

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious  
Studies Department

Classics and Religious Studies

---

2005

## Gendered Interpretations: Two Fourth-Century B.C.E. Performances of Sophocles' *Electra*

Anne Duncan

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, [aduncan4@unl.edu](mailto:aduncan4@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

---

Duncan, Anne, "Gendered Interpretations: Two Fourth-Century B.C.E. Performances of Sophocles' *Electra*" (2005). *Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious Studies Department*. 88.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub/88>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics and Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious Studies Department by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Gendered Interpretations: Two Fourth-Century B.C.E. Performances of Sophocles' *Electra*

ANNE DUNCAN

While the evidence for theatrical practice in the ancient world is admittedly spotty, we are fortunate to have anecdotal evidence concerning two different performances of Sophocles' *Electra*, both from the fourth century B.C.E., by two of the most famous tragic actors in ancient Greece, Theodorus and Polus, who apparently played *Electra*. The evidence suggests that their performances may have differed widely; it is even conceivable that the role was something of a yardstick for measuring great actors of the day (à la Hamlet).<sup>1</sup> I will argue that these two "star" actors gave radically different interpretations of the character of *Electra*, partly due to an approach to performance affected by gender. The idea of interpreting a character is usually assumed to be foreign to ancient Greek theatrical practice, certainly in the fifth century B.C.E., yet I think the evidence leaves us with the conclusion that by the fourth century, "stars" were indeed interpreting characters, and possibly even bringing theories of acting to bear on their interpretations. This paper is thus an experiment in reconstructing the history of dramatic performance in the ancient world. Although the evidence is debatable and more questions will inevitably be raised than answers answered, my aim here is to broaden discussion of performance issues in ancient drama generally and in Greek tragedy in particular.

Most scholars of Greek tragedy interested in performance issues remain focused on recovering or reconstructing the conditions of the original (fifth-century) performance.<sup>2</sup> It is no longer an article of dogma in scholarship on Greek tragedy that the fourth century represents a period of "decline," either in the number of new tragedies written and produced,<sup>3</sup> or in the debasement of plot and music which Aristotle implicitly diagnoses in the *Poetics*.<sup>4</sup> Tragedy in the fourth century, on the other hand, whether new plays or re-performances of "classics" from the fifth-century repertoire, is still relatively understudied.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the (understandable) bias in the scholarly literature towards the *original* performance of the *extant* tragedies has skewed our impression of perform-

ance culture in antiquity. Yet much of the evidence about ancient dramatic performance comes from late sources and describes subsequent performances. Anecdotes about actors, ranging from the fifth century B.C.E. to the very late Empire, comprise a rich source for our information about performance practices. To overlook them because they sometimes describe subsequent performances of canonical plays is to privilege the script at the expense of the actor; after all, every performance is in some sense “original.”<sup>6</sup> It is also to underestimate the impact that “classic” drama had on ancient audiences in periods after the fifth century B.C.E. With judicious use, this neglected body of anecdotal evidence can yield interesting and vital information about ancient performance practices, attitudes towards actors, possibly even theories of acting.

### The Anecdote as Source

A number of different kinds of sources exist for ancient conceptions of mimesis and for ancient concerns about performance. The most often consulted are the writings of elite intellectuals from the ancient world: plays themselves, especially the metatheatrical plays; speeches; and philosophical, literary, rhetorical, and technical treatises.<sup>7</sup> While dramatic, philosophical, and rhetorical texts address the question of mimesis and identity in a subtle and sophisticated dialogue that had been carried on by elite writers over centuries, the anecdotal tradition provides invaluable insight into the ways in which large numbers of people, perhaps even society in general, thought about mimesis and its effects. Anecdotes reported by writers about famous actors and poets, anonymous *Lives* of poets, and other expressions of public opinion can be read as a kind of “popular performance theory.”

The rich tradition of theatrical anecdotes from the ancient world has been underutilized in performance studies by classicists, due in large part to the fact that most of the anecdotes are found in late sources and therefore are presumed to be untrustworthy. Representative of this attitude is David Bain’s dismissal (7): “Unfortunately most anecdotes that we possess about actors and acting in the early Greek theatre are either of doubtful authenticity or of little relevance to the kind of inquiry here undertaken.” Furthermore, many of the anecdotes preserved in later sources concern post-fifth-century performances, and scholars of ancient drama tend to be interested either (if they are more textually oriented) in recovering the author’s original intent, or (if they are more performance-oriented) in recovering the original, fifth-century audience’s experience

of viewing the original, fifth-century performance.<sup>8</sup> These are not the only approaches taken to ancient drama, but nearly so, and they neglect much interesting material that could enrich our understanding of the history of one of the most popular, longlasting, and (arguably) important genres of the ancient world.

To be sure, anecdotes present their own problems of interpretation: they may be recounted because they reveal the social norm or, conversely, the exception to the rule.<sup>9</sup> They tend to follow certain patterns (often with a “punch line” at the end<sup>10</sup>), and in the ancient world, they may appear in texts written centuries after the setting of the anecdotal story. One anecdotal pattern, for example, depicts members of a theatrical audience mistaking theater for reality, or being overly impressed by theatrical effects. In interpreting this type of anecdote, it is crucial to recognize that the anecdote tends to identify those audience members as “deficient” in some way—women, children, or rustics.<sup>11</sup> The *Life of Aeschylus* relates that his Furies were so terrifying that children fainted and women miscarried<sup>12</sup> (a story often repeated by scholars stressing Aeschylus’s supposed tendency towards spectacle<sup>13</sup>), but says nothing about the adult males’ reactions.

I assume here that anecdotes do not (usually) originate with the source in which they are found, but rather are told and retold until they wind up in a text such as Aelian, Aulus Gellius, or Plutarch. Of course, it is always possible that a particular anecdote was invented by the writer in whose text it appears, or that it was invented by one elite writer and passed down through others until it landed in a compendium such as Gellius’s. It seems highly improbable, however, that every theatrical anecdote contained in an ancient source is utterly disconnected from historical events, especially when theater was a cultural form that a broad cross-section of the population (Greek or Roman) saw and responded to, both in the moment and later.<sup>14</sup> As the preface to a recent collection of essays on ancient actors states, “Anecdotes about actors can suggest ways in which the experiences of spectators coloured collective awareness and imagination at different periods.”<sup>15</sup> The “punch line” feature of many ancient theatrical anecdotes, moreover, can be taken as evidence of oral composition, that is, oral formulation and circulation of a story shortly after the events transpired; as with jokes that circulate among large numbers of people, the punch line makes the anecdote memorable and thus repeatable. Even if some anecdotes are entirely fictional, they offer evidence of what the writer thought his audience would believe to be possible.<sup>16</sup>

Some New Historicists would argue further that traditional historians have ignored or dismissed the anecdote because it disrupts traditional historical narratives, and that the anecdote can allow the voices of those usually silenced to emerge, however briefly.<sup>17</sup> Joel Fineman, for example, argues that the anecdote is the momentary eruption of the Real into teleological historical narrative. Fineman's argument must be qualified by the patterning evident in some ancient anecdotes, but his observation that "the anecdote, however literary, is nevertheless . . . the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact" gets at the dual literary/historical nature of the anecdote.<sup>18</sup>

The source in which the anecdote is embedded also must be taken into account. Each ancient author had his own agenda in using the anecdote, and each anecdote is situated in a discursive context. Plutarch, for example, whose *Lives* and *Moralia* are the source for many theatrical anecdotes, was a Greek writing under the Roman Empire and looking backward nostalgically to the time when Athens ruled the world, as well as being a Platonist interpreting history according to certain moral categories.<sup>19</sup> But Plutarch's texts may be viewed as part of a *cultural database*, to use Karen Bassi's term; they offer evidence of attitudes and ideology, even if—or especially when—they are factually inaccurate.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, for the purposes of this paper, Aelian and Aulus Gellius are both authors with their own agendas, and at the same time parts of that "cultural database" of popular anecdotes about famous actors and performances.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, we can view the anecdotal tradition *in general* as a kind of "popular performance theory" because of the way in which anecdotes tend to be told and retold by many people in a given culture; regardless of their historical accuracy, they strike a chord, or perhaps hit a nerve, in the culture's self-image.<sup>22</sup> Anecdotes can serve as an important counterweight, supplement, or even alternative to the texts of elite intellectuals who wrote about drama, and thus as a valuable source for ancient thought about performance.

