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ALLUSIONS IN EURIPIDES' *ELECTRA*

Intertextuality in Euripides has been explored in a number of ways.¹ The modest ambition of this note is to draw attention to two promising instances of this phenomenon in the last scenes of *Electra*, a play that has just benefited of two new, learned and insightful commentaries.² I shall leave aside intertextual games revolving around a single word, although there may be still room for suggestions. For example, Electra wailing on her isolation in the *parodos* (*El.* 181) says δάκρυσι νυχεύω “I spend the night in tears”:³ despite the different context (grief vs. eros), this looks like a deliberate allusion to another virgin *à contre-cœur*, Antigone, and particularly to the hymn to Eros in Sophocles' play (*Ant.* 782–784):

Ἔρως, ὃς ἐν κτήμασι πίπ-
τεις, ὃς ἐν μαλακαῖς παρει-
αῖς νεάνιδος ἐννυχεύεις.

Note in particular the compound ἐννυχεύω (with a sort of military overtone “act as a guard”), and the direct correspondence between Electra's tears and the cheeks of Sophocles' νεᾶνις.

¹ See e.g. Micheline 1987; Torrance 2013.

² Avezzi 2025; Seidensticker 2025.

³ Νυχεύω, proposed by Hermann for the manuscript's χεύω (see the discussion in Distilo 2012, 96–97 and Seidensticker 2025, 144: the conjecture has been criticized, but is still the best available), is a very rare verb, labelled by the most recent commentator (Avezzi 2025, 199) as “lessico assente negli altri tragici”: it also pops up in Eur. *Hyps.* fr. 753 c and in Ps.-Eur. *Rhes.* 520 (see Fries *ad loc.*; at Eur. *Suppl.* 1136 νύχευμα is conjectural, and λόχευμα is more likely).

I

In a stern dialogue with Clytemnestra, Electra reproaches her for eliminating the “best man of Greece”, and compares her with her sister Helen (*El.* 1065–1066):

ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀρπασθεῖσ' ἐκοῦσ' ἀπόλετο
σὺ δ' ἄνδρ' ἄριστον Ἑλλάδος διώλεσας.

The praise of Agamemnon's excellence is later confirmed and expanded by way of a *litotes* (*El.* 1081–1082):

ἄνδρ' εἶχες οὐ κακίον' Αἰγίσθου πόσιν,
ὄν Ἑλλάς αὐτῆς εἴλετο στρατηλάτην.

This theme, in opposition to Aegisthus' baseness, is very popular since at least the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*,⁴ particularly in the frame of the comparison between Clytemnestra and Helen, another well-established *topos* since Homer.⁵ What is peculiar to Euripides' passage, however, is Electra's insistence on both sisters' pernicious beauty (*El.* 1062–1063):

τὸ μὲν γὰρ εἶδος αἴνον ἄξιον φέρειν
Ἑλένης τε καὶ σοῦ, δύο δ' ἔφυτε συγγόνω.

Now, while the *topos* of Helen's beauty is of course ubiquitous throughout Euripides' oeuvre and beyond,⁶ the same move

⁴ See Hes. fr. 176 M.–W. (= 247 M.), 5–7 Κλυταιμῆστρη προλιποῦσ' Ἀγαμέμνονα δῖον / Αἰγίσθω παρέλεκτο καὶ εἴλετο χεῖρον' ἀκοίτην / ὣς δ' Ἑλένη ἤσχυνε λέχος ξανθοῦ Μενελάου, and the discussion in Seidensticker 2025, 389.

⁵ λ 438–439 Ἑλένης μὲν ἀπωλόμεθ' εἵνεκα πολλοί, / σοὶ δὲ Κλυταιμῆστρη δόλον ἦρτε τηλόθ' ἐόντι, which *inter alia* also explains in *El.* 1065–1066 the game on ὄλλυμι and its compounds, unjustly suspected by Pierson (see Distilo 2012, 534).

