Eranos 114:2 (2023) 75–95 • doi: 10.33063/er.v114i2.338

Sparta and Euripides' *Electra*

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Abstract: From early on the myths of Agamemnon and Orestes had political overtones. In the *Iliad* it is Agamemnon as king of Mycenae who leads the Argive forces against Troy but, just as early, Agamemnon and Orestes seem to have been closely associated with Laconia. This article provides a political interpretation of Euripides' *Electra* in which I argue that *Electra* is an anti-Spartan tragedy arising from Sparta's desire to control Argos. Although the mythological background is the Trojan War, the tragedy reflects the deleterious effects of the Peloponnesian War. Unlike in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Electra* where the curse on the royal house forms the central background, the larger focus in Euripides' tragedy is on the territory of Argos. This point is clearly suggested by having the skene depict a farmer's hut which, situated somewhere in the mountains, is emblematic of Argive territory. Argos is a polis divided between two hostile parties: Orestes and Electra, the legitimate successors of the former Argive king, Agamemnon, and pro-Spartan usurpers, the Tyndarids, represented in the play by Clytemnestra and supported in the epilogue by her Tyndarid brothers, the Dioscuri. Castor, their spokesman, provides a completely unsatisfactory moral solution to the revenge of Orestes and Electra, a solution that is simply designed to serve Spartan interests. By imposing a life-long exile on Agamemnon's children, his legal heirs, Castor leaves Argos open for the Spartans to take control. The tragedy contrasts a heroic past with a sordid present which accounts for the so called 'Low Style' of *Electra*. I shall suggest a date between 421–417 BC for the play's production, when there was an insecure peace between Athens and Sparta and the politics of Argos assumed much importance.

Keywords: Argive territory; Peloponnesian War; Spartan Tyndarids; heroic past; sordid present.

Although we do not know the date of the first production of Euripides' *Electra*, no one doubts that it took place during the Peloponnesian War.[1] The war itself, however, has not been seriously considered as an important factor for interpreting *Electra* except insofar as the tragedy seems to reflect some social and intellectual ideas that spread at Athens during the war.[2]

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✍ I should like to thank Paul Cartledge, John Gahan and the anonymous readers at *Eranos* for helpful comments. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[1] Simply for the convenience of this article I take the term 'Peloponnesian War' to refer to the years 431–404 BC. This term itself, though probably used in earlier, now lost historians, is first found much later in Diod. Sic. 12.37.2; 38.1, et al. See e.g., Hornblower 1995, 60, n. 65 and De Ste Croix 1972, 294–295 for a discussion of the ancient terms used after Thucydides who called his work (1.1): "The War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians." I shall discuss the possible dates for the production of *Electra* at the end of this article.

[2] E.g., Rehm 2021, 101–104; Denniston 1939, 80–82; Goldhill 1986, 228–229.

By the 6th century BC, if not before,[3] the *Oresteia* myth clearly was given a political bias. Although in Homer the seat of Agamemnon's power was Mycenae (*Il.* 7.180 and 11.46), Stesichorus, no doubt followed by Simonides (*schol.* Eur.*Or.*46), placed Agamemnon's home in Sparta and its environs to support Spartan claims to suzerainty in the Peloponnese, if not Greece as a whole.[4] We know from Herodotus (1.67–68) that Orestes was worshipped at Sparta as a military hero. Pausanias also records another tradition about him (2.18.5):

> "Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, since he was a neighbour, took possession of Argos. Apart from his paternal kingdom, he had also laid claim to the majority of Arcadians. After taking over the kingship in Sparta, he always had an allied force of Phocians ready to help him. Orestes became king of the Lacedaemonians with their consent, for they thought it right that the sons of the daughter of Tyndareus should rule in preference to the bastards by a slave of Menelaus..."

Pausanias clearly had a Spartan source for this passage. What it shows is that a kinship to Tyndareus was essential for political legitimacy and recognition at Sparta. This image of Tyndareus will be central to my argument below. In Euripides' tragedy, however, as the murderer of his mother, Clytemnestra, a daughter of Tyndareus, Orestes poses a threat to any claims of legitimacy Spartans may make to have control of Argos.

We also know that Stesichorus composed a poem on Helen. In this work, instead of going to Troy, she spent the course of the war in Egypt, loyal to her Spartan husband, Menelaus. Stesichorus' *Palinode*, whether part of a longer poem or a separate work, also like his *Oresteia*, probably had a political intent, in this case absolving Helen of guilt since she had a divine status at Sparta (Paus.3.15.3).[5]

In the mid years of the 5th century the Spartan attempts to control the *Oresteia* myth were both contested and upheld. Unfortunately, we do not know whether Pindar's *Pythian* 11 is to be dated to 474 BC or 454 BC. There have been modern supporters of both dates. If the ode belongs to the earlier date, Pindar continued in promoting a positive, Spartan view of Orestes in avenging his father's death by killing Aegisthus and his mother, Clytemnestra. If it belongs to the later date of 454 BC, Pindar seems to be reacting to a major attempt by the Athenian tragedian Aeschylus to wrest the myth from Spartan control by setting Agamemnon's home

[3] Some modern scholars argue that from early on Agamemnon appears to have been associated with Laconia. See e.g., Hall 1997, 89–94. Osborne 1996, 289, describes the change of Agamemnon's home from Laconia to Mycenae in Homeric epic and tragedy as a "late displacement."

[4] See Cartledge 2002, 46–47.

[5] On the 'new' Helen see Allen 2008, 18–22.

not in Sparta nor even in Mycenae but in Argos.[6] In the Aeschylean version, Orestes is purified by Apollo and stands trial at Athens in a court of Athenian citizens convened by Athena. Prosecuted by the Erinyes of his mother, he is acquitted and returns to rule Argos (*Eum.* 754–760). This radically new version of the myth was, in part, fostered by the Athenians' recent alliance with Argos in 463 BC after breaking their alliance with Sparta.[7]

We do not know whether there were other lost tragic versions, be they pro-Spartan or pro-Argive/Athenian, before the *Electras* of Sophocles and Euripides which were both produced during the Peloponnesian War.[8] Here I shall concentrate on Euripides' tragedy. Given the way the myth seems to have been used in the past by both Spartans and Athenians for propaganda purposes, I should like here to consider the Euripidean version from a political viewpoint.[9]

I begin with what is an overt political allusion to recent events at *Electra* 409–411. Electra tells her farmer husband to go to the old tutor of her father, Agamemnon, to fetch food: "Go to the aged tutor of my dear father who tends his flocks near the River Tanaos that cuts the borders of Argive and Spartan lands." Although scholars have commented on this topical reference, none have satisfactorily considered its dramatic significance.[10] If the reference however is not gratuitous, then it should

[6] Finglass 2007, 5–27 is undecided about the date. Kurke 2013, 101–175 makes a good case for the later date.

