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Language and Character in Euripides' *Electra*

Evert van Emde Boas



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Electra

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To my parents

Preface

I think of this book as the product of a marriage between linguistics and literary interpretation. To some, this may feel like a shotgun wedding; but if I can convince others that this can be a fruitful union between partners who give each other mutual reinforcement, then I will consider it a success.

The book is based on my Oxford DPhil dissertation, submitted in 2010. The present text is considerably revised, even if the overall structure and a good deal of the argument are fundamentally unchanged. The revisions took much longer than hoped and foreseen: uninterrupted teaching obligations and several other projects left precious little time for the necessary work. If this unwelcome delay has one positive consequence, it is that I have been able to take into account several works on Greek linguistics, Greek tragedy, Euripides, and *Electra* specifically that appeared in the intervening years. Once the decision was made that I could not in good faith ignore these works, it became clear that my book would in fact be much improved by incorporating insights from three (!) new commentaries on the play,¹ as well as from various other important works of scholarship.² Had the book appeared sooner, some parts of it and points in it would probably have been outmoded almost at once (it is my hope that this will be less the case for the revised text).

Many thanks are in order. My dual approach was reflected in a pair of dissertation supervisors (one for the literary aspect, one for the

¹ Roisman and Luschnig 2011, Distilo 2012, Cropp 2013. I have reviewed two of these in van Emde Boas 2016. In fact almost nothing will be said in this book about Roisman and Luschnig 2011—a commentary geared towards a different audience (and see the justified reviews by Cropp 2011 and Kovacs 2012). The appearance of the second edition of Cropp's commentary (2013, revised from the 1988 edition) gave rise to a particular quandary: the most straightforward solution—changing all my references to conform to the new edition, on the principle that only the more recent edition can be said to reflect Cropp's thinking—turned out not always to be practicable (see my review for various nuanced changes of phrasing between the editions), and I have therefore retained some references to the older text.

² Many works could be listed here (and several will be found in the bibliography), but I am thinking particularly of Bakker 2010a, Mastronarde 2010, Rutherford 2012, Roisman 2013, Giannakis 2014.

linguistic), and twice as many in this case really meant twice as good. In Oxford, Bill Allan has taught me more about Euripides and tragedy than he might realize, and if I say anything of interest about the interpretation of *Electra* in this book, it is due in part to his constant call for 'pay-off'. He oversaw the project with patience (which I must at times have tried) and level-headedness (which I always appreciated). In Amsterdam I have known Albert Rijksbaron as a teacher, a supervisor twice over, and now as a collaborator (on a different book) and as a friend. In each of these guises, his vast knowledge of Greek has been an inspiration, his keenly discriminating mind a trusty guide.

My examiners, Felix Budelmann and Judith Mossman, deserve gratitude not only for their comments and the most enjoyable two-and-a-half hours of talking about Greek tragedy that I've ever had, but also for recommending the book to the Oxford Classical Monograph committee. Both of them are now valued colleagues and collaborators on different projects, including my present work at the Calleva Centre (Magdalen College, Oxford), where I am in the fortunate position of working with Felix Budelmann on a daily basis.

Richard Rutherford acted as OUP's assigned adviser during the conversion from dissertation to book, and provided helpful notes during that process. The OUP reader was extremely generous with insightful comments, and suggested the new title (a great improvement over the dissertation's bland 'Linguistic Studies in Euripides' *Electra*).

Earlier versions of two chapters were read by Philomen Probert and Angus Bowie, and by Scott Scullion and Adrian Kelly; talking through these chapters with them sharpened my thinking and prevented many errors. The questions and comments of audiences at various seminars and conferences where I presented material have also led to numerous improvements: pride of place belongs to that august institution, Oxford's graduate work-in-progress seminars (long may WiP thrive!). In general, the graduate community in Oxford is not mentioned often enough in these prefaces; its members made my DPhil experience a richer and better one.

Of my great teachers at school and university, I would like to mention Jan Krimp and Ton Jansen (Haarlem), Fred Naiden (Tulane, New Orleans), and Irene de Jong (Amsterdam). Teachers turn into colleagues, and for their support and friendship (while this book was lurking in the background), many thanks are due to my fellow classicists (too many to list by name) at the University of Amsterdam,

the University of Groningen, Leiden University, VU University Amsterdam, and the University of Oxford.

My time as a graduate in Oxford (first for the MSt, then for the DPhil) would not have been possible without the generous support of the VSB-Fonds, the 'Talentenebeurs' of the Netherlands Ministry of Education, the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Corpus Christi College, and the Charles Oldham Fund. In acquiring aid from the last of these sources, the assistance of my College Adviser at Corpus Christi College, Stephen Harrison, and of then College President, Sir Tim Lankester, was instrumental.

At the Press, Georgina Leighton, Lisa Eaton, and Manuela Tecusan swiftly and expertly saw the book through to publication. I am grateful for their warm support.

For sending me their work to read (and view), I thank Mary-Kay Gamel, Ann Suter, Margaret Kitzinger, and Patrick Finglass.

Finally, for various reasons, I thank Glenn Lacki, Laura Bok, Tori McKee, Liz Lucas, Rob Cioffi, Julianne Kerkhecker, Luuk Huitink, and Mathieu de Bakker. Anouk Petersen was there with support in all the important ways at all the important moments. *Optimis parentibus*, who made it all possible, this work is gratefully dedicated.

