# I. MOBILITY

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# ELECTRA LOST IN TRANSIT

*Demetra Kasimis*

Like all the tragedies about the House of Atreus, Euripides' *Electra* dramatizes the political stakes of familial disorder. In the background lies the legendary story of Agamemnon who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia and, after returning from Troy, was killed by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. *Electra* takes place sometime after that murder and political usurpation, with the couple scrambling to secure their rule against the potential threat of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's children. When the play opens, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have already exiled Orestes from Argos and relocated Electra to its border where she lives in a forced countryside marriage to a poor farmer. Over the course of the play, the siblings reunite and plot the murders of their mother and her new husband. By its end, Orestes and Electra are prepared to say goodbye to each other for good and, under the stain of matricide, to embark on their respective forms of movement, wandering for him and a new marriage for her.

Euripides organizes this familiar matricidal material so that questions of displacement and resettlement take center stage. Yet it is to Electra, of course, that the tragedy fastens our attention. Her dislocation from and relocation to a home constitute the fulcrum of the play, which emphasizes the ways she is differently displaced from her brother.[1] As critics have routinely observed, *Electra* homes in on the ways that women's subjugation in the polis requires and is sustained by dislocating them dissimilarly from men. Electra dwells in a cottage, immobilized by an unchosen married life she equates to death and homelessness, and, most strikingly, the state of being a *phygas* (209), a term historically associated with the cross-border movement, fugitivity, and exile of men like her brother.[2] Throughout, *Electra* illustrates the profound dissimilarities between the siblings' predicaments while nevertheless using the same political language to figure them. As a result, *Electra* 'becomes', as Kirk Ormand puts it, 'a meditation on what it means to exile a woman'.[3]

It is perhaps unsurprising that Electra's figuration in the same political terms as her roaming, city-less brother has compelled readers to emphasize her *difference*

1. Before the classical period, banishment primarily 'represented a means of securing political control and survival through the removal of important political rivals' (Tzanetou [1997], 13). That both siblings are expelled from their home is a testament to how they both, if differently, pose a risk to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus' succession.

2. References to the Greek are from Roisman and Luschnig (2011). *Electra* criticism typically translates *phygas* as 'exile', though I generally refrain from using this or any translation of the term so as to capture the play of meanings alive in the Greek and which Electra's speech is bringing to mind. For a reading of Euripides' *Medea* as a meditation on becoming a *phygas*, see Kasimis (2020).

3. Ormand (2009), 250.



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from him in *phygē* ('banishment', 'exile', 'flight').[4] Poetic references to the *phygas* are generally taken to connote a historical category associated with men, whose movement was unrestricted and polis membership full, direct, and therefore losable. For although Attic tragedy frequently identifies women characters as individual, wandering *phygades*, women in ancient Greece 'were not banished in real life', as Angeliki Tzanetou notes.[5] Understood within this standard frame, Electra's self-figuration as a *phygas* does not seek to establish a literal equivalency with her brother, a wanderer who lacks a home and moves between *poleis*, but to politicize a persistently concealed dynamic of dislocation and loss of civic standing to which women were uniquely vulnerable as women living under patriarchy.

That *Electra* 'genders' *phygē* is clear.[6] The question I want to revisit here is to what critical effects it does this. Electra's predicament certainly deviates from the standard masculine activities associated with the *phygas*. But when Electra—estranged from her natal *oikos* and living with a poor farmer—claims a state of being a refugee for herself, is she simply carving out a separate notion of *phygē* for women?

This essay argues that *Electra* is not merely pluralizing an inherited concept when it 'genders' the *phygas* but reconstituting the very terms of the concept. Departing from other interpreters, I suggest that Electra *chooses* to see her otherwise publicly recognized marriage as invalid in order to declare herself bereft of a kinship network and therefore lost in transit.[7] This would mean that *Electra* innovates on a pattern identified in several other tragedies, like *Medea*: the denial or suspension of marriage makes a woman a wanderer.[8] Electra is married, on my view, but she denies that her marriage counts and adopts a term (*phygas*) associated with wandering to describe a condition of immobility and cohabitation in her native polis. Once foregrounded, Euripides' innovation to a tragic convention—the denial of marriage makes a woman a *phygas*—opens up the play in new ways.