### Ancient Theories of Acting

One strand of thought has been hostile to actors almost from the moment drama came into being.<sup>23</sup> This hostility towards impersonation gradually generated in the ancient world several different accusations or stereotypes, or, we could say, theories of acting. One stereotype or theory was that actors simply play themselves onstage;<sup>24</sup> another, that actors are possessed by the characters they play;<sup>25</sup> a third, that actors are frauds or

hypocrites (ὑποκρίτης was the Greek word for actor, though the word did not carry a negative connotation until well after the fifth century B.C.E.).<sup>26</sup> A more positive theory was that actors are skilled mimics. Throughout the history of ancient drama, everyday people as well as intellectuals wrestled with the question of whether acting is a skill (τέχνη), controllable by the self, or a form of inspiration, possibly divine, which enters a self that is by nature receptive to it. Each answer to the question had its own negative side, which antitheatrical thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle could exploit: if acting is a skill, then it is uncomfortably close to deceit; if acting is an exaggeration of innate qualities, then the actor is not as impressive and is possibly even contemptible.

Only a handful of actors during the course of Greco-Roman dramatic history are known to have acted in both tragedies and comedies, and none lived before the first century B.C.E.<sup>27</sup> Like the dramatic poets who specialized in tragedy or comedy, ancient Greek and Roman actors specialized in one genre or the other, and actors seem to have been thought of as performing in accord with their own natures. The idea that actors perform in this way can be reassuring and desirable to someone concerned, as Plato is in the *Republic*, about the effect of impersonation on the moral character of the performer or the audience.<sup>28</sup>

The status of acting as impersonation—as, on a fundamental level, dissembling one's identity—undermines this reassuring theory of acting as simply performing one's self. In fact, this theory, taken to its logical extreme, loses its reassuring quality: if the actor is thought to be suited by his character not only to a particular genre but to a particular type of role, then the antitheatricalists' concerns about mimesis and identity can resurface. In this light, let us turn to examine the *testimonia* about Theodorus, a star actor of the fourth century B.C.E. with an apparently well-defined specialty.

### Theodorus as Electra: The Female Impersonator

Theodorus seems to have played the title role in Sophocles' *Electra*, based on an anecdote about the actor and his wife in Plutarch's *Moralia* (737b):

ἐμνήσθησαν δὲ καὶ τῆς Θεοδώρου τοῦ τραγῳδοῦ γυναικὸς οὐ προσδεξαμένης αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ συγκαθεύδειν ὑπογύου τοῦ ἀγῶνος ὄντος, ἐπεὶ δὲ νικήσας εἰσῆλθεν πρὸς αὐτήν, ἀσπασαμένης καὶ εἰπούσης “Ἀγαμέμνωνος παῖ, νῦν ἐκεῖν’ ἔξεστὶ σοι.”

Mention was also made of the wife of Theodorus the tragic actor who would not admit him to sleep with her while the contest was about to happen, but when he came to her victorious, she welcomed him and said, "Child of Agamemnon, you have permission now."<sup>29</sup>

As if he were an athlete in training and she his coach, Theodorus's wife keeps him from dissipating his vital energy in sex until the big game—here, the dramatic competition in Athens.<sup>30</sup> The line Theodorus's wife quotes to him when she does finally allow him to have sex with her is line 2 of Sophocles' *Electra*; I follow O'Connor in inferring that the line she quotes is from the play Theodorus has just performed.<sup>31</sup> It is possibly significant that in addition to quoting Sophocles' *Electra*, Theodorus's wife keeps him, like his character, "bedless" (or "unmarried," the etymology of *Electra*'s name) until after the performance.<sup>32</sup>

This anecdote from Plutarch is the only notice we have about Theodorus's performance of *Electra*, and it does not describe Theodorus's acting style or abilities in this particular role. We do have, however, information about his style and abilities in some of his other famous performances. Theodorus apparently was a gifted mimic, not only of people, but of the noises made by inanimate objects such as a windlass. In a different section of the *Moralia* (18c), Plutarch suggests that Theodorus was, in some sense, better (or at least more enjoyable) than the real thing:

ὥσπερ γὰρ ὕδρς βοὴν καὶ ψόφον τροχιλίας καὶ πνευμάτων ῥοῖζον καὶ θαλάττης κτύπον ἀκούοντες ἐνοχλούμεθα καὶ δυσχεραίνομεν, ἂν δέ τις πιθανῶς ταῦτα μιμῆται, καθάπερ Παρμένων τὴν ὕν καὶ Θεόδωρος τὰς τροχιλίας, ἡδόμεθα·

For just as when we hear the squeal of a pig, the noise of a windlass, the whistling of the winds, and the roar of the sea, we are annoyed and unable to endure it, but if someone imitates these things persuasively, as Parmenon did a pig and Theodorus a windlass, we are pleased . . .

The fourth-century B.C.E. comic actor Parmenon was famous for an imitation of a pig that was better than the real thing; during a contest in producing realistic sound effects, Parmenon imitated a pig's squeal, and his rivals then brought a pig into the theater and made it squeal. The audience shouted, "Good, but not as good as Parmenon's!"—a cry that became a proverb.<sup>33</sup> The context of both of these passages is a discussion

of the rather Aristotelian paradox that the imitation is more pleasurable for the audience than the real thing; the actor's skill is what makes the imitation of something potentially uninteresting or unpleasant sounding enjoyable. (The pleasure of the audience in this anecdote, incidentally, suggests a certain comfort level with the pretense or feigning of theater, a comfort that is not always acknowledged in other anecdotes.) According to Plutarch, Theodorus was as skilled as Parmenon in imitating noises. We may safely assume that if the tragic actor was famous for successfully mimicking the sound of an inanimate object, then his skill in manipulating his voice was one reason why he was a star actor.<sup>34</sup> As we will see, Theodorus was not only a gifted mimic of windlasses; he could also make his voice sound like the voice of a tearful young heroine.

One anecdote about Theodorus is told in slightly different ways in the second-century Plutarch's *Moralia* and in the third-century Aelian's *Varia Historia*. The anecdote recounts an instance in which Theodorus played a tragic heroine so well that he caused the notoriously cruel tyrant Alexander of Pherae, who was watching the play, to leave the theater in tears. In Plutarch's version of this story (*Moralia* 334a),

Ἀλέξανδρος δ' ὁ Φεραίων τύραννος (ἔδει δὲ τοῦτο μόνον αὐτὸν καλεῖσθαι καὶ μὴ καταισχύνειν τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν), θεώμενος τραγῳδὸν ἐμπαθέστερον ὑφ' ἡδονῆς διετέθη πρὸς τὸν οἶκτον. ἀναπηδήσας οὖν ἐκ τοῦ θεάτρου θάπτον ἢ βάδην ἀπῆει, δεινὸν εἶναι λέγων, εἰ τοσοῦτους ἀποσφάττων πολίτας ὀφθήσεται τοῖς Ἑκάβης καὶ Πολυξένης πάθεσιν ἐπιδακρύων. οὗτος μὲν οὖν μικροῦ καὶ δίκην ἐπράξατο τὸν τραγῳδόν, ὅτι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ καθάπερ σίδηρον ἐμάλαξεν.

Alexander, the tyrant of Pherae (this alone is what he should be called; he shouldn't disgrace his namesake<sup>35</sup>), as he watched a tragic actor, felt himself moved to pity through the enjoyment of the acting. He leapt up, therefore, and left the theater quickly, saying that it would be terrible, if, when he was slaughtering so many citizens, he should be seen weeping at the sufferings of Hecuba and Polyxena. And he almost punished the actor because the actor had softened his spirit, just as iron is softened in the fire.