[7] On Athens' alliance with Argos see Quincey 1965, 190–206; and, more recently, see Beer 2020a, 21–34. Looked at from an Argive point of view the alliance with Athens might be seen as an ongoing shoring up of its defenses against attacks from Sparta. We learn from Paus. (8.27.1) that, since the Argives feared, on an almost daily basis, a threat of being forced by war into subjection to the Spartans, they augmented their numbers by capturing Tiryns, Hysiai, Orneai, Mycenae, Mideia and other less significant towns. In this way they made the threat from the Spartans less fearful. These events took place in the 460s BC. For a citation of ancient sources and references to modern discussions see Kowalzig 2007, 164, n. 91.

[8] Although there can be no certainty on the matter, it seems unlikely that there were other tragic versions of Orestes' matricide between Aesch. *Oresteia* of 458 BC and Eur. and Soph. *Electras*. It would have taken a brave, and presumably a relatively unknown author, to risk challenging the Aesch. version of the myth during the thriving years of Athenian democracy before The Peloponnesian War, especially in light of the signal honour given to Aesch. (*Vita* 12) of allowing others to produce his work after his death. Once Pericles had died and the war began to take a serious toll on the optimism with which the Athenians had entered it, it seems more likely that only a tragedian of the stature of Soph. or Eur. would offer a different take on the myth. We can discern from Ar. *Nub.* 534–536 and *Ran.* 1126–1128; 1141–1143; 1172–1173 how well-known Aesch.'s *Oresteia* was, even if we do not accept Newiger 1961, 422–430, who argues for a revival of it in the 420s BC.

[9] Recently Beer 2022, 23–37 has given an anti-Spartan reading of Soph's *El.*

[10] E.g., Rehm 2021, 145; Cropp 2013, 165; Roisman and Luschnig 2011, 151; Said 1989, 116–117.

serve some useful dramatic function, especially as this boundary between Argos and Sparta was part of an ongoing dispute between the two powers in the Peloponnese that went back to the 6th century (Her. 1.82). The districts of Kynouria and Thyreatis[11] in this border area were still a cause of controversy both at the start of the Peloponnesian War and later during the war. In 431 BC the Spartans settled some Aeginetans in the disputed region after they were expelled from their island by the Athenians (Thuc. 2.27.2). This area was still contested in 420 BC when the Spartans and the Argives attempted to renew a peace treaty (Thuc. 5.41).

War brings about many changes that can affect all classes. While the imaginative background of *Electra* is the aftermath of the Trojan War, the devastation caused by the ongoing Peloponnesian War was surely too close and too recent for several in the Athenian audience to ignore it altogether when viewing the tragedy, not least given the annual invasion of the Spartan army during harvest time that began in 431 BC (Thuc. 2.18–24; 3.1).[12] The spine of *Electra*, I argue, is structured around who controls the territory of Argos and how this affects the status of its inhabitants.

The territorial question is immediately broached in the opening line of *Electra* when the audience hear an invocation in which there is a pun on the word ἄργος which suggests both 'a tract of land' and the polis of Argos: ᾿Ω γῆς παλαιὸν ἄργος, Ἰνάχου ῥοαί ("O earth's ancient plain, streams of Inachos").[13] Thus Argos has two rivers, for in addition to the Inachos (1) there is the Tanaos which, we have seen, forms the disputed boundary with Sparta (410–411).

Orestes stays near the border after he returns from exile, so he can easily escape if recognised (96–97). As well as a plain (1), Argos has a mountainous region where Electra endures an internal exile by being forced into marriage with a poor farmer (207–210). It is from these Argive mountains (699–705) that Pan, the guardian of the fields, descends with a golden lamb to the agora of Argos, whose dramatic import is discussed in more detail below. Near to where Electra's husband has his small holding there is a stream for gathering water (56;78) and a field for oxen to plough

[11] Kynouria and Thyreatis may be two different names for the same place, as Paul Cartledge has suggested to me in email correspondence.

[12] These annual Spartan invasions in the first phase lasted from 431–425 BC. While it has been disputed to what extent the Athenians were seriously affected by these invasions, since they could import their grain from elsewhere, a good case has been made by Thorne (2001, 225–253) that the impact was more serious than has been commonly thought. Certainly, the upheaval, as described in Thuc. 2.14 and 16, of those who traditionally lived ἐν τοῖς ἀγροῖς must have been harshly felt. Moreover, those who lost their rural livelihood quite likely had long memories.

[13] This is the reading defended by Denniston 1939, 55, based on Murray's OCT. I see no solid reason for rejecting it as many modern editors do.

(79). Also, as we have seen, Agamemnon's aged tutor has a sheep-holding (409). The chorus consists of country women who bring news from a milk-drinking, mountain-dweller about a feast for Hera (169–174).[14] A harbour at Nauplia is mentioned twice (452–453; 1278) and Aegisthus has a fine rural estate (777–787). In short, as Cropp reminds us, "In this play 'Argos' and 'Argive' usually denote the Argolid, rarely just the town of Argos."[15]

The skene of Euripides' *Electra* is not the royal house, as in Aeschylus and Sophocles, but a farmer's lowly dwelling on a mountainside somewhat distant from the centre of Argos (207–210), establishing that this is a tragedy that affects not simply ruling elites but the more general community of Argive inhabitants. Whereas in Aeschylus' and Sophocles' versions a strong emphasis is placed on the cursed family, there are only two brief mentions of the curse and *then* only in the *Electra's* epilogue. One is just a general statement about the ruin (ἄτη) caused by the family's ancestors (1305–1307) and the other refers to Clytemnestra's curse (1324). Moreover, there is no explicit mention of the Erinyes by name with whom the traditional curse on the house had been inextricably associated.[16] Also, it is noteworthy that in the main action before the epilogue, the murders of both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra take place while they are away from the palace, thus negating a narrow focus on the house's curse.[17]

The absence of any reference to an ancestral curse is, in fact, central to an understanding of the second stasimon which the chorus of rural women sing (699–746) after Orestes has left to kill Aegisthus (692). Unlike here, the curse assumes much

[14] The play suggests much footslogging. As Rehm 2020, 145–146 n. 3 remarks: "The word 'foot/leg' (poda) occurs over twenty times and the verb for walking another eleven."