As I elaborate below, Electra's self-evaluation as a *phygas* is one of several moves by which she casts her exchange in marriage, the only viable movement

4. Cf. Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (1038), where Orestes is described as an exile, as is Electra (254), but she is not removed from the palace. Sophocles' *Electra* uses similar terms to describe Orestes (601; 776–8), but Aegisthus only threatens Electra with exile and imprisonment (378–82). This term will not be translated again so as to keep its multiple meanings in Greek in play.

5. Tzanetou (1997), 22. The appendix offers a comprehensive list of wandering women in tragedy. They include Io in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*; the Erinyes in his *Eumenides*; the Danaids (as a group) in his *Suppliants*; Iphigenia in Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*; Helen in Euipides' *Helen*; and, I would add, Euripides' *Medea* (Kasimis [2020]). As I argue here, however, Electra, in contrast to Orestes, does not wander but nevertheless sees herself as a *phygas.*

6. Ormand (2009), 231, writes that Euripides 'builds' 'a gendered structure of exile' throughout the play.

7. Wohl (1998), xiv, argues that tragedy frequently dramatizes 'failed transfers'. She further notes, xv, that women's resistance to their roles as objects is a common feature in tragedy and especially in Euripides. On failures in transfer in Euripides, see also Seaford (1990).

8. Tzanetou (1997), 23.



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for women, as a politically consequential form of transit that is tantamount to a forced migration. The end of the play underscores this idea when Electra contends, against her uncle, that her new and politically restorative marriage would be on par with her brother's enforced wandering (1314f.): although it would finally give her an *oikos*, the marriage would take her across the Argos border and rob her of her polis, a deprivation, she is reminded by her uncle, that only men can really claim. Important to stress here, however, is that *Electra* simultaneously presents Orestes' loss of kin and home as preeminent and problematic features of his *phygē*. Euripides' tragedy does not simply refigure the conventional meanings of women's movement. It also refigures the conventional meanings of men's. What does this do?

The gendered mirroring of the siblings in terms of each other does not merely establish two competing notions of *phygē*. Like the text as a whole, it enacts the *relationality* of gender. This theoretical point, and its implications for how to think about displacement in the play and in classical Greek thought more generally, are foreclosed by readings that equate the play's 'gendering' to a focus on women. These accounts assume 'gender' operates as a synonym for 'women' rather than as an analytic category that would be working to criticize and transform the meaning of *phygē*, *tout court*. That Electra lies at the center of this story is undeniable. But the function of figuring her as a *phygas*—or, more accurately, of marking her gender in *phygē*—is not simply to provide a different notion of *phygē* for women. It is to call into question this way of ordering displacement and membership all together. Euripides' deft comparison of the siblings illustrates the limitations of a gendered mapping of *phygē* onto masculine and feminine poles of polis and *oikos*. Failing to attend to this possibility risks reconnecting the concept to its constitutively masculinist associations with external displacement and autonomous physical movement, associations that gender Orestes 'male' but do not even capture what he and others take his *phygē* to entail.[9] Within the world of *Electra*, I argue, it becomes impossible to think of displacement in exclusively territorial or exclusively kinship terms because the gendered siblings who represent these different languages and orders of inclusion are figured entirely in terms of each other.

## Displaced Siblings

Euripides' retelling of Electra's story shares basic features with those of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The farmer, a new character in the myth, explains that Clytemnestra, Electra's mother, has taken over the palace where she now resides with her new husband, Aegisthus, who helped kill her husband,

9. As Marcus Folch's essay on women's incarceration argues in this volume, the interpretive tendency to understand the figure of the prisoner along masculine terms has delimited our understanding of incarceration and its signification in Greek texts.