As this anecdote relates, the tyrant says that it would be shameful for his subjects to see him weeping over the fictional sufferings of a tragic heroine when he had caused so many real deaths. Plutarch does not name the tragic actor, nor does he make it clear whether the role was



Hecuba, Polyxena, or possibly even some other tragic heroine; Aelian is more specific (though not necessarily more accurate) about the name of the actor and the role. One significant detail in Plutarch's version of this anecdote is the aftermath: he adds that Alexander almost punished the tragic actor for "softening his spirit, just as iron is softened in the fire." This comes as no surprise in a section of the *Moralia* entitled "On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander," in which Plutarch says he will bring together anecdotes that depict Alexander the Great's benefaction of the arts as opposed to other tyrants' repression of the arts (333d–f). There is an anxiety lurking in the background here, displaced onto the character of the wicked Alexander of Pherae: the fear that impersonation can potentially destabilize not only the self of the actor who plays the character, making him "possessed" or a fraud, but also the self of the spectator who watches that performance. The fact that it is a man playing a female character who has "softened" the tyrant's spirit is, in this mindset, all the more worrisome. We see as well in these anecdotes the evocation of grief and excessive emotion in the spectator which Plato so fears in the *Republic* and which we will see again in the *Electra*. The twist, of course, is that Alexander of Pherae does not feel this grief for very long, not because he has a noble, Guardian-like soul, but because he is cruel.

In Aelian's version of the story (VH 14.40),

Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Φεραίων τύραννος ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα ἔδοξεν ὀμώτατος εἶναι. Θεοδώρου δὲ τοῦ τῆς τραγῳδίας ποιητοῦ ὑποκρινομένου τὴν Ἀερόπην σφόδρα ἐμπαθῶς, ὁ δὲ εἰς δάκρυα ἐξέπεσεν, εἴτα ἐξανέστη τοῦ θεάτρου. ἀπολογούμενος δὲ ἔλεγε τῷ Θεοδώρῳ ὡς οὐ καταφρονήσας οὐδὲ ἀτιμάσας αὐτὸν ᾤχετο, ἀλλ' αἰδούμενος εἰ τὰ μὲν ὑποκριτοῦ πάθη οἷός τε ἦν ἐλεεῖν, τὰ δὲ τῶν ἑαυτοῦ πολιτῶν οὐχί.

Alexander the tyrant of Pherae was regarded as extremely savage. When the tragic poet Theodorus played Aerope very emotionally, Alexander fell into tears, and then he left the theater. In apologizing, he told Theodorus that he had not left because he despised or dishonored him, but because he was ashamed that he could pity suffering of an actor, but not the suffering of his own citizens.<sup>36</sup>

The point of this story's punch line is that the tyrant was more moved by the *imitation* of sorrow and suffering than by *real* sorrow and suffering; in fact, while the tyrant *causes* his citizens to suffer in real life, he weeps at *feigned* suffering in the theater. This is another version of vivid imitation,

as we saw in the account of the imitation contest in Plutarch, where the audience was pleased by the imitation (Parmenon's pig) when the real thing would actually be distasteful—which is, of course, Aristotle's definition of tragic mimesis. Here the audience (Alexander of Pherae) is far more moved by the imitation than by the real thing.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, this anecdotal theme is about the power of theater, of impersonation. Incidentally, however, it points to Theodorus's skill in playing a pitiable female character—not Electra this time, but Aerope.

Interestingly, based on the evidence we have, Theodorus seems to have specialized in playing tragic heroines. He is thought to have played Aerope [Merope] in Euripides' *Kresphontes*, sometime between 369–359 B.C.E., based on the Aelian anecdote. The version of the Alexander of Pherae anecdote in the *Moralia* names the role of either Hecuba or Polyxena in Euripides' *Hecuba* and does not name the actor, while Plutarch elsewhere mentions Hecuba or Andromache.<sup>38</sup> According to Demosthenes, Theodorus played Antigone in Sophocles' *Antigone*.<sup>39</sup> Based on Theodorus's professional association with the fourth-century B.C.E. Athenian actor-turned-orator Aeschines, who is known to have played Oenomaus in Euripides' *Oenomaus*, we can infer that Theodorus played the deuteragonist's role of Hippodameia in the *Oenomaus*.<sup>40</sup> It is striking that while we have quite a list of famous female roles that Theodorus performed, none of our sources mention him performing a single male role.<sup>41</sup>

The evidence, then, suggests a picture of Theodorus as an exceptionally talented mimic of women, a specialist in tearful, tragic heroines and, possibly, a specialist in wringing tears from his audience as well. If this is so, his prize-winning performance of Electra would have pulled out all the stops. The evidence for Theodorus as a specialist in tragic heroines, a "female impersonator," is significant because most modern accounts of ancient acting claim that we cannot find evidence of specialization this early.<sup>42</sup> Even in the first anecdote, which marks him as a husband and thus might be seen as emphasizing his masculinity, Theodorus is also assimilated strongly to the female character he was playing: his wife keeps him "bedless," like Electra, during the entire rehearsal and performance period.

### Polus as Electra: The Grieving Father

Our evidence for Polus's performance as Electra is one of the most famous anecdotes about theater from the ancient world. Polus suppos-

edly used the urn that contained the ashes of his own son, recently dead, for the scene in the tragedy in which Electra weeps over an empty urn, mistakenly thinking it contains Orestes' ashes. The crowd, Aulus Gellius reports (NA 6.5), was electrified at the actor's "genuine" performance:

histrio in terra Graecia fuit fama celebri, qui gestus et vocis claritudine et venustate ceteris antistabat; nomen fuisse aiunt Polum, tragoedias poetarum nobilium scite atque asseverate actitavit. is Polus unice amatum filium morte amisit. eum luctum quoniam satis visus est eluxisse, rediit ad quaestum artis.

in eo tempore Athenis *Electram* Sophoclis acturus, gestare urnam quasi cum Oresti ossibus debebat. ita compositum fabulae argumentum est, ut veluti fratris reliquias ferens Electra comploret commisereaturque interitum eius existimatum. igitur Polus, lugubri habitu Electrae indutus, ossa atque urnam e sepulcro tulit filii et, quasi Oresti amplexus, opplevit omnia non simulacris neque imitamentis, sed luctu atque lamentis veris et spirantibus. itaque cum agi fabula videretur, dolor actus est.

There was a very famous actor in the land of Greece, who excelled all the rest in his gesture and the clarity of his voice and his charm; they say that his name was Polus, and he often acted the tragedies of famous poets expertly and definitively. This Polus lost his uniquely beloved son to death. When he felt that he had indulged his grief sufficiently, he returned to the practice of his profession.

At that time he was about to act the *Electra* of Sophocles at Athens, and he was responsible for carrying an urn which supposedly contained the bones of Orestes. The plot of the play is arranged so that Electra, as if she were actually carrying her brother's remains, should lament and bewail the death that she believed had overtaken him. Therefore Polus, wearing the mourning clothes of Electra, took the bones and the urn of his son from the tomb and, embracing them as if they were those of Orestes, filled the whole place, not with the imitation or the likeness of sorrow, but with genuine grief and unfeigned lamentation.

This anecdote—that while it seemed that a play was being acted, real grief was enacted—is fascinating on several levels. Most striking, perhaps, is the blurry line between acting the grief of the character and experiencing real grief; the eeriness generated by this blurring is clearly part of

the anecdote's power. It is unclear whether the audience was aware of Polus's substitution of a real urn at the time of the performance, although it seems quite possible that the audience would have known, based on Polus's celebrity status and his temporary withdrawal from the stage during the period of his mourning. Furthermore, we can suspect that Polus made use of his real grief onstage in order to make this *re-performance* of a "classic" fifth-century tragedy "real again" for those members of his fourth-century audience who were familiar with the play. Of course, Electra's grief is a kind of metatheatrical expression: she grieves over an empty urn, for her brother is not really dead, but there would be no ashes in the urn in any case, because it is a prop.<sup>43</sup> The urn as prop foregrounds the mimetic aspect of this scene, which is then put into heightened tension with the actor's inclusion of real pathos, a "real" urn. This is a clear instance in which a particular performance can radically alter the mood of a play, the tone, even the overall interpretation.