[15] Cropp 2012, 135 cites ll.641,715, 1250?, 1313?, and writes: "'Mycenae' occurs only once as a synonym for Argos (963), and 'Mycenaean' seven times (35, 170, 248, 674, 708, 761, 776), always evoking ancient lineage and loyalties." The importance of these points can scarcely be understated, since the Tyndarids form an opposition to this lineage and these loyalties. See also Said 1993,172 on the territorial joining of Mycenae and Argos.

[16] Instead of the term Erinys/Erinyes the term Keres is substituted and, again, only in the epilogue (1252; 1300). Earlier, Orestes had wondered whether an *alastōr* had spoken in the likeness of Apollo (979). While these terms can be taken as synonyms for the more traditional Erinyes, the lack of specific mention seems a deliberate attempt to distance Eur. *El.* from the famous Aeschylean version.

[17] As Papadimitropoulos 2008, 115 writes: "By the change of setting the murders are disassociated from the family curse of the Tantalids, and the revenge is largely disconnected from the plea of justice on account of Agamemnon." Carey 2008, 99 states: "The role assigned to the stage building shrinks the heroic world and creates a more human scale for the action to follow." See also Roisman and Luschnig 2011, 181.

importance elsewhere in many other versions of the Orestes myth,[18] but in Euripides' new version, Thyestes is trying to rob his brother Atreus of his throne. Although Thyestes seduces Atreus' wife, the Cretan Aerope, the more important point is that Thyestes, in trying to seize power at Argos, steals the golden lamb that was sent by Zeus to Atreus as a divine sign of his political legitimacy. By ignoring the family curse, Euripides' version of the myth has all the appearance of being radically new.[19] The reason seems to be that the tragedian wants to give emphasis to the political at the expense of a domestic family feud.

An important key to the meaning of the second stasimon is the significance of the location. Thyestes makes his illegitimate attempt to gain power openly in the agora of Argos. In Euripides' extant tragedies the word agora is a rare term, but of the four examples three are used in *Electra* (388, 708 twice): "A herald standing on a stone pedestal cried out 'people of Mycenae, forward to the agora, to the agora, and behold the awesome portents of our blessed rulers!' At once, dancers honoured the house of the Atreidae (705–712)." Later, in his failed coup attempt, Thyestes, coming into the agora (724), bruited abroad that he had the horned animal with its fleece of gold in his home (723–726).[20] Although the chorus sing of Zeus' wrath at the actions of Thyestes, the specifics of Thyestes' own punishment are omitted (727–736). Interestingly, earlier in the epode of the first stasimon (479–486), the chorus had sung how retribution awaited Clytemnestra; the second stasimon ends on a similar note (745–746).

Thyestes had failed in his attempt to seize power openly in the agora, the political centre of Argos. His son Aegisthus was successful by using a more underhanded means. He seduced a very powerful woman to help him murder the legitimate ruler of Argos secretly in his own home on his return from Troy, for Clytemnestra was not only the wife of Agamemnon, she was also the daughter of Tyndareus. The Tyndarids were legendary rulers of Sparta, the most powerful polis in the Peloponn-

[18] For example, in Aesch. the curse had centred upon Atreus' treatment of Thyestes in making his brother eat his own children (*Ag.*1182–1185; 1600–1602); in Soph. *El.* 502–515 the curse began with Pelops gaining the kingdom of Mycenae by causing the death of Oenomaus in a murderous horse race. Eur. himself (*Or.* 1–51) provides a brief history of the doom-laden family from Tantalus to Orestes.

[19] As Rosivach 1978, 189 n.2 writes: "This absence of testimony outside our play is surprising in view of the large number of ancient authors who mention the myth, and it suggests that Euripides may have invented this version himself to avoid the inconvenient implications of the standard versions." See also Rosivasch 189 n.1 on references to modern works in which ancient data on the myth is set out.

[20] Rehm 2021, 55 writes: "In the second stasimon, the Chorus recount the legend of the golden lamb, a tale of marital infidelity, palace intrigue and dynastic politics." In this statement Rehm puts too much emphasis on the palace and not enough on the agora. The agora suggests a political coup more than simply a 'palace intrigue'.

nese which was always a potential threat to neighbouring Argos. Athenian writers, during the Peloponnesian War, constantly portrayed Spartans as liars and deceptive schemers.[21] In *Electra's* prologue both Clytemnestra's guile and her Tyndarid birthright are given prominence. The audience learn that she used guile (δόλῳ) to help Aegisthus murder Agamemnon (9–10) and that: "Aegisthus is king, marrying the daughter of Tyndareus, that man's wife" i.e. Agamemnon's (12- 13; cf.760; 947).[22]

During the play the importance of Clytemnestra's status is constantly brought to the fore by her being called daughter of Tyndareus, the Spartan king. Only three times is she called Clytemnestra (9;116; 651), whereas she is referred to as daughter of Tyndareus seven times in all, first by the farmer in the prologue (13), twice pejoratively by Electra (60; 117), once reportedly by Aegisthus as "my wife, daughter of Tyndareus" (806). Later in her kakology over Aegisthus' body, as we have seen (930–931), Electra says sarcastically that the Argives used to demean Aegisthus by saying he belonged to his wife, rather than she to him. In the first stasimon Clytemnestra is damned as the daughter of Tyndareus, "the adulterous murderer of her husband" (479–481). Later, in a hyperbolic address to the queen on her entrance, the Chorus say: "O queen of the land of Argos, daughter of Tyndareus and sister of the noble twins of Zeus who inhabit the fiery aether among the stars" (988–993). Even later, Clytemnestra herself refers to Tyndareus as her father (1018) and, as if to ensure the Dioscuri's Spartan connection in the epilogue, when they appear as *dei ex machina*, Electra addresses them as the sons of Tyndareus (1295).