⁶ See e.g. Eur. *Hec.* 269 ἡ Τυνδαρις γὰρ εἶδος ἐκπρεπεστάτη (with Battezzato's note evoking Γ 156–158 as well as Eur. *Andr.* 629–630, *Hel.* 27 etc.), a particularly important passage because it invokes punishment on Helen (266: κείνη γὰρ ὤλεσέν νιν ἐς Τροίαν τ' ἄγει: the object is Achilles).

from the argument of beauty, coupled with the insistence on the betrayed husband's excellence (the shift of the superlative ἄριστον from Menelaus to Agamemnon), famously occurs in Sappho's fr. 16 Neri, ll. 6–9:

ἀ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
 κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἑλένα [τ]ὸν ἄνδρα
 τὸν []ιστον
 καλλ[ίποι]σ' ἔβα 'ς Τροῖαν πλέοι[σα]

The rationale of this emphasis in the context of Sappho's poem has been hotly debated by scholars: Glenn Most's plausible explanation views excellence in beauty as the feature that lends Helen the necessary authority in judging what is κάλλιστον, and simultaneously obliterates or downplays her traditional negative stigma.⁷

That in *El.* 1065–1066 Euripides had Sappho in mind, as he did in a number of allusions detected by recent scholarship,⁸ can be suggested on the basis of both contextual and textual arguments. First of all, beauty is not only the “general heading” of Electra's speech, but it also becomes her substantial objection to Clytemnestra's behaviour – the latter's obsession with physical appearance right upon Agamemnon's departure (the combing and the mirror in *El.* 1071) becomes proof of her plan to betray her husband from the very start. Beauty is thus transformed in a vehicle of guilt rather than in a token of excellence.

Also Electra's reference to Clytemnestra's daughter can be read against the model of Sappho's evocation of Hermione. In Sappho, Hermione is left behind and “forgotten” by Helen sailing for Troy (fr. 16 Neri, ll. 9–12):

⁷ Most 1981. See also the discussion in Hutchinson 2001, 163, and in Patrick Finglass' forthcoming edition and commentary, which I was able to see by courtesy of the author.

⁸ Cavallini 1986, 38–47. See in particular on fr. 16, Scodel 1997 (echoes in *Phoenissae*, *Hypsipyle* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*) and López Cruces – García González 2012, 197–205 (echoes in *Hypsipyle*). Most conspicuous is the case of *Cycl.* 185–186 Μενέλεων, ἀνθρώπιον / λῶστον, λιποῦσα, about which see di Marco 1980.

καλλ[ίποι]σ' ἔβα ἔς Τροῖαν πλέοι[σα].
 κωὺδ[ὲ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων
 π[ά]μ[παν] ἐμνάσθ<η>, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὐταν
 .] [.....]σαν.⁹

In Euripides, Iphigenia is summoned to Troy by her father and then used *a posteriori* by Clytemnestra as the σκῆψις,¹⁰ the excuse for her adultery and subsequent killing of her husband, which in reality had been planned right after his sailing for Troy (l. 1070 νέον τ' ἀπ' οἴκων ἀνδρὸς ἐξωρημένον).

In textual terms, Euripides' ἄριστον matches the universally accepted ἄριστον (be it μέγ' ἄριστον, πανάριστον, or more likely περ ἄριστον¹¹) in the lacuna of fr. 16, l. 8. More interestingly, Euripides' ἐκοῦσα might lend support to the (also widely accepted) idea that a participle describing Helen's will should be restored in fr. 16, l. 12. Since a grave accent (carried by the scrap *POxy* 2166 (a) 2, joined with the main fragment by Lobel in *POxy* vol. XXI, p. 122) appears on the (lost) first syllable of the line, earlier supplements such as Κύπρις ἔκοισαν (Pesenti) or κωὺκ ἀέκοισαν (οὐκ ἀέκοισαν Page) have become untenable. Martinelli Tempesta's οὐδὲ θέλοισαν¹² or Ferrari's κωὺδάμ' ἔκοισαν,¹³ which give the image of an unwilling Helen abducted by Aphrodite in spite of her fundamental integrity,¹⁴

⁹ Once again the Homeric prototype is at work: δ 263–264 παῖδά τ' ἐμὴν νοσφισσαμένη θάλαμόν τε πόσιν τε / οὔ τευ δευόμενον, οὔτ' ἄρ φρένας οὔτε τι εἶδος (note here εἶδος standing once again for 'beauty', and *schol.* δ 264 a on the disappointment of men postponed to rivals on the ground of physical beauty, as was the case with Paris).

