

5-2015

## Out of Good Fortune: The Economics of Tragedy in the House of Atreus

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Out of Good Fortune: The Economics of Tragedy in the House of Atreus

by

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April 17, 2015

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any acknowledgement of thanks must begin with my advisor, Professor Lily Panoussi. This thesis would have been impossible without her generous support and encouragement. I am grateful for her patience, invaluable criticism, kindness, and perceptive advice on matters both academic and personal. I would also like to thank Professor John Oakley, in whose class on Greek Tragedy the idea for this paper first emerged from a discussion of Euripides' *Alcestis*.

It is also my pleasure to thank Professors Bill Hutton, Molly Swetnam-Burland, and John Donahue, who have taught me so much, as well as the entire faculty of the Classics Department at the College of William & Mary, whom I will miss dearly next year.

Outside of Classics, I would like to thank Professor Varun Begley for serving on this committee, as well as for introducing me to psychoanalytic theory and its application in literature. My thanks also go to Dr. Freeman at the Brunswick School, without whom I might never have discovered the strange beauty of Greek, and Dr. Timothy Markey, whose kind teaching indelibly shaped my understanding of Cicero and friendship.

Further thanks to those who read this thesis piecemeal along the way- Laura Watkins, Jacey Smith, and Aaron Bishop.

I owe an inexpressible debt of gratitude to my family for their love and support, as well as for allowing me to make esoteric Classical references at the dinner table. Dad- ett språk är aldrig nog, tusind tak. Mom- you have taught me everything I know, but especially to “never give up, never surrender.” I love you for that, and for so much more. This work is dedicated to you.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>LSJ</i>	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> Compiled by Liddell, Henry George and R. Scott. 1898.
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i>
<i>TAPA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>

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## INTRODUCTION

Of the 32 extant Greek tragedies, seven are written about a single royal family in the epic past: the House of Atreus. These plays present the violent upheavals of fortune that haunt the aristocracy of Mycenae in the Argolid. An ancestral curse of destruction is brought to bear at the beginning of the Trojan War. The king, Agamemnon, sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia, in order to set sail. Upon the army's victorious return, his wife Clytemnestra kills him for revenge, along with the captured Trojan princess Cassandra. Many years later, the couple's surviving son and daughter, Orestes and Electra, murder the queen and are punished for matricide. All three tragic authors wrote plays on this story: no other myth can boast of such wide dissemination and creative influence in the extant tragic corpus. The family serves as the cast for Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi*, and *Eumenides*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Taken as a whole, these plays offer unique insight into a bloodline cursed by a series of murders for revenge.

Tragedy as a genre is concerned with human action and character; why we do what we do; whether or not we have any choice in the matter; how we may confront our fates. Almost every tragedy requires an understanding of its mythological backstory, and a Greek audience would be familiar with each story. And yet these stories are not unchanging monoliths; authors differ in characterization, theme, form, linguistic style, as well as content. Nor were these plays produced in a vacuum; the play's socio-political and –economic background of Athens in the 5th century BC shaped them in profound ways and connected them with Athenian ideology, the *polis*, and its empire.

Traditional analyses of the tragedies of the House of Atreus have interpreted the murders of Iphigenia, Agamemnon, Cassandra, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus as crimes of passion, brought about by the combination of high human emotion with the forces of fate, justice, and necessity. When interpreting literature, especially when the critic is separated from it by thousands of years, it is tempting to take characters at their word and authors at face value. A reader may choose to believe that their killers can claim the name of justice for the murders of Iphigenia, Agamemnon, Cassandra, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. However, one who believes these motivations without question risks ignoring the larger ethical questions that the plays seek to explore, as well as the society in which they were produced. In what follows, I argue that the revenge narrative of the House of Atreus as depicted in tragedy is complicated by the issues of wealth and power central to contemporary life in Athens.

Greek tragedy experienced its zenith during the fifth century BC, a time of unprecedented Athenian wealth and prestige. Following its success in the Persian wars, the Athenian *polis* was the center of the ancient world stage. Despite the destruction of the Acropolis at the hands of Xerxes in September of 480 BC, the Greek allied forces were victorious at the Battle of Salamis only a few weeks later, due to the decisive generalship of Themistocles. Able to boast the defeat of a massive superpower, Athens entered a “Golden Age” as it increased in political power, wealth, and architectural beauty. The century was indeed marked by great leadership: first under Themistocles, and then under Pericles, the most prominent statesman between 461 and 429 BC. In the time between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, Athens was free to develop their governmental system of democracy. Free, male citizens were able to take part in the

larger order governing their lives (Martin 1996, 109). At the same time as Athenians communicated growing pride in democracy, increasing wealth in the hands of elites raised questions of who really held power in the political system, as well as over the other Greek city-states. Financial contributions from rich and powerful men were indispensable to the city's welfare, such as the donation of defensive walls by Cimon (Martin 1996, 108).

An alliance of Greek *poleis*, the Delian League was formed in 478 BC with the ostensible purpose of warding off another Persian invasion. However, in 454 BC Pericles decided to move the treasury to Athens. This was not merely a symbolic gesture of Athens' dominance over the Mediterranean, as many ancients viewed the move as the usurpation of communal monetary resources to fund massive building projects in Athens; allies "lost their independence," which decreased Athens' popularity among the other Greek *poleis* (Th. 1.98- 99). Their fears were flamed by Pericles' insistence that tribute be paid to the Athenians not in ships, men, and weapons, but only in money. The allies paid an average of six hundred talents as an annual tribute to Athens, which was added to the treasure kept on the Acropolis-- six thousand talents of coined silver, uncoined precious metal, and sacred vessels, totaling "not less than five hundred talents" (Th. 2.13.3-5). A reliance on coined money is indicative of a larger economic trend throughout the century. As Athens grew in power, it exhibited a greater appetite for wealth. Themistocles had already persuaded the Athenian *demos* in 483 BC to use revenue from a silver mine in Laurion to expand the navy. Having solidified their military power, the mines were thereafter owned by the state and worked by slaves for a fixed sum and percentage on working (Martin 1996, 104). The mines continued to be an important



source of income for the *polis* when a silver mint was built at the site. The silver mines at Laurion contributed to the rise of coined money in the fifth century, particularly in silver. This new source of coinage helps to explain the sharp uptick in coin hoards in Central Greece during the Classical Period (Thompson, Mørkholm & Kraay 1973, 2).

The rise of coined money had great influence on the aristocratic nuclear family. Pericles, Athens' leading statesman, was emblematic of the changing attitudes of the fifth century. Plutarch writes that Pericles would sell all his crops at one time, and then buy whatever he needed in bulk from the marketplace, with the result that he required both a large storeroom for goods and a large store of silver to buy said goods (Plut. *Per.* 16). Plutarch's mention of Pericles' spending habits implies that they were a departure from traditional economic modes. Similarly, Pericles' contemporary Nicias is said to have kept most of his property in money (*argurion*)—almost a hundred talents. (Plu. *Nic.* 4.2). The rise in elite coin hoards is indicative of an economic revolution. Slowly, monetary commerce began to dominate the economy in all forms of life, as Athenians relied increasingly on what Plato would call “coinage (*nomisma*) for daily exchange” (Lg. 742a). The elite identity was associated more and more with personal stockpiles of coin, rather than their command over stable property holdings.

The evaluation of goods by specific monetary amounts is something that modern peoples take for granted (Seaford 2004, 101), but differs greatly from the Homeric economy. In the Homeric epics, objects are evaluated according to certain inalienable characteristics: beauty, uniqueness, their connection to a particular character or hero. From these specific qualities, objects are endowed with meaning. The shield of Achilles, for example, is judged by its divine origin, ekphrastic depiction of the cosmos, and its

association with the greatest Greek hero at Troy (Seaford 2004, 103). It is not described in terms of subjective cost. Money, by contrast, derives its power from homogeneity, not from uniqueness (Seaford 2004, 253). Because all coined money is identical, it is infinitely exchangeable and impersonal. The same coin used to purchase bread can be exchanged for clothing, sex, oil, bribes, slaves, and so on.

Tragedy was thus created in the midst of a shifting world. The authors of tragedy lived during an increasingly monetized society, yet relied upon mythological source material, which resulted in the production of a uniquely dichotomous genre. The tension between a traditional system of exchange and the newly powerful homogeneity of money is reflected throughout Greek tragedy. This study will examine the linkages of money with power and justice in two tragedies centered upon the house of Atreus: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Electra*. The plays are concerned with the vicissitudes of fortune of a single aristocratic family, the sort of *oikos* who would have held sway over the *polis* had they lived in fifth century BC. While at first glance, the house of Atreus seems to be plagued by a succession of murders motivated by revenge, its fate is marked by deep problems with the transactional, materialistic elements of society. Whereas the Homeric code of exchange creates and solidifies social bonds, in tragedy money opens up chasms of irresolvable conflict between the *oikos* and *polis*.

Close philological analysis reveals a complex lexicon of wealth in these five plays, which alternately enchants and disenchant economic concerns. Money operates as a signifier of power and desire; through the pursuit of it, characters are revealed to be rather less noble than they appear at first glance. The equation of Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia, with material wealth in the moments before her slaughter (A. Ag.

227-247), reveals that Agamemnon is not a man forced to do a difficult thing out of necessity, but a murderer posturing for the approval of his peers. Clytemnestra, no longer a distraught and righteously vengeful mother, reveals her fetish for wealth in the so-called “carpet scene” (A. Ag. 914- 959). Her economic choices reveal her as a kind of “bad aristocrat” in the traditional sense, unwilling to preserve a stable income in favor of the conspicuous consumption characteristic of the Athenian Golden Age. In Euripides’ *Electra*, the heroine is not a mourning princess in exile but the coveter of her mother’s wealth, eager to make it her own, even at the cost of matricide. Her preoccupation with money is made clear in her dismissive treatment of the Farmer (E. *El.* 300- 337) and her obsessive daydreams about her mother’s life in the palace (E. *El.* 925- 956). One wonders if she would have committed such a crime had she been allowed to remain in the palace and the life to which she was accustomed. These familial murders hidden beneath the moniker of revenge are motivated, at least in part, by crass economics. While individual authors emphasize economic motivation more or less (for example, Sophocles in his *Electra* attributes more importance to Apollo’s decree than does Euripides), in all plays human lives are squandered for economic gain.

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Euripides’ *Electra* because they focus on individual characterization at greater length than other plays on the House of Atreus, while still making clear the economic undercurrents of their shared source material.<sup>1</sup> I will discuss *Agamemnon* first and then

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<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is the only play that deals directly with the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra and was thus the clear choice. My decision to use

*Electra*, following not only the narrative proper, but also the order in which the plays were written and produced. Aeschylus' play would have been a foundational text for Euripides; it is thus helpful to discuss themes first in Aeschylus, and then how they are developed by Euripides.

In order to examine the role of economic and social motivations in tragedy, I use concepts and methodology borrowed from Karl Marx. Much of my argument is dependent upon the concept of class interest, economic relation as a signifier of power, belief in the ideological function of literature, and the idea that real economic motivation can be obscured by ideological narrative. Victoria Wohl's *Intimate Commerce* has influenced my discussion of the exchange of women; it is from this work that I derive the idea that beneath a symbolic gift exchange, women are ultimately bought and sold for a man's economic profit. I have also been influenced by feminist literary theory in my discussion of how characters navigate the patriarchal ideology of Greek society. Gaze theory, as formulated by Lacan and taken up by feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey<sup>2</sup>

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Euripides' *Electra*, rather than Agamemnon's *Choephoroi* or Sophocles' *Electra*, was considerably harder. All three tell the same narrative. However, I found that Aeschylus and Sophocles both focused more on the decree of Apollo and the character of Orestes than Electra's own desires and motivations. As this study examines the intersection of gender and money in the House of Atreus, a fuller discussion of the character of Electra is possible through analysis of Euripides' play.

<sup>2</sup>Mulvey, L. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3: 6- 18.

and Luce Irigaray<sup>3</sup>, is the foundation for my analysis of the sacrifice of Iphigenia in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Finally, Richard Seaford's economic history of money in Early Greece has been a salient resource. His argument that historical changes bear weight on literary works, particularly tragedy, is the underpinning of my thesis.

Ultimately, the struggle for material resources at such great personal cost challenges deeply entrenched beliefs in Greek society. Aristocracy, seemingly founded upon noble principles, is actually centered upon such an unstable basis as money. Furthermore, the question of money illuminates the perilous position occupied by women. Equated with financial gain through marriage, their objectification in tragedy has terrible consequences (Wohl 1998, xiv). Traffic in women begins as a symbolic transaction meant to solidify homosocial bonds. The women of tragedy, however, speak frankly about the material nature of such exchanges and thus reveal the bare profit-and-loss accountancy of male society.

The brilliance of such economic considerations in tragedy is their subtlety, lying just below the surface of the language. Once explored, however, the question of money is intricately linked to such questions as power, influence, and the possibility of justice in a world governed by exchange value.

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<sup>3</sup>Irigaray, L. "This Sex Which Is Not One." *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cornell: 23- 33.