Whatever Spartan connection may have been forged for Agamemnon by earlier poets like Stesichorus and Pindar, in Euripides' *Electra* Agamemnon's Mycenaean/Argive heritage as a member of the "honoured house of the Atreidae" (712) is never put in doubt. In fact, we could say that the inhabitants of Argos fall into two parties: one pro-Spartan and the other pro-Argive/Mycenaean.[23]

Until the revenge, the contrast between the status of the winners and losers in this power struggle is stark. Clytemnestra benefits from the great wealth her mur-

[21] See Beer 2020b, 69 for ancient evidence and recent discussions.

[22] In neither Aeschylus' nor Sophocles' version is the honorific notion of kingship bestowed on Aegisthus. Is it because he married into a Spartan royal family where kingship survived? Later in her kakology over Aegisthus' body, Electra demeans his manly status: "You were known among the Argives as the woman's man not she the man's woman. Moreover, it is a disgrace when a woman, not a man, is head of the house. I loathe those children who are called, in the polis, not by their father's but by their mother's name; for when a man makes a conspicuous marriage above himself, all the talk is of the woman not the man" (930–937).

[23] Although Euripides never uses the term στάσις to describe the supporters of Orestes at Argos, as Aesch. (*Cho*. 114; 458) does, this may be because they have largely fallen away in Orestes' long absence. See, for instance *El.* 605–610.

dered husband brought home from Troy (314–318). This is most clearly shown in her arrival at the wretched hovel of her daughter who has all the appearance of a slave woman (1004–1006). The queen rides in a chariot, escorted by a bevy of Trojan slaves. The visual contrast between mother and daughter makes Clytemnestra's entrance look tawdry (988–1003).[24]

The other main winner of the overthrow of Agamemnon is Aegisthus. A major characteristic of Aegisthus is his hubristic behaviour. He would have killed Orestes, had not the boy been saved by the aged tutor of his father (17). He puts a price on Orestes' head (32–34). He also would have killed Electra, had not Clytemnestra scrupled about the killing of her daughter. Electra was therefore married off to a poor farmer instead, so she would not bear powerful sons to avenge her father's death (25–42). Aegisthus' hubris is thrown into relief by the poor farmer who respects Electra (68). Aegisthus also casts shame on the neglected tomb of Agamemnon (326–331). He takes the sceptre of Agamemnon and displays the pomp of royalty (319–321).[25]

In addition to the palace, "the famous lord of the Mycenaeans" (776), as the messenger ironically describes Aegisthus (cf. 327), owns a wealthy rural estate where he can entertain strangers (777–789). Like the nouveaux riches he shows pride in this estate. Bernard waxes lyrical on the rural aspect of the tragedy: "Cette idéalisation des moeurs paysannes donne à *Electre* un charactère très particulier. Pièce de la <*chora*> et non de la <*polis*>, exaltation de la paysannerie, elle célèbre la vie aux champs et un type de citoyen où pouvaient se reconnaître les paysans attiques."[26] Many Athenian rural dwellers however might have shown more annoyance than pleasure at what they heard of Aegisthus' estate, given what Thucydides says (2.65.2) about the Athenian rural population's attitude at the annual Spartan invasions of Attica: "Privately, they [the rural population] were aggrieved by their sufferings: the demos owning less to begin with were deprived of even this, while the powerful elites (οἱ δυνατοί) lost many fine country possessions, including houses and expensive furniture; but most of all they had war instead of peace."

In contrast to Aegisthus, those who are loyal to Agamemnon lose their status on his death and suffer some form of exile, whether beyond the confines of Argive territory or internally, somewhere remote from the royal palace. Although as a child he is brought safely to Strophios in Phocis (16–18), Orestes has since been an unhappy wanderer (130–131), living on a minimal subsistence (232–236) with a price upon his head (32–34). After he arrives back in his homeland, not having any known, loyal

[24] Hammond 1984, 384 even suggests that Clytemnestra and her attendants make her grand entrance "in two splendid equipages."

[25] See also n. 22 above.

[26] Bernard 1985, 249.

supporters (602–611) while seeking news of his sister, he carries a sword (225) and cautiously stays 'at the borders of Argos' (πρὸς τέρμονας γῆς τῆσδ') for safe escape if necessary (95–97). It is impossible for Orestes to gain access within the walls of the polis, as Aegisthus keeps them well guarded (615–616).

Electra suffers an internal exile to a craggy mountainous region (207–210) far from town (246) as a result of being married to a nameless farmer. She had been sought as a wife by many noble men (20–21), including, before his divination, her uncle, the Tyndarid Castor whom she spurns (312).[27] When she enters, her lowly status is revealed by her carrying a water pitcher on her close-cropped head (55–56;107–110;140;241). Although the chorus of rural women offer to lend her fine clothes for a festival (190–192), Electra refuses because this would betray her slave-like mask (309–311) which reveals both Aegisthus' hubris (58) and her lamentation for her father.[28] She is happy to die if her brother will return, and they kill her father's murderers. Her sole motivation is vengeance.

As we have seen, the aged tutor of Agamemnon has been banished to the disputed borderland between Argive territory and Spartan. Apart from Electra and Orestes this slave is the only vociferous Argive loyal to Agamemnon. Like the tutor, Electra's husband does not have a personal name but is identified only by his occupation. Although he comes from good Mycenaean stock, the farmer has become impoverished (34–38), but accepts his reduction in status without complaint. It would have been otiose for Euripides to explain how his family had lost its wealth, but his plight may well have elicited sympathy in part of the audience, given Thucydides' statement at 2.65.2 (above) about the losses of the rural population of Attica. In not complaining about his loss of status the farmer serves a double purpose: by treating Electra with respect his behaviour stands in contrast to the hubris of Aegisthus; and his poor homestead adds emphasis to the gaudy glamour of Clytemnestra on her arrival there.

I have suggested that behind the tragedy of *Electra* there is a civil conflict between pro-Argive/Mycenaean and pro-Spartan supporters in which the pro-Spartans are the usurpers of legitimate power at Argos. Before I argue for this more fully from an examination of the murders and of the epilogue, I should like to suggest how the Peloponnesian War as background affects other aspects of the play.

[27] There is little agreement among editors about the precise text of ll.311–313, though the general sense is clear. Many modern editors wrongly reject the verb ἀναίνομαι (312), meaning 'spurn'. If Electra had consented to marry a Tyndarid, i.e. a Spartan, she would have betrayed her Atreid father and made herself subordinate to relatives whom she detests.