One question that seems never to have been raised in discussions of this anecdote, however, is how, and when, the audience learned about the urn.<sup>44</sup> Was the information leaked before the performance, or even advertised, in some sense? Or was it discovered only later and retrojected back into the anecdote by Gellius or his sources?<sup>45</sup> If the information was somehow made available to the audience beforehand, this would suggest that it was felt to be necessary for the audience's proper appreciation of Polus's performance as *authentic*; if it was not known beforehand, the emphasis falls on Polus's performance as *moving*. The two alternatives suggest two different theories of acting. If the appreciation is for the authentic performance of real (known) grief, then that suggests that the audience imagines theater to work by actors essentially playing themselves onstage. If, on the other hand, the appreciation is for the moving performance of (what is assumed to be) feigned grief, then that suggests that the audience imagines theater to work by effective, skillful dissembling. These are two different theories of acting with a very long history, starting in classical antiquity but extending up through the present day.

### Performing Electra

The evidence we have suggests a contrast between Theodorus's and Polus's interpretations of Electra. Theodorus's performance may have depended on his identification with the character of Electra. The anecdotal evidence about Theodorus's acting style stresses his mimicry, his ability to make his audience feel the "reality" of his female characters and

even, in the case of the tyrant Alexander of Pherae, to change the character of his audience, to “soften” them—to alter their identities, at least temporarily. This is an example of what we might call the *possession theory* of ancient acting.

Polus’s performance, on the other hand, depended on the knowledge (revealed at some point) that he was a father; that is, Polus distanced himself from his female character, insisting to the audience that his grief as a father was equivalent to (if not the same as) Electra’s grief as a sister. Polus also distanced himself in time from his grief, waiting until “sufficient” time had passed after his son’s death to make use of his emotions.<sup>46</sup> Both of these factors present Polus as a skilled actor who made use of his genuine emotion in a controlled, focused way for the performance he was giving. Polus’s distancing techniques also underwrite his masculinity: whereas women’s lamentation in ancient Greece was “typically” excessive,<sup>47</sup> Polus’s grief is controlled; whereas mimesis was considered feminine in its deception,<sup>48</sup> Polus’s performance of his fatherly grief is successful precisely because it is not simulated. And in further contrast to Theodorus, we do not have any evidence of Polus playing other female characters, while he is known to have played Oedipus in both *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.<sup>49</sup> Polus’s performance of Electra thus appears to be part of his career of important protagonist roles; it is incidental that the role is female.

It is fascinating to think that Polus’s distanced performance as Electra and Theodorus’s closely identified performance as Electra may have taken place in the same century, if we can believe that these anecdotes record historical events. The two different performances suggest that Greek theatrical audiences in the fourth century B.C.E. were familiar not only with typecast actors, but also with the concept of “interpreting” a character, something that is not usually attributed to ancient theatrical practice. Even if both anecdotes are wholly fictional, however, they at least present us with evidence of several different ancient theories of acting and, implicitly, of identity. Theodorus’s anecdotal tradition places him, apparently, in the “acting as possession” camp, although the stories about his mimicry suggest that he possessed a highly developed skill as well. Polus’s performance clearly embodies a theory of acting as skill, as what Plato would call a *technē*.

I should emphasize that the distinction between the two styles or theories of acting is not completely tidy. Clearly, Theodorus’s impersonations of tearful heroines imply a great deal of skill, as his imitation of the windlass also suggests, and, conversely, Polus’s skillful use of his own

real grief implies a great deal of emotional absorption into the role. Each actor used elements of both approaches to acting. What I am arguing is that each actor's performance of Electra *foregrounds* one or the other approach to acting and, as we will see below, that these different approaches have different gendered subtexts: the "possession" approach is a "feminine" style, whereas the "distanced" approach is a "masculine" style.

The emphasis on control, self-mastery, in the Polus anecdote balances out his presentation of raw, "authentic," unfeigned emotion. But Polus's anecdote is even more complicated. As Mark Ringer (189) notes in his book on metatheater in Sophocles, there is a paradox in this account: "Polus seems to have realized that the more genuine his grief appeared to his audience, the greater would be the metatheatrical effect of the scene." The dramatic irony of this scene, where the audience knows that Orestes is not dead, calls attention to the metatheatrical status of the urn as a trigger for elaborately performed mourning. Just when it seems that Polus is being singled out for his sincerity, his "genuine" grief, his lack of theatrical deception, we are reminded that this genuine grief is wasted within the world of the play. The paradox of the anecdote is that Electra's grief is true (sincere) but false (groundless), while Polus's grief is false (performed) but true (sincere).

In the absence of ancient acting manuals, the effect of Polus's and Theodorus's performances on the audience provides a concrete point of reference for those attempting to describe ancient theories and practices of acting. Theodorus can make a brutal tyrant dissolve into tears through his uncanny mimesis of a tragic heroine. Polus can do the same to an entire audience through the reenactment of his own grief within the fiction of a tragic role. Which performance is more inspired: the one by the mimic of women, or the one by the grieving father? Which performance is more skilled? Which is more sincere? Which is more deceptive? The actors' techniques remain elusive, even as their effect on their audience is clear: both performances were great successes.

### Interpreting Electra

I would now like to turn to the text of the play and sketch out a few ways in which these two performance styles could have affected the two actors' interpretations of Electra. This is admittedly speculative, but it is worthwhile to examine the implications of the evidence about these two performances. They have bearing on some interpretive matters in the

play as well: the character of Electra, and the scholarly debate over the tone at the end of the play.<sup>50</sup>

One area in which different performance styles could affect the interpretation of Electra's character, and thus the play as a whole, is the play's presentation of gender issues. Following from Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Sophocles' earlier *Antigone*, Sophocles' *Electra* contains several passages in which gender comes explicitly to the fore. In an exchange that evokes the opening of *Antigone*, Electra, like Antigone, asks her sister Chrysothemis to help her in defying their relatives (here killing them as opposed to illegally burying a brother). Electra predicts to Chrysothemis that people will say of the two of them, "They should be honored by all for their courageous/manly actions" (τιμᾶν ἅπαντας οὐνεκ' ἀνδρείας χρεῶν, (83).<sup>51</sup> Chrysothemis, like Ismene, replies that they are mere women who cannot hope to struggle against the rule of men (947-1014).<sup>52</sup> Picking up on this exchange later in the play, Orestes urges Electra not to alert the women in the palace to his presence, saying, "Yes, but remember that even women have it in them to be warlike; / You know that well from experience" (ὅρα γε μὲν δὴ καὶ γυναῖξιν ὡς Ἄρης / ἔνεστιν; εὖ δ' ἔξοισθα πειραθεῖσά που, 1243-44). When Orestes and Pylades enter the palace to kill Clytemnestra, Electra makes her only brief exit from the stage during the entire play.<sup>53</sup> Then she returns to the stage, to keep watch for Aegisthus, and when she hears her mother's death-cry, she urges Orestes on by crying out, "Strike a double blow, if you have the strength!" (παῖσον, εἰ σθένες, διπλῆν, 1415). All of these moments in the play could be performed in a way that emphasizes Electra's mannish daring, somewhat reminiscent of Clytemnestra's character in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*.<sup>54</sup> We can imagine Polus, even before the scene with his son's urn, using gesture and body language and perhaps his voice to suggest a masculine strength beneath the character's ragged robes.