## CHAPTER ONE: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* presents a complicated portrait of the economic motivations behind Clytemnestra's murder of her husband, Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae. Upon first reading the play, it seems concerned chiefly with justice: is Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia just? Is Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon deserved? An understanding of how justice functions in this work is impossible without an examination of individual motivations. Through a close reading of the play, I will demonstrate the economics at work behind plot and characterization. The Trojan War, the background and catalyst for this work, is a victory sought so that the Greeks may plunder Troy. Aeschylus depicts a world in which money is so powerful as to be a libidinal force. Furthermore, the association of sex with money continues in the relations between male and female characters. Men exchange Helen, Iphigenia, and Cassandra through marriage: an economic transaction that devalues both the objects (women) and the subjects (men). Clytemnestra alone stands at the border of male and female in her economic practices, a woman who engages in material transaction and reveals the injustice of such practices. Her actions debase aristocratic economic ethics as mere consumerism. Though many characters lay claim to the cause of justice, their motivations are tainted by the desire for material wealth. Agamemnon kills his daughter so that she may be a symbol of his status. Clytemnestra chooses self-aggrandizement over the aristocratic imperatives of civic expenditure. Rather than enacting justice, these characters taint the House of Atreus with crime.

## THE WAR AT TROY

The Trojan War is the impetus behind Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy. Although in myth a war fought for glory and honor, the motivations behind it are complex and much less noble than the pursuit of *kleos*. The sack of the city is tremendously profitable for the victorious Greeks, as mythic Troy was famously wealthy. Priam's extravagant ransom for his son, Hector, in Book 24 of the *Iliad* establishes the magnificence of the royal treasure chamber (228- 35). Such characterization extends to the city itself. Any city able to support its population during a decade-long siege would possess an extraordinary amount of economic resources. Furthermore, traditional Homeric epithets establish Troy as grand in both appearance and size. It is called "strong-founded, well-built,"<sup>4</sup> "strong-walled,"<sup>5</sup> "gate-towering,"<sup>6</sup> "great,"<sup>7</sup> and "beautiful."<sup>8</sup> Troy represents vast loot for those Greek soldiers who hope to seize it: wealth that doesn't need to be laboriously eked out of the land as the Greeks might otherwise have to do at home. The chorus explicitly names the profits to be gained in such a victory:

πάντα δὲ πύργων  
κτίνη πρόσθε τὰ δημοπληθέα

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<sup>4</sup> H. *Il.* 1.164, 2.133, 4.33, 5.489, 8.288, 9.402, 13.380, 21.433, among others.

<sup>5</sup> H. *Il.* 1.129, 2.113, 2.288, 5.716, 8.241, 9.20; H. *Od.* 20.302.

<sup>6</sup> H. *Il.* 16.698, 21.544.

<sup>7</sup> H. *Il.* 2.332, 2.803, 6.392, 7.296, 9.136, 22.251. H. *Od.* 3.108.

<sup>8</sup> H. *Il.* 5.210, 22.121.

Μοῖρα λαπάξει πρὸς τὸ βίαιον (128- 30)

and in front of their walls

Destiny will violently plunder

all the mass of livestock the community possesses.<sup>9</sup>

The Greek warriors will benefit economically from the destruction of Troy. Furthermore, by placing these expectations in the mouth of Calchas, the Greek seer, the Chorus makes it clear the men undertaking the expedition expected plundering upon conquest. The promise that they would be able to steal Trojan livestock and wealth would have been a prime incentive: more motivating, perhaps, than a war waged on behalf of one man's faithless wife.<sup>10</sup> Calchas' promise that Μοῖρα (130, Destiny) will despoil the city encourages the Greeks that their success is both fated and approved by the supernatural forces governing their cosmos. Those at home in Mycenae also expect their warriors to dispossess conquered Troy of its wealth. Speaking to the Chorus, Clytemnestra says that

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<sup>9</sup> In the entirety of my discussion of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, I take translations from Sommerstein, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> The Greeks speak disparagingly of Helen's role in causing the Trojan War. When discussing their comrades fallen in battle, they lament first the loss of life and then blame it on Helen: *τάδε σῖγά τις βαῦζει* (449- 50, this is what they are snarling, under their breath). They resent dying in a war fought *ἀλλοτρίας διαὶ γυναικός* (448- 49, because of someone else's wife).



it is right for the Greeks to take the city for their own, eating whatever food the Trojans have<sup>11</sup> and sleeping in their homes.<sup>12</sup> She is cautious, however, lest they plunder excessively: ἔρωσ δὲ μή τις πρότερον ἐμπίπτη στρατῶ/ πορθεῖν ἅ μὴ χρῆ, κέρδεσιν νικωμένους (341- 342, only let no desire first fall on the army to plunder what they should not, overcome by the prospect of gain). Men can be carried away in the chaos of massacre and looting. Clytemnestra's warning in this passage is ironic: the sack of Troy is notoriously violent and impious, involving the killing of Priam at the altar of Zeus Herkeios, seizure of Cassandra from the temple of Athena, murder of Astyanax from Trojan towers, and rape of Andromache.

Furthermore, ἔρωσ (341, desire) is the drive behind the sack of Troy. Looting is thus characterized as libidinal. The drives for economic possession and erotic possession are one and the same. Ἔρωσ is often personified in contemporary literature as the god Cupid or the force of Desire in a more general sense. It is impossible to escape the will of the gods in religious thought. Is there ever any question that the Greek soldiers will be unable to resist their violent desires? Economic concerns are fetishized and thus pursued by any means necessary. In turn, yielding to such desires is akin to being conquered (342, κέρδεσιν νικωμένους, literally 'having been conquered by profits'). Thus, *profit* is cast in

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<sup>11</sup> τοὺς δ' αὖτε νυκτίπλαγκτος ἐκ μάχης πόνος /νήσταις πρὸς ἀρίστοισιν ὧν ἔχει πόλις /τάσσει (330- 32, Weary nocturnal patrolling after the battle has led to their mustering, famished, at breakfasts consisting of what the city has available)

<sup>12</sup> ἐν δ' αἰχμαλώτοις Τρωικοῖς οἰκήμασιν/ ναίουσιν ἤδη (334- 35, They are now living in captured Trojan dwellings)

the active sexual role and the Greek soldiers in the passive one. Sexual passivity is associated with women<sup>13</sup>. It is shameful for men, particularly the heroes of Homeric epic, to be compared to women. Furthermore, κέρδος is a crass term, one associated with day-to-day wages and less with the glory of Homeric victories (Kurke 1991, 228- 32).

Aristocrats such as Clytemnestra do not frequently use such terminology. Indeed, the only other character in the *Agamemnon* to speak of κέρδος is the Herald, a commoner.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, Agamemnon rarely speaks directly about money, and refers to it with dignified vocabulary, such as πλούτου (820, wealth). Clytemnestra's blending of the vulgar κέρδεσιν with the supernaturally powerful ἔρωσ creates a powerful image of men held captive by their basest and yet most arousing needs, conquered even in the moment of conquest. Through her diction, Clytemnestra ascribes the weakness of women and poor day-laborers to the elite Greek male heroes. The queen's speech is sarcastic, both knowing that the Greek army cannot ignore such impulses and hoping for her husband's return so that she may kill him. The Greeks pursue war against Troy for explicitly economic concerns, hoping to make the wealth of a tremendously powerful city theirs.

The possession of Troy is fetishized both economically and sexually. Issues of gender and materialism are intertwined throughout the *Agamemnon* in the wake of the

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault 1984.

<sup>14</sup> ἡμῖν δὲ τοῖς λοιποῖσιν Ἀργείων στρατοῦ/ νικᾷ τὸ κέρδος, πῆμα δ' οὐκ ἀντιρρέπει.” (573- 74, for us, the remnant of the Argive host, the gain has the advantage and the loss does not bear down the scale).

army's return to Mycenae. In the next section, we will see how the war's economic motivations are the result of a complicated exchange of women.

## GENDER AND EXCHANGE

The immediate cause of Troy's downfall is, of course, Helen. Given in marriage to Menelaus, stolen by Paris, returned to her first husband, Helen is objectified and exchanged among a number of men. Aeschylus explores the cost of obtaining Helen throughout the play. As the catalyst for the Trojan War, Helen's "marriages" bring about the disastrous events described in *Agamemnon*. In each major plot point, Helen is complicit. Aeschylus thus compares her bride-price to the sack of Troy, the carnage of a decade-long war, the sacrifice of an innocent, and the murder of a king.

Helen's identity is based upon her universal desirability. She is the most beautiful woman in the world and all men wish to possess her in marriage. Helen is consistently defined in terms of her male companions, rather than as a stand-alone character. In the *Parodos*, the Chorus sings:

οὔτω δ' Ἀτρέως παῖδας ὁ κρείσσων  
ἐπ' Ἀλεξάνδρῳ πέμπει ξένιος  
Ζεὺς πολυάνορος ἀμφὶ γυναικὸς  
πολλὰ παλαίσματα καὶ γυιοβαρῆ  
γόνατος κονίαισιν ἐρειδομένου  
διακναιομένης τ' ἐν προτελείοις

κάμακος θήσων Δαναοῖσι

Τρωσί θ' ὁμοίως... (60- 67)

So the sons of Atreus were sent  
against Alexander by the mightier power, Zeus,  
god of hospitality, who thus, for the sake of a woman of many men  
was to impose many limb-wearying struggles,  
with the knee pressed down into the dust  
and the spearshaft shattered  
in the pre-nuptial rites, upon the Danaans  
and the Trojans alike.

Helen is πολυάνορος... γυναικὸς (62, a woman of many men). This is the first occurrence of the word πολυάνορος (Fraenkel 1950, 40), here used to mean 'the wife of many husbands'. In other contexts, however, it has meant 'with many men, much-frequented.'<sup>15</sup> Aeschylus' diction references Helen's two marriages, alleged promiscuity, and is perhaps allusive to prostitutes, who are much-frequented by men in exchange for money. Similarly, she is ἀλλοτρίας διαὶ γυναικός (448- 449, someone else's wife) and τὰν δορίγαμβρον ἀμφινεικῆ θ' Ἑλέναν (686- 687, Helen, the spear-bride for whom two contended). Helen is described as a sought-after possession, rather than as an intrinsically

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<sup>15</sup> In *E. It.* 1280, where it is used to describe the cult throne (θρόνος) of Apollo at which many men pray and leave monetary offerings. Cf. *Ar.Av.*1313 and *IG42(1).129.12* (*Epid.*).

valuable person. Never appearing in the *Agamemnon* but frequently discussed, Helen is defined by her relations with men.<sup>16</sup> As the universally-desirable object for which men strive, she is the cause of death for untold numbers of Greek and Trojan warriors (66- 67, Δαναοῖσι/ Τρωσὶ θ' ὁμοίως). These men died in battle as a pre-nuptial rite, the first offerings before a wedding (65, ἐν προτελείοις).<sup>17</sup> Rather than the traditional sacrifice before marriage, mass slaughter ushers in Helen's marriage (Rehm 1994, 43). In the first stasimon, the Chorus elaborates further on the image, singing that Helen arrives ἄγρουσά τ' ἀντίφερνον Ἴλίῳ φθορὰν/ βέβακεν ρίμφα διὰ/ πυλᾶν (406- 407, bringing destruction to Ilium instead of a dowry,/ she went lightly through the gates). Death en masse accompanies Helen's bridal homecoming, rather than the traditional dowry, an economic boon for the bridegroom and his family.

Greek marriage was a social and economic exchange that ensured the continuity of the husband's *oikos* by providing legitimate heirs and fulfilling religious observances in his particular ancestor cult (Rehm 1994, 12). Men alone arranged marriages, beginning with the ἐγγύη (betrothal) made by the κύριοι (*kurioi*, or legal guardians) of the couple or

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<sup>16</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to her role in the Homeric epics. In the *Iliad* particularly, Helen is one of the most dynamic characters and an agent in her own right. She is capable of upbraiding Paris' cowardice, confronting the goddess Aphrodite, and paying a moving tribute to her fallen brother-in-law. Her speech practically concludes the epic (H. *Il.* 762-75), as the penultimate speaker at Hector's funeral (the last being King Priam himself).

<sup>17</sup> The same conflation of marital and death imagery is used to describe the sacrifice of Iphigenia, a similarity that I will discuss later in this chapter.

the prospective bride's *kurios* and the groom himself if he had reached adulthood.<sup>18</sup> A dowry was arranged so that the woman might have property if the marriage was terminated in the future, either by death or divorce. In that case, the groom would have to return the original dowry or pay eighteen percent annual interest on its value. Thus, Greek marriages were an economic exchange of women enacted between men. Helen turns this paradigm on its head in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: rather than going peacefully from the house of her father to that of Menelaus, she escapes the possession of men again and again, trailing destruction in her wake.

Helen's identity in the *Agamemnon* is constructed around the way she consistently eludes permanent exchange through marriage. Aeschylus defines her by her absence, not only from the play, but also from its mythological backstory. Shortly before the image of her marriage to death at Troy, the Chorus describes her departure from Greece:

λιποῦσα δ' ἀστοῖσιν ἀπίστοράς  
τε καὶ κλόνας λογχίμους  
ναυβάτας θ' ὀπλισμούς. (403- 405)

Leaving to her fellow-citizens the turmoil  
of shield-bearing warriors, the setting of ambushes,  
the arming of men to go in ships.