[28] See Lloyd 1986, 1–19 on Electra's lamentation. On the contrast between Electra's poverty and wealth in the play see Zeitlin 1970, 647.

War is a catalyst for change. As Thucydides writes (3.82.2): "War, removing the easy supply of daily needs, is a harsh teacher and disposes the moods of the majority to reflect their circumstances." Much has been made of the discordant tone of *Electra*, more than in any other Euripidean tragedy. This discordant tone has caused it to be looked upon as a problem play. Taking her terms from Aristotle's *Poetics,* Michelini examines *Electra* through the polarities of *to spoudaion* and *to geloion*, the serious and the comic,[29] and the play has invited a whole variety of descriptive terms: "melodrama," "comedy," "low style," "antiheroic," "down-to-earth realism."[30] G. Arnott has termed its effect "deglamorization."[31] In describing the tragedy in these terms few have taken seriously into account how the Peloponnesian War introduced human brutality on an almost unprecedented scale that changed people's behaviour irrevocably. As Thucydides writes (3.83.1): "So every kind of malfeasance appeared in Greek society because of the feuds (στάσεις); and straightforwardness, the main quality of a man's noble character (τὸ γενναῖον), was laughed down (καταγελασθὲν) and vanished (ἠφανίσθη).

To underscore these changes, Euripides is constantly contrasting the past with the present. For instance, as the conqueror of Troy, Agamemnon is held up as a great war leader (1–8), but on his return home he is murdered by his deceitful wife and Aegisthus (8–10). Nowhere is the contrast between past and present more evident than in those intertextual references to Homer and Aeschylus which provide images of the past by which to compare the 'deglamorized' world of the Euripidean *Electra*. The first stasimon (432–486), after depicting the famous ships that brought Agamemnon and Achilles to Troy, in company with dancing Nereids and cavorting dolphins and followed by a description of the golden shield of Achilles wrought by Hephaestus, ends on a grim note of Clytemnestra murdering her husband.[32] Similarly, the intertextual reference to Agamemnon's arrival home as conqueror of Troy to his palace at Argos in a chariot (*Ag.* 810–974), with only Cassandra as a visual token

[29] Michelini 1987, 182–183, adopts these terms from Arist. *Poet.* 48a2 and 49a36. For her *El.* "challenges the basic split" between the two.

[30] Kitto 1961, 332 "melodrama"; for Knox 1979, 254, although the deaths of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are "treacherous, brutal murders…as social comedy the opening scenes of the play are brilliant." Michelini 1987, 181 entitles her chapter on the play: "*Elektra:* The 'Low' Style" and at 185 she terms it "antiheroic". Gellie 1981, 10 writes: "Perhaps we should be using terms like social realism." Goff 1999–2000, 93–105 critically examines the way the term "real" has been used in discussions of *El.*

[31] Arnott 1981, 181.

[32] See Cropp 2012, 135 with other references to the "pathetic contrast" between Agamemnon's military success and his fate at home. See Cropp 166–168 also on the dramatic significance of the first stasimon with references to other scholars' discussions.

of his victory, makes Clytemnestra's arrival at Electra's hovel, with her overblown retinue of Trojan slaves, look grotesquely déclassé.

It is against the background of these types of intertextual allusions that we should interpret Euripides' highly controversial recognition scene of Orestes and Electra (503–584) in which it has been widely thought that Euripides' treatment is a denigration of the Aeschylean scene (*Cho.* 164–245). To quote Denniston:[33] "Almost all scholars have seen in this episode a piece of deliberate, and even malicious criticism." Part of the problem here is that the dramaturgy of both the Aeschylean and Euripidean scenes has found its critics. In Aeschylus, Electra finds locks of hair and footprints at the tomb of her father and, because of the likeness to her own, believes they are those of Orestes. Orestes himself then appears and proves who he is through a garment Electra wove for him as a child. Conacher describes these proofs as: "The artificial and improbable 'tokens' of Aeschylus' recognition scene."[34] The important point, however, is not the artificiality of the tokens but, as the following speech of Orestes makes clear (246–263), these are two innocent children caught in a dreadful situation, not of their own making. The reunion of the lost brother and sister is simply designed to evoke sympathy in the audience for them and Orestes' dire task ahead. In Euripides, when Electra pooh-poohs these same tokens of recognition provided by the old tutor, the contrast throws into relief the noble simplicity of the Aeschylean version. Instead of evoking sympathy for Electra and Orestes, the Euripidean recognition scene serves as a moment of transition to when they have to face the full brutality of the murders they are about to commit. As if to underscore the change of Weltanschauung between past and present, the recognition in Euripides culminates in another intertextual reference. Orestes is finally recognised by a scar on his eyebrow from when he and Electra, as children, were chasing a fawn in their father's house (573–574). This mundane scene from their childhood in no way prepares them for what is to come in contrast to the heroic way in which Odysseus received his scar as a child in a wild boar hunt by which he is recognised (*Od.*19.392–394; 21.219–224).[35]

Many have often used the term parody in a pejorative sense to describe Euripides' treatment of Aeschylus' recognition scene.[36] But this is to misunderstand how

[33] Denniston 1939, 114.

[34] Conacher 1987, 106 and further 128, n8.

[35] On Orestes' scar see especially Tarkow 1981, 43–53; see also Goff 1991, 259–267.

[36] E.g., Wohl 2015, 67–68; Hammond 1984, 380; Goff 1999–2000, 95. Walton 2009, 19 and Michelini 1987, 204 even uses the term "debunking". Raeburn 2000, 159 is critical of the term parody in the context. For him Euripides would be "guilty of gratuitous pedantry, if not wilful misrepresentation, and interrupting the flow of the drama for a piece of sophistic literary criticism." Raeburn however also

the tragedian uses intertextual allusions in *Electra.* As Linda Hutcheon has written: "Many parodies…do not ridicule the background text but use them as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny."[37] Parody implies an intimate knowledge of the parodied text and can be a form of flattery in that it shows that this text is sufficiently important as to be worthy of parody.[38]

What impresses about Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is not heroic endeavours as much as the ever-increasing brutalities as the war dragged on, both within *poleis* and outside. He called the Corcyrean revolution (3.84.1) just the first example of internal atrocities, as reprisals became widespread when those who had been governed by acts of wanton violence (*hubris*) rather than by moderation (*sophrosune*) took a merciless revenge. Thucydides highlights certain events, like the Melian Debate and the dreadful fate the Athenians carried out on Melians, for dramatic effect (5.84–116), but we should not overlook others to which the historian does not give the same emphasis. For instance, the people of Skione suffered the same fate in 420 BC as the Melians were to later, but Thucydides sums up their fate in a single sentence (5.32.1).