Conversely, there are many other moments in the play in which Electra's pathos as a grieving, powerless woman is emphasized. Her status as an unmarried, childless, fatherless, and (she fears) brotherless woman reinforces her isolation; she has no male kin to pursue the vengeance she so desperately desires.<sup>55</sup> Electra is onstage for over ninety percent of the play<sup>56</sup> and a great proportion of her speech is lyrical lament, a typically feminine genre of speech.<sup>57</sup> As well as being remarkable for the amount of lamentation she produces, Electra is unique in the way she laments: she is the only character in Sophocles' extant tragedies to sing a monody before the Chorus's first entrance,<sup>58</sup> and when the Chorus does enter, she sings a *kommos* with them, rather than remaining

silent during a choral ode.<sup>59</sup> Her most famous speech, the lament over the empty urn, emphasizes her utter powerlessness and hopelessness.<sup>60</sup> Her voice is her most distinctive characteristic, and in a very real sense, her only weapon.<sup>61</sup> In a disturbing moment of vocal aggression, she mimics the absent Clytemnestra (289-98).<sup>62</sup> Because of her voice, Aegisthus plans to seal her inside a cave where she can “sing [her] evils” (ὕμνησεις κακά, 382). Electra is repeatedly compared to the nightingale, a mythic archetype of feminine grief and lament.<sup>63</sup> These are moments and themes that would have allowed Theodorus, with his expertise in giving voice to suffering heroines, to arouse tears in his audience.

It is significant that Electra has more “mannish” moments towards the end of the play, when she learns of Orestes’ survival and his plot against their mother; her character might be said to metamorphose from passive, verbal, and feminine to more active, deed-oriented, and masculine. This gender shift in her character corresponds precisely with another shift that is important for our appreciation of the way different actors could have interpreted Electra: her shift from truth-teller to dissembler, from one who uses language sincerely to express deep, genuine emotion to one who uses language opportunistically to deceive and entrap listeners.<sup>64</sup> She undergoes a shift, we might say, from antitheatrical to theatricalized character.

J. Michael Walton has observed that virtually all the other characters in this play are “actors” except for Electra, who refuses to dissemble or play a role until the end.<sup>65</sup> Critics in the “pessimistic” camp tend to argue that Electra is as morally bankrupt throughout the play as any other character, although most concede that she does not use *dolos* like her brother (or the rest of the characters).<sup>66</sup> But regardless of whether we believe that this play wholeheartedly endorses or subtly condemns the matricide, it seems impossible to deny that Electra is marked out as different from all the other characters in the play: visually, in her squalid appearance and her constant presence onstage; vocally, in her numerous lyric passages and her incessant mourning;<sup>67</sup> and, I would argue, philosophically, in her refusal to dissemble her feelings. She openly insults and defies her “shameless” mother; she refuses her sister’s hypocritical path of inward mourning and outward compliance with the new regime. She cannot (or will not) restrain her grief-stricken outburst when the news arrives that Orestes has died, even in front of her mother, even at her own risk. She mourns what she believes to be Orestes’ ashes in the famous “urn scene,” dilating on her grief in front of a complete stranger (who, of course, is revealed as none other than Orestes himself).<sup>68</sup> In fact,



she cannot (or will not) restrain her joy when she and Orestes finally recognize each other: the Tutor comes outside to silence them, and, as has often been observed, Orestes immediately complies and urges Electra to stop her loud emotional singing.<sup>69</sup> But Electra cannot completely hide her feelings even when it will help her cause; she is fortunate that her tears of joy will be mistaken by those inside the house for her usual tears of mourning.<sup>70</sup> It is only in her encounter with the loathed Aegisthus, at the very end of the play, that Electra manages to conceal information and emotions—and only by the use of ambiguous language that could potentially mean the opposite of what it does. In other words, Electra, unlike every other character in the play —Orestes, the Tutor, Chrysothemis, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus—is utterly sincere.<sup>71</sup> She does not learn to be an actor, a feigner, until the very end, when everything is on the line.

What does this mean for our two fourth-century actors' interpretations of Electra? The role, with its extremes of emotion, its high proportion of sung to spoken lines, and the sheer physical endurance required to play it, was a natural to become a "yardstick" of an actor's abilities. It remains a "yardstick" today. In the playbill for the 1999 Broadway production of *Electra*, an article about the production emphasizes the emotional and physical intensity of the role of Electra, played by Zoë Wanamaker: "The role leaves Wanamaker predictably drained, and time is required in the decompression chamber after every performance before she can rejoin the living."<sup>72</sup> Wanamaker herself is quoted as saying,

It's very demanding because of the nature of the piece. I mean, I can't go partying. I have to live like a monk. I have to preserve my voice and my energy because, although it's only 90 minutes, it is an *intense* 90 minutes. There is always ten percent that I try and hold back, but the rest of it is all out there. . . . I didn't imagine that I was taking the part home with me, but when we finished *Electra* the first time [in the 1997 London production], my back went out, I got the flu, I slept for five days nonstop. This part is a killer, but she's also a meteoric soul, a luminous heroine.<sup>73</sup>

Fiona Shaw, who played Electra in several Royal Shakespeare Company productions of *Electra* during the mid-1990s, recounts her experience rehearsing and playing the role:

If Electra continues on, she will die at the end of the day. It's these extreme dramatic premises that unlock the play: If there is no other

day... So she is absolutely wrecked at the beginning of the play—which makes it very hard to rehearse! You can't rehearse it, you can only redo it. You can't talk about it, you can only find it. And this made it *agony* to rehearse. To this day I have unhealed scars, bruises and broken blood vessels, because it was really a horrendous thing to rehearse. The whole lot of us woke up with profound depression in the morning. There was no joy in it. It was very, very uncomfortable. (135)

Both of these actresses' remarks suggest that what is so difficult about the role is the emotional sincerity one has to muster to play the role effectively, which for both of them translates into physical suffering. It is interesting, however, that Wannamaker's perspective ("There is always ten percent that I try and hold back") sounds more like the disciplined approach of Polus, while Shaw's perspective ("You can't rehearse it, you can only redo it") sounds more like the "possession" approach of Theodorus.

Another reason for the role's popularity in antiquity may have been that it allowed either the masculine or the feminine Electra to be emphasized; different actors could produce different interpretations of the character. It is ironic, furthermore, that what seems to have become a standard "star turn" role is essentially antitheatrical; Electra the character insists on absolute truth, absolute sincerity, as the ground of her moral universe, even as the actor playing her must muster up all his resources of craft and skill and mimicry.<sup>74</sup> The role demands the hardest theatrical trick of all: the appearance of utter sincerity, the paradoxical lack of all theatrical trappings. The two virtuoso actors we have examined here found radically different ways to give "sincere" performances.

### Conclusion

Sophocles' *Electra* is hardly unique in admitting of different interpretations of particular characters. Discussing the character of Odysseus in the *Philoctetes*, Easterling suggests that Sophocles, in drawing his major characters, left open the possibility of interpreting them in more than one way, in order to make them more believable and "real."<sup>75</sup> While psychological realism may (or may not) be a concern more of our time than of classical antiquity, the idea of ancient actors (and audiences) interpreting characters in different ways does not seem to be anachronistic. It is appealing to consider the possibility that characters, and even entire plays, about which critics have debated furiously were written *so that they*

could be played in more than one way.<sup>76</sup> The *Life of Sophocles* claims that Sophocles wrote his dramas to suit his actors' characters. Mary Lefkowitz argues that this claim is obviously about Sophocles' skill in delineating character in his poetry, and points out that it would have been impossible for him to write for particular actors in the fifth century, given the lottery system for assigning actors to particular plays.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps, in fact, Sophocles (and the other playwrights of the later fifth century) had to write their principal characters in a way that allowed for more than one interpretation precisely *because of* the lottery system.

This argument is plausible, from a viewpoint that is interested as much in subsequent performances as in the original performance. The need for flexibility in terms of assigning actors to roles suggests that other post-fifth-century actors may have had the opportunity to develop interpretations of a given character, as they came to perform that role in turn. It might even give us some insight into why certain plays were more popular in re-performance (and in different locations and with different actors) than others.

Analyzing these different perceptions and stereotypes about actors and acting in the ancient world gives us insight into popular and elite attitudes toward entertainment, into ancient conceptions of gender and identity, and into anxieties about performance and spectatorship. Electra, the sincere, feminine truth-teller who becomes an insincere, masculine feigner, represents the theatrical process itself: the character learns to dissemble her feelings, her words, even her gender. The character of Electra allowed actors to play out through her their different specialties and theories of acting in each new performance. The anecdotal evidence suggests that audiences in the fourth century B.C.E. were intrigued by fresh and apparently personalized interpretations of this "star turn" role.