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Agamemnon, Electra's father, and exile Orestes, Electra's brother. In Euripides' version, however, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have also displaced Electra from her familial 'house' (*domois*, 19) and moved her to the cottage of the farmer, whom they 'appointed' as her husband.[10] The arrangement is meant to protect their rule over the city by preventing Electra from marrying a noble man and bearing a potentially avenging son. Although meant as an alternative to killing her, the solution puts Electra in a marriage she nevertheless likens to 'death' (*thanasimon gamon*, 247).[11]

The tragedy goes on to depict the sibling conspirators, who re-meet in an early recognition scene on the borders of the city, killing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra separately. Orestes, who cannot enter the city center, finds Aegisthus in the countryside. Electra must make more of an effort. She lures her mother to the house on the outskirts of Argos by relaying the false message that she has given birth. Clytemnestra arrives at the farmer's cottage expecting to meet her new grandchild only to find her own son instead. Egged on by his sister, Orestes thrusts a knife into his mother's throat. The siblings quickly regret their matricide, and the play ends with their forced but separate migrations from Argos. Orestes will leave again as a *phygas*, though this time with the stain of a matricide (975), and Electra as the object in a new bridal exchange.

As it depicts these events, *Electra* makes striking recourse to a vocabulary of dislocation and exile to figure the lives of the sibling outcasts. The farmer's opening introduces the different effects that banishment has had on them by focusing on physical movement. He describes Orestes as a homeless *phygas* (31) who moves from city to city and Electra as a paradoxical 'virgin-wife' (*parthenos*, 44; *damarta*, 35). References to Orestes' moving around reverberate through the tragedy. Characters use various cognates of *aliteuein* (131; 139; 202; 175) to describe him as a roamer, suggesting he exists in a perpetual state of mobility and homelessness. Electra, too, emphasizes this aspect of Orestes' predicament as when, ignorant of his identity, she asks him to tell her the whereabouts of the *phygas* who lacks a polis (233).

Yet elsewhere *Electra* establishes proximity between the siblings' predicaments. Most important is Electra's deployment of the *topos* of the *phygas*, which aligns her situation with Orestes' in spite of the apparent differences in their (spatialized) place. She says her brother, the *phygas,* 'dwells' 'in another land, a wretched wanderer' while she resides in a 'toiler's cottage', also a *phygas* from her 'father's house' (*patriōn domatōn*, 209). The chorus of women makes this link even clearer by bringing Orestes' exile in line with his sister's. They describe Orestes as a long-wandering exile not (or not primarily) from the polis but, like Electra, from their 'father's home' (*patriōn domatōn*,

10. Verheij (2016), 766.
11. Unless otherwise noted, translations are by Kovacs (1998).



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587f.). The sense in which the siblings' predicaments blur will re-emerge as a question at the end of the play.

At first glance, then, *Electra* maps the siblings' displacements along conventionally gendered terms of physical mobility, formal political membership, and territorial boundaries. Men move outdoors, belong to a polis (which they can lose), and fall victim to 'external' displacement. Women, by contrast, are moved for marriage toward a destination (a home) where they are supposed to stay. They belong first and fully to an *oikos*, in other words, the conduit to a polis in which they are always already semi-outsiders. If women are trafficked from one home to another, theirs is a mobility that is never supposed to end in homelessness, which is to say, in the loss of a *domus* and an *oikos*.[12] The question, then, is how Electra, married and at home, comes to see herself as a *phygas* nevertheless.

## Electra Lost in Transit

Euripides removes Electra from her familial home through a conspicuously aberrational marriage. Electra equates this exchange with an act of political displacement she describes as *phygē*, a term with connotations of fugitivity and movement not simply exile. This section takes another look at the meaning of Electra's problematic marriage in an effort to foreground the role she plays in claiming it as a failure and the political implications of this act. The peculiarities Euripides gives the marriage arrangement free him to provoke a slew of new political questions about the meaning of the *phygas*.

Let me note first that Electra's marriage to the farmer achieves the immediate outcome desired by its broker, Aegisthus. He and Clytemnestra do not die at the hands of an avenging grandchild but not because Electra's marriage blocks a 'noble' (*gennaios*, 370) birth, as he intended.[13] The couple overlooks the possibility that the exiled Orestes could return to Argos because they share a version of Electra's sentiment that a *phygas* is a 'powerless' person (*asthenēs*, 233; 352) and underestimate both displaced siblings.[14] Electra's marriage indirectly facilitates the murder, then, because it relocates her to a borderland where she can re-meet and conspire with her fugitive brother.

12. However, aspects of Electra's characterization and 'distorting', because 'recriminating', self-presentation also defy this conventional picture. She often goes outside not simply to perform labor that is beneath her (and that her husband offers to do) but to make her misery public. On this characterization of Electra as a 'liar' and a discussion of the 'unreliability of her distorting spectacles', see Arnott (1981), 185.

