

Electra

Consider the significance of the following lines and extracts from the play. Write brief notes, answering the questions as they arise. Finally choose one of the essays listed at the end.

Peasant:

"Well, I belong to a good family;
I've nothing to be ashamed of there ; we're Mycenaeans,
And always have been; but we're poor; and when you're poor
Good breeding counts for nothing." (page 106)

Electra:

"My mother, Tyndareos' daughter, lost in wickedness,
To show Aegisthus favour, drives me out of doors." (page 107)

Orestes:

"No one knows I am here.
But wait - I see a slave girl coming, carrying
A water jar on her shorn head. Let us keep hidden". (page 108)

Electra:

"Come, my brother, save me from misery and weariness!
Zeus, O Zeus, hear me! Let Orestes,
Wherever he be, land on the shore of Argos
and punish the murderers of my father!" (page 109)

Electra:

"Look at me - my hair uncared-for,
my dress in tatters!
While I, banished from my ancestral palace,
Live in a labourer's cottage ..." (page 111)

Orestes:

"Suppose Orestes comes: how will he deal with this?" (page 114)

Electra:

"Friend, if I saw him I should not recognise him." (page 115)
..... tell Orestes my disgrace and his;
First how I am dressed; how I am stabled here; the filth
that weighs me down, the squalid shack that has replaced
my royal palace; how I must sit at the loom and weave
..... never a feast
On holy days, never a dance; "

Electra:

".....Agamemnon brought
Death to the Phrygian nation: Orestes is still young,
And had a greater father - can't he kill one man?" (page 116)

Peasant:

"Is it me the gentlemen were wanting? - Now look, wife:
It's not right to stand talking out here with young men." (page 116)

Orestes:

"There's no clear sign to tell the quality of a man.
...This man is not a leading Argive citizen;
He's one of the many; yet he's a true nobleman." (page 117-118)

Electra:

"You fool, you know how bare your house is. These two guests are
far above your level." (page 119)

Peasant:

"Rich bellies hold about the same amount as poor." (page 119)

Old Man:

"This path up to her house is far too steep for me,
A wrinkled old man. Still, a friend's a friend; so I
must drag myself up - bent back, wobbly knee, and all." (page 121)

Old Man:

"Perhaps - perhaps your brother came here secretly
And paid this reverence to his father's desolate tomb.
Go there yourself, and put that hair against your own;
see if the colour tallies.

Electra:

"You should know better than to think *my* brother,
my brave Orestes, would have come here secretly
Because he feared Aegisthus. Anyway, how could
The two locks correspond, the one a nobleman's,
Grown like an athlete's in the palaestra, mine a woman's,
Softened with combing? It's absurd. Besides, you'd find
Many with similar hair, who are not of the same blood.

Old Man:

"Go and try the shoe-prints there with your own foot,
My child; see if the shape and size are like your own."

Electra:

"Foot-prints? How could there be foot-prints on rocky ground?
And if there could, brother's and sister's feet would not
Be the same size; the weaker sex has smaller feet."

Old Man:

"Yet, should you meet him face to face, would he not wear,
for recognition, the cloak, woven on your loom....?"

Electra:

"Surely you know that, when Orestes went away,
I was a child? Even if I had been weaving clothes,
Clothes don't grow larger on the body....." (pages 122-3)

Electra:

"Do you see some token to convince me?"

Old Man:

This scar on his brow;" (page 124)

Orestes:

"..if I catch the prey I have come to hunt..."

Chorus:

" Our deliverer stands before us,
A beacon of hope for Argos." (page 125)

Old Man:

"Kill Aegisthus and your mother"

Orestes:

"That's the glorious deed I have come to attempt. But how to achieve it?" (page 126)

Electra:

"Women! Your part will be, like beacons after battle, to raise the cry
for life or death. I'll be on watch; and my hand too
will hold a sword. If I'm defeated, my enemies
shall never glut their vengeance on my living flesh." (page 129)

Electra:

" That means the sword for me - now; I must lose no time.

Chorus:

No! wait at least until you know the worst is true.

Electra:

I must not. We are lost. We have lost. There would be news by now.

Chorus:

There will be. It's no easy matter to kill a king." (page 131)

Electra:

"Who are you? How do I know your news is true?"

Messenger:

You know me - I'm your brother's servant!" (page 132)

Messenger: (quoting Aegisthus)

"I've heard it boasted that Thessalians are expert
at two things: cutting up a dead blt skilfully,
and breaking horses to the rein. Friend, here's the sword...'
It was a well-made Dorian sword." (page 133)

Electra:

"Come, friends; such festive finery as I still possess
Stored in the house, I must bring out, to crown with joy
My brother's head, and celebrate his victory."

Welcome, brave conqueror!

Orestes:

"Name first the gods, Electra, as accomplisners
Of this good fortune;" (page 135)

Electra:

"Of all the harsh and bitter things I have to say,
What shall come first, what last?
All that longed to tell you to your face..." (page 136)

Read carefully the whole of Electra's speech on pages 136-137) Make sure you understand fully what accusations she is making against both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra: make a list of key points.

Electra:

"What is it? An armed force from Mycenae?"

Orestes:

No, it is my mother.....

What shall we do then? Are we going to kill our mother?"

Electra:

Have you grown soft, as soon as you set eyes on her?

Orestes:

"Avenging him I am pure; but killing her, condemned."

Electra:

"If you neglect to avenge him you defy the gods."

Orestes:

"But if I kill my mother, shall I not be punished?" (page 138)

Read carefully the whole of Clytemnestra's speech to Electra on page 140-1. How does she try to justify herself for killing Agamemnon?

Chorus:

"Your words are just; yet in your 'justice' there remains
Something repellent. A wife ought in all things to accept
Her husband's judgement, if she is wise. Those who will not admit this, fall outside my scope
of argument." (page 141)

Read carefully the whole of Electra's speech to Clytemnestra on pages 141-2. List Electra's main points of criticism of her mother.

Clytemnestra:

" - You there! take the carriage away and feed the horses. Give me as much
time as I need to make this offering; then come for me.

(to Electra) I have my husband too to think of.

Electra:

"Please come in to our poor house. Take care this smoky wall does not dirty
your dress. Now you shall offer to the gods the sacrifice that is due." (page 144)

Electra:

"Tears, my brother - let tears be endless.
I am guilty.

I was burning with desperate rage against her;
Yet she was my mother, I her daughter." (page 146)

Orestes:

"O Phoebus, in the command of your oracle
Justice was hidden from me;
but in its fulfilment
You have made torment clear." (page 146)

Electra:

"As we wrap this cloak round you
We love you, though we hated you." (page 147-8)

Castor:

"Her fate was just; but your act is not justified." (page 148)

Read carefully the whole of Castor's speech on pages 148-9. What will be the outcome of Electra and Orestes' actions? Who are the Dioscuri and why do they appear at the end of the play?

Essay questions: Choose ONE:

1. 'Euripides' *ELECTRA* can hardly be described as tragedy in view of its unheroic characters and excessive realism'. Discuss.
2. Aristotle quotes Sophocles as saying 'I portray men as they ought to be, Euripides portrays them as they are.' How true to real life do you consider the human characters in the Electra?
3. In what ways does Euripides explore issues of family and loyalty in Electra?