### Texts Cited

- Babbitt, Frank Cole, ed. and trans. 1957. *Plutarch, Moralia*. Vol. 4. Cambridge, MA.
- March, Jenny. 2001. *Sophocles, Electra: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. Warminster.
- Minar, Edwin L., Jr., F. H. Sandbach, and W. C. Hembold, eds. and trans. 1961. *Plutarch, Moralia*. Vol. 9. Cambridge, MA.
- Rolfe, John C., ed. and trans. 1961. *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*. Vol. 2. Cambridge, MA.
- Ross, W. D., ed. 1959. *Aristotle, Ars Rhetorica*. Oxford.
- Wilson, N. G., ed. and trans. 1997. *Aelian, Historical Miscellany*. Cambridge, MA.

## Works Cited

- Bain, David. 1977. *Actors and Audience: A Study of Asides and Related Conventions in Greek Drama*. Oxford.
- Baldwin, Barry. 1975. *Studies in Aulus Gellius*. Lawrence, KS.
- Barish, Jonas. 1981. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley.
- Bassi, Karen. 1998. *Acting Like Men: Gender, Drama, and Nostalgia in Ancient Greece*. Ann Arbor.
- Batchelder, Ann. 1994. *The Seal of Orestes: Self-Reference and Authority in Sophocles' Electra*. Lanham, MD.
- Carson, Anne. 1996. "Screaming in Translation: The *Elektra* of Sophokles." In Dunn 1996, 5–11.
- Csapo, Eric and William J. Slater. 1995. *The Context of Ancient Drama*. Ann Arbor.
- Dunn, Francis M. 1996. *Sophocles' Electra in Performance*. DRAMA: Beiträge zum antiken Drama und seiner Rezeption, 4. Stuttgart.
- . 1998. "Orestes and the Urn (Sophocles, *Electra* 54–55)." *Mnemosyne* 51: 438–43.
- Easterling, Pat. 1977a. "Character in Sophocles." *G&R* 24.2: 121–29.
- , ed. 1997b. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge.
- . 2002. "Actor as Icon." In Easterling and Hall, 327–41.
- and Edith Hall, eds. 2002. *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession*. Cambridge.
- Enders, Jody. 2002. *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends*. Chicago.
- Ewans, Michael. 2000. "Dominance and Submission, Rhetoric and Sincerity: Insights from a Production of Sophocles' *Electra*." *Helios* 27.2: 123–36.
- Fineman, Joel. 1989. "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction." In H. Aram Veesser, ed., *The New Historicism*. New York. 49–76.
- Foley, Helene. 2001. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton and Oxford.
- Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt. 2000. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago and London.
- Gamel, Mary-Kay. 2002. "Introduction." Special issue: *Performing/Transforming Aristophanes' Thesmophoriazousai*. *AJP* 123.3: 319–28.
- Garton, Charles. 1972. *Personal Aspects of the Roman Theatre*. Toronto.
- Ghiron-Bistagne, Paulette. 1976. *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique*. Paris.
- Goff, Barbara, ed. 1995. *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama*. Austin.
- Green, J. R. 1994. *Theatre in Ancient Greek Society*. London and New York.
- Hall, Edith. 1999. "Actor's Song in Tragedy." In Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne, eds., *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*. Cambridge. 96–122.
- . 2002. "The Singing Actors of Antiquity." In Easterling and Hall, 3–38.
- Haun, Harry. 1999. "Wanamaker Haymaker." *Playbill* for the Broadway production of Sophocles' *Electra*. New York. 46–47.
- Holford-Strevens, Leofranc. 1988. *Aulus Gellius*. London.
- Kitzinger, Rachel. 1991. "Why Mourning Becomes Elektra." *CA* 10: 298–327.
- Lamberton, Robert. 2001. *Plutarch*. New Haven and London.
- Lefkowitz, Mary. 1981. *The Lives of the Greek Poets*. Baltimore.
- MacLeod, Leona. 2001. *Dolos and Dike in Sophocles' Elektra*. Leiden-Boston-Köln.
- McClure, Laura. 1999. *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*. Princeton.

- O'Connor, John Bartholomew. 1908. *Chapters in the History of Actors and Acting in Ancient Greece: Together with a Prosopographia Histrionum Graecorum*. Chicago.
- Ormand, Kirk. 1999. *Exchange and the Maiden: Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy*. Austin.
- Pelling, Christopher. 1995. "Plutarch's Adaptation of his Source-Material." In Scardigli, 125–54.
- Pickard-Cambridge, Sir Arthur. 1968. *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*. 2d rev. ed. John Gould and D. M. Lewis. Oxford.
- Rehm, Rush. 1992. *Greek Tragic Theatre*. New York.
- . 1996. "Public Spaces, Private Voices: Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and Sophokles' *Elektra*." In Dunn 1996, 49–59.
- Ringer, Mark. 1996. "Reflections on an Empty Urn." In Dunn 1996, 93–100.
- . 1998. *Electra and the Empty Urn: Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles*. Chapel Hill and London.
- Russell, D. A. 1995. "On Reading Plutarch's *Lives*." In Scardigli, 75–94.
- Saller, Richard. 1980. "Anecdotes as Historical Evidence for the Principate." *G&R* 27: 69–83.
- Scardigli, Barbara, ed. 1995. *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*. Oxford.
- Seaford, Richard. 1985. "The Destruction of Limits in Sophokles' *Elektra*." *CQ* 35: 315–23.
- Seale, David. 1982. *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*. Chicago.
- Segal, Charles. 1966. "The *Electra* of Sophocles." *TAPA* 97: 473–545.
- . 1981. *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*. Cambridge, MA.
- . 1995. *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*. Cambridge, MA.
- Shaw, Fiona. 1996. "Electra Speechless." In Dunn 1996, 131–38.
- Silveira Cyrino, Monica. 1998. "Sex, Status and Song: Locating the Lyric Singer in the Actors' Duets of Euripides." *QUCC* 60.3: 81–101.
- Slater, Niall W. 1993. "From Ancient Performance to New Historicism." In Niall W. Slater and Bernhard Zimmerman, eds., *Intertextualität in der griechisch-römischen Komödie*. *DRAMA: Beiträge zum antiken Drama und seiner Rezeption*, 2. Stuttgart. 1–13.
- Taplin, Oliver. 1977. *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford.
- . 1993. *Comic Angels: And Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Paintings*. Oxford.
- Walton, J. Michael. 1996. "Sophocles' *Electra*: Actors in Space." In Dunn 1996, 41–48.
- Wheeler, Graham. 2003. "Gender and Transgression in Sophocles' *Electra*." *CQ* 53.2: 377–88.
- Wiles, David. 1991. *The Masks of Menander: Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance*. Cambridge.
- . 1997. *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning*. Cambridge.
- . 2000. *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction*. Cambridge.
- Winkler, John J. and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds. 1990. *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*. Princeton.
- Woodard, Thomas. 1966. "The *Electra* of Sophocles." In Thomas Woodard, ed., *Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. 125–45.
- Xanthakis-Karamanos, G. 1980. *Studies in Fourth-Century Tragedy*. Athens.
- Zeitlin, Froma I. 1996. *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. Princeton.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rehm 1996: 53: "Without an exceptional actor in the title role [of Electra], the play has no more chance of success than does *Hamlet* without a Hamlet." See also Ringer 1998: 5.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Wiles 1997 and 2000; Ringer 1998; Dunn 1998; Goff; Rehm; Winkler and Zeitlin; Seale; Taplin 1977. One interesting exception is Taplin 1993, who addresses Hellenistic performance of tragedy and comedy out of necessity, since he is examining post-fifth-century south Italian vase paintings.