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<sup>18</sup> Women were not legal agents and thus unable to participate on their own behalf.

Helen never speaks in the *Agamemnon*. Her value is determined by what lengths men will go in order to possess her, and she is thus always characterized as λιποῦσα (405, leaving).<sup>19</sup> It seems that she was not at Sparta for long at all: Aeschylus uses the unusual resultative perfect βέβακεν (407, she has already gone). Later, she is characterized as ὑπερποντίας (414, she who is beyond the sea) as Menelaus longs hopelessly for her. The Chorus says that φάσμα δόξει δόμων ἀνάσσειν (415, a phantom will seem to rule the house). Helen's absence rules Menelaus and thus the other Greek princes. The Chorus compares her to a beautiful statue without eyes (418), an empty pleasure in dreams gone upon waking (422- 423), and a vision that slips through one's arms (424- 425, παραλλάξασα διὰ/ χερῶν βέβακεν ὄψις). Helen is defined by her relationships with men, yet those relationships are undermined and denied by her constant state of flight.

Helen is the intersection of two different systems of economic evaluation: Homeric and Classical (Wohl 1998, 93). Earning her value through the *agon* of Greek male warriors, she is a prize for which men contend. As a woman exchanged for money in marriage, she is at the same time a commodity that men may buy. Helen is the gold standard by which disparate items can be evaluated (Bakewell 2007, 124). Her illusory nature makes her the perfect commodity: her value changes based upon who or what is chasing her.

The objectification and commodification of Helen results in carnage for all those involved. This is representative of the destructive power of exchange. The monetary exchange of human beings is inherently unfair: men and women do not come with a price tag, and thus cannot fairly traded for money. Helen makes this underlying truth manifest.

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<sup>19</sup> Notably, the first active verb used to describe her in the play (Wohl 1998, 93).

Though a human being capable of thought and emotion, she is deprived of agency when traded for a bride-price in marriage. Marriage is a bad deal, short-changing Helen's unique and precious value for limited monetary price. Aeschylus depicts this exchange as similarly destructive for the men arranging such a transaction. The Trojan war fought over Helen desecrates Greek soldiers, turning them into ash. The Chorus laments:

πολλὰ γοῦν θιγγάνει πρὸς ἦπαρ:  
οὓς μὲν γάρ τις ἔπεμψεν  
οἶδεν, ἀντὶ δὲ φωτῶν  
τεύχη καὶ σποδὸς εἰς ἑκά-  
στου δόμους ἀφικνεῖται. (432- 436)

There is much, at any rate, that strikes deep into the soul:  
one knows the men one sent off,  
but instead of human beings  
urns and ashes arrive back  
at each man's home.

Helen's departure has struck grief into the hearts of every Greek: Menelaus mourns her absence at Troy, while the families of soldiers await their loved ones but receive only ash in return. The passage is particularly somber, even in a play about how tragic homecomings can be. The indefinite pronoun *τις* communicates the universality of grief: everyone in Greece has felt the painful loss of no longer being able to speak to a loved



one parted from them by the finality of death. In the following strophe, the Chorus expands upon the image:

ὁ χρυσαμοιβὸς δ' Ἄρης σωμάτων  
καὶ ταλαντοῦχος ἐν μάχῃ δορὸς  
πυρωθὲν ἐξ Ἰλίου  
φίλοισι πέμπει βαρὺ  
ψῆγμα δυσδάκρυτον ἀν-  
τήνορος σποδοῦ γεμί-  
ζων λέβητας εὐθέτους. (438- 44)

Ares, the moneychanger of bodies,  
holding his scales in the battle of spears,  
sends back from Ilium to their dear ones  
heavy dust that has been through the fire,  
to be sadly wept over,  
filling easily-stowed urns  
with ash given in exchange for men.

The pathos of the preceding lines suddenly elucidates the true nature of the war in Troy. If Helen is the universal equivalent by which all other things are judged, Ares is the moneychanger who weighs out human lives in exchange for other goods. Ψῆγμα (442)

means ‘that which is rubbed or scraped off, shavings, scrapings, chips’<sup>20</sup> but here is a reference to gold dust in particular (Fraenkel 1950, 230). The ash of cremated warriors is compared to gold dust because both are heavy: gold due to its density, ash because of the grief its arrival will cause (Sommerstein 2008, 53). Thus, Ares accepts large items (i.e. men’s bodies) and trades them for more compact but heavier substances (i.e. ash). The ash is modified by the aorist passive participle πυρωθὲν (440, literally ‘having been fired’). Although some scholars have considered this a reference to ore refining,<sup>21</sup> it may be a reference to metal melted down and shaped into coins (Bakewell 2004, 124). The complex image of Ares as a common day-trader, exchanging men for ash that may be melted into coinage, draws attention to the economic concerns behind the Trojan War. Battle results in the trade of living men for dead, and is waged over a commodity (Helen) that can never truly be attained. Furthermore, the image of λέβητας εὐθέτους (444, easily-stowed urns) suggests not only funerary urns but also storage vessels, commonly used to transport goods across the Mediterranean in antiquity (Wohl 1998, 96). Aeschylus seems to suggest that a war waged on behalf of an exchanged commodity blurs the lines between humans and commodities. Exchange does violence to both the commodity (Helen) and the exchangers (Greek men, who are weighed out in ash to account for her bride price). This is the real cost of Helen: thousands of dead Greek and Trojan men.

Helen’s war is initiated by the exchange of yet another woman. In order for the Greeks to sail to Troy, they must appease Artemis through a virgin sacrifice. Their departure, however, is thwarted by ill-favoring winds; Artemis is displeased with King

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<sup>20</sup> LSJ s.v. ψήγμα.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Headlam, cited in Fraenkel (1950), 230.

Agamemnon and manipulates nature so that he cannot sail to war. The goddess demands the sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia. Agamemnon, we are told, is predictably horrified. Yet, having already gathered the forces, how can he back down? *πῶς λιπόναις γένωμαι/ ξυμμαχίας ἀμαρτῶν;* (212- 213, How can I become a deserter of the fleet, losing my alliance?) he asks. He cannot renege on his commitment to the Greek *poleis*, as well as to his own brother. This would mean the loss of significant social status in the eyes of the other Greek leaders; in a culture based so intrinsically on masculine honor as that of Archaic Greece, life without honor is worse than death.<sup>22</sup> The decision to sacrifice Iphigenia is made by male heroes<sup>23</sup> whose greatest goal in life is the accumulation of glory. Indeed, Aeschylus peoples the scene with men alone: Agamemnon, Menelaus, Calchas the seer, the Greek leaders (200, *πρόμοισιν;* 230, *φιλόμαχοι βραβῆς;* 240- 47, *ἕκαστον θυτήρ/ων... πατὸς κατ' ἀνδρῶνας εὐτραπέζους*) and soldiers (109, *Ἑλλάδος ἦβας;* 185, *νεῶν Ἀχαικῶν;* 189, *Ἀχαικὸς λεώς;* 197, *ἄνθος Ἀργείων*). The chorus describes it as *ὄδιον κράτος αἴσιον ἀνδρῶν/ ἐντελέων* (104- 105, the auspicious departure of the commanders, men invested with power). Agamemnon purports to be such a man,

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<sup>22</sup> Sophocles writes an entire play, *Ajax*, upon this premise. Having been denied the prizes due to him in war, the Greek hero Ajax commits suicide rather than face a life without honor. He insists that, *ἀλλ' ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι/ τὸν εὐγενῆ χρῆ* (479- 480, the options for a noble man are only two: either live with honor, or make a quick and honorable death).

<sup>23</sup> From her absence in the scene, we can assume that Clytemnestra has no hand in the sacrifice of her daughter.

“invested with power,” but must command the respect of fellow male citizens in order to do so. He sacrifices his daughter in order to confirm his allegiance to his fellow Greek men and to assert his role as their leader.

Aeschylus’ diction reveals the decision to be more complicated than a conflict of interest between *oikos* and *polis*. Economic concerns contribute to Agamemnon’s murder of Iphigenia in two main ways. First, the conquest of Troy and subsequent plundering are too tempting to deny (both for Agamemnon and the Greek army). Second, Agamemnon seeks to establish his elite status through the sacrifice of his daughter, his most prized possession. The king calls his daughter a δόμων ἄγαλμα (207, the delight of my house), a term that depicts her as the most prestigious sacrificial commodity of Agamemnon’s *oikos*. The economy of archaic Greece includes a complex hierarchy of dedications to the gods. The sacrifice of expensive or valuable goods demonstrated the class of particular families or individuals: the wealthier one was, the more lavish an offering with which one could afford to part. The “top-rank gifts” were called *agalmata*. (Morris 1986, 12). The temples of the gods, therefore, were arenas for elite competition and display so that aristocrats could legitimize their privileged positions in society. Such demarcations of class through religious offerings continued through Archaic Greece into the Classical Period. Indeed, the primary meaning of *agalma* in fifth century BC Athens was “an offering to the gods” (Morris 1986, 12). Aeschylus uses a blend of economic and religious terminology to describe Iphigenia. She functions as a commodity that will ensure both Greek victory and Agamemnon’s elite status.

The religious overtones of the term *agalma* indicate her ultimate fate before it has happened: her *telos* is destined to be on the altar of the gods. Although she is depicted as

a sacrifice to the gods, the decision to sacrifice her is made only by mortals. Greek religious thought is generally uncomfortable with the notion of sacrifice as a straightforward economic exchange.<sup>24</sup> Although Calchas has suggested the sacrifice of Iphigenia as an appeal to Artemis, the goddess herself does not give the command in the *Agamemnon*. The audience learns of it, removed by many degrees of hearsay: the Chorus reports what Calchas says the omens have told him. I believe that such distance is not accidental and is meant to prompt questions about the legitimacy of virgin sacrifice, as well as the true motives behind it.

The sacrifice of Iphigenia may be read as a potlatch ceremony,<sup>25</sup> in which precious goods are destroyed in order to impress one's elite peers. By characterizing his daughter as a precious commodity and then sacrificing her before an audience of elite males, Agamemnon demonstrates his power and wealth. The destruction of a valuable object demonstrates that one can afford to waste resources. As a virgin at the age of marriage, Iphigenia is at her most valuable, economically speaking, at the moment of her sacrifice. In many versions of the myth, the Greek commanders lure her to her doom with the promise of marriage to Achilles.<sup>26</sup> The scene is marked by wedding imagery. Iphigenia wears saffron-colored robes (239, κρόκου βαφὰς δ' ἐς πέδον χέουσα), the color

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<sup>24</sup> Socrates, when discussing piety, asks ἐμπορικὴ ἄρα τις ἂν εἴη, ᾧ Εὐθύφρων, τέχνη ἢ ὁσιότης θεοῖς καὶ ἀνθρώποις παρ' ἀλλήλων; (Pl. *Eu.* 14E, Then piety, it would seem, Euthyphro, is some sort of art by which men and gods do business with each other.)

<sup>25</sup> The description of the potlatch is given in Mauss, M (1954), *The Gift*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hyginus, *Fabulae* 69.

worn by brides.<sup>27</sup> Eroticism suffuses her description, particularly in her pleading glances to the Greek men surrounding her:

ἔβαλλ' ἕκαστον θυτήρων ἀπ' ὄμματος βέλει  
φιλοίκτω, πρέπουσά τως  
ἐν γραφαῖς... (240- 42)

she cast on each of her sacrificers a glance darted from her eye,  
a glance to stir pity,  
standing out as if in a picture

Iphigenia is a spectacle to be admired, objectified by the gaze of the male audience. Although she attempts to garner pity by desperately glancing at the men around her, Iphigenia remains to them only a picture (242, γραφαῖς) rather than a living human woman. Even the motion of her eyes serves to emphasize her helplessness. The vision of Iphigenia is that of a passive, beautiful object desired by men. In the formulation of feminist gaze theory, Iphigenia is a product, while the Greek soldiers are consumers. The consumer seeks to use the object for their own enjoyment, while the product exists only for another's satisfaction (Irigaray 1985: 31- 2). This passage prefigures the description of Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, entering Troy as a bride:

ἀκασκαῖον δ' ἄγαλμα πλούτου,

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<sup>27</sup> On Iphigenia's sacrifice as a marriage to death, see Rehm (1994), 43- 58.

μαλθακὸν ὀμμάτων βέλος,  
δηξίθυμον ἔρωτος ἄνθος. (741- 743)

a gentle adornment of wealth,  
a soft glance darted from the eyes,  
a flower of love to pierce the soul.

The association of Iphigenia with Helen, the most sought-after bride in classical mythology, communicates her desirability at the moment of her death. Iphigenia is at an age when she might bring economic gain to her family through marriage. Instead, her sacrifice is steeped in erotic and wedding imagery. Just as Iphigenia is a δόμων ἄγαλμα (207), Helen is an ἄγαλμα πλούτου (741, adornment of wealth). Both women are characterized in economic terms and exchanged in marriage. Furthermore, the sacrifice is described as a wedding ritual for the beginning of the Trojan War: it is a προτέλεια ναῶν (227, preliminary rite to the fleet's departure). Iphigenia must be destroyed in order for the ships to leave. Just as the scores of dead warriors are an offering to Helen's wedding, Iphigenia is objectified in her death, a perverse short-changing of human life for the glories of war, rendered questionable by the practice of human sacrifice (Zeitlin 1965, 464).

