

Introduction[1]

The *Electra* of Euripides has the distinction of being, perhaps, the best abused, and, one might add, not the best understood, of ancient tragedies. "A singular monument of poetical, or rather unpoetical perversity;" "the very worst of all his pieces;" are, for instance, the phrases applied to it by Schlegel. Considering that he judged it by the standards of conventional classicism, he could scarcely have arrived at any different conclusion. For it is essentially, and perhaps consciously, a protest against those standards. So, indeed, is the tragedy of *The Trojan Women*; but on very different lines. The *Electra* has none of the imaginative splendour, the vastness, the intense poetry, of that wonderful work. It is a close-knit, powerful, well-constructed play, as realistic as the tragic conventions will allow, intellectual and rebellious. Its *psychology* reminds one of Browning, or even of Ibsen.

To a fifth-century Greek all history came in the form of legend; and no less than three extant tragedies, Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers* (456 B.C.), Euripides' *Electra* (413 B.C.), and Sophocles' *Electra* (date unknown: but perhaps the latest of the three) are based on the particular piece of legend or history now before us. It narrates how the son and daughter of the murdered king, Agamemnon, slew, in due course of revenge, and by Apollo's express command, their guilty mother and her paramour.

Homer had long since told the story, as he tells so many, simply and grandly, without moral questioning and without intensity. The atmosphere is heroic. It is all a blood-feud between chieftains, in which Orestes, after seven years, succeeds in slaying his foe Aegisthus, who had killed his father. He probably killed his mother also; but we are not directly told so. His sister may have helped him, and he may possibly have gone mad afterwards; but these painful issues are kept determinedly in the shade.

Somewhat surprisingly, Sophocles, although by his time Electra and Clytemnestra had become leading figures in the story and the mother-murder its essential climax, preserves a very similar atmosphere. His tragedy is enthusiastically praised by Schlegel for "the celestial purity, the fresh breath of life and youth, that is diffused over so dreadful a subject." "Everything dark and ominous is avoided. Orestes enjoys the fulness of health and strength. He is beset neither with doubts nor stings of conscience." Especially laudable is the "austerity" with which Aegisthus is driven into the house to receive, according to Schlegel, a specially ignominious death!

This combination of matricide and good spirits, however satisfactory to the determined classicist, will probably strike most intelligent readers as a little curious, and even, if one may use the word at all in connection with so powerful a play, undramatic. It becomes intelligible as soon as we observe that Sophocles was deliberately seeking what he regarded as an archaic or "Homeric" style (cf. Jebb, *Introd.* p. xli.); and this archaism, in its turn, seems to me best explained as a conscious reaction against Euripides' searching and unconventional treatment of the same subject (cf. Wilamowitz in *Hermes*, xviii. pp. 214 ff.). In the result Sophocles is not only more "classical" than Euripides; he is more primitive by far than Aeschylus.

For Aeschylus, though steeped in the glory of the world of legend, would not lightly accept its judgment upon religious and moral questions, and above all would not, in that region, play at make-believe. He would not elude the horror of this story by simply not mentioning it, like Homer, or by pretending that an evil act was a good one, like Sophocles. He faces the horror; realises it; and tries to surmount it on the sweep of a great wave of religious emotion. The mother-murder, even if done by a god's command, is a sin; a sin to be expiated by unfathomable suffering. Yet, since the god cannot have commanded evil, it is a duty also. It is a sin that *must* be committed.

Euripides, here as often, represents intellectually the thought of Aeschylus carried a step further. He faced the problem just as Aeschylus did, and as Sophocles did not. But the solution offered by Aeschylus did not satisfy him. It cannot, in its actual details, satisfy

any one. To him the mother-murder—like most acts of revenge, but more than most—was a sin and a horror. Therefore it should not have been committed; and the god who enjoined it *did* command evil, as he had done in a hundred other cases! He is no god of light; he is only a demon of old superstition, acting, among other influences, upon a sore-beset man, and driving him towards a miscalled duty, the horror of which, when done, will unseat his reason.

But another problem interests Euripides even more than this. What kind of man was it—above all, what kind of woman can it have been, who would do this deed of mother-murder, not in sudden fury but deliberately, as an act of "justice," after many years? A "sympathetic" hero and heroine are out of the question; and Euripides does not deal in stage villains. He seeks real people. And few attentive readers of this play can doubt that he has found them.