¹⁰ *El.* 1067–1068 σκῆψιν προτείνουσ' ὡς ὑπὲρ τέκνου πόσιν / ἔκτεινας: The word may recall Aesch. *Agam.* 886 τοιάδε μέντοι σκῆψις οὐ δόλον φέρει (Clytemnestra's *excusatio* for Orestes' absence).

¹¹ τὸν περ ἄριστον was proposed by B. Marzullo on the basis of the comparison with T 95–96: see Pfeijffer 2000, 3 and n. 9, and Neri 2021, 579.

¹² Martinelli Tempesta 1999 (but is it likely that the accent should just serve to mark the distinction between θέλω and ἐθέλω, which are normally interchangeable in Aeolic poetry?).

¹³ See the discussion in Neri 2021, 579–580.

¹⁴ Contrast the image of a strongly responsible and willing Helen, the symbol of a personal choice and of self-consciousness, detected in Sappho's fragment by Marzullo 1978–1979 – this might lead to semantically opposite solutions such as e.g. κωὺδ' ἀέκοισαν (but see Neri *ad loc.*).

work very well in this frame, as it is well-known that Euripides consistently presented Helen in a negative light in the story of Paris' rape.¹⁵ At the beginning of a speech whose solemnity and frankness is underlined by the speakers themselves,¹⁶ Electra takes her cue from the association of Clytemnestra with her sister and insists on her determination not to improve at all on Helen in terms of σωφροσύνη (*El.* 1083–1085): much like Hecuba in her famous tirade in the *Trojan Women*,¹⁷ she finds a powerful starting-point in the reversal of Sappho's "iconoclastic" argument about Helen's innocence.

II

1) The links of *Electra* with the *Oresteia* are intrinsic, manifold, and largely apparent.¹⁸ One that to my knowledge has never been noticed (but may perhaps belong to the parallels too obvious to deserve a special mention¹⁹) concerns the last line of the proper action of the play – the last line, that is, before the final anapaests recited by Castor, Orestes, and Electra (*El.* 1291):

εὐδαιμονήσεις τῶνδ' ἀπαλλαχθεὶς πόνων.

The line rounds off Castor's prophecy about Orestes' future salvation from toil and from the Erinyes after the vote in Athens and an appropriate purification. The *iunctura* ἀπαλλ- πόνων (whether verbal

¹⁵ See in particular (with Cavallini 1986, 39–43) Eur. *Iph. Aul.* 781–783; *Hel.* 696–697 (with Marzullo 1978–1979); *Tro.* 373 ἐκούσης κού βία λελησμένης, where Cassandra also points out that Agamemnon ὁ σοφός (probably ironic) τὰ φίλτατ' ὄλεσ' (371) in exchange of the most hateful, i.e. Helen, ἐχθίστων ὕπερ (370).

¹⁶ Electra had preliminarily asked her mother for permission to use παρρησία (ll. 1049, 1056).

¹⁷ See Eur. *Tro.* 969–1032, particularly 988 ὁ σὸς δ' ἰδὼν νιν νοῦς ἐποίηθη Κύπρις with the quasi allegorical idea that "Aphrodite" is in fact just Helen's mind and her folly.

¹⁸ The main fieldwork was carried out by Krauss 1905, 101–113 and Aéliou 1983. On the *Agamemnon* see the discussion in Torrance 2013, 14–33, part. 31–33; there is frequent reference to Aeschylus in Michelini 1987, 181–230.

¹⁹ A category evoked by Ieranò 2006, 79–80 about Κάδμου πολῖται occurring in both Eur. *Phoen.* 1399 and Aesch. *Sept.* 1.

or nominal) is recurrent throughout Greek tragedy,²⁰ but there is little doubt that this particular line evokes directly the *Oresteia*, on the one hand Apollo's identical claim in the *Libation Bearers* (83 ὅστ' ἐς τὸ πᾶν σε τῶνδ' ἀπαλλάξαι πόνων), on the other (and more closely, see the pronoun τῶνδ' and the idea of happiness): θεοὺς μὲν αἰτῶ τῶνδ' ἀπαλλαγὴν πόνων (*Agam.* 1) and νῦν δ' εὐτυχῆς γένοιτ' ἀπαλλαγὴ πόνων (*Agam.* 20), the beginning and the end of the first speech of the first play in Aeschylus' trilogy. If the Athenian public can be credited with some kind of *memoria incipitaria*,²¹ I find it likely that the *dénouement* of Orestes' tragedy as prospected by Castor alludes to the beginning of the poor watchman's *rhexis*. In purely literary terms, Euripides vindicates for *Electra* the role of closing the action inaugurated by the first line of the *Oresteia*, and of thus truly fulfilling the "deliverance from toil" repeatedly invoked by characters in the Aeschylean *coup d'envoi*.

