famous innovation: the addition of the third actor. This extra performer revolutionized tragedy, allowing for more developed plots and psychologically complex relationships. It also elevated the status of the actors above that of the chorus, cutting choral activities that were not directly related to the action of the major characters. Sophocles and Euripides allotted an average of 20 percent of their lines to the chorus, whereas Aeschylus had devoted 50 percent.

Sophocles also altered the content of the choral lines. While the choral lines of his early plays are primarily devoted to song, his later chorus sings less and speaks more.
This shift suggests that Sophocles began his career by modeling his work on that of Aeschylus, but gradually departed from it in favor of his own style—a more economical form of dramatic storytelling. The chorus was streamlined to become an active and invested participant, almost serving as a fourth actor at times. Aristotle praises this development in his *Poetics*, saying, “One ought to consider the chorus one of the actors. It should be part of the whole and participate in the action not in the manner of Euripides but in the manner of Sophocles.”

As Sophocles’ choral technique evolved, two main types of chorus appeared. Their development appears to have been nonlinear, suggesting that the poet tailored his chorus to the circumstances of his protagonists, rather than adopting a standard approach. One type of chorus is closely tied to a singular character and presents a sympathetic account of his or her background. This is the case in *Ajax*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Elektra*, and *Philoctetes*. The *choreutae* of *Ajax* are unfailingly devoted to their general, and, because of their subordinate military status, powerless to escape the consequences of his actions. In this sense, they are similar to the unmarried girls of *The Women of Trachis* and the sailors of *Philoctetes*. Comprised of followers rather than elders or nobles, these choruses are emotionally and ethically dependent upon the protagonist. In *Ajax* and *The Women of Trachis*, for example, the chorus falls almost silent after the protagonist commits suicide. In contrast, the chorus of *Elektra* is more like that of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Though supportive of *Elektra*, their noble status puts them on near-equal footing. They are not reliant on her for either security or moral direction.

Sophocles’ most famous tragedies, known as the Theban plays or the Oedipus cycle, present choruses that stand apart from and even challenge their protagonists. In *Oedipus the King*, the chorus of elders is loyal to Oedipus, but their religiosity clashes with his secular view. The chorus of Sophocles’ second surviving tragedy, *Antigone*, doesn’t support Antigone until late in the play. Also the only example of a Sophoclean chorus that is a different gender from the protagonist, the inconstant Theban elders underscore Antigone’s isolation as well as the theme of human fallibility. Similarly, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles’ final tragedy, the chorus of elderly nobles is initially hostile to Oedipus and must be won over.

The plays of Sophocles owed much of their popularity to the dramatic efficiency of their chorus. Ironically, their success foreshadows the chorus’s demise. In coming centuries, playwrights would continue to follow Sophocles’ lead by writing more and more psychologically developed characters, gradually reducing the role of the chorus until it became obsolete.

**SOURCES**

“The Exponential Multiplication of Outrage”

Justice in *Elektra*

By Michael Paller

Halfway through *Elektra*, Elektra demands of her mother, Clytemnestra:

> by what law is [Agamemnon] supposed to die by your hands?
> Take care:
> if you establish this principle
> you’ll come to regret it yourself:
> because if you allow tit-for-tat murder then you will be the first to die
> if you ever stumble upon Justice.

First, some exposition to catch us up to this point: about eight years before the play begins, Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, butchered her husband, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, on his return from the Trojan War because he: a) killed her first husband, murdered her infant daughter, and forced her to marry him; b) sacrificed her second daughter, Iphigenia, to the goddess Artemis, who was preventing the Greek fleet from setting sail for the Trojan War; and c) brought back with him as bounty from the war a concubine, the prophetess Cassandra, and their twin sons. As far as Clytemnestra was concerned, she had plenty of justification for her actions.

Ever since, her daughter Elektra has demanded vengeance for her father, who was not only murdered, but whose body was also butchered and defiled, against all the laws of Greek religion. She’s prayed for the return of her brother, Orestes, who surely will take matters into his own hands. Indeed, at the beginning of the play he has already arrived without her knowledge—with an instruction from Apollo, no less—to “avenge with justice” the murderous act of his mother by proceeding with “the slaughtering of the guilty.”

Murder upon murder, revenge upon revenge. One can’t help asking whether Elektra’s warning to Clytemnestra might apply to herself and Orestes, as well. Is what she prays for, what Orestes arrives to do, what Apollo has ordered him to do, simply more tit-for-tat murder, however they dress it up with the word “justice”? After all, as the Chorus reminds us, the House of Atreus has a history as bloody as it is long:
That's how it is with this family. . . .

the exponential
multiplication
of outrage.

In this context, what does Justice mean?

The tragedies produced every spring at the Great Dionysia Festival in the amphitheater at the base of the Acropolis had several purposes. Athenians were proud of their culture; they considered everyone else to be barbarians, and tragedies were one way to demonstrate to the audience of Athenian citizens and honored guests the superiority of the Athenian way of life. On a less conscious level, the tragedies grappled with the anxieties of the male ruling class—first and foremost, what to do about women. Men wanted them out of sight, at home. They couldn't be citizens or buy property, most weren't taught to read and write. Respectable women (that is, those who were not prostitutes or courtesans) generally weren't allowed to be seen in public, for fear of tempting other men or being tempted themselves. What they might get up to when their husbands were away on business or at war was constantly on men's minds, and this concern surfaces in many of the tragedies, including Elektra. After all, Clytemnestra took Aegisthus as her lover during Agamemnon's ten-year sojourn in Troy, plotted his murder in his absence, and, in some versions, ruled alongside her consort.

The tragedies celebrated Athenian justice, and values such as almost-continuous war and the subjugation of women and slaves, but they also challenged and questioned them. The playwrights often gave voice to outsiders, especially women (think not only of Elektra, but also Antigone, Medea, and the women of Troy) and in doing so prompted citizens to examine the underpinnings of their Athenian democracy.