Though the Chorus waxes poetic about Iphigenia's beauty, they refuse to relate the sacrifice itself; they instead increase suspense in the audience through a complex image of eroticism and economic transaction. The passage gives a great deal of detail about the unfavorable winds, the war councils, and Iphigenia at the altar. Yet, the Chorus elides the sacrifice itself: τὰ δ' ἔνθεν οὔτ' εἶδον οὔτ' ἐννέπω:/ τέχνη δὲ Κάλχαντος οὐκ

ἄκραντοι (248- 249, What followed I did not see and do not say: but the skilled prophecies of Calchas do not fail of fulfillment). The Chorus' voyeuristic description of Iphigenia is doubly perverse when they shy away from describing the savagery of her death and choose rather to confirm the judgment of their male peer, Calchas—a small consolation for Iphigenia, bound, gagged, and murdered like an animal on the altar (235-237).

Though the Chorus is uncomfortable with acknowledging the horrific nature of Iphigenia's death, Agamemnon is strangely cavalier. Although at first horrified by the prospect of killing his own child, it takes little time for him to overcome his discomfort. In the course of a mere eleven lines, he dispatches with the entire moral dilemma.

Agamemnon assures himself:

παυσανέμου γὰρ θυσίας  
παρθενίου θ' αἵματος ὀρ-  
γᾶ περιόργως ἐπιθυ-  
μεῖν θέμις. εὖ γὰρ εἴη. (214-217)

That they should long with an intense passion  
for a sacrifice to end the winds  
and for the blood of a maiden  
is quite natural. May all be well!



Agamemnon, callous and concerned primarily with status, resolves in a matter of moments to condemn his child to a violent death. His presentation of the dilemma deliberately avoids the slaughter itself, as the king is either unwilling or unable to face the horrific situation. The subject of ἐπιθυμεῖν (216- 217, to wish, to be eager for) is unclear: no subject is given in the sentence nor in the lines immediately preceding it. Fraenkel dismisses the possibility that the subject is Artemis and instead argues that the ambiguity is intentional (Fraenkel 1950, 126). Agamemnon's rhetoric includes both his companions and himself, without referencing anyone specifically. He refuses to take responsibility for the sacrifice of Iphigenia, though he ultimately knows that it is unnatural to feel ἐπιθυμία for the blood of an innocent (Fraenkel 1950, 126). Furthermore, he does not discuss it as a horror for which he must steel himself; instead, the murder of Iphigenia is θέμις (217, *right*). His diction is indicative of misogynistic attitudes. The word θέμις is used in earlier literature to describe the deferential role that women play in society: it is θέμις for men to have sex with women (H. *Il.* 9.134) and for a wife to grieve if her husband perishes abroad (H. *Od.* 14.130). As a hero of Homeric epic, it is not surprising that Agamemnon would view a woman as the means to an end. With three words, εὖ γὰρ εἶη (217, may all be well), he seals Iphigenia's fate— a disturbingly offhand remark for a man justifying his daughter's death. He speaks of the justifications for her death and then the result he hopes will come from it, avoiding the resolution itself: 'I am determined to sacrifice her' (Fraenkel 1950, 126). Agamemnon considers her little more than the means to the end of economic, and thus social, superiority.

The image of Iphigenia as a precious and unique commodity, squandered as if she were replaceable, is Agamemnon's ultimate sin. By destroying his δόμων ἄγαλμα,

Agamemnon jeopardizes the ethos of the Greek household, which was the preservation of aristocratic wealth for generations (Goldhill 1986, 11). Iphigenia, an *agalma*, is used and tossed aside as if she were simply *ploutos* (Wohl 1998, 86). In this sense, Agamemnon fails not only as a father but as an aristocrat, who should be able to distinguish between responsible and irresponsible expenditure.

If Agamemnon is a bad aristocrat, his wife Clytemnestra is ultimately his economic match. Though a woman, she enacts her own economic transaction by killing Agamemnon and usurping his royal wealth and power. She is an economic agent in her own right, able to conduct the bloody business of money as male characters do. Nowhere is her privileged economic position more evident than in her murder of Cassandra. Having killed her husband, Clytemnestra takes revenge to excess. Though the slaying of Agamemnon is justifiable by ancient laws of kinship, Cassandra is innocent. She is described in economic terms: a luxury good imported along with the spoils of Troy. Agamemnon describes her:

αὕτη δὲ πολλῶν χρημάτων ἐξαίρετον

ἄνθος, στρατοῦ δώρημα, ἐμοὶ ξυνέσπετο. (A. Ag. 954- 955)

This woman has come with me as a gift from the army,  
the choice flower of its rich booty.

Cassandra is chosen from the plunder of her sacked city. The phrase *πολλῶν χρημάτων* (954) in particular has material denotations. *χρῆμα* most frequently means ‘goods,

property,' not human beings.<sup>28</sup> She is given to Agamemnon by his troops, exchanged just as Helen and Iphigenia have been. Cassandra herself prophesies her death in economic terms: her murder will be a wage paid for services rendered (1261- 1262, τεύχουσα κάμοῦ μισθὸν ἐνθήσειν κότῳ/ ἐπέύχεται). Her death is the price Agamemnon must pay for bringing her to Troy.

Exchanged between men and defined in economic terms, Cassandra is sacrificed in a lavish scene of destruction as Iphigenia had been at the beginning of the play. Yet Clytemnestra, a woman, is her murderer. This is indicative of Clytemnestra's transgressive identity (Wohl 1998, 103). The queen is characterized as a man through her force of personality (10-11) and her willingness to enact economic transactions as men do. In sacrificing a young girl, as her husband had done to Iphigenia, in an act of economic destruction, Clytemnestra commits the same atrocity as Agamemnon. It is for this crime that she will be punished in the ensuing plays of the House of Atreus. Ultimately, the exchange of women for money is an extreme form of consumerism. By trading a human life for limited monetary value, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra spend their aristocratic wealth, rather than preserving it for future generations. Such careless spending is manifested in the so-called "carpet scene."

## CONSUMERISM

Aeschylus collapses a decade of history between the Chorus' description of Agamemnon's departure and the action of the play itself: his return. The opening scene announces the long-awaited arrival of the Greek forces from Troy. After the Chorus and

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<sup>28</sup> LSJ s.v. χρῆμα.

Clytemnestra discuss the developments made in preparation for the King's arrival, Agamemnon makes his long-awaited entrance on stage, speaking finally at line 810.<sup>29</sup> His pedantic opening speech is followed by an *agon* of sorts between Clytemnestra and her husband. The Queen urges Agamemnon to walk across a brilliant red cloth into the palace, described first as στρωννύναι πετάσμασιν (909, fine fabrics) and alternately as 'clothing' (921, εἴμασι; 963, εἰμάτων). It is elaborately embroidered (923, 926, 936) and extremely precious. As its beauty and value will be destroyed by footsteps, Agamemnon initially refuses but eventually relents to Clytemnestra's rhetoric. In destroying the carpet, Agamemnon makes the same mistake that he had in killing Iphigenia.

The tapestry is endowed with symbolic value. Its deep purple color represents the sovereignty (910, 946, 959) and is metonymy for the wealth of the royal family (948, 958- 962) [Wohl 1998, 86]. Agamemnon recognizes that such an object should be reserved for the gods (922- 924), yet treats something precious as replaceable. Thus the king turns the divine ἀλουργέσιν θεῶν (946, purple-dyed robes of the gods) into πλοῦτον ἀργυρωνήτους θ' ὑφάς (949, wealth and woven work bought with silver). With characteristic dismissiveness, Agamemnon ignores the peril he brings upon himself: τούτων μὲν οὕτω (950, Well, so much for that). The flippant diction echoes his final words about the sacrifice of Iphigenia. The genitive of respect here (950, τούτων) collapses his previous argument into a mere three words: "a dry, businesslike formula of transition" (Fraenkel 1950, 432). For all his initial reluctance to step on the carpet, Agamemnon banishes his qualms without even a long speech of justification. Although Agamemnon seems concerned with appearances of piety in his initial entrance, his

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<sup>29</sup> Ironic, perhaps, for a play given his name.

characterization is actually that of a man who believes himself to be above the law, both human and divine. The king is willing to commit egregious crimes at the urging of others (the Greek chieftains in the departure scene, and Clytemnestra in the carpet scene). A man so easily persuaded perhaps harbors such desires but would not act on them without societal pressure. Furthermore, he does not ruminate on the consequences of his actions for very long after having come to a decision. It is almost too easy for Clytemnestra to persuade her husband to destroy the wealth of his family, just as he killed their daughter ten years prior.

In confirming his moral and economic ineptitude, Agamemnon gives Clytemnestra the opportunity for which she has waited ten years. Joyfully, she announces:

ἔστιν θάλασσα, τίς δέ νιν κατασβέσει;  
τρέφουσα πολλῆς πορφύρας ἰσάργυρον  
κηκίδα παγκαίνιστον, εἰμάτων βαφάς.  
οἶκος δ' ὑπάρχει τῶνδε σὺν θεοῖς ἄλις  
ἔχειν: πένεσθαι δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται δόμος. (958- 962)

There is a sea—who will ever dry it up?—which breeds an ever-renewed ooze of abundant purple, worth its weight in silver, to dye clothing with. So with the gods' help, my lord, we can remedy this loss; our house does not know what poverty is.

In this passage, as in the *agon*, Clytemnestra argues for the consumption of material goods bought with royal wealth. The sea produces an inexhaustible supply of πορφύρας (959, purple). The word indicates a certain purple mollusk, *Murex trunculus* (Sommerstein 2008, 112), as well as the purple dye obtained from it by metonymy.<sup>30</sup> To stain such a large swath of cloth would take a great deal of dye, and to find enough of the particular breed of mollusk required would be labor intensive, and thus extremely costly. The assertion that the πένεσθαι δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται δόμος (962, our house does not know what poverty is) is hubristic: the sea cannot literally produce an infinite supply of dye, and not even the wealth of the Atreides can purchase an infinite amount of it.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, she claims that this purple dye is ισάργυρον (959, worth its weight in silver). This is a particularly rare word, used only a few other times in the corpus of Greek literature.<sup>32</sup> The purchase of cloth with silver stands out in sharp contrast to the traditional role of women as weavers of cloth for their household--for example Penelope, the wife par excellence, always sitting at her loom (H. *Od.* 104- 10). Rather than creating this carpet out of wool from their own land, the Queen has bought it with cash, for the

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<sup>30</sup> LSJ s.v. πορφύρα. For this sense of the word, see Sapph. 44, Hdt.3.22.

<sup>31</sup> In the characterization of the sea as both homogenous and infinite, Aeschylus could be referring to the homogeneity and “unlimit” of coined money. Coinage, which proliferated during the fifth century BC, is identical to itself and infinitely reproducible through minting (Seaford 2004: 167).

<sup>32</sup> LSJ s.v. ισάργυρος, c.f. Achae.5, Ephipp.21.4.

sake of conspicuous consumption. Clytemnestra emphasizes the extravagant price of the carpet, even as she advocates for its destruction.

The careless squandering of royal wealth is more than a misstep on Agamemnon's part. The same words that describe its extravagant fabric have connotations of blood, gore, and murder. Thus, Clytemnestra suggests that her husband invites his own murder in the destruction of a precious and expensive object. The carpet is stained with κηκίδα παγκαίνιστον (959- 960, an ever-renewed ooze). In other words, the sea will never run out of dye. Κηκίδα can mean 'anything gushing', but most frequently refers to 'bubbling blood.'<sup>33</sup> In the following play, *Choephoroi*, Orestes uses the word to describe the gory murder of his father (Ae. *Ch.* 1012).<sup>34</sup> Thus, the opulence of wealth anticipates and causes Agamemnon's death. Clytemnestra continues the image in her description: the sea produces purple mollusks as εϊμάτων βαφάς (960, a dye for clothing). The word βαφή, literally 'a dipping', is also a technical term in weapon-making. In order to temper or edge an iron blade, a metallurgist must dip it in water.<sup>35</sup> The dying of the carpet is suggestive of war, and thus evocative of blood and carnage. It is also the term used to describe Iphigenia's saffron-dyed robe at the moment of her sacrifice: κρόκου βαφάς δ' ἐς πέδον χέουσα, (239, as she poured saffron dye towards the ground). Clytemnestra deliberately chooses a word suggestive of her daughter's murder in the execution of her

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<sup>33</sup> LSJ. s.v. κηκίς.

<sup>34</sup> κηκίς can also refer to 'the juices drawn from a sacrificial victim' as it does in *S.Ant.* 1008.