The son is an exile, bred in the desperate hopes and wild schemes of exile; he is a prince without a kingdom, always dreaming of his wrongs and his restoration; and driven by the old savage doctrine, which an oracle has confirmed, of the duty and manliness of revenge. He is, as was shown by his later history, a man subject to overpowering impulses and to fits of will-less brooding. Lastly, he is very young, and is swept away by his sister's intenser nature.

That sister is the central figure of the tragedy. A woman shattered in childhood by the shock of an experience too terrible for a girl to bear; a poisoned and a haunted woman, eating her heart in ceaseless broodings of hate and love, alike unsatisfied—hate against her mother and stepfather, love for her dead father and her brother in exile; a woman who has known luxury and state, and cares much for them; who is intolerant of poverty, and who feels her youth passing away. And meantime there is her name, on which all legend, if I am not mistaken, insists; she is *A-lektra*, "the Unmated."

There is, perhaps, no woman's character in the range of Greek tragedy so profoundly studied. Not Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, not Phaedra nor Medea.

One's thoughts can only wander towards two great heroines of "lost" plays,

Althaea in the *Meleager*, and Stheneboea in the *Bellerophon*.

G.M.

[Footnote 1: Most of this introduction is reprinted, by the kind permission of the Editors, from an article in the *Independent Review* vol. i. No. 4.]

ELECTRA

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

CLYTEMNESTRA, *Queen of Argos and Mycenae; widow of Agamemnon.*

ELECTRA, *daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.*

ORESTES, *son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, now in banishment.*

A PEASANT, *husband of Electra.*

AN OLD MAN, *formerly servant to Agamemnon.*

PYLADES, *son of Strophios, King of Phocis; friend to Orestes.*

AEGISTHUS, *usurping King of Argos and Mycenae, now husband of Clytemnestra.*

The Heroes CASTOR and POLYDEUCES.

CHORUS of Argive Women, with their LEADER.

FOLLOWERS of ORESTES; HANDMAIDS of CLYTEMNESTRA.

The Scene is laid in the mountains of Argos. The play was first produced between the years 414 and 412 B.C.

ELECTRA

The scene represents a hut on a desolate mountain side; the river Inachus is visible in the distance. The time is the dusk of early dawn, before sunrise. The PEASANT is discovered in front of the hut.

PEASANT.

Old gleam on the face of the world, I give thee hail,
River of Argos land, where sail on sail
The long ships met, a thousand, near and far,
When Agamemnon walked the seas in war;
Who smote King Priam in the dust, and burned
The storied streets of Ilion, and returned
Above all conquerors, heaping tower and fane
Of Argos high with spoils of Eastern slain.

So in far lands he prospered; and at home
His own wife trapped and slew him. 'Twas the doom
Aegisthus wrought, son of his father's foe.

Gone is that King, and the old spear laid low
That Tantalus wielded when the world was young.
Aegisthus hath his queen, and reigns among
His people. And the children here alone,
Orestes and Electra, buds unblown
Of man and womanhood, when forth to Troy
He shook his sail and left them—lo, the boy
Orestes, ere Aegisthus' hand could fall,
Was stolen from Argos—borne by one old thrall,
Who served his father's boyhood, over seas
Far off, and laid upon King Strophios' knees
In Phocis, for the old king's sake. But here
The maid Electra waited, year by year,

Alone, till the warm days of womanhood
Drew nigh and suitors came of gentle blood
In Hellas. Then Aegisthus was in fear
Lest she be wed in some great house, and bear
A son to avenge her father. Close he wrought
Her prison in his house, and gave her not
To any wooer. Then, since even this
Was full of peril, and the secret kiss
Of some bold prince might find her yet, and rend
Her prison walls, Aegisthus at the end
Would slay her. Then her mother, she so wild
Aforetime, pled with him and saved her child.
Her heart had still an answer for her lord
Murdered, but if the child's blood spoke, what word
Could meet the hate thereof? After that day
Aegisthus thus decreed: whoso should slay
The old king's wandering son, should win rich meed
Of gold; and for Electra, she must wed
With me, not base of blood – in that I stand
True Mycenaean – but in gold and land
Most poor, which maketh highest birth as naught.
So from a powerless husband shall be wrought
A powerless peril. Had some man of might
Possessed her, he had called perchance to light
Her father's blood, and unknown vengeance
Risen on Aegisthus yet.

Aye, mine she is:

But never yet these arms – the Cyprian knows
My truth! – have clasped her body, and she goes
A virgin still. Myself would hold it shame
To abase this daughter of a royal name.
I am too lowly to love violence. Yea,
Orestes too doth move me, far away,
Mine unknown brother! Will he ever now
Come back and see his sister bowed so low?