13. Genealogy is indeterminate of nobility, according to Orestes, who says there is 'no reliable way to predict it' (369).

14. Orestes asks Aegisthus (834) if, as the commander of the city, he really fears the 'trickery' (*dolos*) of an 'exile' (*phygados*), suggesting, as the tragedy goes on to show, that deceit is the *phygas*' political tool (regardless of one's gender).



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This means that the bridal exchange Euripides makes central to his version of the story fails in two ways. It fails to resolve the problem of violent revenge for which it is arranged. But more importantly, for my purposes, it fails to put Electra in a clear kinship position. This second notion of failure, on which I focus below, is not merely privative, for Electra claims that her movement between homes has made her a *phygas* like her brother.

The clearest reason that Electra's marriage to the farmer does not count in her eyes is that her betrothal defied the rituals of marriage, which require that one's closest male relative (Orestes in this case) act as a 'guardian' (*kyrios*) and exchange her with another man.[15] The transfer bestows relations of kin between two families and establishes a new *oikos*. This patriarchal arrangement constitutes not just a house but also a family, one function of which is to produce legitimate offspring. When uncontested, the traffic in women enables the conferral of political kinship locations to individuals: men are legible to a polis most immediately as husbands, fathers, and brothers and women as wives, mothers, and sisters. Polis membership thus depends on membership in an *oikos.* This hierarchical relation does not so much reflect that the *oikos* is a pre-political sphere that provides the conditions for political life outside and beyond it so much as insist that this is the case. This idea of the *oikos*, which is to say, its inevitably subordinate position in a hierarchical relationship with the polis, comes under increasing scrutiny in the play.

In the fifth-century BCE Athenian context of the play's performance, the fact that Aegisthus was not Electra's guardian could have been grounds to dispute the marriage. Electra speculates that this is the reason the farmer will not consummate their relationship.[16] He thinks the man who gave her to him lacked the 'authority' (*kyrios*, 259) to do so. This understanding of their chaste marriage makes Electra's oft-noted virginity less the constitutive feature of the marriage's failure than its sign, the mark of a prior aberration, a transgression of ritual, an attempt at bridal exchange outside of proper kinship.[17] (Her virginity is one reason she is available for another, more proper marriage later on.) For Froma Zeitlin, 'Euripides' ironical innovation in creating a married Electra, while, at the same time, preserving her traditional status of virgin makes her a still greater social misfit' than her violent family history already has.[18] Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz finds that the marriage innovation that keeps Electra a

15. On the promise of the bride to the groom as an exchange between men that authorizes the marriage, see Rabinowitz (1993), 4. See also Vernant (2006).

16. Other characters, including the farmer, offer different reasons that do not directly raise the issue of guardianship but are related to it. The farmer, for example, shares Electra's impression that the marriage is degrading for her but says it is his sense of honor that restrains him from committing hubris and consummating his marriage to Agamemnon's daughter (45). Orestes (260), on the other hand, assumes that the farmer fears *him* too much to exercise his 'marital rights', to use Lloyd's expression ([1986], 13).

17. Electra keeps the fact of her chastity a secret from Aegisthus, and this move enables her to lure Clytemnestra to the countryside on the pretense that she has given birth.

18. Zeitlin (1970), 650.



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virgin works to confer on her a 'contradictory' 'status, married but a maiden still'.[19] Richard Seaford explores the structural effects of such a 'failure of transferal'. Not only does it produce a contradiction for 'the woman' that keeps her 'implicated in two different lineages'. It generates 'a contradiction which may endanger the continuity of one or the other of them' and, we might add, interrupts the formation of families and production of political kinship.[20]

Another interpretation of the meaning and effects of Euripides' marriage innovation is possible, however. Consider, for instance, the detail rarely mentioned in criticism on the play that although Electra's relationship is unconsummated and improperly authorized, it unfolds under one roof, a 'shared house', which 'socially, if not legally, defined marriage' in the fifth century.[21] Kirk Ormand has written in a different context that 'the state of matrimony was not legally defined' in fifth-century Athens, which 'makes it quite difficult to determine exactly what constituted legitimate marriage beyond the fact of *synoikein*', cohabitation.[22] A court dispute, for example, might take cohabitation as synonymous with marriage, although even this was not unequivocal in its meaning (Dem. 59.13f.).[23] This means that Electra's maiden-wife status, a contradiction in political kinship, does not simply disclose an already improperly married state. It signifies an interpretive complexity inherent in the discursive and cultural acts that constitute marriage and which Electra exploits to serve a defiant reinterpretation of her situation.