Sophocles' Elektra certainly asks provocative questions. Like all of the 32 surviving Athenian tragedies, it's a family story. Like the families in the other tragedies, moreover, this one is royal, and its action takes place in the public space before the family home, the palace of Mycenae. Thus, the family's actions concern not just themselves but the entire city, and their behavior is meant to set an example. An example, however, of what? Elektra has consequences far beyond those often associated with an ordinary domestic dispute, its confounding questions about justice prompted the original Athenian audience of about 413 BCE to confront difficult choices and in doing so declare their values.

It's not clear whether Sophocles meant Elektra to question the treatment of women in Athens, although he does provide convincing cases for both its women who consider themselves wronged by men. However, Clytemnestra and Elektra also believe that restitution can only come in the form of murder. How, Sophocles asks, should we regard a civilization where the brutalized demand that brutality be visited on offenders? If a society endorses eye-for-an-eye vengeance, can it call itself civilized?

The stories that the Athenian playwrights told were old and known to all; what was new was the way they treated familiar material. Aeschylus, the first of the great Athenian playwrights, had explored these questions in 458 BCE in the Oresteia, the second part of which, The Libation Bearers, is an earlier telling of the Elektra story. Taken as a whole,
his trilogy is a mythic account of the founding of the Athenian system of justice meant to supplant vendette. The Oresteia was perhaps an expression of optimism, a hope that Athens might yet live up to its self-image as the world’s most civilized state. The skeptical Elektra of Euripides, written perhaps 40 years later, questions Apollo’s wisdom in ordering the murder of a more human, less threatening Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. At the center of Sophocles’ Elektra, probably written a few years after Euripides’ is a daughter whose thirst for vengeance may make her look remarkably like her revenge-bent mother, and perhaps suggests that the rational society of Aeschylus’s masterpiece remained a long way off. “How far have we come since Aeschylus,” Sophocles seems to have asked his audience, “if blood still demands blood? What of Athenian exceptionalism now?”

The Athenian audience, who relished a good debate, could see through Sophocles’ play back to Euripides’ and some even to Aeschylus’s. Watching Elektra, they witnessed the play not only as a drama but also as an argument between multiple Elektras over a definition of justice and what it meant to be civilized. They also knew Orestes from The Odyssey, in which he’s held up to Odysseus’s son, Telemachus, as an example of how brave men defend the family honor—and how Euripides in his Elektra undercut that reputation. At the end of the play, after Orestes has fulfilled Elektra’s deepest wish, the Chorus suggests that the long, bloody story of the House of Atreus is at last complete. The audience, who in their lives knew more war and struggle than calm and balance, could be excused if they doubted the outcome was as final as that. The argument about what is justice never is.
The Cursed House of Atreus

By Dan Rubin

The Crimes of Tantalus

The suffering seen in Elektra began not with the murder of Agamemnon, but generations earlier, when his great grandfather, Tantalus, committed unfathomable crimes against the gods. Tantalus, the son of a deity (perhaps even Zeus himself), was a Lydian king whom the gods invited to dine at Olympian banquets of divine nectar and ambrosia. After one such feast, he stole the mythic food and shared it with his mortal friends, but he went on to commit an even graver offense than this.

Upon inviting the gods to dine with him, Tantalus learned his larder was insufficient to feed his guests. In desperation, he killed his own son, Pelops, chopping up his body and preparing him as a stew. The gods were wise to the ingredients of Tantalus’s dish, and none ate (except for Demeter, who was preoccupied thinking about her daughter Persephone’s unfortunate betrothal to Hades).

Tantalus’s punishment for his crimes was severe. First, his kingdom, wracked by earthquakes, fell to ruin and his family line was cursed. Then he was sentenced to eternal damnation in Hades, where he hung from the bough of a fruit-tree that leaned over a lake. Above him, the fruit was just out of reach; below him, the water at times reached his chin, but never his mouth. He was perpetually tortured by hunger and thirst.

Pelops Reanimated

Hermes collected the pieces of Pelop’s corpse, except for one of his shoulders, which Demeter had swallowed. The goddess kindly replaced the missing body part with ivory, and Hermes boiled the pieces together in a magic cauldron until the boy was whole again. After Pelops emerged, Poseidon fell in love with him and appointed him his “cup-bearer” on Olympus. When he came of age, Pelops traveled west to Greece and fell in love with princess Hippodamia of Pisa. Suitors of Hippodamia had to compete against her father, Oenomaus, in a chariot race: if they won, they could marry the princess, but if they lost, they would be executed. Oenomaus disposed of 12 princes in this manner and posted their heads on the palace gates.

After convincing Oenomaus’s chariot driver, Myrtilus, to replace the lynchpins of the king’s chariot with wax, Pelops defeated Oenomaus, who was dragged to his death.
when his wheels flew off. Pelops had promised Myrtilus a night with Hippodameia in exchange for his help, but after Myrtilus tried to ravish the princess, Pelops kicked him from a moving chariot into Cape Geraestus. As the charioteer drowned, he cursed Pelops’s family. Pelops took the throne of Pisa and conquered the surrounding region, renaming it Peloponnese.

**Atreus and Thyestes: Fraternal Feud**

Hippodamia gave birth to the twins Thyestes and Atreus. As a young man, Atreus vowed to sacrifice his finest lamb to Artemis. To test this, the goddess sent him a lamb with a golden fleece. Atreus indeed sacrificed the lamb, but he stuffed and mounted its precious fleece, arousing the ire of Artemis. Thyestes coveted this prize. Atreus’s wife, Aerope, lusted after Thyestes and stole the fleece for him. In exchange he became her lover.

