

Electra Never Forgets: Memory and Self-Definition in Sophocles

“He is a fool who forgets his parents when they have died wretchedly,” says Electra to the chorus when they remind her that her constant lamentation will not bring Agamemnon back from the dead (Soph. *El.* 145-146). From her first interactions with the chorus, Electra’s memory is not only a personal matter, but also a way for her to define herself in relation to those around her. Broadly speaking, memory is both an individual and a social phenomenon; although groups are often defined by a sense of collective memory, individual memories allow people to situate themselves within their social context (Kirk 2005). Along with contributing to self-definition, memories can be shaped by pre-existing ideas; as memories are recalled, they are often brought into line with an individual’s established beliefs about herself and the world (King 2000, Neisser 2009). At the same time, memories are reconstructed with each instance of recollection, and successive versions of a memory can thus reflect an individual’s interaction with her present context (Lehrer 2007). In this paper, I will argue that, in Sophocles’ *Electra*, conflicting perspectives on memory and forgetfulness provide a useful lens through which to view the broader conflicts of personality which drive the action of the play.

The role of memory in dramatic characterization has recently attracted considerable interest. At the most basic level, when dramatic characters remember events prior to the beginning of a play, their accounts of those events imply an offstage existence and a degree of subjectivity (Favorini 2008). In particular, much has been written about memory in early modern drama; it has been noted that Shakespearean characters often remember the past in idiosyncratic ways and have an interest in shaping the memories of others (Sullivan 2005, Tribble 2008). Although considerably less attention has been paid to the role of memory in ancient drama, characters in tragedy are often preoccupied with the past, and they speak about

that past through the filter of personal experience (Gould 1999, Hutchinson 1999). As they look back on the past, moreover, many tragic characters use their own experiences to support theories about the way of the world and their own place in that world.

Memory is particularly prominent in Sophocles' *Electra*, which contains more than a third of all the explicit references to memory and forgetting in Sophocles. By the time Orestes returns, Electra has spent years in a suspended state, devoted only to her father's memory. Along with speaking about the past, Electra refers frequently to the fact of her own memory, particularly as it sets her apart from other members of her family. Although Chrysothemis and Orestes ought to be on Electra's side, Electra presents them both as culpable insofar as they have forgotten their familial obligations. Even after she has been reunited with Orestes, Electra remains isolated by her memory; while Orestes, eager to move the revenge plot forward, says there will be time later to reflect on the past (Soph. *El.* 1251-1252), Electra continues to focus on the years of suffering which preceded his return. When Electra concludes her lyric rejoicing at Orestes' long-awaited return with a reminder of her own constant remembrance (Soph. *El.* 1285-1287), her focus on her role as a preserver of memory only highlights the continuing disconnect between the siblings.

Works Cited

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