2) Although the end of *Electra* is fraught with allusions to the *Agamemnon*,²² only passing attention has been devoted to the words by which Electra introduces her mother in her house – these are in fact the very last words she speaks to her, for ll. 1142–1146 are pronounced *seule en scène* after she has walked in (*El.* 1139–1141):

χώρει πένητας ἐς δόμους· φρούρει δέ μοι
 μὴ σ' αἰθαλώση πολύκαπνον στέγος πέπλους.
 θύσεις γὰρ οἷα χρῆ σε δαίμοσιν θύη.

The declared reason of Electra's reference to soiling πέπλοι is that Clytemnestra is going to perform rites to the gods (l. 1141), although, by a transparent irony, she is in fact going to end up as "the 'proper' sacrificial victim".²³ There can be no doubt that πολύκαπνον στέγος

²⁰ See Eur. *Med.* 333; *Heracl.* 586, 811; *Andr.* 424.

²¹ See Conte 1985.

²² See e.g. the chorus song in ll. 1147–1164, "unter dessen Klängen Klytemnestra ihrem Geschick entgegengeht, in grossen Zügen den Inhalt des Agamemnon" (so Steiger quoted by Krauss 1905, 107, who also compares ll. 1142–1146 with Aesch. *Cho.* 904–908).

²³ Cropp 2013 *ad loc.*; Torrance 2013, 32–33, rightly arguing against the idea (Hammond 1984, 381–386) that these allusions should have anything ludicrous or farcical; on l. 1141 "chargé d'un sens sinistre", see Aéliou 1983, II. 68.

evokes the chorus' prophecy in the *Agamemnon* "Justice shines in smoke-soiled dwellings";²⁴ and this is all the more relevant in a play marked by its (highly unusual) setting, namely the poor and filthy house of Electra's husband, the Peasant who plays a decisive role in the first part of the play. The inadequacy of this house is often evoked in the play,²⁵ also in opposition to the grandeur of Clytemnestra's palace and in affinity with the experience of Orestes' exile.²⁶

The first *comparandum* for this scene is the carpet scene in the *Agamemnon*,²⁷ for textual and contextual reasons:

– *El.* 1139 πένητας ἐς δόμους is a hint to Clytemnestra's denial in *Agam.* 962 πένεσθαι δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται δόμος; and the purple tapestry laid down before the king's feet upon his arrival in the *Agamemnon* stands as a clear and memorable symbol of the wealth of the house;²⁸

– Clytemnestra entering Electra's house in her most beautiful and shining garments (*El.* 966 στολῆ λαμπρύνεται)²⁹ is about to be killed just as is Agamemnon upon entering the palace in *Agam.* 957.

Still, it has gone unnoticed that Electra's words introducing her mother into her house (*El.* 1139–1040) also imply an allusion to the topical moment of Agamemnon's arrival at Argos. Electra's recommendation to her mother about the danger of soiling her clothes by stepping into the house (μή σ' αἰθαλώση...), while perhaps alluding

²⁴ *Agam.* 774–775 Δίκη δὲ λάμπει μὲν ἐν / δυσκάπνοις δώμασιν: see O'Brien 1964, 35 n. 38; Torrance 2013, 33; Medda 2007, 62–63; Avezzi 2025, 404.

²⁵ Since Electra's first exchange with the Chorus, and then in her *rhesis* to the disguised Orestes in 300–322: see Medda 2007, 55–61.

²⁶ The peculiar setting also entails some "comic" moments, such as the scene (*El.* 404–419) where Electra reproaches her husband for inviting people without making sure in advance of how much food is in store – a very important moment in the definition of those who "belong" to the house and of those who do not: see Medda 2007, 60–62.

²⁷ See Zeitlin 1970, 657: "It is a brilliant entrance, reminiscent of Agamemnon's fateful entrance in Aeschylus", taken up by Michelini 1987, 222: "This moment's obvious analogy is the 'carpet scene'": but no details are given (see also Torrance 2013, 33 and Seidensticker 2025, 403).