When the king of Mycenae died, an oracle advised the Mycenaeans to crown one of Pelops’s sons from the neighboring kingdom. Unaware that he had been robbed (not to mention cuckolded), Atreus suggested that whoever possessed the golden fleece should become king. Thyestes led the magistrates to his home, showed them the fleece, and was crowned. Atreus soon supplanted him, however. Thyestes agreed to give up the throne when the sun traveled backwards, so Zeus and Helius, taking Atreus’s part, reversed the sun’s course, causing it to set in the East. Atreus banished his deposed brother.

Atreus later lured Thyestes back to Mycenae with the promise of amnesty, only to murder Thyestes’ sons, chop them up, cook them in a stew, and serve them to his brother upon his return. Exiled once more, Thyestes consulted the Delphic Oracle, which advised him to beget a son with his own daughter, Pelopia, a priestess of Athena at a temple in Sicyon. He disguised himself, raped her, and fled to Lydia.

The Delphic Oracle told Atreus to recall Thyestes from Sicyon, but Atreus arrived after his brother had left. Not realizing Pelopia was his niece, Atreus fell in love with her and took her as his new wife (Aerope had been executed for her infidelity). Pelopia gave birth to Thyestes’ son, whom she left to die on a mountain. The infant was saved by goatherds and fed by a she-goat, and thus was named Aegisthus, or “goat-strength.” Atreus, thinking Aegisthus was his offspring, brought the baby back to the palace and reared him as his heir. He forgave his wife, because it was an accepted fact that women sometimes went mad following childbirth.

Later, Agamemnon and Menelaus, Atreus’s sons by Aerope, captured Thyestes and brought him back to Mycenae. Atreus ordered Aegisthus, then seven years old, to go to the dungeon by himself and kill their prisoner, but Thyestes disarmed the boy and revealed himself as his true father. He ordered Aegisthus to bring Pelopia to him. When Thyestes confessed he had raped her, she plunged a sword into her breast. Then, following Thyestes’ orders, Aegisthus killed Atreus. Thyestes resumed control of Mycenae. Agamemnon, however, had the support of King Tyndareus of Sparta, who marched against Thyestes, sent him back into exile, and put Agamemnon on the throne.
Agamemnon, Leader of the Greeks

As king of Mycenae, Agamemnon made war against his cousin Tantalus of Pisa (son of Pelops’s brother, Broteas, who had been driven mad by Artemis and threw himself on a flaming pyre because he thought himself fireproof). Agamemnon killed Tantalus and his newborn child, and forcibly married his widow, Clytemnestra, the daughter of King Tyndareus. Clytemnestra’s brothers, the Dioscuri, attempted to rescue her, but were slaughtered. She bore Agamemnon four children: a son, Orestes, and three daughters, Elektra (or Laodice), Iphigenia (or Iphianassa), and Chrysothemis.

Clytemnestra’s sister was the famously beautiful Helen. To avert potential quarreling, their father made Helen’s many suitors swear to defend her chosen husband regardless of who won her. Helen married Menelaus, who became the king of Sparta after Tyndareus’s death. Unbeknownst to Menelaus, Tyndareus had neglected to honor Aphrodite many years before, and the goddess took her revenge by making the princesses of Sparta adulterers. As a manifestation of this curse, Helen began an affair with Paris of Troy, which led to the devastating Trojan War.

When the Trojan prince absconded with Helen, Menelaus begged Agamemnon to lead a Greek army against Troy. Agamemnon consented, and all the suitors who had sworn Tyndareus’s oath were called upon. The great fleet assembled in Aulis, a protected beach in the Euboean straits, only to find themselves windbound. The prophet Calchas explained they would not be able to leave until Agamemnon, who had infuriated Artemis when he shot her stag and claimed to be as good an archer as she, sacrificed Iphigenia to the goddess. (Other versions of the myth say that the goddess simply held a grudge against the House of Atreus because of the earlier golden fleece incident.) Agamemnon at first refused to sacrifice his daughter, but when Odysseus threatened to leave the coalition, he caved. Clytemnestra brought Iphigenia to Aulis, both believing the girl was to wed the peerless warrior Achilles. After Iphigenia was beheaded with a sacrificial axe in front of her horrified mother, Artemis released the winds, and the fleet set sail.

While Agamemnon led the ten-year assault on the walled city of Troy, Aegisthus stayed in Greece to seduce Clytemnestra and plan Agamemnon’s downfall. When the Mycenaean king returned from war, he brought with him the Trojan princess Cassandra, the prophetess daughter of King Priam, whom he had taken as a mistress and with whom he had had twin boys. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus conspired to kill them all: after welcoming her husband home and drawing him a warm bath, Clytemnestra entangled Agamemnon in a net, allowing Aegisthus to easily cut him down with a sword. Agamemnon fell back into the bath, and Clytemnestra beheaded him with an axe, which she then used on Cassandra and the children.

The coup resulted in a palace-wide battle between those loyal to Agamemnon and Aegisthus’s supporters. During the melee, Elektra gave the young Orestes to a trusted tutor, who smuggled him out of the city to Crisa. For seven years, Aegisthus ruled Mycenae; in the eighth year, Orestes secretly returned. Which brings us to Elektra.
Degrees of Fury
Comparing Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles

By Dan Rubin

Elektra and Orestes’ plot to avenge Agamemnon is the only story for which we have extant dramatizations from the three great tragedians of classical Greece. These variations share a number of essential elements: Orestes, returning to his homeland from exile after visiting the Oracle of Apollo, finds Elektra reduced to rags and still mourning the death of their father. Encouraged by a supportive chorus, the siblings work together and Orestes kills their mother, Clytemnestra, and their stepfather, Aegisthus. But beyond these basic plot points, the three plays—Aeschylus’s *Choephori* (*The Libation Bearers*), Euripides’ *Elektra*, and Sophocles’ *Elektra*—are remarkably different.