<sup>3</sup> On which see Xanthakis-Karamanos, who gathers compelling evidence for a vibrant theatrical culture that produced plenty of new tragedies well into the fourth century.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle consistently faults contemporary (usually nameless) tragic poets for falling away from the best practices of the later fifth century: see *Poet.* 6, 1450b5; 8, 1451a15; 9, 1451b30–52a1; 14, 1453a20–35; 15, 1454b20; 17, 1455a25; 18, 1456a1; 18, 1456a15–30; 24, 1459b35–60a1; 26, 1461b25–62a10.

<sup>5</sup> In the recent *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, a total of nine pages (112–20) are devoted to fourth-century tragedy, in Easterling's (1977b) fine essay "From Repertoire to Canon."

<sup>6</sup> See Gamel, esp. 323.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, *Frogs*, *Thesmophoriazousae*; Plato's *Republic* and *Ion*; Aristotle's *Poetics*; Demosthenes 18 and 19; Horace's *Art of Poetry*; the *Rhetoric to Herennius*; Quintilian; Pollux; Vitruvius. Many of these are often writing decades or centuries after the performances they describe, even though they tend to be privileged as sources by scholars of ancient drama.

<sup>8</sup> Slater 2 notes that attempts to situate performance criticism (here, of Aristophanes) in a historical context "need not necessarily exalt the specific first performance in antiquity over other performances."

<sup>9</sup> See Garton 23–24.

<sup>10</sup> See Saller 74, 81.

<sup>11</sup> Garton 26. More modern examples of this anecdotal pattern include the cowboys who supposedly shot up the screen in attempts to shoot the villains of early Westerns, and the shadow-puppet show attacked by a too-engaged audience of Maoris in the film "The Piano."

<sup>12</sup> See Lefkowitz 71, 158.

<sup>13</sup> On the history of this scholarly assumption, see Taplin 1977: 39–49. See also Csapo and Slater 260; Enders 75.

<sup>14</sup> See also Wiles 2000: 5.

<sup>15</sup> Easterling and Hall xx.

<sup>16</sup> Saller 81 notes that the punch line is much more likely to remain unchanged in different versions of an anecdote than almost any other detail (though see his 78). He also concedes that although anecdotes rarely provide reliable evidence of historical events, they can provide evidence of ideology and beliefs (82).

<sup>17</sup> See Gallagher and Greenblatt, chaps. 1–2, on the anecdote as providing "the touch of the real" and enabling "counterhistories" to be written.

<sup>18</sup> Fineman 57.

<sup>19</sup> See Lamberton; Pelling; Russell.

<sup>20</sup> Bassi 8.

<sup>21</sup> On Aulus Gellius, see Holford-Strevens, esp. 227–35; Baldwin. On Aelian, see Wilson's introduction to the recent (1997) Loeb edition of the *Varia Historia*.

<sup>22</sup> One modern analogue is the "urban myth"—an anecdote about anonymous people in some unpleasant or threatening situation that speaks to our fears about modern life, and is then happily told and retold by people even if it turns out that the story is not true. Some typical patterns include dangerous/disgusting items found in fast food ("Kentucky Fried Rat"), dangerous animals lurking in urban settings (alligators in the sewers), and gangs preying on innocent victims through tricks (shooting at drivers who flick their headlights at night). Ronald Regan's "Welfare Queen" anecdote is a famous example of someone influencing audiences by continuing to tell an urban myth after he learned it was not factually true. See Enders, esp. xxv–xxvii, 8–11.

<sup>23</sup> See Barish, esp. chaps. 1–2.

<sup>24</sup> Aeschines 2.156–57 points out that the comic actor Satyrus of Olynthia was famous for playing slaves, but was in fact a free man who conducted himself nobly. Aeschines' use of this example suggests that his audience might expect the opposite to be true: that the actor would be a slave, or at least servile, like his characters. See also Aristotle, *Poet.* 4, 1448b (dramatic poets choose genres according to their personalities).

<sup>25</sup> Plato's *Ion* depicts this stereotype, with a rhapsode "becoming" (though somewhat cynically) the various characters whose lines he sings. For a later example, see Plutarch, *Cic.* 5.4.

<sup>26</sup> Already in the fourth century, actors could be seen as insincere flatterers: Aristotle, *Rhet.* 3.2.10, 1405a23 observes about actors that "Some call them 'Dionysustoadies' [διονυσόλακας], but they call themselves 'artists' [τεχνίτας] (these are both metaphorical, the former disparaging, the latter the opposite)." By the time of the Christian Scriptures, ὑποκριτής could mean "pretender, flatterer, hypocrite" (LSJ, s.h.v.). On the term, see Ghiron-Bistagne 115–19 (who argues that the modern sense of "hypocrite" was present by the fourth century); Pickard-Cambridge 126–27.

<sup>27</sup> Iranus and Praxiteles date from the first century B.C.E., and an unknown actor of the Imperial period won victories in both comedy and tragedy: O'Connor 43–44. On the Roman side, the only actor of whom we know to perform in both tragedy and comedy is the first-century Republican actor Roscius.

<sup>28</sup> *Republic* 395d, 605b, 608a–b.

<sup>29</sup> All translations are my own; the texts used are listed in the Works Cited.

<sup>30</sup> See also Aelian, *NA* 6.1 and *VH* 3.30.

<sup>31</sup> O'Connor 101. This kind of argument risks circularity, but the anecdote's punch line is "funnier" (i.e., more effective) if the line she quotes to him is from the recent play. It goes without saying that if Theodorus won the prize for acting in this play, he must have been playing the character Electra as the protagonist.

<sup>32</sup> On this etymology (*a-lektra*) see Wheeler 380; March 151; Ormand 62–63; Segal 1966: 494.

<sup>33</sup> Plutarch, *Mor.* 18c.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle praises Theodorus for the naturalness of his voice in delivery: "... and consider, for example, the voice of Theodorus compared to the voice of other actors; for his voice seemed to be that of the person who was speaking [i.e., the character], while those of other actors seemed to come from someone else" (... καὶ οἷον ἢ Θεο-)

δάρου φωνὴ πέπονθε πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἄλλων ὑποκριτῶν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ λέγοντος ἔοικεν εἶναι, αἱ δ' ἄλλότριάι, *Rhet.* 3.3, 1404b21–24). See Csapo and Slater 263–64; Ghiron-Bistagne 157.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander the Great.

<sup>36</sup> Scholars tend to correct Aelian and substitute the name of Merope, since she is the wife of Kresphontes, while Aerope is the wife of Atreus; see Ghiron-Bistagne 157. Aelian may have misremembered the name of the role; his memory, or his sources, do not seem impeccable, since he calls Theodorus a “tragic poet” rather than a “tragic actor.”

<sup>37</sup> Wiles 1991: 12 analyzes this anecdote as an example of the “double awareness” of the theatrical audience.

<sup>38</sup> Plutarch, *Pel.* 29.

<sup>39</sup> Demosthenes 19.246.

<sup>40</sup> Demosthenes 18.242; O'Connor 101 and 54 n. 3.

<sup>41</sup> O'Connor 101. See also Hall 1999: 103; Ghiron-Bistagne 157–58.

<sup>42</sup> Although see now Easterling and Hall 12, 130 n. 8, 328.

<sup>43</sup> On the metatheatrical dimension of the urn, see Dunn 1998: 439; Ringer 1998: 1–7, 185–91 and 1996: 93–100; Batchelder 32–35; Wiles 1991: 13–14, 17; Segal 1981: 287–88.

<sup>44</sup> Discussions include Easterling 2002: 335–36; Ringer 1998: 1–7; Csapo and Slater 264; Green 57. Ringer is troubled by Gellius's account that Polus took his son's ashes from the tomb dressed as Electra and “filled the whole place” with genuine lamentation; he wonders if Gellius describes a rehearsal in a graveyard. This seems to make too much of fuzzy word order; Gellius does not seem to be concerned with strict chronology in the anecdote, with whether Polus dressed in costume before removing the urn (note his vagueness about how long Polus refrained from acting), so much as the effect of the real urn on the performance and on the audience.