<sup>35</sup> LSJ s.v. βαφή.

plan for revenge. In the “carpet scene” Agamemnon destroys an irreplaceable and sacred object as though it were a simple commodity, bought and sold with cash: this is precisely the action *δυσσεβῆ... ἄναγνον ἀνίερον* (219- 220, impious... impure, unholy) that he had undertaken in sacrificing Iphigenia. Clytemnestra forces him to reenact his murderous departure in this scene of perverted homecoming.<sup>36</sup>

Clytemnestra thus gives voice to Agamemnon’s pretensions of unlimited wealth and reveals them through deliberately economic vocabulary. Agamemnon’s heroic stature is revealed as base materialism. Just before his death, the Chorus utters the words *τὸ μὲν εἶ πρόσσειν ἀκόρεστον ἔφυ/ πᾶσι βροτοῖσιν* (1331- 1332, all mortals have by nature an insatiable appetite for success). The same drive for economic resources led Agamemnon to the murder of his daughter, the slaughter of innocents in Troy, and walking across the carpet to his own doom in the palace. Clytemnestra uses his own weakness for money against him in the manner of his death. Having just murdered Agamemnon, she rejoices openly to the Chorus:

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<sup>36</sup> The sense that the carpet scene is a reenactment of Iphigenia’s death was visually represented in Katie Mitchell’s 1999 production of the *Agamemnon* in the Cottesloe Theatre (under the adapted title *The Home Guard*). In the unfolding of the carpet, it becomes clear that “this was not a tapestry but a patchwork, a patchwork made up of a hundred little girl’s dresses; Iphigenia’s dresses, all in different shades of red, the obsessive recoverings or remakings of a dead child’s wardrobes. The effect was all the more powerful for Agamemnon’s never appearing to notice what he was walking over as he strode to his death.” (Walton 2006, 58). See also Macintosh (2005).



οὕτω δ' ἔπραξα, καὶ τὰδ' οὐκ ἀρνήσομαι:  
ὥς μήτε φεύγειν μήτ' ἀμύνεσθαι μόρον,  
ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον, ὅσπερ ἰχθύων,  
περιστιχίζω, πλοῦτον εἵματος κακόν. (1380- 1383)

I did it this way—I won't deny it—  
so that he could neither escape death nor defend himself.  
I staked out around him an endless net, as one does for fish,  
a wickedly opulent garment.

Clytemnestra draws a bath for Agamemnon, throws a net around him so that he cannot escape, and then murders him. She describes the trap as an ἀμφίβληστρον (1382, a thing that covers around). As it covers the dead king, it also serves as his funeral shroud, and is thus ἄπειρον (1382, without limit) because it wraps around the hands and feet of the corpse. It is also “without limit” because it provides no opportunity for escape (Seaford 2004, 254). The limitless nature of Clytemnestra's trap echoes the carpet scene: the sea has an endless supply of dye, and the royal household an endless supply of silver with which to buy it. Clytemnestra creates the final limit (i.e. death) of Agamemnon using a limitless trap, analogous to money. The king has already demonstrated his ἀκόρεστον ἔφου (1331, insatiable appetite) for material wealth. In a sadistic reversal of agency, the trap of limitless money ends his appetite permanently, condemning him to the Underworld. Agamemnon's desire for unlimited economic resources is self-serving and

represents a failure of aristocratic *megaloprepeia*. Spending royal wealth on luxury items to be destroyed needlessly, the monarchy ignores their ethical obligation to ensure the welfare of the *polis* at large.

The interaction of Clytemnestra and Cassandra makes clear the dichotomy between expected aristocratic principles and actual economic practice in the House of Atreus. After Agamemnon instructs his wife to treat the Trojan princess well, Clytemnestra tells the girl that she is lucky to be a slave in an old-money family: εἰ δ' οὐκ ἀνάγκη τῆσδ' ἐπιρρέποι τύχης, / ἀρχαιοπλούτων δεσποτῶν πολλὴ χάρις (1042- 43, but if the constraint of that lot [i.e. slavery] should indeed befall one, then to have masters old in wealth is a thing to be deeply thankful for). Those who have always been rich know how to treat their slaves better than would someone who has only recently come into money. Neither Agamemnon nor his wife treats their wealth with the taste expected of royalty: Clytemnestra will violently destroy Cassandra (herself a luxury possession) a mere three hundred lines later. The royal family is economically wasteful and thus falls far short of the aristocratic ethos. Clytemnestra's pronouncement that she wants only a small part of her husband's wealth (1574- 75, κτεάνων τε μέρος / βαιὸν ἐχούση πᾶν ἀπόχρη μοι) rings false in light of her destructive spending throughout the play. Her subsequent usurpation of both the throne and its accompanying wealth proves indicative of the consumerism that plagues the House of Atreus.

The Trojan War propels the events of *Agamemnon*. Although supposedly a war fought for male honor and glory, it is in fact a complex transaction in which a single woman, Helen, is defined and redefined along monetary lines. This economy of women traded between men ought to bring profit to their male exchangers; instead, it results in

the slaughter of two innocent girls, innumerable Greek and Trojan soldiers, and the king of Mycenae. In economic terms, to destroy human life in an attempt to gain money and power is to act as a consumer rather than aristocrat, spending carelessly and without discretion. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* presents the punishment of the eponymous king for this crime. Clytemnestra, however, repeats his very sins in the murder of her husband and Cassandra. Thus, the narrative of the House of Atreus continues as justice is brought to bear on the queen at the hands of her own children. In my next chapter, I will examine the ways in which Euripides explores and expands upon the themes of lust for wealth, gendered exchange, elite identity, and consumerism in his *Electra*.

## CHAPTER TWO: Euripides' *Electra*

Euripides' *Electra* presents a complicated portrait of the economic machinations behind a noble Greek family. Clytemnestra, having ostensibly killed Agamemnon for impiety, falls into the same trap of reckless spending in the murder of Cassandra and treatment of her own children. Clytemnestra shares political control of Argos with her lover, Aegisthus, rather than giving her son, Orestes, the kingship as she ought. Euripides' *Electra* centers on the two surviving children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra: Orestes, a young man who has been exiled, and Electra, a girl given away in marriage to a poor farmer. Orestes returns to Argos to avenge his father's death and conspires with his sister to plot the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes kills Aegisthus as Electra lures Clytemnestra to her hut. When Orestes returns, the siblings kill their mother, supplicating herself at their feet. Castor and Pollux (the deified twin brothers of Clytemnestra and Helen) appear and tell Orestes what he must do to redeem himself in the eyes of the gods.

Orestes and Electra claim that the murder of their mother and Aegisthus is justice for their father's death. Close examination of Euripides' diction and characterization, however, reveals a much different landscape. *Electra* lays bare the crass economics underlying these romanticized killings. Though Clytemnestra is hungry for wealth and power, valuing them more than her own children, the prince and princess express similarly materialistic views. Orestes believes that money is the defining characteristic of aristocracy and kills less out of reverence for Apollo's edict than to regain his birthright,

the palace. Electra is not only a mourning daughter but also the coveter of her mother's newly inherited wealth, eager to make it her own, even at the cost of matricide. In this scheme, human lives are squandered for economic gain. Four main themes pervade the economics of the play: the tension between the elite class (Orestes and Electra) and the common people (the Farmer), the consumerism demonstrated by Clytemnestra, Electra's defiance of gender norms, and the tension between unique identity and homogenous conformity in the recognition scene. Such complicated dynamics are indicative of the shifting socioeconomic climate of fifth century BC Athens.

#### ELITE IDENTITY

Athens in the fifth century BC was dominated largely by the upper classes. Even as democracy developed, the city's leaders and officials were drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the well-to-do (Griffith 1995, 66). The highest class of Athenian society was the *pentacosiemedimni*, those whose estate produced 500 bushels of goods each year. These men alone could be chosen for high public offices; the best a poor, male citizen could hope for was freedom of speech and equality before the law (Griffith 1995, 66). Euripides uses a mythological story in order to explore what it means to be a member of the "elite" in society. Although heroes of myth often boasted of noble or divine parentage that justified their special status in society, *Electra* demonstrates that nobility is associated less with character than with money. The House of Atreus, upon which *Electra* centers, is the perfect example of an elite family that controls a large segment of society, much like the *pentacosiemedimni* in Athens. Agamemnon is able to boast of his lineage many generations back. Furthermore, Agamemnon's kingdom,

Mycenae, was particularly famed for its wealth. One of the Homeric epithets for Mycenae and Argos is πολύχρυσος (rich in gold).<sup>37</sup> As a mythic family, the House of Atreus ought to be concerned with Greek moral ideals: piety, skill in battle, honor, reverence for family, political responsibility, and moderation. And yet the aristocrats act with the least deportment, showing themselves to be more concerned with material wealth than with exemplifying morality.

In the opening of the play, the audience is told that Aegisthus fears that Electra might bear a child to a noble man (23, ἀριστέων, and 26, γενναίῳ) who may grow up to be his father's avenger. Yet he marries her off instead to a man with pure Mycenaean heritage (35- 36, πατέρων... Μυκηναίων ἄπο γεγῶσιν), whose family tree is certainly nothing to be ashamed of (37, λαμπροὶ γὰρ ἐς γένος γε) because this man's poverty neutralizes him as a threat (37- 38, χρημάτων δέ δὴ πένητες). Aegisthus' valuation of nobility apparently holds money in higher regard than breeding (38, ἔνθεν ἠὺ γένοι ἀπόλλυται). Such a worldview will prove fatal to Aegisthus—in his preoccupation with money he has missed the imminent danger posed by Electra herself.<sup>38</sup> It is telling, perhaps, that Aegisthus offers gold for the murder of Orestes (33, χρυσὸν), rather than seeking out and eliminating the boy himself. This passive attitude can be interpreted as a failure to live up to aristocratic ideals; a Homeric hero would have taken care of such a threat himself.

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<sup>37</sup> LSJ s.v. πολύχρυσος. Cf. *Il.* 11.46., *S. El.* 9.

<sup>38</sup> It is she, not her husband or son, who plots the assassination of the royal couple.

Conceptions of nobility are best illustrated in those interactions between elite and non-elite characters, specifically between Electra and Orestes, two young elites, and the Farmer, a free-born but poor man. While the aristocracy claims to be the result of long generations of noble birth, both Electra and Orestes, like Aegisthus, consider it to be an economic title. The scene between Electra and the Farmer brings this into even sharper focus. Electra emerges as more concerned with status and appearance than her husband, as is evident in her reproaches to him: ὦ τλήμιον, εἰδὼς δωμάτων χρεῖαν σέθεν/ τί τούσδ' ἐδέξω μείζονας σαυτοῦ ξένους; (404- 5, You are thoughtless. You know quite well the house is bare; why take these strangers in? They are born better than you).<sup>39</sup> ὦ τλήμιον is a disparaging term and can have connotations of economic distress.<sup>40</sup> Earlier in the play, Electra informs the audience that it is not for the loss of adornment or wealth that she, τάλαιν' (178), mourns. Yet by using an etymologically associated word,<sup>41</sup> Electra associates her distress with her poverty. It echoes Orestes' initial address: μέν', ὦ τάλαινα (220, Stay, wretch). Recognized as τάλαινα by her brother, Electra transfers this quality to her husband, laying the blame for her reduced circumstances squarely on his shoulders.

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<sup>39</sup> For the entirety of my discussion of Euripides' *Electra*, I will be using Emily Townsend Vermeule's 1968 translation for the University of Chicago Press.

<sup>40</sup> LSJ s.v. τλήμιον. In *S.Ph.* 161, it is used to describe Heracles as he hides in a rocky cave, living at subsistence level, forced to shoot birds to survive. See also *Ar. Pax.* 723 and *X.An.* 3.1.29.

<sup>41</sup> LSJ s.v. τάλαινα.

Similarly, Orestes' snobbery becomes evident early in the play, in his disdain for the Farmer's modest home. "A ditch-digger or herdsman is worthy of the house" (252, σκαφεύς τις ἢ βουφορβὸς ἄξιος δόμων), he sneers. Electra in reply states that her husband is poor but noble (253), a nobility defined by the fact that he does not dare to consummate their marriage. The nobility accessible to a poor man, it would seem, is not of a heroic or epic sort, but rather the quiet validation that the elite class is irreproachable. Euripides plays further with notions of class and money, as well as what they mean to an aristocratic youth, in the conversation between Orestes and the Farmer. Orestes launches into a long-winded soliloquy on the meaning of virtue, which he generously claims is completely independent from wealth.

φεῦ:

οὐκ ἔστ' ἀκριβὲς οὐδὲν? εἰς εὐανδρίαν:

ἔχουσι γὰρ ταραγμὸν αἰ φύσεις βροτῶν...

πῶς οὖν τις αὐτὰ διαλαβὼν ὀρθῶς κρινεῖ;

πλούτῳ; πονηρῷ τᾶρα χρήσεται κριτῆ.

ἢ τοῖς ἔχουσι μηδέν; ἀλλ' ἔχει νόσον

πενία, διδάσκει δ' ἄνδρα τῆ χρεία κακόν.

ἀλλ' εἰς ὅπλ' ἔλθω; τίς δὲ πρὸς λόγῃν βλέπων

μάρτυς γένοιτ' ἂν ὅστις ἐστὶν ἀγαθός;

... οὐδὲ γὰρ δόρυ

μᾶλλον βραχίων σθεναρὸς ἀσθενοῦς μένει:

ἐν τῆ φύσει δὲ τοῦτο κἂν εὐψυχία.