Before the Plays

The earliest reference we have to the children of Agamemnon appears in Homer’s *Iliad*. Achilles refuses to fight because of his quarrel with Agamemnon over the concubine Briseis. Recognizing this is causing the Greek army devastating losses on the battlefield, Agamemnon sends the persuasive Odysseus to the slighted warrior’s tent. “Sir, we are in the face of great disaster, and without your help know not whether we shall save our fleet or lose it,” Odysseus pleads with Achilles. Odysseus then lists off the generous gifts that Agamemnon will bestow upon Achilles if he returns to battle: gold, iron, horses, Briseis herself. The final prize is, of course, the dearest:

> You shall be [Agamemnon’s] son-in-law, and he will show you like honor with his own dear son Orestes, who is being nurtured in all abundance. Agamemnon has three daughters, Chrysothemis, Laodice [Elektra], and Iphianassa [Iphigenia]; you may take the one of your choice.

Achilles does not become Agamemnon's son-in-law: he dies before the fall of Troy. But it is interesting that he is given the option to marry Iphigenia, because in the traditions we are most familiar with today, Agamemnon sacrifices her at Aulis before the Trojan War begins—and when he returns home, Clytemnestra kills him for it.

Iphigenia’s death does not seem to factor into Homer’s understanding of why Agamemnon meets his gruesome end. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus meets the sad spirit of
Agamemnon in the underworld. “How did you come by your death?” he asks the king. The ghost responds:

Aegisthus and my wicked wife were the death of me between them. He asked me to his house, feasted me, and then butchered me most miserably as though I were a fat beast in a slaughter house, while all around me my comrades were slain like sheep or pigs. . . . 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.

Clytemnestra’s violence, at least from Agamemnon’s perspective, was the result of her affair with Aegisthus (and had nothing to do with his own affair with Cassandra).

In another part of The Odyssey, we learn of the vengeance of Orestes. King Nestor tells Odysseus’s son, Telemachus, “You will have heard of Agamemnon and the bad end he came to at the hands of Aegisthus—and a fearful reckoning did Aegisthus presently pay. See what a good thing it is for a man to leave a son behind him to do as Orestes did, who killed false Aegisthus the murderer of his noble father.” Telemachus asks, “How came false Aegisthus to kill so far better a man than himself?” To which Nestor replies:

[Aegisthus] cajoled Agamemnon’s wife Clytemnestra with incessant flattery. At first she would have nothing to do with his wicked scheme, for she was of a good natural disposition . . . [but eventually] she went willingly enough to the house of Aegisthus. . . . For seven years after he had killed Agamemnon he ruled in Mycenae, 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 of false Aegisthus by a banquet to the people of Argos.

Here again, Agamemnon’s death is attributed not to any wrongdoing on his part, but to the unholy relationship between his wife and his cousin Aegisthus.

The events of the Trojan War occurred around 1200 BCE. Homer probably composed The Iliad around 750 BCE and The Odyssey around 725 BCE, but controversy surrounds this. As far as we know, the earliest evidence of the sacrifice of Iphigenia appeared in the post-Homeric epic Cypria, dated to the late seventh century BCE. Cypria was well known in antiquity, and even though it has been lost, the philosopher Proclus summarized its contents in the fifth century CE. The collection of four poems acted as a prequel to The Iliad and provided most of the Iphigenia-related details with which we are familiar: Artemis, angry at boastful Agamemnon for shooting her stag, sends winds that prevent the Greek ships assembled at Aulis from leaving for Troy until Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter, who is fetched under the pretense that she is to marry Achilles. Perhaps fewer will recognize the next part of the myth: just before the girl is killed, Artemis
snatches Iphigenia from the altar, replacing her body with a stag, and whisks her away to Tauri. As far as Clytemnestra knows, however, her child is dead.

**Aeschylus’s *The Libation Bearers***

Aeschylus was born around 525 BCE and lived until 456–55 BCE. He produced his first tragedy at the Festival of Dionysus in 499, but did not win first place until 484; he was victorious almost every year thereafter until Sophocles came along. Seven of Aeschylus’s estimated 90 plays survive today, but the authorship of one of these, *Prometheus Bound*, is contested. The poet was deeply concerned with morality and religion, and his plays generally emphasize situation over character development, present the gods as just (if stern), and attribute human suffering to human action.

Aeschylus knew the myth of Agamemnon and his children well. He referred to his work as “slices from the banquet of Homer,” but he must also have been familiar with *Cypria*, as well as other lost iterations, like the *Oresteia* by Stesichorus (600–550 BCE), which provided the earliest reference to Elektra (“unwed one”) as another name for Laodice. Yet, as the poet himself suggests, he is much more beholden to *The Odyssey’s* version of the death of the Mycenaean king, which is the subject of Aeschylus’s final tetralogy, the *Oresteia*, produced in Athens in 458 BCE. It is comprised of *Agamemnon*, in which Agamemnon returns home with Cassandra of Troy and both are murdered by Aegisthus and Clytemnestra; *The Libation Bearers; Eumenides*, in which Orestes, haunted by goddesses of retribution for his crime of matricide, is judged by Athena and found innocent of wrongdoing; and a lost satyr play entitled *Proteus*. The *Oresteia* is the only complete surviving trilogy from the period.

*The Libation Bearers* opens in front of Agamemnon’s tomb in Argos. Orestes returns home from exile with his companion Pylades and pays his respects to his father, but he is immediately interrupted by the arrival of the mourning Elektra, who is escorted by a chorus of slave women. Orestes hides. Elektra brings libations for the dead sent by Clytemnestra for the husband she murdered and mutilated. Frightened by a nightmare that foretold Orestes’ vengeance, Clytemnestra hopes offerings will ward off any ills that might befall her, so she has released her daughter (whom she keeps “leashed like a vicious dog in a dark cell”) to deliver her gifts. After Elektra prays that her brother will return to “kill the killers in return, with justice,” Orestes comes forward and tells his sister how Apollo commanded him to avenge their father’s murder.