The active role Electra plays in declaring herself unmarried in marriage and equating this state with a political condition of exile may be easiest to appreciate when she 'refuses' (*anainomai*, 311) to accept the chorus' invitation to celebrate the *partheneia* for Hera with the other 'wives of Argos' (*nymphais*, 179). The most powerful of criticism on Electra's use of political language has found great meaning in this decision. Electra does not tell the chorus the real reason for opting out, but she even declines their subsequent offer to give her the proper clothes she says she needs to take part. From this, Zeitlin concludes that Electra's 'self-imposed' exclusion publicizes a feeling of 'inner isolation' that cannot be disentangled from her 'isolation from the civic life of the polis'.[24] For Ormand, her confrontation with the chorus supports the more general view that to 'exile a woman from the city, one does so by exiling her from proper marital relations, and thus from civic involvement in official cult'. To the

19. Rabinowitz (2015), 221.

20. Seaford (1990), 152, identifies this failure of transferal as a recurrent problem in Euripides' tragedies.

21. Ormand (1999), 10. Here I take the approach of Easterling (1985), who argues that tragic depictions of heroic worlds anachronistically and inconsistently deploy the language of Athenian democratic institutions.

22. Ormand (1999), 165 n.1.

23. In *Against Neaera*, the accusation that a man is acting as if he is married to a foreign woman is based in part on the claim that they 'live together' (*synoikein*) in the same house.

24. Zeitlin (1970), 648.



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extent that the tragedy constitutes 'a meditation on what it means to exile a woman', Ormand adds, it presents us with a 'person who even when occupying the seat of "citizen" has none of the participatory rights of citizen men'.[25] For, 'even in exile…the relation to the city that Electra has been denied is not a direct, political relation'.[26] This denial makes Electra 'virtually an exile' and, in Zeitlin's gloss, '*agamos, ateknos, apolis, aphilos*'.[27]

The aforementioned readings converge in concluding that Electra is a *phygas* because she has been forced to give up even those membership activities that constitute women's already attenuated relationship to the polis. Though Ormand and Zeitlin acknowledge that the exile is 'self-imposed', they do not find in Electra's *phygas* language an example of a political claim or an attempt at meaning-making so much as an outward recognition of an unequivocal condition that has been foisted upon her. They stress her status as an object in a problematic bridal exchange that has failed to bestow a clear kinship location and blocked her from actualizing the de-privileged civic standing afforded women inside proper kinship.[28] On this view, the effect of Electra's self-presentation as a *phygas* is merely to confirm the gendered division of membership. To qualify Electra as a 'virtual' exile, as Zeitlin does, is to remark a woman's difference from a man even in *phygē*. Just as women are almost-but-not-quite citizens, they are almost-but-not-quite *phygades* or become *phygades* because of their particular form of de-privileged membership.

The difficulty with this approach, however, is that it underappreciates the ambiguity inherent in marriage acts *tout court* and distracts us from appreciating that Electra contests one meaning of her bridal exchange to declare another. In other words, Electra resists the possibility that she is married. Allusions to similarly defiant acts of interpretation and opting out by women can be found in Herodotus' account of the Athenian settlers of Miletus, who abducted Carian women and slaughtered their male relatives before living with them. Without guardians, the women could not properly marry their abductors. Though they did in some senses act married, they nevertheless protested their forced marriages by refusing to take part in some but not all practices of cohabitation, such as eating with the men and mentioning them by name (Hdt. 1.146.2f.).

All this suggests that Electra is a *phygas* not because she is banned from acting as a wife (she is not) but because she decides to occupy two kinship locations and acts *as if* she lacks (a clear) one. Critics who note the problematic nature of Electra's marriage see this, of course. Yet in an effort to understand what makes her claim political, they tend to focus on her political inactivity and cast that inactivity as an inevitable state generated by a political order that has failed to acknowledge her situation as a form of political exclusion. The alternative interpretation

25. Ormand (2009), 250.
26. Ormand (2009), 257.
27. Zeitlin (1970), 650.
28. On this dynamic in Euripides' plays more generally, see Seaford (1990) and Wohl (1998).