... ὥς ἐμοὶ πένης

εἴη πρόθυμος πλουσίου μᾶλλον ξένος. (367- 95)

Alas! we look for good on earth and cannot recognize it  
when met, since all our human heritage runs mongrel.  
How then can man distinguish man, what test can he use?  
the test of wealth? That measure means poverty of mind;  
of poverty? The pauper owns one thing, the sickness  
of his condition, a compelling teacher of evil;  
by nerve in war? Yet who, when a spear is cast across  
his face, will stand to witness his companion's courage?  
... not even sterner in the shocks of war than weaker  
men, for courage is the gift of character.  
.... our poor host  
seems eager to entertain us, more than a rich man might.

In this passage, Orestes claims that money is no judge of character, yet his distinctions are ultimately rhetorical. He does not reference any specific attribute of the Farmer, or even addresses him directly. This is indicative of his underlying insincerity. He lists a number of unsuccessful ways to judge a man's worth, all of which have little to do with the Farmer's hospitality. It is not terribly surprising that the Farmer welcomes Orestes into his house; the young noble is, after all, his brother-in-law. Furthermore, the moral law of *xenia* dictates that you ought to welcome strangers into your home. Perhaps even more

influential than blood or ethics in the Farmer's hospitality is the fact that he is a subject of Orestes. The Farmer is well aware that Orestes is the rightful ruler of Argos. There is little chance that he would have refused him entrance to his home. Why then, does Orestes concern himself with such an elaborate expression of thanks, yet one that is full of empty clichés? He seeks to show off his ability to argue rather than to offer heartfelt gratitude.

Orestes' speech is highly rhetorical: he begins with an ethical question (if it is possible to judge character from appearance), offers a number of alternatives (wealth, poverty, skill in war), and disproves each of them in turn. A Greek audience might have associated this improvised speech with Sophistic teaching.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Orestes disproves his own point (that wealth and nobility are unrelated) through the use of such rhetoric. He consistently uses examples accessible only to the aristocratic class. The bulk of his proof lies in the assertion that skill in battle is unrelated to wealth. Orestes argues that a poor man may be as brave in battle as a rich one. This is ironic in light of the fact that the upper classes commanded the lower; a hoplite in the army would be part of a deme unit and led by an upper-class officer (Griffith 1995, 66). A poor man might be brave but would not have been highly valued in a regimental system based on class. Orestes' argumentation is therefore as empty as his sentiment: while he assumes that the

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<sup>42</sup> Sophists encouraged students to be able to compose impromptu speeches through the use of common examples and subjects (*topoi*) (Poulakos 1995, 18). As a youth entering manhood, Orestes is just the age at which he might have learned Sophistic teachings, had he lived in fifth century Athens.

Farmer must be of an inferior bloodline because he is poor, the audience knows differently. The Farmer has already revealed to us that he is of respectable lineage (35-39), and thus reveals the passage as steeped in irony. Though Orestes tries to express his egalitarianism by refuting the belief that class and virtue are related, the Farmer's own respectful treatment of Electra and generosity towards Orestes support a link between nobility of birth and nobility of character. Ultimately, Orestes only communicates his classist assumption that a poor man must be low-born. He is as concerned as his sister with economic loss and gain. All Orestes can offer the Farmer are empty words and the promise of future payment: after hearing that his sister is still a virgin, he says that her husband deserves good payment: *γενναῖον ἄνδρ' ἔλεξας, εὖ τε δραστέον* (262, you paint one of nature's gentlemen, we must pay him well).<sup>43</sup> Again, Orestes betrays his belief in money as the ultimate signifier of power, gratitude, and value.

Though an elite man, Orestes displays poor manners and believes that men are defined by their socio-economic status. In contrast, the Farmer places little stock in money, yet is a more admirable character in every way. The Farmer explains his practical philosophy on wealth (424- 31). Although admitting the fact that money (427, *τὰ χρήμαθ'*) has great strength (427, *μέγα σθένος*), he believes that it is only important in that it can secure the necessities of life:

*ἔστιν δὲ δὴ τοσαῦτα γ' ἐν δόμοις ἔτι*

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<sup>43</sup> "He must be treated well" or "he must be paid well" depending on the translation. LSJ s.v. "δραστέος"

ὥσθ' ἔν γ' ἐπ' ἡμᾶρ τούσδε πληρῶσαι βορᾶς.  
ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις δ' ἠνίκ' ἄν γνώμης πέσω,  
σκοπῶ τὰ χρήμαθ' ὡς ἔχει μέγα σθένος,  
ξένοις τε δοῦναι σῶμά τ' ἐς νόσους πεσόν  
δαπάναισι σῶσαι, τῆς δ' ἐφ' ἡμέραν βορᾶς  
ἐς σμικρὸν ἦκει, πᾶς γὰρ ἐμπλησθεὶς ἀνήρ  
ὁ πλούσιός τε χὼ πένης ἴσον φερεῖ. (424- 31)

The house holds little, yet it is enough, I know,  
to keep these strangers choked with food at least one day.  
In times like these, when wishes soar but power fails,  
I contemplate the steady comfort found in gold:  
gold you can spend on guests; gold you can pay the doctor  
when you get sick. But a small crumb of gold will buy  
our daily bread, and when a man has eaten that,  
you cannot really tell the rich and poor apart. (emphasis mine)

The Farmer shares the other characters' view of nobility but differs from Electra and Orestes in his view of money. He rarely thinks about money with the exception of special circumstances, as in the case of sickness or when entertaining unexpected visitors. Generally, though, the rich and poor are equals if they are able to sustain themselves. The Farmer considers money a means to an end (health and safety), rather than an end in and of itself.

Furthermore, the Farmer uses straightforward, plain vocabulary when describing economic status. He refers to himself frequently as “a poor man” (39, ἄσθενεῖ and ἄσθενῆ; 362, πένης).<sup>44</sup> When referencing money, he usually uses the common term, χρῆμα (37, χρημάτων; 427, χρήμαθ’); a polysemic word whose meanings range from ‘goods, property’ to ‘money’ and ‘need.’<sup>45</sup> Honest about his simple lifestyle, he only mentions his poverty in relation to Electra’s well-to-do upbringing. He does not feel the need to disguise his economic status through rhetoric: he is comfortable with his lifestyle as it is. Euripides dispenses with the Farmer early on in the play, as these are his last lines. The sudden exit emphasizes his last speech, though Orestes and Electra do not even reply (instead, the Chorus begins the First Stasimon). The prince and princess, motivated by dreams of material wealth, cannot understand the Farmer’s apathy towards money. This lack of response on their part underscores the abruptness of the Farmer’s exit and is indicative of his limited dramatic role in the play: the Farmer ultimately serves as a contrast between Electra’s reality and what she expected reality to be.

Although the Farmer cares little for money, he constantly maintains his concern for deportment and breeding, thus disassociating wealth from noble birth. In the

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<sup>44</sup> Athenian society of the fifth century BC was generally divided into two classes: the rich (*plousioi*) and laborers (*perietes*) [Ober 1989, 194]. Though the Farmer does not use these exact terms, he expresses economic status in the same dichotomy. In his mind, a man is either rich or poor. For more on the vocabulary of wealth and poverty, cf. Finley 1983, 10.

<sup>45</sup> LSJ s.v. χρῆμα.

beginning of the play, he boasts that although he is poor, he is of pure Mycenaean heritage (35- 38). Throughout, he consistently shows respect for those of noble birth and demonstrates that he shares the aristocratic belief that one's attitudes and manners are inherited. Thus, he shows pride in his breeding when speaking to Orestes: *καὶ γὰρ εἰ πένης ἔφυν, οὔτοι τό γ' ἦθος δυσγενὲς παρέξομαι* (362- 63, and although I am a poor man, I will not display manners that are ill-bred). He is unable to boast of any great means and emphasizes his ancestry instead. Respectful of one's bloodline to the point that he refuses to touch Electra, a princess, the Farmer is the foil to the royal family, who place greatest value in wealth.

## CONSUMERISM

Electra's preoccupation with the murder of her father Agamemnon stems mainly from the fact that it negatively impedes her access to her own wealth. She frequently discusses both the poverty of her daily life and the extravagance of life in the palace, describing a striking dichotomy between two extremes. Unlike Orestes, who values his father's wealth largely because it can afford him political power, Electra is concerned with palatial luxury. Her diction is revelatory of such a desire. Rather than using direct referents like *ἀσθενής* (39, as her husband, the Farmer, does), Electra refers to money in terms of the luxury it can purchase. She speaks of *ἀγλαΐαις* (75, ornaments), *σκυλεύμασιν Φρυγίοισιν* (314, Phrygian spoils), *θρόνῳ* (315, throne), *πόρπαισιν* (318, brooches). Furthermore, she describes objects by their metalwork (176, *χρυσέοις*; 317, *χρυσέαις*,

gold). This diction contributes to the characterization of Electra as materialistic and covetous of the luxurious lifestyle to which she feels entitled.

Part of Electra's larger rhetorical goal throughout the play is to exaggerate her suffering, her lived experience of poverty. The princess has been undertaking extra duties in order to emphasize her lowly position in society. Electra's entrance onto the stage occurs when she is carrying a water vessel on her head (54-56), which would be a shocking image for the audience, as slaves were assigned the task of carrying water in public (Roisman & Luschnig 2011, 100). In another of his plays, *The Trojan Women*, Euripides describes the horror and shame that nobility felt in performing such work. The Chorus of conquered Trojan noblewomen laments the misery of their situation in a tricolon crescendo: they will be separated from their children, raped by Greek soldiers, and forced to carry water as a slave.<sup>46</sup> The image of Electra, a princess, with a water jug on her head is pitiful. The Farmer informs her that she does not need to do this housework (57, οὐ δὴ χρείας ἐς τοσόνδ' ἀφιγμένη). Why then does she impose such a shameful toil upon herself? Electra tells her husband that she ought to share in his fortune by doing chores. This pretext makes the princess seem kind, even overly generous, but it is not the real reason. In her opening soliloquy Electra explains that she carries water, ὡς ὕβριον δείξωμεν Αἰγίσθου θεοῖς (58, so that we may show the hubris of Aegisthus to the gods). The princess does not truly care about her husband's workload but self-consciously performs for a divine audience (as well as the actual audience of Athenians

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<sup>46</sup>E. *Tro.* 201- 7. See also Hdt. 3.14, in which Cambyses of Persia humiliates the pharaoh Psamennitus by forcing him to watch his daughter carrying water in public.

in the theatre) in order to demonstrate the evil of Aegisthus, who has condemned her to a life of poverty. Electra is determined to demonstrate the immorality of the royal couple, even at the expense of her own honor. It is interesting that she makes no mention of her father's murder, although she characterizes Clytemnestra as πανώλης (60, all-destructive). The context for such a description is not Clytemnestra's killing of Agamemnon and Cassandra, however, but the fact that the queen exiled her eldest two children from the palace. Indeed, Clytemnestra has had other children with Aegisthus, who pose a serious threat to Orestes' and Electra's inheritance, already imperiled by their tenuous relationship with the new king and queen. Electra claims that her mother considers herself and Orestes πάρεργ' (63, inferior) to her children with Aegisthus. Since this word can mean (among other things) 'mere accessory,'<sup>47</sup> or 'mere baubles,'<sup>48</sup> Electra describes herself as one of Clytemnestra's old, less flashy possessions. She resents her downgraded status and feels herself to be a cheap commodity. The dichotomy between her current life and the circumstances of her birth weighs heavily on her mind, and she seeks to impress her poverty upon the audience at every available opportunity.

Money is synonymous with status for Electra. She exaggerates her current status to emphasize the change in her fortunes. Although she protests that it is not for her poverty that she mourns (175- 76, οὐκ ἐκ ἀγλαίαις... οὐδ' ἐπὶ χρυσέοις ὄρμοις), she seems preoccupied with the loss of status she has suffered, inviting discussion of her fallen circumstances. The princess employs *apophysis* here; by insisting that she will not speak

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<sup>47</sup> LSJ s.v. πάρεργος. See Pl.*Ti.*21c.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *HF*.1340.



of her stolen gold and jewels, she speaks of them. The rhetoric is insincere. Had she no thought of wealth, she simply would not have mentioned it. Ultimately, if Electra cares so little for money, why does she mention it so frequently?<sup>49</sup> She offers the pretext that noble birth makes poverty shameful, protesting that her dirty hair and tattered clothes (183- 84, *πιναρὰν κόμαν καὶ τρύχη τάδ' ἐμῶν πέπλων*) are unworthy of both her father and Troy, the city he conquered. The daughter of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, destroyer of Ilium, should not be subjected to such treatment. Yet Electra also considers herself too good to accept help from others. When she laments that she is unable to participate in festivals due to her shabby attire, the Chorus offers Electra a gold dress (190- 94). She ignores their offer and weeps more about the death of her father (201, *οἴμοι τοῦ καταφθιμένου*) and the poverty in which she lives (207- 8, *αὐτὰ δ' ἐν χερνῆσι δόμοις/ ναίω ψυχὰν τακομένα*, I myself live in a poor man's house, wasting my life away). Her silence about the dress is an implicit refusal to borrow it and attend the festivals. Had she truly wished to participate in the festivals out of religious fervor or civic-mindedness, she would have accepted their offer gladly. But Electra wishes only to lament her ill fortune and thus gain sympathy. Although she has the opportunity to better her life among the common people, she makes no effort to do so. Hers is a life of self-imposed asceticism because Electra believes herself inherently deserving of material wealth.