In a rare scene change, the siblings return to Mycenae. Orestes, pretending to be a foreigner, convinces Clytemnestra that her son is dead. The queen rejoices while Orestes’ old nurse, Cilissa, who reared and nursed Orestes, mourns. The chorus convinces Cilissa to fetch Aegisthus and tell him to hasten back without waiting for his bodyguards. When Aegisthus arrives Orestes stabs him inside the palace. He then grabs his mother, but hesitates. “What will I do, Pylades?” he asks his friend. “I dread to kill my mother!” Pylades reminds Orestes of the torments Apollo threatened him with if he fails to avenge his father, and Orestes proceeds.
Clytemnestra does not invoke the memory of Iphigenia in her defense. She says of her crime, “Destiny had a hand in that, my child,” most likely referring to her affair with Aegisthus. She tells her son that she grew lonely while Agamemnon was at Troy, and she reminds Orestes that she protected him by sending him away after Agamemnon’s death. When all else fails, she warns him of the curse that will befall him if he kills her. Orestes escorts her inside and stabs her.

His suffering is immediate. Standing over his mother’s corpse, Orestes tries to convince himself he “pursued this bloody death with justice.” The chorus, too, attempts to comfort him, but he quickly cracks with guilt as he (and only he) sees the Furies, monstrous goddesses of retribution, swarming toward him.

**Euripides’ *Elektra***

Euripides, 40 years Aeschylus’s junior, was born around 485 BCE and grew up in Athens when the city was the cultural hub of the Greek world. He entered his first playwriting festival when he was 30 (just three years after the premiere of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*)
and wrote at least 80 plays before he died in 407–06 BCE (shortly before the death of Sophocles). Best guesses place the opening date of *Elektra* at around 416 BCE.

Euripides was the least decorated of the three tragedians, only winning the Festival of Dionysus four or five times, but that is not to say he was unpopular. While his challenging and subversive dramas—which promote the idea that honor is not contingent on wealth (and vice versa) and criticize the unfair double standard women face—may not have won over judges, the public loved his accessible dialogue, in which characters spoke more like real people than the characters of Aeschylus. In *Frogs*, the comic playwright Aristophanes (446–386 BCE) portrays Euripides as unafraid to confront the more disturbing sides of humanity. Aristotle claimed the playwright was the best of the three tragedians at eliciting emotion.

Euripides’ *Elektra* takes place on a remote farm outside the walls of Mycenae. A farmer laments Agamemnon’s undignified fall and Aegisthus’s unlawful rise. He is grateful that Orestes was smuggled away by Agamemnon’s tutor before Aegisthus could kill the child. Elektra was left behind, and as she grew up, the princes of Greece asked for her hand. Aegisthus, fearing a noble child would avenge Agamemnon, married Elektra off to the poor farmer. But the farmer, wise to Aegisthus’s scheme and recognizing his own unworthiness, has left his wife untouched.

Orestes and Pylades arrive from the Oracle of Apollo via Agamemnon’s tomb. The men hide as Elektra approaches, dirty and dressed in rags, carrying a jug of water from the river and followed by her friends, a chorus of country women. Hearing his sister mourn her disenfranchisement, Orestes speaks to her without revealing his identity. He confirms that Elektra is as murderous as he: “I would die happy if I had shed my mother’s blood in revenge,” she tells him.

The farmer fetches the tutor that saved Orestes. When he arrives the tutor identifies Orestes by a scar on his forehead and he informs the reunited siblings that Aegisthus is currently alone in a nearby pasture sacrificing an ox. Clytemnestra will join her husband later; she stayed behind in the palace because the people of Mycenae hate her and she travels the streets as little as possible. Upon learning that Clytemnestra will be near, Elektra declares, “I shall arrange the killing of my mother.”

Orestes kills Aegisthus in the field and brings the corpse back to the farm. Elektra lures her mother to the farm by sending word that she has given birth. When Orestes sees his mother, his resolve wavers. Elektra’s does not: “Watch that you don’t unman yourself and play the coward,” she scolds her brother. “Go and set up the same trap for her as she used against her husband for Aegisthus’s sake.”

When she arrives, Clytemnestra defends the crimes she committed against Agamemnon, the embodiment of male hypocrisy who murdered their innocent daughter. “If Menelaus had been secretly snatched from his house, ought I to have killed Orestes so that I could save Menelaus, my sister’s husband?” she pointedly asks. Agamemnon, she continues, had the audacity to return from Troy with Cassandra by his side. Then he kept both wives together in the same house—with no blemish to his name. Whereas she is ostracized for taking a lover.
Elektra remains unmoved. She brings her mother into the house, where Orestes awaits. In the final moment, Elektra nervously drops her sword, but holds Orestes’ sword with him as they drive it into their mother’s neck. The blood-splattered siblings return with the bodies of their victims. Both are immediately penitent of the horrific crime they just committed together.

Clytemnestra’s half-brothers, Castor and Polydeuces (sons of Zeus), arrive. They blame the family’s misfortunes on Apollo, tell Elektra to marry Pylades, and predict that the Furies will haunt Orestes. He will stand trial in Athens, they foretell, and after he is acquitted, his suffering will cease.

Sophocles’ *Elektra*

Born in the 490s BCE, Sophocles first competed in the Festival of Dionysus in 468 BCE, and he was still competing in 406 BCE, the year of his death. According to Aristotle, Sophocles made this comparison between himself and his contemporary: “I portray men as they ought to be, but Euripides portrays men as they are.” Ancient critics praised Sophocles’ style as a successful compromise between the austerity of Aeschylus’s work and the populism of Euripides’. Modern scholars note his mastery of theatricality (particularly his use of props and entrances) and metaphor.