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advanced here locates the political force of Electra's *phygas* claim in her insistence that she can refuse to accept the valuation of herself as married.[29] This different view suggests that the central political and theoretical issue in this play is not that Electra's loss of a clear kinship location has made her ineligible for membership—as the chorus' invitation makes clear, Electra has access. It is that Electra's kinship location emerges as an inherently unstable concept.

To see the stakes of reading the play this way, consider briefly the remarks Orestes makes about his sister's marriage. He accuses the farmer of aiding Electra in the pretense of a marriage, a criticism we might translate more literally as 'conspiring to rob marriage of its purpose' (*synekkleptei gamous | tous sous*, 364f.). The purpose of marriage is a recurrent theme in *Electra* which characters typically take up through a discussion of their families' own improper marriages. Thus, we understand that Electra's exchange between the farmer and Aegisthus was meant to secure the political stability of another irregular household, Aegisthus' marriage to Clytemnestra. That relationship, of course, was established by the dislocation (the murder) of Agamemnon. Yet Agamemnon's physical displacement was partly a response to Clytemnestra's symbolic displacement. When he returned from Troy, as Clytemnestra tells her daughter, Agamemnon kept 'two women (*nympha*) in the same house' (1033f.). The introduction of Cassandra into the house called into question Clytemnestra's status as a wife in the household. Not unlike Electra's situation, then, it was cohabitation that made or unmade political kinship ties. Cassandra's presence blurred the line between wife and concubine and put into crisis not only Clytemnestra's status but all the kinship assignments in the *oikos*. We might say it undid the work of Clytemnestra's initial exchange in marriage.[30]

Yet when we look more closely at Clytemnestra's account, the problem is not just that practices of traffic, cohabitation, and procreation can make or unmake political kin. It is that these practices are used to ground a system of gender that is inherently insecure. 'When a husband errs by rejecting the woman in his house', Clytemnestra continues, 'the wife desires to imitate her husband and acquire a new lover' (1036–8).[31] The problem here is that sexual relations which approximate 'real' marriages make shams of them and, in confounding the difference, undo the transformation of biological males and females into 'men' and 'women'. When wives become concubines and concubines wives, women become men and men women. The 'wrong' kinds of unions, in other words, unsettle and expose the fragility of the gender hierarchy that subordinates women.

29. Though she does not analyze *Electra*, Wohl (1998) explores the politically unsettling implications of similar acts of defiance. In tragedy, she argues (1998), xxxv, when heroines 'refuse their role as objectified other and claim the position of self', they 'interrupt the social mechanisms of the exchange' of marriage and 'jeopardize the male subjects who are predicated upon their supposed lack'.

30. Clytemnestra traces this disorder and its effects back to her sister Helen, whose sexual transgression with Paris turned her from a wife into a 'whore' (*margos*, 1027).

31. Electra's manliness suggests that the breakdown of her paternal *oikos* put her kinship assignment and, hence, her gender role in crisis, too.



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That Electra's speech sheds light on the dynamics and institutional mechanisms like marriage that maintain, and are maintained by, women's subordination in the polis is incontrovertible. But we can go further to suggest that she arrogates to herself the power to evaluate what her marriage means. Yet a question remains. When Electra calls herself a *phygas*, is she simply using a masculine category to name an inevitable loss of de-privileged membership or reimagining its terms? What would it look like to take Electra's words at face value and, rather than see her as a 'virtual' exile, see her establishing an equivalence with her brother after all?

## The Problem of the *apolis* Woman

Euripides' *Electra* begins with an account of a woman's marriage to one man and ends with her impending marriage to another. Following the murder of Clytemnestra, one of her twin brothers, Castor, tells his nephew Orestes that he must leave Argos but not before giving his maiden-wife sister to Pylades, who will take her as his 'wife' (*alochon*) to his 'home' (*domous*) (1249, cf. 1284).[32] Pylades' exchange with Orestes, who is Electra's guardian, would restore the non-binary Electra to an *oikos* and presumably bring an end to the kinship trouble that has made her a *phygas* in her eyes.

