

The Complexity of the Concept of Justice in Sophocles' Electra

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexity of the concept of justice in Sophocles' tragedy Electra. While the main characters claim to be righteous and just, Sophocles subtly presents them as murderers and morally bankrupt. Electra persuades her brother, Orestes, to avenge the death of their father, Agamemnon, who gets murdered at the hands of their mother, Clytemnestra, not because she seeks justice, but to achieve praise from the public through protecting the paternal bloodline of her family. Sophocles does not present Electra as a heroine who deserves admiration, but rather as a murderer and deceptive who forfeited joy and stability of her family. He also does not trivialize or justify the crime of matricide and suggests that justice cannot be attained through violence and deception.

Keywords: Matricide, Justice, Revenge, Greek, Deception

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إلتباس مفهوم العدالة في مسرحية سوفوكليس اليكتر

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ملخص

يدرس هذا البحث إلتباس مفهوم العدالة في مسرحية سوفوكليس التراجيدية اليكتر. بينما تدعي الشخصيات الرئيسية أنها على حق وعادلة، يقدم سوفوكليس تلك الشخصيات ببراعة كقتلة ومفلسة أخلاقيا. تقوم اليكتر بإقناع شقيقها أوريسيتيس للإنتقام لموت أبيهم أجاممنون الذي قتل على يد والدتهم كلتمسترا ليس لأنها تسعى لتحقيق العدالة وإنما لتحصل على مديح عامة الناس من خلال حماية السلالة الأبوية للعائلة. لا يقدم سوفوكليس اليكتر كبطلة تستحق الإحترام وإنما كقاتلة ومخادعة أضاعت بهجة وإستقرار عائلتها. كما أنه أيضا لا يبسط أو يسوغ جريمة قتل الأم ويقترح أنه لا يمكن تحقيق العدالة من خلال العنف والخداع.

الكلمات الدالة: قتل الأم، عدالة، إنتقام، إغريقي، خداع

The tragedy of the Greek playwright Sophocles, *Electra*, written in the fifth century BCE, highlights the incessant mourning of the main female character, Electra, for her murdered father, King Agamemnon, who is killed at the hands of his wife, Clytemnestra, and her paramour, Aegisthus. The play reveals the desire of the lamenting Electra for revenge with the assistance of her brother, Orestes. This brutal revenge that takes place complicates the concept of justice and increases social problems. Dué (2012) focuses on the lamentation of women in Greek tragedy, “if there is one thing that female characters do in tragedy ... it is lament. Both epic and tragedy are infused with the grief of women, despite the fact that they are male-oriented performance traditions” (236). Willner (1982) reads the play from a feminist perspective, “the myth of Electra ... reiterates male dominance and restriction of women to the domestic sphere” (66). King (2012) also claims that Electra desires to free herself from the restrictions of gender that culminates in matricide, “Electra’s imagined masculinity reflects her longing for a freedom from the constraints of gender itself” (399). Other critics like Prins (2017) oppose the readings of feminists of the play by arguing that the loyalty of Electra to her father and brother represents an attempt to maintain patriarchy, “nineteenth-century readings of the play tended to emphasize the piety of Electra; defined by grief for her father and brother, she could be interpreted as a dutiful daughter and sister who is devoted to the restoration of patriarchal order” (117). This paper focuses on the complexity of the concept of justice in the play by suggesting that matricide does not represent an act of heroism or justice but rather an act of violence that creates social problems in society.

Electra draws attention to her status as a woman who laments the murder of her father and claims to seek justice through taking revenge on her mother. She emphasizes that her cause is just through praying to the gods to send her brother Orestes to help her avenge the death of their father,

Come to my aid!

Avenge my father’s death!

And send my brother; bring to me Orestes! For I can no more

Sustain this grief; it crushes me. (116-120)

It would be important to note here that Electra and Orestes conform to the gender norms of the ancient Greek society that expected women to be under the guardianship of men. Regardless of the immorality of the quest, Electra seems to be completely dependent on her brother Orestes in taking revenge on their mother. Dunn (2012) states,

Orestes is associated with action, the public sphere, and civic values, whereas Electra's world is that of words, of the household, and of family ties. Orestes is rational yet devious; Electra is emotional and direct; Orestes presumes a cosmos that is linear, concrete, and objective; Electra, one that is unchanging, abstract, and subjective. (100).