There are no records of when Sophocles’ *Elektra* debuted (dates are only available for two of the seven plays that survive from his 120-play oeuvre), and scholars have long debated whether or not it predates Euripides’ *Elektra*. The two pieces are as different from each other as they are from Aeschylus’s version, and Sophocles’ telling is unique, as scholar L. A. Post points out in his 1953 article “Sophocles, Strategy, and the *Electra*,” for “its emphasis on action.”

In Sophocles’ *Elektra*, the Oracle of Apollo has not commanded Orestes to act, but rather—because Orestes, without divine encouragement, had already made the decision to avenge his father—advises him on the most logical strategy: stealth. This strategy leads Orestes directly to the doorstep of the Mycenaean palace, rather than Agamemnon’s tomb (*The Libation Bearers*) or an out-of-the-way farm (Euripides’ *Elektra*). Orestes returns home accompanied not only by his friend Pylades but also his tutor, who trained him for vengeance and continues to advise and assist him in his singular pursuit.

Orestes finds Elektra surrounded not only by a chorus of women (noble maidens) but also in the company of her sister, Chrysothemis, whom Sophocles uses as a foil to show the comfortable life Elektra could have led had she not stubbornly remained loyal to her fallen father. Elektra’s action is one of resistance and rebellion as she awaits Orestes. With her jailer Aegisthus away at the beginning of the play, she has escaped the confines of the palace to lament publicly.

Relative to the other playwrights, Sophocles places the reunion of Orestes and Elektra late in his tragedy. V. E. G. Kenna suggests in the 1961 article “The Return of Orestes” that in no other decision is “the dramatic genius of Sophocles so apparent,” as
this delay grants stage time for the deep exploration of the minds and motives of Orestes and, even more so, Elektra as they move irrevocably toward their deadly goal. This delay is also the result of Orestes’ strategy. As a lone assassin, he wants to understand the lay of the land before attacking. He is able to move about undetected because the tutor's fictional account of how Orestes died while competing in the Delphic Games persuades the paranoid Clytemnestra to lower her guard. This element of the play is reminiscent of *The Libation Bearers*, in which Clytemnestra is similarly informed of Orestes’ death (the lie is told by Orestes himself), but Aeschylus’s Elektra is never deceived, as she is in Sophocles’ play. The lie is entirely absent from Euripides’ version.

When Elektra learns of her brother’s death, her action must change: she will execute her mother and stepfather herself. But, as we know, Orestes is not dead, and he commits his premeditated assault. Unlike Euripides’ Elektra, Sophocles’ Elektra does not ultimately play a direct role in the murders—she does not hold the sword as her brother stabs Clytemnestra. This is because Sophocles’ single-minded Orestes does not hesitate in his matricide. Unlike his counterparts in the other two plays, he even kills Clytemnestra before he kills Aegisthus.

Notably absent from the end of Sophocles’ *Elektra* are the Furies. In *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes is chased offstage by the dark goddesses of guilt and retribution. In Euripides’ *Elektra*, the monsters do not appear, but Clytemnestra’s brothers predict they will soon arrive and hound Orestes all the way to Athens. But in Sophocles’ tragedy there is no second-guessing, regret, or mourning. After Orestes stabs his mother once, Elektra shouts, “Strike her a second time!” He does so, and the play quickly ends.

The end of *The Libation Bearers* shows the continued suffering of the children of the House of Atreus. Euripides’ *Elektra* promises the same, but also looks forward to Orestes’ eventual absolution in court. Sophocles’ *Elektra*, on the other hand, appears to grant its audience finality. Justice has been served, according to the chorus: “Clan of Atreus,” they chant, “free at last / of your sufferings / by this enterprise / completed / Now.”

This is not to say that Sophocles is the most optimistic of the three tragedians. On the contrary, he perhaps presents the bleakest outlook on where blood-for-blood retaliation will lead civilization: to the internalized acceptance of violence. He asks his audience: What does it say about two young nobles that they can brutally and methodically cut down their own mother without reservation? More importantly, what does it say about a society that celebrates this heinous act as righteousness?

**SOURCES**

A Woman’s Duty

By Emily Sloan-Pace

The concept of duty in Greek antiquity was a complicated one, made up of a network of loyalties and commitments that were ranked hierarchically and characterized by competing claims to power. In the premodern world, duty and ritual were essential elements in organizing everyday life: gods must be appeased through sacrifice, kinship ties must be reaffirmed through gifts and service, friends and strangers must be extended hospitality. The questions of to whom one owes loyalty and of which duties are more important than others, are frequently at issue in Sophocles’ Elektra, a play that pits social, divine, and familial allegiances against one another. It is a work characterized by a series of conflicting obligations: those owed between husbands and wives, from humans to the gods, between children and their parents, and from the living to the dead. However, duty is, above all, dictated by one’s gender: a woman owed an unquestioning fealty to the man who “owned” her, be that her husband or her father.

Women in antiquity were thought of as less (intelligent, strong, capable) than men, which made feminine deference to the male a given and allowed the patriarchal system that governed social and political relations to operate without resistance. Women were barred from political assemblies. They could not vote or hold office. Some women could read and write, but most only to the extent necessary to maintain the household. Women of the upper classes were married at a very young age (12–14), often to men decades older, couplings arranged in order to secure political or financial alliances. Women were legally perpetual minors, forever controlled by the head of their household.