It is in the light of these brutalising effects that we should primarily consider the revenge of Electra and Orestes rather than through their characters.[39] Their father Agamemnon was treacherously murdered by Aegisthus and his wife Clytemnestra, and his father Atreus, the legitimate ruler, had to survive an attempted coup by his brother, Thyestes, who had seduced Atreus' wife to help his cause. One reason why civic *stasis* is so appalling is that it so often divides families.[40] There is no denying that

does not see the positive use of parody. He calls the episode (160) "an anti-recognition scene". That Ar. refers to Aesch.'s recognition scene at *Nub* 534–536 shows its popularity. For a more positive reading of what Eur. is doing with the recognition tokens of Aesch. see Allan 2008, 25, though I differ from him on the significance of Orestes' scar in comparison with Odysseus'.

[37] Hutcheon 1985, 57. See also Grube 1965, 24 who states: "Now parody does not necessarily imply condemnation or even criticism, but it can be a powerful critical weapon."

[38] Think of Aristophanes' many parodies of Euripides. He would not have done this with a minor tragic playwright. Cratin. 307 even coined a word to show the intimacy of the connection: εὐριπιδαριστοφανίζω 'to Aristophanise Euripides'.

[39] Character analysis of *Electra* is much in vogue. Recently a whole book has been devoted to it by Van Emde Boas 2017, but the most sensible treatment of Electra and Orestes in the tragedy is Lloyd 1986, 1–19. See also the salutary remarks of Rehm 2021, 45–46.

[40] In addition to the Orestes story, the fratricidal myth of Polyneices/Eteocles is the most well-known. *Stasis* tends to reduce matters to 'black and white' terms. According to Arist. [*Ath.Pol.* 8.5], Solon passed a law that if, in times of *stasis*, a citizen did not support actively either side he should be banished and have no part in the polis as a citizen.

the method by which both Aegisthus is killed[41] and Clytemnestra murdered is ruthlessly horrible,[42] but both children have been so foully treated that revenge clouds their minds, especially Electra's, so as to block out any other consideration until after the matricide when they realise the full horror of their actions (1177- 1232).[43]

There has been much discussion about the epilogue when the Dioscuri appear as *dei ex machina*. For Dunn, in the epilogue "we have a lengthy prophecy that tries to tie up loose ends and conspicuously fails to do so."[44] Much of the dissatisfaction felt about the epilogue can be explained if we realise that the Dioscuri have an inextricable connection with Sparta, and especially with Sparta as a military power. As Cartledge writes:[45] "Helen's twin brothers...the Dioskouroi...served as mythical representations of the two Spartan kings, to the extent that, when the Spartans went to war, they took along with them images of one or both of the Dioskouroi as talismans." The Spartan connection is further emphasised when Electra identifies the Dioscuri by their patronym, sons of Tyndareus (1295), just as earlier in the tragedy Clytemnestra had been identified more frequently as daughter of Tyndareus than by her personal name. It was probably to win over Electra to Spartan interests that Castor, before his deification, had been a suitor for her hand (312–313). Castor also repeats the myth, especially associated with Sparta, that Helen never went to Troy but had spent the time of the Trojan War in Egypt, loyal to her husband Menelaus (1280–1283). Thus, in accordance with her status as a divinity at Sparta, Helen's character is whitewashed rather than treated as that of a guilty woman who caused the Trojan War – the famous version of her in myth. Instead of calling Agamemnon the conqueror of Troy as is common (3–8), Castor awards that distinction to the Spartan Menelaus (1279). Not only that but, in Castor's version, Menelaus was serving a higher purpose than the mere recovery of his supposedly adulterous wife. He was fulfilling the will of Zeus who caused the war to stir up strife and bloodshed among

[41] Avezzi 2016, 63–86 examines the peculiar quality of the messenger speech in which the killing of Aegisthus is described (774–859) and claims 74: "What clearly emerges is that this Messenger was no mere spectator but an accomplice of Orestes and Pylades." From *El*. 393–394 it seems likely that Orestes is accompanied by two other helpers as well as Pylades.

[42] Arnott 1981, 181 compares the murders to Chicago gangland killings. The summary arrest, trial and execution of the Romanian President Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife Elena might also seem a fitting analogy.

[43] O'Brien 1964, 18 writes: "Fear has infected all the major characters to a degree unknown in the corresponding plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles." For him (31) *Electra* depicts no erasure of evil, but an exchange of like for like (ἀμοιβαὶ κακῶν). See also Zeitlin 1970, 668.

[44] Dunn 1996, 69.

[45] Cartledge 2001, 62–63. See also Carlier 1984, 246. For ancient sources see Her. 5.75; Plut.*Mor*. 478a; cf. Xen. *Hell*. 6.3.6.

mortals (1282–1285).[46] Castor also informs Electra and Orestes that Menelaus and Helen, who is closely associated with her sister (213–214;1064), will bury Clytemnestra. More surprisingly Castor says the citizens of Argos will give Aegisthus a formal burial – a point to which we shall return below.

The aggrandisement of Spartan interests should help explain the nebulous, not to say negative, way Apollo is depicted in the tragedy. Unlike in the Aeschylean version which for the Athenians was the definitive one, Apollo's support of Orestes seems vague. In Aeschylus it is the wrong done to Agamemnon that is paramount in Apollo's support; in the Euripidean version no direct mention of Agamemnon is actually ascribed to Apollo.[47] Orestes tells us that he has come in secret to Argos from "the god's mysteries" (87) – a very cryptic phrase; Later Orestes says: "Loxias' oracles are steadfast, but I count at nought human prophecy" (399–400). Since there was always some human involvement in the utterances of Delphic oracles, this vague but carefully worded statement may suggest that for Orestes there is an element of doubt in what he has heard.[48] Immediately before the matricide, Orestes openly questions the wisdom of Apollo's prophecy (971): "O Phoebus, your oracular pronouncement contained much folly." Instead of Pylades, who in Aeschylus serves as Apollo's spokesman in strengthening Orestes' resolve for the matricide (*Cho*. 900–902), in Euripides it is the all too human Electra who, knowing nothing of what the oracle said to Orestes, urges him on (972–984).[49] Orestes even wonders aloud whether it was an *alastôr*, disguised as the god, who ordered the deed (979).