<sup>45</sup> Baldwin 39 mentions the anecdote in passing, but says nothing about its origin. Holford-Strevens 173 argues that the anecdote is concerned with the actor, not the playwright, and that the anecdote's exposition of the play's plot “suggests that Gellius' public could not be expected to have read the play.” See also Holford-Strevens, chap. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Ringer 1998: 2.

<sup>47</sup> McClure 7, 41, 44–46.

<sup>48</sup> Zeitlin 341–74, esp. 361–63.

<sup>49</sup> Plutarch, *Mor.* 1c.

<sup>50</sup> *Electra* is often seen as Sophocles' “problem” play because of the apparently straightforward celebration of the matricide. Critics tend to split into two camps, which might be termed (borrowing from the analogous debate in Vergilian studies over the *Aeneid*) *optimist* and *pessimist*. The “optimists” argue that we are to take the celebration of the matricide by the Chorus and the characters in earnest; the “pessimists” look for hints that the celebration of the matricide is undermined by the poet. For recent accounts of the debate, see Wheeler 377–78; MacLeod 4–20 (an especially thorough summing up of the scholarship), 166–84; Foley 146; March 15–20 (an “optimist”) Ewans 123–27 (a “pessimist”); Ringer 1998: 128–30, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Ringer 1998: 179 translates ἀνδρείας simply and literally as “manlike.”

<sup>52</sup> See Foley 160–64; Ormand 74–75; Ringer 1998: 130, 179–80. Seale 68 states that Electra's courage in this scene “is characterised as explicitly masculine, against the



submissiveness of Chrysothemis," and 69 that she is "heir to the man's part, to a vengeance which is both noble and just."

<sup>53</sup> On the difficulties of interpreting this exit, see Rehm 1996: 57.

<sup>54</sup> Ringer 1998: 201 speculates that the actor playing Electra (in the fifth-century performance) might have used a "violent gesture to enact the offstage murder" when she urges Orestes to strike the second blow.

<sup>55</sup> In addition to lamenting the deaths of her father and brother, Electra also laments that she has no man and no children (164, 187–88). Seaford 318–19 sees Electra's isolation as similar to the liminal status of a bride, except that it is a paradoxically permanent and absolute liminality. Ormand reads Electra's permanent liminal unmarried state as a way Electra creates "room for herself to act" (62) and "a source of power" (67).

<sup>56</sup> March 11; see also Seale 79; Woodard 126.

<sup>57</sup> Woodard 126: "She chants more lyrics than any other Sophoclean protagonist." On lament as a traditionally feminine genre, see McClure 40–47, 54. See also Carson.

<sup>58</sup> March 143–44; see also Foley 156.

<sup>59</sup> Seale 59.

<sup>60</sup> Kitzinger 322 n. 59 details the way the sound of Electra's words in this speech and even the pitch-accents add to the impression of "passionate grief." Rehm 1996: 56 suggests that Electra could hold the urn "tight to her womb, as if to fill the void of her own childlessness" in performance. Segal 1966: 517: "She treats the urn as if it were the body of her child: she holds it close, refuses to give it up, complains of the loss of her 'nurture' (1143–44, 1147), calls it 'that which is dearest to her' (*ta philtata*, 1208)." See also Segal 1995: 124.

<sup>61</sup> Ringer 1998: 132 describes the *Electra* as "scored" like an opera for three actors' "voices," but makes no acknowledgement that more than one voice ever played Electra—despite his own earlier discussion of the Polus anecdote (1–7).

<sup>62</sup> See Ringer 1998: 147–48; Batchelder 58–59; Kitzinger 307.

<sup>63</sup> Sophocles, *Elect.* 107, 147–49, 1077. On the image of the nightingale in this play, see Ringer 1998: 142–45; Batchelder 52; Segal 1966: 492–93, 525; Woodard 132. On the nightingale's association with female song in tragedy generally, see Hall 2002: 7.

<sup>64</sup> Woodard 130 sees "a distinction between a masculine world of *erga*, in which *logoi* are mere servants, and a feminine world of *logoi*, here laments, which preclude physical effectiveness but have another power all their own" throughout most of the play, until Electra's *logoi* are reconciled to her brother's *erga*. Kitzinger presents a more nuanced view of the *logos/ergon* debate: she argues that Electra's vision of justice, as demonstrated by her in the first half of the play, is the complete "harmony" of her words, actions, and character, and that the *paidagogos*'s lie and Orestes' plot in the second half of the play silence Electra and compel her to use deceitful language. Kitzinger's argument corresponds rather neatly with my own, since this "harmony" of language, action, and character is precisely what makes a person "sincere." See also Wheeler 379; Segal 1995: 43 and 1966: 532.

<sup>65</sup> Walton 42.

<sup>66</sup> Ringer 1998: 146–52, 156–60 argues that Electra "performs" or "stages" action all the way through, although he contradicts himself in places (145).

<sup>67</sup> On Electra's appearance (including the suggestion that the actor would have worn a mask with close-shorn hair signifying mourning) and constant stage presence,

see Seale 58–59, 79. On Electra's unbounded, "frozen" mourning, see Kitzinger 305; Seaford. Batchelder 69–71 suggests that the girdle Electra persuades Chrysothemis to leave on Agamemnon's grave instead of Clytemnestra's offerings is a fitting symbol for Electra herself: unadorned (οὐ χλιδιστὶς ἡσκημένον, 452), straightforward, honest, sincere.

<sup>68</sup> Kitzinger 323 n. 60 discusses various scholarly opinions about the effect of this scene on the audience, which knows that Orestes is standing next to Electra; against those who feel the dramatic irony makes the scene feel "worked up," Kitzinger rightly insists that "the nature of her language does not allow us to question her sincerity; rather we are impressed by the futility of her real suffering."

<sup>69</sup> See Foley 157, 166; Ormand 60, 76; Kitzinger 324; Seale 73; Woodard 140. One critic who disputes the standard criticism of Orestes as callous in this passage is MacLeod 162–64. At this point, Electra is singing and Orestes is speaking; Silveira Cyrino 91–92 argues that this kind of lopsided duet (in Euripides) typically results in the "emotional" woman's ultimate subordination to the "calmer" man.

<sup>70</sup> Kitzinger 325 reads this as a sign that Electra is already embracing deception. What Electra actually says, however, is that those inside the house will misread her (genuine) tears of joy for her (usual, equally genuine) tears of sorrow (1309–13); she does not say she will weep in order to deceive them, only that her tears will be conveniently misread. Indeed, she seems at this point still unable to suppress her sincere emotions.

<sup>71</sup> Seale 61: "There is no façade or mystery about Electra, no inner depths or ambiguity of character to be discovered. Every emotion and attitude is made explicit in her immoderate and unceasing lamentation, in her defiant public stance, symbolised on-stage in her location and agitated movements outside the house, even in her physical appearance." Segal 1966: 512: "She has little skill at deceptive *logoi* herself, and so is an innocent victim of such *logoi* when employed by others." MacLeod 166 notes that the "pessimistic" critics routinely claim that "Elektra has suffered irreparable damage to her 'personality' or 'soul'"—a claim that is clearly dependent on a psychological reading of her character. This kind of reading, I would argue, is encouraged by Electra's "sincere," nontheatrical character in relation to everyone else in the play.

<sup>72</sup> Haun 47.

<sup>73</sup> Haun 47.

<sup>74</sup> So Segal 1966: 475 notes: "Treachery and deceit, in the form of *doloi* and *logoi*, seldom come off well in Sophocles. His heroes, in sharp distinction from those of Euripides, look back to the Homeric ideal of *aretê*: bold forthrightness, nobility of temper and purpose, singlemindedness, lack of duplicity."

<sup>75</sup> Easterling 1977: 125–26.

<sup>76</sup> Such as, for example, Medea, or Creon in *Antigone*.

<sup>77</sup> Vita 6; Lefkowitz 78, 161. Hall 2002: 9, however, seems to take the claim of the Vita at face value. On the lottery system, see Pickard-Cambridge 93–95.