This is not to say that women were inactive members of ancient Greek society, but their spheres of activity lay primarily behind household (oikos) walls. Women, with their husbands’ instruction, ensured the proper function of the domestic space and managed a number of elements of the oikos. Women were tasked with educating children (especially training daughters in the skills needed to be a wife), overseeing slaves, and keeping track of the financial resources of the home. A woman’s most important duty was to give birth, particularly to sons, making sure that the family name and honor would continue to propagate. The importance of lineage led to the fear and strict regulation of women’s sexuality. While women of the lower classes would visit the marketplace and engage in occupations, wealthy women rarely left the house, save to visit the homes of relatives and other wealthy women and attend special events like weddings and festivals.
Acts of mourning were among the few public activities in which upper-class women were allowed to engage. Though members of both sexes grieved for the dead, acts of public mourning were frequently the duty of women, with daughters and wives expected to express their bereavement at the loss of the patriarch. Mourning was intended to showcase one’s loss as well as celebrate the deceased. Proper execution of funerary rites was an essential part of the social reputation of the living, a sign of piety to both the dead and to the family. Formal lamentation rituals consisted of female mourners tearing out their hair, scratching at their cheeks and necks to the point of bleeding, beating their breasts, and singing dirges. In *Elektra*, Clytemnestra fails to perform any of these necessary rituals, and forbids Elektra to enact these rites herself.

Clytemnestra assumes a masculine, active role in vengeance—“a woman with a man’s mind,” according to Aeschylus. Any search for justice or retribution was to be done by the male head of household. Female passivity was the norm: the most socially unacceptable crime in *Elektra* is not Orestes’ act of matricide, but Clytemnestra’s act of mariticide. Elektra, too, longs to commit murder, but keeps her hands (literally, at least) bloodless by letting Orestes perform the final fatal act.

Female vengeance is validated, but only so long as it is done by proxy. Women may talk about killing, but to actually commit such an act makes them monstrous. Orestes, the son and heir to the throne, must set the world aright. We are told from the play’s opening lines that Orestes has been trained to seek revenge, educated by his tutor to restore order and assume the powers Clytemnestra has usurped. Elektra, however, must wait: her task is to mourn and anticipate the return of her brother.
Burial Rituals in Ancient Greece

By Elizabeth Brodersen

Death was treated very seriously in ancient Greece. Proper burial, with concomitant rites, was considered necessary to ensure the admission of the deceased’s psyche, or soul, to the land of the dead (generally Hades, or, with great luck, the Elysian Fields). Elaborate rituals were conducted to appease the dead, who tended to haunt the living, bringing war and plague or preventing the growth of crops and birth of children, if not properly cared for. Conversely, a happy psyche was believed to bring prosperity and fertility. Proper disposition of the body was so important to the ancient Greeks that they conducted burial “in empty clothes” for those who died at sea, and a traveler passing an exposed corpse was expected at least to throw a symbolic handful of dirt on it; even enemies were entitled to decent burial. Anyone who left a body unburied risked the wrath of the quixotic gods, who demanded lavish offerings in the name of the dead and decreed burial a sacred family duty.

The most common method of disposing of a body in early times was inhumation—sometimes under the family’s house—later supplanted by cremation in popularity. A “proper” burial entailed a complicated, dramatic process of extended feasting, accompanied by animal (and sometimes human) sacrifice, the pouring of libations, speeches, games, and, most importantly, violent expressions of grief—which could be bought from professional mourners or coerced from prisoners of war or other slaves.

Although funeral expenses were the responsibility of the deceased’s male heirs, the execution of rites was the special province of the women in the family. It was their duty to cry over the grave—wailing wildly, tearing their hair, beating their breasts, and lacerating their cheeks in grief. By the sixth century BCE, this practice had grown so out of control that Greek lawgivers tried to suppress it by restricting attendance at funerals to women of the deceased’s immediate family who were over 60 years old and by prohibiting professional mourners.

The body, washed and dressed by the women and surrounded by lamenting mourners, was first displayed to receive the greetings of friends and family. It was supposed to be buried by sunrise on the third day after death, but the deceased of important families were often displayed for longer periods—in the case of Achilles, a reputed 17 days. The body was brought to the grave in an extravagant procession: the men in chariots or armor, the women still wailing. At the grave, speeches were made, sacrifices offered, gifts given to the deceased, and libations of barley broth, honey, milk, wine, oil, water,
and sometimes blood poured on the body. A feast was cooked and eaten at a graveside funeral banquet at which the deceased was believed to be present and participating. A mound was then built over the body—the greater the social significance of the deceased, the larger the mound.

The feast, sacrificial offerings, and libations were repeated on the ninth and thirtieth days after death. In this way the deceased was appeased and kept in good spirits. These rituals were performed as a means of contacting the dead so they would hear the prayers of the living, and also served to keep them “alive” until they safely reached the world of the dead. Sometimes tubes were inserted in the grave so that food and drink could actually reach the corpse. Once the rituals were complete, the psyche was believed to have crossed the rivers, passed through the gates of Hades, and united with the dead. Beginning in the fifth century BCE, the notion of judgment colored the purpose of the rites, and women had the additional burden of seeking forgiveness for the deceased’s sins through satisfactory lamentation and offering.

Many of these customs persist to this day in parts of Greece, where death and mourning are an integral part of the daily life of rural women. The ancient customs and beliefs have merged with principles of Orthodox Christianity but remain substantially intact. The psyche is believed to hover near the earth for 40 days after death before a messenger of God leads it away for judgment. The deceased is believed to retain invisible human form and thus to be completely dependent on the offerings and libations of its female relatives for survival. When they feast they do so in the deceased’s name, praying for the forgiveness of his sins, believing that the food passes through their own bodies into his. The libations—offered by the priest in ritual as well as by the women in their daily congress with the dead—are poured directly onto the grave. Without them, the deceased would thirst, for the afterworld is believed to be a place of eternally searing heat and desiccation.

The women—neighbors and friends as well as family members—visit the grave daily, speaking and crying to it as the embodiment of the beloved departed. Those not properly buried and cared for after death are believed to become “revenants,” or the living dead, who will reanimate and harm the living.