The fact that Electra seems to be tied to the domestic sphere and suffers mistreatment at the hands of her mother makes speech her only way of rebellion. However, there is no doubt that the presence of Electra and her lament in public urges Orestes to make vengeance possible. Dué (2012) argues that "lament is the only medium through which women have a sanctioned public voice, the one weapon they possess to defend themselves with in desperate circumstances" (236). Electra attempts to draw the sympathy of the public through mourning at the gates of the palace and vows not to cease until receiving justice,

I only, father, mourn your death.
Nor ever will
I cease from dirge and sad lament
So long as I behold the sun
By day and see the stars by night;
But like the sorrowing nightingale
Who mourns her young unceasingly,
Here at the very gates will I
Proclaim my grief for all to hear. (102-109)

Electra refuses to give up excessive lamentation and rejects the attempts of the townswomen to console her and this represents her strong need for vengeance. Willner (1982) reads Electra as a heroine and claims that her

heroism “is expressed in sustained public mourning for her father and in calls for him to be revenged” (68). Dué (2012) points out that women in Greek society used the “language of lament” (239) to draw attention and achieve their goals. Dué adds, “In recent years laments have been interpreted as powerful speech-acts, capable of inciting violent action. In the context of lament, women can voice subversive concerns and speak in ways in which they cannot under any other circumstances” (236). This implies that the lament of Electra in the play does not only represent a way to express grief, but also a cry for justice. Therefore, Electra represents “the very embodiment of mourning” (Prins, 2017, 120) who claims to be attached to the dead and seeks revenge on her mother out of loyalty to her father.

Sophocles’ Electra seems to be full of violence and hatred rather than justice and love. Electra claims to have a strong desire for justice through lamenting in public and awaiting her brother, Orestes, to take the revenge. Moreover, Orestes is motivated by the oracle of Apollo given to him at Delphi that ordered to avenge the murder of Agamemnon. Orestes expresses no grief for his father, but rather obeys the commands of Apollo. He describes the instructions of Apollo and the manner to the vengeance of Agamemnon’s death,

I went to Delphi, and I asked Apollo
How best I might avenge my father's death
On these who murdered him. The god's reply
Was brief; it went like this: Not with an army
But with your own right hand, by stratagem

Give them what they have earned, and kill them both. (32-37, emphasis in original)

In this passage Orestes describes how he was commanded by “Apollo to carry out his mission through trickery” (Finglass, 2005, 199). The fact that Orestes seems to be supported by the gods gives him the feeling of righteousness and morality; therefore, he prays that he achieves victory over his opponents through deception,

And so, I trust, may I, through this pretence,
Look down triumphant like the sun in heaven upon my enemies.
Only do thou, my native soil; you, gods of Argos,
Receive and prosper me. House of my fathers,

Receive me with your blessing! The gods have sent me,
And I have come to purify and purge you. (66-71).

The fact that Apollo charges Orestes to kill his mother and Aegisthus makes the Greek gods one of the main causes of sorrow among humans. The Greek gods seem to be not supporters of justice and set a bad example for humans through their call for revenge and deception. This means that the Greek gods lead law-abiding humans down ways of immorality and iniquity.

Sophocles presents Electra as the protector of the bloodline of her family that appears to be completely paternal. This means that what annoys Electra is seeing Aegisthus taking the place of her father in the house of Agamemnon rather than seeking justice. Electra laments, "I must see Aegisthus/ Sitting upon my father's throne, wearing/ My father's robes, and pouring his libations/ Beside the hearth-stone where they murdered him?" (267-270). Therefore, Electra takes her mother as an enemy not only because she suffers abuse, but also because her mother substitutes Aegisthus for Electra's father. McClure (2012) comments,

As the defender of paternal heredity, Electra rails most against Clytemnestra's crime of adultery, through which she has transmitted the authority of her house to Aegisthus rather than to Orestes. She refers to him not as a legitimate spouse, but as her mother's bedmate. (374)

This leads to question the real reason behind the constant laments of Electra and her strong desire for revenge. In her attempt to persuade her sister, Chrysothemis, to help her avenge the death of their father, Electra claims that they will be praised and admired by the public for their so-called heroic deed. When Electra asks, "Do you not see what glory you will win/ Both for yourself and me by doing this?" (973-974), Chrysothemis replies, "It brings us nothing, if when we have won/ That glorious repute, we die ignobly" (1006-1007). Chrysothemis refuses the constant precautions of

Electra for matricide because she does not seem to be ambitious as her sister, who seeks praise from the public, and the fact that vendetta does not bring justice but ignoble death. Therefore, Electra seems to be defender of the heritage of her family rather than of justice and righteousness.

Electra's motivations for vengeance appear to be suspect as she gets irrational and falls prey to evil. Electra addresses the chorus, "Enduring this, my friends, how can I follow/ Wisdom and piety? Among such evils/ How can my conduct not be evil too?" (307-309). Therefore, if Clytemnestra is presented as wicked and deceptive, Electra follows the same evil and deceptive methods by murdering her mother. The intense grief of Electra does not seem to be a result of her attachment to the dead as she relentlessly claims, but because she would remain unwedded after the murder of her protector and guardian, Agamemnon, and that she will continue to suffer the constant abuses at the hands of her mother. It would be important to note here that "women in ancient Greece were under the tutelage of father, brother, husband, or grown son" (Willner, 1982, 58), and that Electra feels helpless after the murder of her father and her belief that her brother, Orestes, has perished. Therefore, Electra seems to be left unprotected and deprived of the chance to become a mother. Bakogianni (2009) comments, "the murder of Agamemnon consigned his daughter to a state of perpetual virginity that would have been seen as unnatural in fifth-century BC Greece" (47). Electra laments her outsider status as a virgin,