But as we saw in the last section, the bridal exchange also makes men out of biological males and political kin out of men. This means that the marriage that is supposed to restore Electra to a clear kinship location should also 're-man' Orestes, whose masculinity was called into question not only by his sister—she criticized him for hesitating to murder their mother (*anandrian*, 'unmanly', 982)—but also implicitly by Aegisthus, whose usurpation of the guardian role effectively dislocated Orestes from his role in the gender-structured family. Orestes' brief return to the outskirts of Argos, then, is more than a physical repatriation: he recovers his place as Electra's closest relative and guardian, which means his sojourn temporarily resolves the symbolically political dimension of exile that is typically, though not exclusively, associated with Electra. When it comes to Electra's *phygē*, it is similarly supposed to be marriage or more specifically the identity of the men undertaking her bridal exchange (Orestes not Aegisthus) that makes the crucial difference for her lived experience. Things turn out not to be so straightforward.

I have been proposing throughout the essay that we consider Electra's *phygas* claim as an effort to concretize an equivalence with her brother that is not simply reflective of a patriarchal status quo but is also conceptually transformative. The ending of the tragedy affords a specific opportunity to focus on this possibility

32. Castor's language draws specific attention to Electra's contradictory status by using both terms simultaneously (*korēn*, 'maiden', and *damarta*, 'wife', 1284).



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because the question of what, beyond the initial fact of their banishment, might be common to both figures surfaces explicitly in the closing moments of the play.

Castor's exchange draws a through line from the siblings' common origins (the wrongdoing of their ancestors) to their 'common acts' and, finally, to their 'common fates' (1305). His remarks ultimately culminate in a disagreement, however, over what exactly is shared about their fates, which the siblings will live out separately and differently. Orestes claims some parity between them when he laments that he is leaving his sister and she him. Castor immediately rebukes him for extending to Electra the sort of concern reserved for a man. Electra has a husband and a home, Castor counters, which means that she will not have suffered anything worth pitying apart from having to leave her polis behind (1311–13). As Ormand reads this scene, 'Castor's response to Orestes' emotional farewell can only be felt as shocking' because 'he has redefined Electra's existence as if family and home were her *only* set of relations, as if her existence as an Argive woman were of no consequence.'[33] Yet Castor's statements merely rehearse the polis view that women have an attenuated rather than a non-existent relationship to a polis. He doubles down on the gendered division of political membership, which requires that movement in and out of a polis mean something different for women than it does for men. Electra responds by drawing attention to this double standard. She offers a rhetorical (gnomic) statement about whether there is (for anyone) a greater misery than to leave one's *patria gē* (1314f.).

Much is at stake in this brief back-and-forth. Castor expresses a gendered distinction between 'home' (*domos*) and 'city' (*polis*). Insisting that 'a husband and a home', a conjugal *oikos*, is the only arrangement that really matters for a woman is not only to discount a woman's tie to her polis but more fundamentally to depoliticize the bridal exchange. As we have seen, the institution and cultural practices of marriage do not resolve the political problem of women's precariousness or vulnerability to homelessness. They instead conceal the problem in a discourse like Castor's, which relegates the marital exchange that readies kin for entry into the polis to a 'pre-political' space. The disagreement between Castor and Electra would seem to turn, then, on a question about whether women who move between *poleis* count as (forced) migrants, like Orestes, or are, no matter what, always 'merely' women, which is to say, objects moved by men between domestic spaces on behalf of the family. At stake in the presumption that a marriage which takes a woman across polis lines is only incidentally a migration is the very stability of the *oikos*/polis opposition that Orestes momentarily unsettled when he lamented his sister's exile in equal terms to his own.