A hierarchical system of family relationships governs primary responsibility for the care and feeding of the dead: a wife cares for her husband, a mother for her unmarried son, a daughter-in-law for her mother- and father-in-law, and a daughter for a father without married sons. Women are expected to wear black and avoid pleasure for a long, regulated period of time after a death in the family, and to remain in the house, except for the requisite trips to the grave.

Aafter five years, the bones of the deceased are lovingly exhumed—if they are clean and white, the women have done their job and obtained forgiveness for the deceased, who may now enter the world of the dead, leaving the women free to reenter the world of the living. The bones are then added to those of the other forgiven dead of the village in a common pile. If the bones are dark, however, or retain pieces of flesh, the mourning and nurturing continue.
Glossary of Gods

Apollo and the Oracle at Delphi
Apollo—often referred to as Phoebus, “the radiant one”—is the god of light, prophecy, and religious healing. He is also the champion of music and poetry (symbolized by his lyre, which creates well-ordered music, unlike the ecstatic rhythms of Dionysus’s flute and drums), dance, and intellectual inquiry. He is the son of Zeus and Leto (a daughter of Titans) and the twin brother of Artemis. According to Aeschylus, after Orestes murders his mother and is haunted by the Furies, Apollo cleanses him of his “justifiable” crime.

Delphi was a sanctuary of Apollo on the southern slopes of Mt. Parnassus, and the Delphic Oracle wielded great power due to its centrality and fame. It was consulted by city-states and individuals alike, and it was often associated with purification. On the altar outside the temple, in which the divine prophecies were delivered by the Pythia (chaste women who served at the temple for life), preliminary sacrifices were made.

Delphi also hosted the pan-Hellenic Pythian Games, athletic and musical competitions held in honor of Apollo. The athletic events included foot and chariot races, and the victor was awarded a laurel wreath.

Ares
Ares is the unpopular god of brutal warfare—disliked by even his parents, Zeus and Hera. He stands in contrast to Athena, who represented honorable and strategic battle. Only Aphrodite, the goddess of love and his lover, can stand him. To be invited “to dine at Ares’ famous table” is a metaphor for dying on the battlefield.

Artemis
Twin sister to Apollo, the virgin huntress Artemis presides over womanhood and childbirth. A skilled archer, she is also associated with hunting and all things wild and she is the chief protector of young animals—especially fawns. Because of an insult Agamemnon made earlier in his life, Artemis refused to release the winds that would take the Greek fleet to Troy until Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia.

Dionysus and the Dionysia
A religious celebration and dramatic competition, the Dionysia was held at the foot of Athen’s Acropolis each March to honor Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. On three days of the five- or six-day celebration, three playwrights presented their tragedies, plus a satyr play
(a comic burlesque on a mythical theme). The dramatists, selected by the festival organizer on the basis of play submissions and reputation, were in charge of directing the actors and overseeing the entire production and were supplied with a patron to pay related costs. Ten judges, chosen from the ten “tribes” that made up Athens, selected the best play of the year. It is estimated that as many as 1,500 men participated in the all-day performances, which were attended by an estimated 15 to 20 thousand spectators. Given their severely limited role in the public life of ancient Greece, it is unlikely that women performed in or attended the dramatic presentations.

The Dionysia served a political function as well: to display the growing power of Athens and its experiment in democracy, the festival included a parade of the state-supported orphans of the war dead, a presentation of gifts from the towns to the city-state, an acknowledgment of the city benefactors, and a ceremony honoring foreign dignitaries. These events helped the young democracy strengthen the Athenian power base, while allowing a rigorous critique of the state and a dramatization of citizen responsibility in a democratic society.

The Erinnyes or Furies
The daughters of Air and Mother Earth and granddaughters of Darkness and Chaos, Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera are goddesses of vengeance even more ancient than the Olympian gods. They live in Erebus, a region of the underworld near the palace of Hades and Persephone, and punish criminals by hounding them relentlessly until they die in agonizing torment. The Furies have snakes for hair, dogs’ heads, coal-black bodies, bats’ wings, and bloodshot eyes. It is dangerous to mention them by name, so they are usually referred to as the Eumenides, “The Kindly Ones.” According to Aeschylus and Euripides, after murdering his mother, Orestes is driven mad by the Furies until he is released by the merciful Athena and Apollo.

Hermes
The son of Zeus and the nymph Maia, the essentially kindly Hermes is the messenger god, carrying out the orders of his father, but also a negotiator with and a guide of mortals. He is the god of movement and the protector of children. He is also adept at technology, magic, trickery, and deception—relying on persuasion rather than weapons, and rarely associated with war. He invented the lyre out of a tortoise shell and is the patron of orators.

Justice and Nemesis
Dice, or Justice, the personification of natural law and shame, is a deity invented by early philosophers. Nemesis, “dispenser of dues,” on the other hand, is an ancient goddess (daughter of the Titan Oceanus), primarily responsible for punishing men who are not grateful for the good fortune bestowed upon them by the gods. More generally, Nemesis maintains equilibrium by measuring out happiness and unhappiness.
Questions to Consider

1. Is justice served in Sophocles’ *Elektra*? If so, how? If not, why?
2. What role do the gods play in the world of Sophocles’ *Elektra*?
3. Why do you think Elektra decides to wait for Orestes to return home before she acts?
4. Chrysothemis does not appear in Aeschylus’s or Euripides’ dramatizations of the Elektra myth: what purpose does she serve in Sophocles’ *Elektra*? What role does the Tutor play? The Chorus?
5. How are ideas of femininity and masculinity presented in Sophocles’ *Elektra*?
6. What connections can you draw between this production of Sophocles’ *Elektra* and modern international and domestic politics? How does the design influence those connections?
7. How does David Lang’s music affect your understanding of the story?

For Further Information . . .