²⁸ Cropp 2013 *ad loc.* refers to Clytemnestra's hybristic words in *Agam.* 958–962.

²⁹ On the antithetical modesty of Electra's self-woven clothes (*El.* 307, but also Clytemnestra's own words evoking Electra as ἄλουτος καὶ δυσείματος during her alleged childbirth in l. 1107) see Torrance 2013, 17–18 and Raeburn 2000, 153.

to Clytemnestra's recommendation to Agamemnon about the opportunity to step on the carpet rather than on bare earth (*Agam.* 906–907 μὴ χαμαὶ τιθεῖς / τὸν σὸν πόδ'),³⁰ matches closely Agamemnon's reluctance to walk on the carpet, a reluctance that rests on a number of reasons. He argues namely that such a honour is womanly (*Agam.* 918 γυναικὸς ἐν τρόποις), that it is a “barbarian” custom (919 βαρβάρου φωτὸς δίκη), that it might elicit the envy of the gods (918–924, part. 921–922 ἐπίφθονον πόρον), and also – this he adds after a tense stichomythy with her wife, thus qualifying his final decision to acquiesce to Clytemnestra's invitation and to step on the tapestry barefoot (l. 957 πορφύρας πατῶν will be his last words) – that he finds it a shame (πολλὴ αἰδῶς) to soil the purple carpet, and thus to ruin the house's goods (δωματοφθορεῖν), particularly those expensive tapestries (*Agam.* 948–949):

πολλὴ γὰρ αἰδῶς δωματοφθορεῖν ποσὶν
φθειρόντα πλοῦτον ἀργυρωνήτους θ' ὑφάας.³¹

It looks as if Euripides' *Electra* were obliquely and ironically re-enacting her father's attention to the cleanness and tidiness of the house's goods, be they garments or tapestries: by a curious game of mirrors, the sources of dirt are no longer Agamemnon's sandals soiling and contaminating Clytemnestra's tapestry, but rather *Electra*'s house soiling and contaminating Clytemnestra's robe.

In Aeschylus the purple tapestry stands for a path that will lead Agamemnon, under Clytemnestra's control, towards the δίκη of vengeance in her house (*Agam.* 910–911 εὐθὺς γενέσθω πορφυρόστρωτος πόρος / ἐς δῶμ' ἄελπτον ὡς ἂν ἡγήται Δίκη), leaving the soil of Argos untouched and simultaneously arousing the gods'

³⁰ Both Clytemnestra and *Electra* conclude by invoking, in a gruesomely deceitful irony, the gods' will – one that both addressees (in the former case Agamemnon, in the latter Clytemnestra) completely misunderstand: *El.* 1141 θύσεις γὰρ οἶα χρὴ σε δαίμοσιν θῆ – *Agam.* 912–913 τὰ δ' ἄλλα φροντὶς οὐχ ὑπνω νικωμένη / θήσει δικαίως σὺν θεοῖς εἰμαρμένα.

³¹ In l. 948 all editors accept Schütz's conjecture δωματοφθορεῖν for σωματοφθορεῖν, and are happy with the repetition of φθειρόντα in l. 949 (Hermann's conjecture φύροντα is a secondary option, that has ended up in Medda's text by mistake – communication of the author).

and the citizens' φθόνος.³² Similarly, in Euripides it is Clytemnestra's turn to risk contamination and to follow with dirty garments the path leading inside her daughter's house, and to her own δίκη of vengeance. In both scenes, the women are strong enough to state almost explicitly (and with a cruel hypocrisy) the terms of this fraud, and thus to manipulate verbal communication so as to deceive their respective antagonists.³³ The interplay with the Aeschylean prototype, not least due to the transformation of the deceiving character into the victim, is thus crucial in order to appreciate Euripides' literary fabric.

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³² Medda 2024, I. 114–117.

³³ Aélion 1983, II. 68, rightly insists on the substantial equivalence between mother and daughter in hypocrisy and in the ability to devise a terrible deception for their victim.

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The paper discusses a couple of passages in Euripides' *Electra* that might show signs of intertextual allusion to Sappho, Sophocles, and above all to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

В статье рассматриваются несколько мест из "Электры" Эврипида, в которых можно заметить следы интертекстуальных аллюзий на Сапфо, Софокла и главным образом на "Агамемнона" Эсхила.

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