A Note on Citations, Abbreviations, and Cross-referencing

References to the works of ancient authors follow the conventions adopted in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Hornblower et al. 2012), except that speeches by the orators are always referred to by number and Euripides' *Heracles* is abbreviated *Her.* instead of *HF*. Fragments from tragedy are cited according to the relevant volumes of *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*. In the bibliography, journal titles follow the abbreviations in *L'Année Philologique*. Sigla for Euripides' plays are usually not preceded by 'Eur.' when no other authors are discussed, unless this specification adds clarity.

Commentaries and editions are normally cited by author name (and title of the play) only; thus 'Basta Donzelli *app. crit.*' refers to the *apparatus criticus* in her Teubner edition of the *Electra*, and 'Fraenkel *ad loc.*' or 'Fraenkel on Aesch. Ag. 1' refers to the relevant note in his *Agamemnon*. 'Cropp', unless otherwise indicated, refers to the second edition of his commentary (2013). All these works may be found in the bibliography. Occasionally I also mention the proposer of a textual emendation by name only: for full details in such cases, the reader is referred to Basta Donzelli's edition. Otherwise, all works apart from standard reference works are cited using the author-year format.

In keeping with OUP's preferred house style (and with an eye to the book's digital edition), I have inserted cross-references to other points in the book only by section number or footnote number (with the chapter added only if the reference is to a different one), rather than by page number. It is my hope that this will, on the whole, make the reader's job in tracing my argument easier rather than more difficult. Translations of Greek and foreign languages throughout the text are my own. For the use of the asterisk (*), see the Introduction, §1.2.

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Introduction

Modern Linguistics and Euripides' Electra

1. AIMS, APPROACHES, OUTLINE

1.1. Reading, linguistically

This book is first and foremost a literary reading of Euripides' *Electra*, a play that remains the subject of great interest and great controversy. In the course of my reading, I will often draw the same kind of conclusions (about the text and its interpretation, characters, themes, and so forth) as have been drawn by scholars who worked on the play previously. But the way in which I aim to reach those conclusions is different from what is usual in work on Greek tragedy: throughout, the basis of my analysis will be the play's *language*. This may seem a vacuous statement concerning a play of which we have nothing left but its language,¹ yet, in a discipline where 'research into Greek

¹ This statement requires some modification, of course—but not much. Almost all of the 'evidence' for what we 'know' about *Electra* is circumstantial: (1) its relation to works using the same mythical material, including Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* and Sophocles' *Electra* (whether the latter comes before or after it; see §4.4); (2) its dating in relation to that of other Euripidean works (which is insecure: see Basta Donzelli 1978: 27–71; long-held beliefs about allusions to contemporary events were disproven by Zuntz 1955: 63–71); (3) its place in the Euripidean oeuvre and within tragedy more generally (with regard to the development of this form, its literary techniques, etc.); and (4) acting and performance aspects of the first performance (see n. 8). There are very few—and largely inconsequential—scholia (see Keene 1893b), five papyrus fragments (gathered in Basta Donzelli 1995a: xxxvii–xxxviii), and Euripides' version of the story does not appear to be represented in vase painting (the play is accordingly absent from Taplin 2007). The curious reference to this play in Plutarch's *Lysander* (15.3) seems to suggest that *Electra* was known well enough in antiquity, disproving the view that it 'has never been a terribly popular play' (Whitehorne 1978: 5). For the play's reception, see Bakogianni 2011 and Luschniak 2015.

tragedy' has sometimes come to be synonymous with 'research into the (sociopolitical, religious, and historical) context of Greek tragedy', such a singular focus is worth making explicit upfront.² More importantly, in approaching the play's language, I plan to travel along some different avenues from those normally taken by classicists in linguistic enquiry: my close reading will be heavily informed by modern linguistic methodology, and it is a secondary aim of the work to show that this methodological apparatus, developed in the last half century or so in general linguistics, can teach us much about tragic language and how we should interpret it.

In saying that I will follow 'different avenues' I do not wish to discount the rich body of work emerging in recent decades that applies modern linguistic theory to ancient languages.³ Yet not all of the linguistic approaches I will adopt have been utilized, or utilized as fully as they can be, even in this current of research; and no one (to my knowledge) has attempted to apply all of them, combined, to a single text in order to see what they can tell us about the interpretation of that text.

A methodological problem immediately rears its head: can we hope to apply techniques that were developed in the study of modern languages (usually in their everyday, spoken form) fruitfully to ancient Greek (or to any 'dead' language), let alone to the highly stylized Greek of tragedy?⁴ The answer is a qualified 'yes': we can, and for various reasons. First of all, linguistic theory is often concerned with identifying 'universal' features of language usage. It must be

² I do not mean to suggest that such a context is unimportant, only that it will not be central to my approach. There seems, in fact, to have been something of a pendulum swing towards work with a focus on language since the dissertation on which this book is based was submitted: one may point here, e.g. to Rutherford 2012; and note the review by Wright (2013).

³ Nor is it a coincidence that much of that body of work derives from what is sometimes called 'Dutch scholarship' (even if this is somewhat unfair to the numerous scholars of other nationalities who work in the field). Book titles such as *Grammar as Interpretation* (Bakker 1997a) and *The Language of Literature* (Allan and Buijs 2007) may be taken as emblematic of this tradition and explain my affinity with it. Outside classics, my approach coincides with work in the (modern) field of stylistics. The outstanding introduction to this field is Leech and Short 2007; good introductory matter may also be found in Toolan 1998. Within this tradition, I found the work of Toolan (1990) and that of Culpeper (e.g. 2001, 2002, 2009) on characterization especially instructive.

⁴ 'Stylization' itself is not a straightforward concept, of course. For some discussion, see Silk 1996 and Rutherford 2010, 2012.