Doth any deem me fool, to hold a fair
Maid in my room and seek no joy, but spare

Her maidenhood? If any such there be,
Let him but look within. The fool is he
In gentle things, weighing the more and less
Of love by his own heart's untenderness.

[As he ceases ELECTRA comes out of the hut. She is in mourning garb, and carries a large pitcher on her head. She speaks without observing the PEASANT'S presence.]

ELECTRA.

Dark shepherdess of many a golden star,
Dost see me, Mother Night? And how this jar
Hath worn my earth-bowed head, as forth and fro
For water to the hillward springs I go?
Not for mere stress of need, but purpose set,
That never day nor night God may forget
Aegisthus' sin: aye, and perchance a cry
Cast forth to the waste shining of the sky
May find my father's ear.... The woman bred
Of Tyndareus, my mother – on her head
Be curses! – from my house hath outcast me;
She hath borne children to our enemy;
She hath made me naught, she hath made Orestes naught....

[As the bitterness of her tone increases, the PEASANT comes forward.]

PEASANT.

What wouldst thou now, my sad one, ever fraught
With toil to lighten my toil? And so soft
Thy nurture was! Have I not chid thee oft,
And thou wilt cease not, serving without end?

ELECTRA (turning to him with impulsive affection).

O friend, my friend, as God might be my friend,
Thou only hast not trampled on my tears.
Life scarce can be so hard, 'mid many fears

And many shames, when mortal heart can find
Somewhere one healing touch, as my sick mind
Finds thee.... And should I wait thy word, to endure
A little for thine easing, yea, or pour
My strength out in thy toiling fellowship?
Thou hast enough with fields and kine to keep;
'Tis mine to make all bright within the door.
'Tis joy to him that toils, when toil is o'er,
To find home waiting, full of happy things.

PEASANT.

If so it please thee, go thy way. The springs
Are not far off. And I before the morn
Must drive my team afield, and sow the corn
In the hollows. — Not a thousand prayers can gain
A man's bare bread, save an he work amain.

[ELECTRA and the PEASANT depart on their several ways. After a few moments there enter stealthily two armed men, ORESTES and PYLADES.

ORESTES.

Thou art the first that I have known in deed
True and my friend, and shelterer of my need.
Thou only, Pylades, of all that knew,
Hast held Orestes of some worth, all through
These years of helplessness, wherein I lie
Downtrodden by the murderer — yea, and by
The murderess, my mother!... I am come,
Fresh from the cleansing of Apollo, home
To Argos — and my coming no man yet
Knoweth — to pay the bloody twain their debt
Of blood. This very night I crept alone
To my dead father's grave, and poured thereon
My heart's first tears and tresses of my head
New-shorn, and o'er the barrow of the dead

Slew a black lamb, unknown of them that reign
In this unhappy land.... I am not fain
To pass the city gates, but hold me here
Hard on the borders. So my road is clear
To fly if men look close and watch my way;
If not, to seek my sister. For men say
She dwelleth in these hills, no more a maid
But wedded. I must find her house, for aid
To guide our work, and learn what hath betid
Of late in Argos. — Ha, the radiant lid
Of Dawn's eye lifteth! Come, friend; leave we now
This trodden path. Some worker of the plough,
Or serving damsel at her early task
Will presently come by, whom we may ask
If here my sister dwells. But soft! Even now
I see some bondmaid there, her death-shorn brow
Bending beneath its freight of well-water.
Lie close until she pass; then question her.
A slave might help us well, or speak some sign
Of import to this work of mine and thine.

[*The two men retire into ambush. ELECTRA enters, returning from the well.*]

ELECTRA.

Onward, O labouring tread,
As on move the years;
Onward amid thy tears,
O happier dead!

Let me remember. I am she, [*Strophe 1.*
Agamemnon's child, and the mother of me
Clytemnestra, the evil Queen,
Helen's sister. And folk, I ween,
That pass in the streets call yet my name
Electra.... God protect my shame!
For toil, toil is a weary thing,

And life is heavy about my head;
And thou far off, O Father and King,
In the lost lands of the dead.
A bloody twain made these things be;
One was thy bitterest enemy,
And one the wife that lay by thee.