I am alone, without the comfort of children; no
Husband to stand beside me, and share the burden;
Spurned like a slave, dressed like a slave, fed on the scraps,
I serve, disdained by all – in the house of my fathers! (189-192)

Therefore, it would be erroneous to say that Electra is driven by her desire for justice through matricide, but rather to save the reputation and nobility of her family, especially when she is left unmarried. Willner (1982) argues, "Sophocles' Electra hated her mother not only because of the loss of their father but also, and perhaps especially, because her mother abused and deprived her, Electra, of her womanly due" (70). Electra has been robbed of the desire to become a woman and bear children to protect her. Accordingly, Dué (2012) misinterprets the play when she announces that the laments of Electra bring justice and order. Dué claims, "[Electra's] laments are what

brings justice for the death of Agamemnon” (246). However, the crime of matricide does not bring justice, but rather death and destruction. This means that stability and filial ties will never be seen again in the house of Agamemnon.

The justification of Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon complicates the concept of justice in the play. Clytemnestra does not deny her crime of killing Agamemnon, but she claims that Agamemnon deserved that punishment because he offered their daughter, Iphigenia, to the god Artemis. Clytemnestra justifies the murder of Electra's father as following:

Your father: that is always your excuse,
That he was killed by me. – By me! of course;
I know he was, and I do not deny it—
Because his own crime killed him, and not I
Alone. And you, if you had known your duty,
Ought to have helped, for I was helping Justice.
This father of yours, whom you are always mourning,
Had killed your sister, sacrificing her
To Artemis. (526-534)

Clytemnestra asserts that Agamemnon did not have the right to kill her daughter and that he was unjust and unrighteous. It would be important to note here that it was the god, Artemis, who demanded the sacrifice of Iphigenia after Artemis stops the winds and the Greek fleet fails to sail to the Trojan War because Agamemnon killed a deer sacred to Artemis. This implies that all characters in the play are tied to appease the gods and that the gods become a cause of their suffering. Nooter (2011) states, “Orestes is the source of deceit while Electra uses her lamentation and arguments to offer ‘moral clarity’” (401) for matricide. At the same time, Clytemnestra claims that Electra is a wrongdoer and not helping justice by not giving hand in the murder of Agamemnon.

The murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus presents Electra and Orestes as criminals not as pursuers of justice. Electra celebrates the revenge by not allowing Aegisthus to speak before his death. She replies to the request of Aegisthus to speak,

No, by the gods, Orestes! No
Long speech from him! No, not a single word!
He's face to face with death; there's nothing gained
Ingaining time. Kill him at once! And when
You've killed him, throw the body out of sight,
And let him have the funeral he deserves.
Animals shall eat him! (1481-1489)

By denying Aegisthus burial through mutilating him and leaving him to be devoured by the dogs, Electra and Aegisthus break the religious law of ancient Greece that protects the right of the dead. This unjust and violent action throws the city into chaos and it would be impossible that Sophocles was supporting murder. Konstan (2008) asserts that Sophocles presents matricide as horrible,

Sophocles did indeed represent the matricide as odious, but he did so indirectly, hinting to an astute audience that Orestes had prejudged the response of the oracle and that he indeed entertained doubts about the rightness of his reprisal ... Orestes was motivated chiefly by the desire for gain, and also by the relatively sympathetic representation of Clytemnestra. (77)

March (2001) also comments that Sophocles should have been critical of the crime of matricide, "the wise and humane Sophocles could not really have condoned a deed as horrific and polluting as matricide, and that he must therefore have been subtly condemning it and implying the imminent arrival, or even the presence, of the Furies in the play" (16). This implies that Sophocles presents Electra as a murderer rather than a heroine and that justice can only be attained in the court of law not through deception and violence. Wright (2005) comments,

The emotional life of this monstrous family is, and has always been, disastrously unsound, and it is unthinkable that its surviving members will

ever experience the stability, closeness, and happiness to which they aspire. Despite what the unfortunate Electra might think or hope, nothing is going to be all right in this family ever again. (194)

No doubt that Electra has forfeited joy and stability through matricide. This implies that Electra's irrationality and desire to achieve glory and heroism bring nothing but chaos and destruction.

In conclusion, it would be erroneous to claim that Sophocles presents Electra as a righteous heroine and defend her quest for matricide. Sophocles suggests throughout the play that justice can never be attained through revenge and deception and condemns Electra for her crime of matricide. The incessant mourning of Electra represents an attempt to draw the sympathy of the public and present her quest for revenge as right and necessary. Electra spurs Orestes to murder their mother to protect the heritage of her father, so she can achieve praise from the public. The irrationality of Electra and her desire for personal gain make her fall prey to evil and drive the house of Agamemnon into chaos.

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