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<sup>49</sup> See lines 175- 77, 235, 253, 314- 22, 404- 05, 601- 03, 870- 73, 939- 44, 952, 1131, and 1139- 40.

Electra's greatest complaint appears to be her marriage to the Farmer. When describing her husband, Electra focuses on his poverty, the characteristic most salient in her mind. She claims that she lives in the house of a poor man (αὐτὰ δ' ἐν χερνῆσι δόμοις/ ναίω ψυχὰν τακομένα, 207-8). Electra describes her daily life in melodramatic terms:

πρῶτον μὲν οἷσις ἐν πέπλοις ἀλιζομαι,  
πίνω θ' ὄσφ βέβριθ', ὑπὸ στέγαισί τε  
οἷσισι ναίω βασιλικῶν ἐκ δωμάτων,  
αὐτὴ μὲν ἐκμοχθοῦσα κερκίσι πεπλους,  
ἢ γυμνὸν ἔξω σῶμα κάστερήσομαι,  
αὐτὴ δὲ πηγὰς ποταμίους φορουμένη, (304- 10)

First tell him how I am kept like a beast in stable rags,  
my skin heavy with grease and dirt. Describe to him  
this hut- *my* home, who used to live in the king's palace.  
I weave my clothes myself and slavelike at the loom  
must work or else walk naked through the world in nothing  
I fetch and carry water from the riverside

The diction is deliberately hyperbolic; Electra likens herself to a beast of burden and a slave, living in squalor. The reality of her life is likely different: her husband is not a slave, but a free man with an honest living. While there is no question that she is no

longer living in a palace like an aristocrat, Electra exaggerates her reduced circumstances in order to attract sympathy.

Electra's preoccupation with money persists in her relationship with her brother. When Orestes arrives, one of the first questions she asks is if her brother has a living. Orestes replies that he does but that an exile is always a poor man (236, ἀσθενῆς δὲ δὴ φεύγων ἀνὴρ). Electra's question is not merely a polite one; one of the meanings of the word ἀσθενέω is 'to be too poor to pay taxes.'<sup>50</sup> A man who does not pay taxes would have been unable to vote in democratic Athens, the period during which *Electra* was performed. Such a person would be subject to other's political wishes, rather than an agent in their own right. Economic resources are the keys with which one unlocks society. Electra and Orestes have been denied far more than just their father's fortune; they have been robbed of any meaningful life. Electra is unable to put the thought of the royal inheritance from her mind.

Euripides characterizes Clytemnestra in similar terms: she is a "bad aristocrat," unwilling to spend the wealth of Mycenae in socially acceptable ways, choosing instead to lavish herself with displays of conspicuous consumption. In fifth century BC Athens, the generosity of the elite class was essential to the city's economic health. "Aristocratic *megaloprepeia* (magnificence and munificence)... finance[ed], among other things, the production of this play. On the other hand, excessive expenditure raised the specter of tyranny" (Wohl 1998, 88). The elite of contemporary Athens treaded a fine line of appropriate economic display. Clytemnestra's spending is more characteristic of a tyrant than a benevolent patriarch willing to put up the cost for athletic or artistic productions;

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<sup>50</sup> Breitenbach 1934, 20.

as such, I argue that an Athenian audience would have viewed her with scorn and opprobrium. Clytemnestra has already usurped the throne, but more damning is her acquiring of luxury to display political power.

Electra describes the lavish lifestyle of her mother (313-321) as distinctly Eastern. Clytemnestra sits on Phrygian rugs, surrounded by Trojan slave girls, dressed in luxurious imported clothes and golden jewelry. References to the East might have reminded an Athenian audience of the Persian king Xerxes, whom they had recently defeated and was the subject of scorn for his luxurious lifestyle. Electra specifically says that these riches were taken from Agamemnon (316, “ὡς ἔπερσ’ ἐμὸς πατήρ”), and that his blood is still splattered, rotting, on the wall. Though years have passed since the murder of Agamemnon, the image of his blood, black and rancid, on the walls of the palace communicates the moral outrage of claiming his property. The queen purchases luxury items for herself with blood money. Murder, rather than cash, is the real cost of Clytemnestra’s charmed life. The gore taints such items with *miasma* and makes explicit the Queen’s problematic spending.

A democratic Athenian audience would expect an aristocrat to exhibit taste and discretion; Clytemnestra merely has the economic means to buy. She is a consumer, rather than an aristocrat. When she sees Electra near the end of the play, she comments disparagingly on her appearance and house, although this is the lifestyle to which Clytemnestra has condemned her. Euripides characterizes Clytemnestra as a woman willing to sacrifice anything for money. To this point, the queen claims that the throngs of Trojan slave girls are a replacement for her murdered daughter, Iphigenia (1000-1003). They are σμικρὸν γέρασ, καλὸν δὲ κέκτημαι δόμοις (1003, a slight reward but an

ornament to my house). The sacrifice of Iphigenia was supposedly the justification for Agamemnon's murder; if she can be replaced with slaves (a mere commodity, bought and sold with money), Clytemnestra at the very least confuses money with love and at most killed her husband for the wealth she would gain.

The arrival of Clytemnestra at Electra's home shows that the queen has become as vulgar a spender as her husband, Agamemnon, had been. Mother arrives in a horse-drawn carriage and accompanied by Trojan slave women (addressed and referred to in the feminine plural, 998, 1007, 1010). The carriage is driven into the orchestra by two (or more) male attendants (addressed in the masculine plural at 1135-38) who are lavishly dressed (cf. 315-18, 967, 1140). Clytemnestra's entrance echoes the arrival of Agamemnon in Aeschylus' play (Halleran 11, 14-15). Both characters enter with their spoils and are lured to their doom. Electra's prior descriptions of the queen's grand lifestyle come to life as a "moving tableau" (Halleran 11, 14-15). If Agamemnon had been a tasteless aristocrat in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra now exhibits the same gauche tendencies in Euripides' *Electra*. The description of impressive wealth set the stage for the final confrontation of mother and daughter. Electra's hatred of Clytemnestra is tied inextricably with her usurpation of the family's wealth.

The *agon* before Clytemnestra's death demonstrates that Electra blames her mother for murdering her father out of greed. In turn, Electra's condemnation of reveals the princess's own preoccupation with wealth. Clytemnestra attempts to justify her actions to her daughter. She claims to have killed Agamemnon as righteous vengeance: he murdered their daughter Iphigenia and introduced Cassandra into the palace as a

concubine. Electra refutes her mother's arguments, before finally revealing the true source of her hatred for her mother:

πῶς οὐ πόσιν κτείνασα πατρώους δόμους  
ἡμῖν προσῆψας, ἀλλ' ἐπηνέγκω λέχει  
τὰλλότρια, μισθοῦ τοῦς γάμους ὠνουμένη; (1088- 90)

When you killed your husband, why did you not bestow  
the ancestral home on us, but took to bed the gold  
which never belonged to you to buy yourself a lover?

Electra's strongest protestations are not against the murder of Agamemnon, but for the loss of vast wealth that is hers by law. "Athenian law stipulated that the estate of a deceased man went to his sons, who were required to draw on their legacy to provide their sisters with a dowry" (Roisman & Luschignig 2011, 216).<sup>51</sup> Clytemnestra has no legal right to Agamemnon's estate; a wife's only property after the death of her husband would

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<sup>51</sup> Though *Electra* is set in Bronze Age Argos, it was first performed probably before 413 BC in Athens (458 is the date of the *Oresteia*). A Greek audience would probably have been more familiar with the law of their own day and age than with the particular legal customs of a civilization more than a thousand years in the past. Furthermore, anachronisms may be a useful lens through which we can speculate about the audience's reactions to drama.

be her dowry.<sup>52</sup> Electra is correct in her criticism: if Clytemnestra had only killed Agamemnon out of maternal love for Iphigenia, why would that love not extend to Orestes and Electra? Electra's hatred of her mother is complicated, fueled by grief for her dead father, anger for a mother who has abandoned her, jealousy of Aegisthus, and desire for wealth that is hers by law.

In this passage, Electra uses economic terminology to depict Clytemnestra's mismanagement of the kingdom. She and her brother are owed πατρῶους δόμους (1088, the ancestral home). This phrase connotes a long line of aristocracy, wealth that has been ennobled by generations of good breeding. Instead of giving the ancestral home to her children, Clytemnestra has brought them to her new marriage, having purchased it with wages (1090, μισθοῦ τοὺς γάμους ὠνουμένη). The word used in this context, μισθός, is rather vulgar, meaning 'fixed wages' or 'pay.'<sup>53</sup> Clytemnestra is not a queen but a common consumer, spending aristocratic wealth as mere wages. She has no legal right to Agamemnon's wealth or to the Trojan spoils the king had won in war (the Trojan slave girls, throne, clothing, jewelry, etc.), yet she flaunts it conspicuously. The sexual taunt here—that Clytemnestra had to purchase a new lover—makes clear the bitterness in such accusations of fiscal irresponsibility. Clytemnestra has purchased a new husband and produced new children with him, forever ruining the chances that her eldest children can

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<sup>52</sup> And as Clytemnestra's father was the king of Sparta, her dowry would probably have been nothing to scoff at. She could have kept this money and left Agamemnon's to his heirs.

<sup>53</sup> LSJ s.v. μισθός.

inherit their father's wealth. Electra resents her mother not only for the Eastern, and thus tasteless, way in which she spends money; it is Electra's money that Clytemnestra now lavishes on a new family, while her eldest daughter lives in abject poverty.

In the moments before Clytemnestra's death, Euripides makes clear that Electra seeks to kill her mother out of violent covetousness. The princess mocks her mother with an ironic invitation into the Farmer's house: *χώρει πένητας ἐς δόμους* (1139, enter our poor house). She bids her be careful lest she stain her robe. Electra notes once more her mother's lavish style of dress, contrasting it with her own impoverished lifestyle. I suggest that this is an ironic allusion to the fact that Clytemnestra's robes are about to be stained with blood, and also points to the red-stained carpet by which Clytemnestra herself lured Agamemnon to his death in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (957). The mention of material possessions in the climax of the play is indicative of the depths of Electra's hatred and envy. If the princess simply disapproved of Clytemnestra's improper economic habits, she would not have mentioned the poverty of her own home. The invitation is an inversion of Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon: in Aeschylus' play, Clytemnestra lures Agamemnon inside the house with wealth (the carpet scene). In Euripides, Electra taunts her mother with the cost of Clytemnestra's greed. The queen could not live in luxury had she not robbed Electra of her inheritance. The princess is motivated to kill her mother through hatred of her own poverty. In this passage, Electra bids her mother welcome to the very thing (poverty) that will kill her. Electra is chiefly concerned with status and wealth; she does not hesitate to kill for money, instead mentioning it as her motive in the moment of the killing itself. One wonders if Electra would have committed the matricide at all had she been allowed to remain in the palace.



An examination of the vocabulary of mercantile exchange in the play is important because it is used to describe criminal acts. Just before Clytemnestra's murder, the chorus' third stasimon begins with the simple phrase ἀμοιβαὶ κακῶν (1147, evils are interchanging). The word ἀμοιβή can mean 'requit, recompense, repayment, compensation.'<sup>54</sup> This refers to the cyclical family murders of the House of Atreus, as well as the evil of such a system of murders for economic gain. The audience reflects on the endless cycle of blood which, time and again, serves as compensation and exchange: Iphigenia exchanged for sailing to Troy, the slaughter of Agamemnon and Cassandra as compensation for the slain Iphigenia, and finally, the exchange of the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus for the slain King Agamemnon. Exchange itself is a curse upon the house. The mercantile diction here is allusive to the role of mercenary concerns throughout the series of murders. Orestes' pronouncement upon his entrance explicitly evokes the concept of exchange: he proclaims that he has returned to Argos "to exchange the murder of [his] father with his murderers" (89, φόνον φονεῦσι πατρὸς ἀλλάξω ἐμοῦ). The verb ἀλλάσσω means 'give in exchange, barter one thing for another, repay.'<sup>55</sup> Orestes therefore presents himself as a debt collector, describing his avenging of his father's death in monetary terms. Accordingly, the murders of Clytemnestra are only justified if they are equal punishment for the murders of Agamemnon and Cassandra, undertaken by a blood relative. The text's use of *polyptoton* in the phrase φόνον φονεῦσι is telling: Orestes is more concerned with showing off his rhetorical ability than taking revenge for the murder of his father. "In this tragedy, Orestes is more prone than any of

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<sup>54</sup> LSJ s.v. ἀμοιβή.

<sup>55</sup> LSJ s.v. ἀλλάσσω. See *A.Pr.*967, *E.Alc.*661, *Th.*8.82, *E.El.*89.

the other characters to indulge in wordplay... A similar abundance of rhetorical figures is characteristic of personae whom Euripides presents as sophistic, insincere, or manipulative” (Roisman & Luschign 2011, 106). The act of revenge is characterized as a monetary exchange at the beginning of the play (by Orestes) and at the end (by the Chorus). Rather than seeking vengeance for the murder of their father, Electra and Orestes seek the repayment of debts. As a male, Orestes is the expected avenger of his father. Electra, however, is an unexpected killer because she is a woman. Much like her own mother, Electra defies gender expectations in order to become an economic agent.