To see this more clearly, it may help to review the sense in which Electra understands herself as a *phygas* for the duration of the play. I argued in the last section that her *phygas* claim depends on her evaluating her removal from

33. Ormand (2009), 267.



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her familial home as a failed traffic in women, rather than on her acknowledging a predetermined or inevitable failure that is entirely externally imposed by the men (or palace) that arrange her removal. She demonstrates that the marriage is a failure by acting as a contradictory maiden-wife. This disturbance to her kinship assignment, in which she has a hand, further unsettles the meaning of (her) gender throughout the play: Electra appears manly, Orestes womanly, and both are implicated in each other's political idioms.[34] In the character of Castor, then, the play's closing scenes return us to the scandal of this blurring. For, when faced with the prospect of gaining a stable status through her authorized betrothal to Pylades, Electra does not protest the marriage *per se*. She objects to its valuation as a politically restorative act for her. Thus, the issue is not simply that Electra understands herself to be migrating (rather than just married) but the *sense* in which she thinks her marriage makes her an exile again.

On the eve of her new and authorized marriage, Electra reprises her *phygas* claim by reaching for the language of *patria gē* (1315), a term that typically denotes a state of *phygē*. 'What exiles are often deprived of and debarred from is *patris*', explains Thomas Heine Nielsen, who adds that the word connotes both 'kin' and 'polis'.[35] What is more, *patris* may refer to both a territorial space and a political community (which is delimited territorially).[36] Electra's use of *patria gē*, then, is noteworthy because it resists the injunction to choose between home and city. In this way, her speech to Castor is apiece with her earlier efforts to bring her condition in line with Orestes' (just as Orestes himself attempts with Castor above). As we saw, Orestes' exile is frequently figured as the spatialized act of a roaming *apolis* man spurred by dislocation from a paternal *oikos*. When throughout the tragedy Electra uses political terms to figure her marital condition, she not only protests the terms of her political value under patriarchy. She also figures her brother's exile in the supposedly feminine, because domestic, terms of her own exclusion. These instances establish a link between the homeless person on the run and the one who, immobilized in a home, is (internally) displaced by falling outside of proper kinship. Now, confronted with the chance for proper reintegration into an *oikos*, Electra connects herself to her male sibling but not only through physical movement. For, as Orestes suggests, the loss of a polis is also a loss of each other. It is a loss of kin. Electra's use of *patria gē* captures the siblings' shared sense that 'home is only partly a geographically centered notion' for anyone.[37]

34. Similarly, Judith Butler (2000), 11, argues that Antigone comes 'to act in ways that are called manly not only because she acts in defiance of the law but also because she assumes the voice of the law in committing the act against the law'.

35. Nielsen (2004), 54, 57, 58. Nielsen acknowledges that *patris* sometimes refers to a region larger than a polis but that these references are few by comparison. Ultimately, he argues that 'to a Greek of the Archaic and Classical periods, a *patris* was his polis' (69).

36. Nielsen (2004), 70f.

37. Xenos (1993), 424.



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The end of *Electra* is striking because its protagonist suggests that her imminent re-marriage counts as a change in *homeland* not simply home. To claim otherwise, as Castor does, is to assume first that, for women, there is only trafficking not migration and second that the 'home' lost by a *phygas*, which is to say by a man, is always only the polis not the *oikos*, which encompasses a family, access to political membership, and a house. What Electra's speech dares to imagine, then, is a notion of women's mobility (and exile) that cannot be subsumed under an idiom of traffic (1315). What it leaves open, and her blurring with Orestes underscores, is the further possibility that loss of home and loss of homeland go hand in hand for the *phygas* in general.

For Electra, reintegration into an *oikos* might make her a wife, but it does not put an end to her exile. The issue, then, is not only that Electra, like Medea, lacks a familial *oikos* to return to should something go wrong in her new marriage. It is that, as the term *patria gē* suggests, the polis attempts to distinguish, by gendering, two notions of homelessness that are, in everyday practice, impossible to disentangle. The physical borders of the polis, like the nation-state, are usually assumed to be 'categorically different from the impenetrable, because interior, borders that divide members along kinship (or ethnic) lines, as they did in Athens.'[38] When early in the play Electra marks herself as a *phygas* by refusing to participate in the cult rites that help constitute women's citizenship, she therefore acts as the *apolis* woman she (claims she) becomes when at the end she is restored to an *oikos* by a proper marriage. What is the meaning of this? From Electra's perspective, both falling outside of proper kinship and moving back into it renders her a *phygas* because marriage, the inherently ambiguous act on which the regulation of political kinship depends, never settles once and for all the question of membership. If Electra can get lost in transit, marriage is neither the flip side of nor the antidote to *phygē*.

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38. Kasimis (2018), 181.



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