When Castor speaks *ex machina*, he too speaks negatively about Apollo (1245–1246): "Phoebus, Phoebus – but as he is my master, I stay silent. Wise though he is, his oracles were not wise." Later he says that Loxias will take the blame for making his oracular pronouncement on Clytemnestra's murder (1266–1267; cf. 1296 and 1302). Yet in spite of the Aeschylean version, after his trial in Athens under the protec-

[46] I wonder whether the words about strife and bloodshed would have caused the current Peloponnesian War to resonate in the minds of many in the audience.

[47] As Rehm 2021, 106 says: "In his *Electra*...Euripides minimizes Apollo's presence and importance." Or to express the matter very differently Conacher 1967, 208 states: "...the murder of Agamemnon (which should, one would suppose, be the nub of the matter) almost gets lost entirely."

[48] Park and Wormell 1956, 39 write: "... the confused and disjointed remarks of a hypnotised woman must have needed considerable exercise of imagination to reduce them to a form of response. In this must have lain the chief temptation for the priests." See Cropp 2013, 164 on the distrust of seers expressed by Athenian writers in the late 5th century.

[49] Note the rhetorical nature of her question (972): "But where Apollo is witless, who can be wise?" Goff 1991, 265 also notes that it is Electra rather than Pylades who has to steel Orestes' resolve for the matricide.

tion of Athena who will shield him from his mother's Fury-like Keres (1252–1257),[50] Orestes will not be allowed to live in Argos as its legitimate ruler but will live his remaining days in exile. Thus, both Apollo's and Athena's so-called protection of Orestes proves feckless. In appealing to Moira and Zeus (1248) and Moira and Ananke (1301) as higher forces, Castor's pronouncements pay only lip service to Aeschylus' *Oresteia* while totally undercutting its efficacy.

Orestes will be exiled to Arcadia where he is to found a new city named after himself (1273–1275) and Electra will not see her homeland again, being married to Pylades of Phocis. During the Peloponnesian War, both these places of exile were well within the Spartans' sphere of influence, if not control. In the tragedy Argos itself however is even more problematic as it will seemingly be left leaderless. Clearly only the Spartans have the strength to fill the power vacuum. Without being explicit, the text may suggest a possible answer to this problem. Since Homer, Aegisthus has been cast in the role of the villain (e.g., *Od.* 3.194–198 and Aesch. *Ag.* 1625–1627), but Castor suggests his rehabilitation by being given a formal burial by the citizens of Argos (1276–1277). Early in the tragedy we are told that Clytemnestra has borne children by Aegisthus, while neglecting her children by Agamemnon (60–63). In other words the seat of power in Argos seems vacant for the offspring of the Tyndarid Clytemnestra to assume.[51] To purge Argos of all its Mycenaean memories and make it a stronghold for Spartan interests is likely the reason why the farmer husband of Electra, who prided himself on being of good Mycenaean stock (35–36) and

[50] Castor states that Athena will protect Orestes by "holding out her gorgon-faced aegis over his head" (1259; Cropp's trans). The image of the Gorgon in the play however is equivocal. See O'Brien 1964, 13–39. As he concludes (39) the Gorgon is "the figure which represents at once the victim and the killer as well as the fear that makes them all alike." In the Dioscuri's version, Orestes' trial on the Areopagus is downgraded. It is not the first homicide trial held there unlike in Aesch. *Eum.* where it is specially convened by the goddess Athena. Moreover, although Orestes is acquitted since the votes are equal, he will not return to his homeland of Argos. Orestes has already endured a life of exile, and more exile is to come (1250–1252). As Wohl 2015, 73 succinctly puts it: "Orestes never actually takes up his crown." We may wonder therefore how useful Athena's help is.

[51] What is also interesting is that, while in Aesch. *Cho*. 973 and Soph. *El*. 661 and 664 Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are always described in terms of tyranny, in Eur. *El*. they are described in terms of royalty through words with basil- roots: Aeg. 12.760; Clyt. 988; 997. It is almost as if they rule jointly as king and queen. Is it simply a coincidence that at Sparta there was a dyarchy whose power was legitimated by their twin forbears, Castor and Pollux, sons of Tyndareus? To use the words of Carlier 1984, 246: "Les rois étaient considérés à Sparte comme les successeurs lointains, les protégés et les représentants sur terres des Dioscures. La protection exercée par les jumeaux divine sur la cité de Sparte était à la fois le modèle et la garantie divine de la dyarchie Spartiate. Inversement cette double royauté était la condition de la protection divine."

showed loyalty to the memory of Agamemnon by not deflowering his daughter, is to be exiled to Phocis (1286–1287) with Pylades and Electra.

To show the one-sidedness of the Dioscuri's divine dispensations is quite likely the reason why Orestes and Electra are allowed to put difficult questions to Castor – something exceptional in an epilogue of Euripides' plays (1292–1341).[52] One of the terrible costs of war, be it internal or external, can be the loss of one's homeland. We may not wholly like Orestes and Electra as characters, but they are, as the children of Agamemnon, the legitimate heirs to the rule over Argos. Instead, they are doomed to spend their lives in exile, separated from their loved ones. When Orestes laments how, already after such a long separation from Electra, they must be immediately deprived of each other again (1308–1310), Castor glibly replies that Electra has a husband and a home and suffers nothing more pitiful than being deprived of the Argive polis (1311–1313). To this Electra scornfully replies (1314–1315): "What greater cries of anguish are there than to have to abandon the confines of one's native land?" (γῆς πατρίας ὅρον ἐκλείπειν). Electra's answer goes to the very heart of the tragedy which is centred on who controls the territory of Argos. Forever separated from their closest family member, Electra and Orestes will spend the rest of their lives as refugees. In fact, except as a young boy, Orestes never really experiences the joys of living in his native polis.

