

Dismantling the Heroic Tradition in Euripides's *Electra*

Scholars have long regarded Euripides's *Electra* as a play that defies conventions of the heroic tradition. In the introduction to his edition of the text, Denniston argued that “the Euripidean Orestes...is a very different person from the energetic and self-reliant hero of Aeschylus and Sophocles” and that the play's Electra “is a woman in whose soul tenderness is all but dead” (Denniston 1939). O'Brien wrote that the play did not offer “a practical solution of its problems of conduct, but a varied and powerful presentation of sufferers who have become moral replicas of their tormentors” (O'Brien 1964). Morwood found the play to present an “irrecoverably dark world...[where] blood, death and defilement are the deepest truths, the ultimate realities” (Morwood 1981). Michelini contended that “the ‘realism’ of Elektra cannot be treated apart from the play's vigorous attack on tragic literary norms” and referred to the play as “untragic or antitragic” (Michelini 1987). Roisman, too, concludes that the play “includes probing questions, as well as doubts about, and challenges to, mythic tradition, accepted social values, assumed gender roles, and existing categories” (Roisman 2017). Perhaps most emphatic is David Kovacs, who, in the introduction to his Loeb edition writes, “The strongest case for Euripides as destroyer of tradition could be made on the basis of his *Electra*. It has seemed to many that in this play especially Euripides is bent on killing traditional tragedy and dancing on its grave” (Kovacs 1998). Kovacs then identifies four aspects of the play that show Euripides going against tradition: (1.) the play's “untragic realism;” (2.) the unheroic depiction of characters; (3.) the portrayal of Apollo and his oracle as questionable; and (4.) the passage at 518 – 44 that seems to mock the recognition scene in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* (Kovacs 1998). This essay joins in the main with those who view *Electra* as a problem play that uses the tragic form

in ways unlike earlier Attic tragedians. Yet, I argue that Euripides attempts more than experimentation with form. Additionally, I deny that the play is mere nihilism reflecting cultural malaise at the end of the fifth century. My contention is that Euripides, like the philosophers of the late fifth century, attempts a reevaluation of values and that the plays in the Trojan and Mycenaean cycle of myths provide an especially fruitful ground for querying Homer and the heroic tradition. Moreover, if *Electra* is to be dated to 413 (as I believe it is), the play comes in the wake of the failed Sicilian Expedition and the defection of Alcibiades. Taking a hint from Nietzsche, who called Euripides “the poet of aesthetic Socratism,” (Nietzsche 1886) and building on Kovacs’s second point regarding the “unheroic depiction of characters,” I argue that Euripides takes figures, such as Orestes, whose values are largely unquestioned in Homer, and exposes them to critique at a time when the Athenians were in dire need of examining their beliefs regarding heroic models.

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