Brother, brother, on some far shore [*Antistrophe* 1.
Hast thou a city, is there a door
That knows thy footfall, Wandering One?
Who left me, left me, when all our pain
Was bitter about us, a father slain,
And a girl that wept in her room alone.
Thou couldst break me this bondage sore,
Only thou, who art far away,
Loose our father, and wake once more....
Zeus, Zeus, dost hear me pray?...
The sleeping blood and the shame and the doom!
O feet that rest not, over the foam
Of distant seas, come home, come home!

What boots this cruse that I carry? [*Strophe* 2.
O, set free my brow!
For the gathered tears that tarry
Through the day and the dark till now,
Now in the dawn are free,
Father, and flow beneath
The floor of the world, to be
As a song in she house of Death:
From the rising up of the day
They guide my heart away,
The silent tears unshed,
And my body mourns for the dead;
My cheeks bleed silently,
And these bruised temples keep
Their pain, remembering thee
And thy bloody sleep.

Be rent, O hair of mine head!

As a swan crying alone
Where the river windeth cold,
For a loved, for a silent one,
Whom the toils of the fowler hold,
I cry, Father, to thee,
O slain in misery!

The water, the wan water, [*Antistrophe* 2.
Lapped him, and his head
Drooped in the bed of slaughter
Low, as one wearied;
Woe for the edged axe,
And woe for the heart of hate,
Houndlike about thy tracks,
O conqueror desolate,
From Troy over land and sea,
Till a wife stood waiting thee;
Not with crowns did she stand,
Nor flowers of peace in her hand;
With Aegisthus' dagger drawn
For her hire she strove,
Through shame and through blood alone;
And won her a traitor's love.

[*As she ceases there enter from right and left the CHORUS, consisting of women of Argos, young and old, in festal dress.*

CHORUS.

Some Women.

Child of the mighty dead, [*Strophe*.
Electra, lo, my way
To thee in the dawn hath sped,
And the cot on the mountain grey,
For the Watcher hath cried this day:

He of the ancient folk,
The walker of waste and hill,
Who drinketh the milk of the flock;
And he told of Hera's will;
For the morrow's morrow now
They cry her festival,
And before her throne shall bow
Our damsels all.

ELECTRA.

Not unto joy, nor sweet
Music, nor shining of gold,
The wings of my spirit beat.
Let the brides of Argos hold
Their dance in the night, as of old;
I lead no dance; I mark
No beat as the dancers sway;
With tears I dwell in the dark,
And my thought is of tears always,
To the going down of the day.
Look on my wasted hair
And raiment.... This that I bear,
Is it meet for the King my sire,
And her whom the King begot?
For Troy, that was burned with fire
And forgetteth not?

CHORUS.

Other Women.

Hera is great! — Ah, come, [*Antistrophe.*
Be kind; and my hand shall bring
Fair raiment, work of the loom,
And many a golden thing,
For joyous robe-wearing.

Deemest thou this thy woe
Shall rise unto God as prayer,
Or bend thine haters low?
Doth God for thy pain have care?
Not tears for the dead nor sighs,
But worship and joy divine
Shall win thee peace in thy skies,
O daughter mine!

ELECTRA.

No care cometh to God
For the voice of the helpless; none
For the crying of ancient blood.
Alas for him that is gone,
And for thee, O wandering one:
That now, methinks, in a land
Of the stranger must toil for hire,
And stand where the poor men stand,
A-cold by another's fire,
O son of the mighty sire:
While I in a beggar's cot
On the wrecked hills, changing not,
Starve in my soul for food;
But our mother lieth wed
In another's arms, and blood
Is about her bed.

LEADER.

On all of Greece she wrought great jeopardy,
Thy mother's sister, Helen, — and on thee.

[ORESTES and PYLADES move out from their concealment; ORESTES comes forward: PYLADES beckons to two ARMED SERVANTS and stays with them in the background.]

ELECTRA.

Woe's me! No more of wailing! Women, flee!
Strange armed men beside the dwelling there
Lie ambushed! They are rising from their lair.
Back by the road, all you. I will essay
The house; and may our good feet save us!

ORESTES (*between ELECTRA and the hut*).

Stay,
Unhappy woman! Never fear my steel.

ELECTRA (*in utter panic*).

O bright Apollo! Mercy! See, I kneel;
Slay me not.

ORESTES.

Others I have yet to slay
Less dear than thou.

ELECTRA.

Go from me! Wouldst thou lay
Hand on a body that is not for thee?

ORESTES.

None is there I would touch more righteously.

ELECTRA.

Why lurk'st thou by my house? And why a sword?

ORESTES.

Stay. Listen! Thou wilt not gainsay my word.