We do not know the date of the production of Euripides' *Electra*. Those who have proposed possible dates have either relied on the use of metrical statistics and would date it somewhere between 422–417 BC or on allusions in the epilogue to events outside the play; these would date it later to between 415–413 BC.[53] The problem with those who hold the latter view is that the allusions cannot be shown to have ostensible dramatic relevance and therefore detract from Euripides' artistic vision. I should therefore like to propose possible dates that combine the evidence of metri-

[52] Andújar 2016, 166: "By including a series of unprecedented questions and complaints to a deity who has made himself manifest, Euripides not only prolongs the typical scene of deus ex machina, but also crucially shifts the balance of power, allowing mortals more control over an experience that typically embodies the awesome power of the gods over humans." See also Whitehorne 1978, 12 on the ignorance of the Dioscuri.

[53] Cropp's edition 2013, 31–33 gives references to major discussions about the date; he himself suggests a date between 422–417 BC, relying on the resolution of iambic trimeters as analysed in Cropp and Fick 1985, 14–23, especially the table on 23 (cf. 61 also). Roisman and Luschnig 2011, 28–30 express some reservations about the reliability of the resolution of trimeters with regard to dating as well as reservations about the views of earlier critics who relied on extra dramatic allusions in the text. My own argument for the dating will refer to a more specific extra dramatic allusion, in the text, that also has dramatic relevance; I shall support this with circumstantial evidence.

cal statistics with an allusion in the play to historical events outside the play which have dramatic significance.

I have suggested that central to an understanding of *Electra* is the question of who controls the territory of Argos: the Tyndarid Spartans or the Mycenaean Argives. We have seen earlier that Electra tells her husband to go to the old tutor who tends his flocks "around the Tanaos River that cuts through the borders of Argos and Spartan land" (410–411). This longstanding territorial dispute became a matter of greater importance in 422 BC. The Spartans were under considerable pressure as their thirty-year truce with the Argives was about to expire. The Argives said they were not ready to renew the truce unless this disputed district of Kynouria was returned to them (Thuc.5.14.4). The Spartans feared that, if the truce were not renewed, they might face an unwinnable war against both Argos and Athens at the same time (5.14.4).

The Peace of Nicias in 421BC between Athens and Sparta may have relieved Spartan concerns momentarily but it was an 'insecure peace' in which both sides inflicted the most harm, short of invading each other's territory (Thuc.5.25.3; cf.26.3). It was during this period from 421–417 BC that Argos played a central role in much that happened (Thuc.5.25–83).[54] The Argives had taken no part in what Thucydides calls 'The Attic War' (Thuc.5.28.2) and had profited by remaining neutral. Thinking that there would be war with Sparta, as their truce with them was about to expire, the Argives even hoped they might gain leadership in the Peloponnese and called for an alliance (Thuc.5.28), of all *poleis* except those of Sparta and Athens. When this did not work out, they decided to try to resolve their differences with Sparta, but the sticking point was still the disputed territory of Kynouria. The Spartans refused but wanted the treaty renewed on the same terms as before; at last they accepted a compromise because they wanted peace with Argos, but this did not finally settle the border dispute (5.41). Now, however, relations between Athens and Sparta took a serious turn for the worse, since the Athenians thought that they had been deceived by the Spartans over the return to them of Panactum (5.42). Then, through the devious intervention of the young Alcibiades, an alliance was forged instead between Athens, Argos, Mantineia and Elis (Thuc. 5.47).

This alliance eventually led to the battle of Mantineia in 418, in which the Spartans roundly defeated Athens, Argos and their allies (Thuc.5.69–75). As a result, Argos broke its alliance with Athens and made one with Sparta. Acting together, they voted not to receive any Athenian herald or delegation until Athenians abandoned their forts in the Peloponnese (Thuc.5.80). There was already at Argos a pro-Spartan

[54] The references to Argos, Argives and Argive affairs are about three times more in Thuc. Book 5 than in all the other books of his History combined.

faction who wanted to overthrow the democracy. Becoming more powerful, these had persuaded the majority to accept the Spartan peace terms before attacking the democrats. The Spartans then helped the Argives replace the democracy with an oligarchy favourable to themselves in the winter of 418 BC (Thuc.5.81.2). This oligarchy however was short-lived, for in the following summer the democrats slowly regrouped, while the Spartans were celebrating the Gymnopaediae, and prevailed over the oligarchs, killing some and expelling others (Thuc.5.82.2).

In discussing Thucydides' account of the years 421–417 BC, Westlake refers to "the utter bankruptcy of Greek statesmanship…especially in the Peloponnese" and concludes, with regard to the leadership of Sparta and Argos: "Their leaders are shown to have been nonentities who intrigued, wrangled, misled others, concealed their real motives, pursued selfish or parochial objectives."[55]

I suggest that it was this topsy-turvy time in Greek politics, when what happened at Argos might have serious consequences for the outcome of future hostilities between Athens and Sparta, that inspired Euripides to produce his *Electra*. Instead of focusing on a traditional family curse, the audience learn that the problems of the Atreids begin with a failed attempted coup by Thyestes to deprive Atreus of his legitimate power. This is followed in the next generation by the murder, on his return home, of Atreus' son, Agamemnon, a victorious war leader, by his deceitful Tyndarid wife and her paramour, Aegisthus. Aegisthus takes on the trappings of a monarch. Agamemnon's legitimate heirs, after being foully treated, exact a brutal revenge only to find that a deified Spartan warlord in the form of the Tyndarid Castor autocratically condemns them to permanent exile. In so doing, Castor distorts history by rehabilitating the egregious Aegisthus (1276–1277), by wrongly implying that the Spartan Menelaus was the main vanquisher of Troy, and, *the* ultimate falsehood of all, by whitening the reputation of the Spartan Helen, the dark woman of the most famous of Greek myths – the Trojan War. With the exception of the Mycenaean/Argive Agamemnon, there are no heroes in this drama, but the tragedy is centred on the uncertain fate of Argos that the Spartans want to claim for their own deceitful and nefarious purposes.

It would be nice if we could assign the first production of *Electra* to the Dionysia of 418/417 BC after the oligarchic coup at Argos, following the battle of Mantineia. This date however may be too neat and tidy. Nevertheless, what seems very likely is that it was produced during the insecure peace of 421–417 BC, the only time when the volatile politics of Argos assumed such importance during the Peloponnesian War. This time would make dramatic sense of the allusion in the tragedy to the dis-

[55] Westlake 1971, 323 and 324.

puted territory around the Tanaos river (410–411) and would fit in with Cropp and Fick (1985, 14–23) who argue, from the frequency of tribrach resolutions in *Electra,* for a date between 422–417 BC.

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