## GENDER

The works of Euripides are often noted for the enhancement of pre-existing female roles (Conacher 1967, 203), and *Electra* is no exception. The play gives fuller voice to the thoughts and actions of the character, Electra, than do the other renditions of the myth by Sophocles and Aeschylus. Euripides barely mentions the decree of Apollo that occupies so much of the action in Sophocles’ *Electra*; Electra participates fully in the plot and is onstage for nearly all the play (except for five brief exits). Instead, the narrative focuses a great deal on Electra’s daily life as a woman in Greek society. In this play, Euripides presents Electra as a woman with both economic and sexual desires, who is also willing to act on them.

Electra’s preoccupation with her marital status characterizes her as capable of recognizing and giving voice to her wishes. In this sense, she is able to become an agent in her own life, rather than the object of male desires. Her very name means ‘unmarried’

(Roisman & Luschign 2011, 11).<sup>56</sup> Although given to the Farmer in marriage, this is a union in name only: the union is never consummated. Electra laments the match to a man she disdains as lower-class than herself. When Orestes asks why she lives in such poverty, Electra replies that it is because ἐγημάμεσθ', ὃ ξεῖνε, θανάσιμον γάμον (247, I am married, stranger-- a wedding much like death). In the previous chapter, I examined the theme of the marriage to death in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Euripides employs similar diction to describe Electra's union, though it is to a living man rather than Hades personified. Electra casts herself in the role of the sacrificed girl, like her sister Iphigenia. She is so ashamed of her marriage that she believes it to be equal to death. Her insecurity stems in part from the marriage to a nobleman to which she feels entitled. Electra had been betrothed to Castor before his death (Roisman & Luschign 2011, 140), is now ashamed to say that she has married a poor man. The romantic connection to Castor is a Euripidean innovation. Electra came close to a marriage with a nobleman who loved her, only to have her hopes dashed. By marrying Castor, Electra would have been able to live a life of luxury, supported by the same aristocratic wealth in which she was raised. Electra's preoccupation with marriage is further manifested in her hatred of her mother, Clytemnestra.

Clytemnestra has everything that Electra desires: money and marriage. The princess frequently mentions her mother's affair with Aegisthus. She laments that the queen δόλιον ἔσχεν ἀκοίταν (166, she got herself a shifty lover) and μάτηρ δ' ἐν λέκτροις

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<sup>56</sup> Aelian, a third-century A.D. miscellanist, claimed that the poet Xanthus in the seventh-century B.C. had given her this name because she remained unmarried for so long.

φονίους/ ἄλλῳ σύγγαμος οἰκεῖ (211- 12, my mother rolls in her bloody bed and plays at love with a stranger). The condemnation of Clytemnestra is pruriently sexual. The image of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus copulating in Agamemnon's gory marriage bed mingles the moral outrage of Clytemnestra's sexual life and slaying of her husband. The two crimes of adultery and murder are inextricably tied. Electra's voyeuristic imaginings are indicative of her sexual desire that cannot be fulfilled in her current marriage. The murder of Clytemnestra could be the solution to her problems. With their mother dead, Orestes would serve as Electra's *kurios* and arrange for her a more economically prudent match. By reclaiming their father's wealth, the two siblings would have more than enough resources to provide Electra's dowry. Electra is driven by her ideological function as a woman to accomplish her own agency. Though she traditionally would be exchanged between men in marriage, Electra seeks to arrange her own marriage through the murder of her mother and Aegisthus.

Through characterization of Electra as sexually and economically desirous, Euripides creates a woman who is able to enact traditionally female desires (marriage) as a man would (murder and money). Alone of the three Electras in tragedy, Euripides is present at the scene of the crime and actively kills Clytemnestra with her brother. Unlike Aeschylus' character who merely complies with her brother's wishes, or Sophocles' heroine who urges Orestes on, Euripides' Electra plots her mother's death and places her hand on the sword to kill her own mother. Her fate at the end of the play, then, is ironic. Having been a uniquely autonomous agent throughout the play, Electra gains exactly what she desired: marriage to a nobleman. She is given away to Orestes' friend Pylades.

Following the pronouncement of her marriage, Electra speaks very little other than to lament her fate.

Electra's identity as an economic and sexual agent is precarious. While unmarried (effectively), she is able to enact her own desires. Married off to Pylades, as she once would have wished, Electra finds herself reduced to the typical role of a Greek woman. The unfairness of such an exchange (independence for passivity) is reflective of the exchange value governing the tragedies of the House of Atreus as a whole. When human beings are reduced to mere monetary worth, it complicates the questions of justice and identity inherent in tragedy. The reduction of unique personalities to mere homogenous types is indicative of shifting economic trends during tragedy's zenith and is expressed in the recognition of *Electra*.

#### UNIQUENESS VS. HOMOGENEITY

In Euripides' *Electra*, individuals are often compared to impersonal currency, a topos suggestive of the proliferation of coined money during the fifth century BC. The suggestion that human lives may be exchanged for cash is indicative of the preoccupation with material wealth that characterizes the members of the House of Atreus. The tension between a traditional system of exchange and the increasingly powerful homogeneity of money is reflected throughout Greek tragedy and in *Electra* in particular.

While money's power lies in its homogeneity, individuals are important due to their unique and inalienable characteristics. In Euripides' *Electra*, however, metaphors of coinage complicate interpersonal relationships. Perhaps the most important relationship

in the play is that of Electra and Orestes, the long-lost siblings. Their recognition scene is the catalyst for all action in the drama. Neither sibling may obtain revenge until they find the other. In both Aeschylus' and Sophocles' renditions of the scene, it is a fairly straightforward encounter: Electra recognizes her brother through three specific personal markers (a lock of hair, footprints, and an old cloak). Euripides, however, subverts audience expectations when his Electra dismisses the traditional markers. Instead, the recognition scene is an extended metaphor for an economic transaction.

Πρέσβυς

ἀλλ' εὐγενεῖς μὲν, ἐν δὲ κιβδήλῳ τόδε,  
πολλοὶ γὰρ ὄντες εὐγενεῖς εἰσιν κακοί.  
ὅμως δὲ χαίρειν τοὺς ξένους προσεννέπω. (550- 552)

.....

Ὀρέστης

ἔα,  
τί μ' ἐσδέδορκεν ὥσπερ ἀργύρου σκοπῶν  
λαμπρὸν χαρακτῆρ'; ἢ προσεικάζει μέ τω; (558- 59)

Old Man

Well. They look highborn enough, but the coin may prove  
False. Often a noble face hides filthy ways.  
Nevertheless—greetings, strangers, I wish you well.

Orestes

Ah, why do you stare upon me like a man who squints  
At the bright stamp of a coin? Do I stir your memory?

The Old Man believes that Orestes and Pylades look well-born (550, 552, εὐγενεῖς) but fears that appearances can be deceptive. He compares Orestes to coinage, namely that the newcomers' nobility may be counterfeit (550, κίβδηλον).<sup>57</sup> The metaphor is specific to the fifth century BC, when the most common way to test the value of coinage was to examine the engraved or impressed mark (*character*) on it (Seaford 2004, 154), while previously, precious metal would have to be tested by the touchstone. Why does Euripides employ such an anachronism? Electra refuses to believe that the lock of hair, sacrifices at the tomb, and footprints are signs that Orestes has returned. Instead, she agrees with the Old Man's comparison of her brother to coinage. This may be indicative of the marginalization of individual, heroic value in a world increasingly dominated by monetized exchange (Seaford 2004, 153).

Similarly, Orestes uses monetary diction (559, χαρακτηῖρ; 558, ἀργύρου) when he wonders why the Old Man is staring so intently at him. The Chorus ultimately recognize Orestes by a scar on his forehead, which is compared to the sign on a coin, thus exchanging an individual marker with an impersonal medium. Orestes, a stranger, is identified as a unique individual, by the same process by which a coin is identified as genuine by 'looking at the mark' and comparing it with the standardized type of homogenous coinage (Seaford 2004, 154- 55). The recognition is ultimately of Orestes' conformity to the homogenous type of "hero," rather than by unique attributes invested

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<sup>57</sup> For this metaphor, see also E. *Med.* 516- 19 and E. *Hipp.* 616.

with meaning. In Euripides' play, heroes are no longer identified by their special identity, but by how closely they resemble the typified 'hero.'

In *Electra*, Euripides expounds upon the issues of money, class, and gender found in the tragedies of the House of Atreus. Rather than being the noble revengers of their father, Electra and Orestes seek to establish socioeconomic control through whatever means necessary, including the murder of their mother. While Clytemnestra and Electra are noteworthy female characters for acting upon their desires, they are both covetous. Orestes is a typical member of the elite, who inadvertently reveals the true definition of 'nobility' as 'someone with a great deal of money.' The exchange of human life for wealth ultimately complicates the justice of the characters' actions. Euripides' *Electra* asks the question if any murder, especially that undertaken out of greed, can be the workings of justice.



## CONCLUSION

In this study, I examined the role of monetary concerns in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Electra*. While characters in these plays claim that murder is just and deserved, close philological and theoretical analysis reveals that Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Electra, and Orestes commit unspeakable crimes out of base economic desire. Money signifies desire and power. As such, characters pursue it in order to preserve or regain their social status. In the House of Atreus, love is subordinated to money and power. The urge to present oneself as economically- and thus politically- powerful arises out of the changing world in which tragedy was born: a society structured around the marginalization of various groups (women, the poor, the non-Greek) in favor of others (wealthy Athenian men).

This thesis is only a small foray into possible research on the topic of economic ideology in Greek tragedy. Further study of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* might benefit an understanding of the intersection of money, gender, and power in the House of Atreus. While this study has focused on the ways in which economics contribute to the downfall of Agamemnon and his family, an examination of the dispensation of justice that puts an end to the family's misfortunes in the final play of the *Oresteia* would be fruitful. Additional research might also include a study of the differing characterizations of Electra by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. For the sake of focusing my argument, the second chapter examined the Euripidean character, though interesting commonalities might be found in the other two plays. Sophocles, for example, gives Electra a sister, Chrysothemis, who lives in the palace with her mother and Aegisthus. Raised in royal luxury, Chrysothemis does not share Electra's passion for revenge. To what extent does

greed factor into Electra's motivations in Sophocles' play? Finally, why are Electra and Orestes ultimately forgiven for their crimes? What is the significance of Orestes' trial being in Athens? Such questions are essential to an understanding of the interactions of tragedy as a genre with the time and place in which it was produced.

The narrative of the House of Atreus explores the dominant ideology of fifth century BC Athens, that is, the division of society into economic classes and domination of women by men. By the end of the each play, the social hierarchy has been torn down and then reaffirmed. *Agamemnon* presents the killing of the king of Mycenae for his wealth. Clytemnestra usurps power, instituting a matriarchal political system. In *Electra*, the prince and princess seek to reinstate a patriarchal structure so as to inherit their father's wealth. At the end of the *Oresteia* trilogy, it may seem that the dominant belief system has triumphed: Orestes is pardoned by the Athenian court of the Areopagus, consisting of a jury of elite males<sup>58</sup> (*A. Eu.* 752-53). The two most well-defined female

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<sup>58</sup> The goddess Athena is the only woman at Orestes' trial, and serves as the judge.

However, her views are those of the ultimate patriarchal figure, Zeus:

μήτηρ γὰρ οὔτις ἐστὶν ἢ μ' ἐγείνατο,  
τὸ δ' ἄρσεν αἰνῶ πάντα, πλὴν γάμου τυχεῖν,  
ἅπαντι θυμῷ, κάρτα δ' εἰμὶ τοῦ πατρός. (736- 738)

For there was no mother who gave me birth,  
and in all things, except for marriage,  
whole-heartedly I am for the male, and entirely on the father's side.

characters, Electra and Clytemnestra, have both been silenced (the princess by her marriage to the nobleman Pylades, Clytemnestra by her death).

Yet, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Electra* call into question such ideology. Both plays raise questions about the concepts of gender difference and economic hierarchy, revealing elements of resistance to Athenian dominant ideology. Helen's elusive nature defies her exchange through marriage. The sacrifice of Iphigenia is a perverse display of economic power. Clytemnestra challenges economic and sexual norms by spending money and engaging in sexual relationships as men do. Conversations between the Farmer and elite characters reveal the asymmetry of a political system that gives power primarily to the wealthy, while Electra's agency and limitless desire run contrary to contemporary gender norms. The tragedies of the House of Atreus, which ultimately present the victory of dominant ideology, serve as criticism for and resistance to the very beliefs they present as triumphant (Foucault 1978, 95).<sup>59</sup> Through the presentation of money as a motivation for murder, these plays challenge a power structure, because they denounce it being held in place primarily by greed. If the patriarchal, elite power structure is founded upon and reaffirmed by blood money, we cannot blindly accept it as just and unchangeable.

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<sup>59</sup> "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power... Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network."

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