



[Electra](#), by Sophocles

In A Nutshell

Sophocles was a Greek playwright living roughly around 400 BC. He and his two contemporaries, Aeschylus and Euripides, are some of the most important Ancient Greek playwrights. Aeschylus, who was older than Sophocles, was the big man around town (or at least, the big playwright around town) when Sophocles made his entrance onto the theatre scene. At the tender age of 28, Sophocles bested his elder by taking first prize in the major theatre competition of the year, establishing himself as a real player in the theatrical arena. Though he produced over 120 plays in his lifetime, sadly very few are still around for us to read today.

Sophocles made some noteworthy changes to the *status quo* of Greek theatre, most notably popularizing single, free-standing plays as opposed to the lengthy trilogies favored by writers like Aeschylus. There are also differences of style and technique between the three playwrights. Euripides marginalized the Chorus more and more over the course of his career, until it was almost tangential. Aeschylus was way more old school and always had the Chorus front and center. Sophocles was somewhere in between the other two, which you'll see when you read *Electra*. To make things a bit more juicy, keep in mind that there was a major rivalry going between Euripides and Sophocles. They had great respect for each other but had radically different approaches to drama. Sophocles was the more conservative and generally sought to validate mythic traditions and heroes with his work. Euripides, not so much. In terms of dramatic structure, Sophocles liked tight logical plots, while Euripides wasn't afraid to

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loosen up a bit.

Sophocles's play *Electra* (410 B.C.) is based on the famous Greek Orestes myth. It tells the story of a young woman waiting for her brother to arrive so that they can avenge their father's death by murdering their mother and her new husband.

These are several different interpretations of the myth, and all three of the playwrights – Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus – wrote a play that dealt with this iconic myth in a slightly different way. Aeschylus features the story in his play *The Libation Bearers*, the second segment of a longer trilogy. Aeschylus's primary concern was the moral implications of murdering one's own family members. In the end of his play, the Furies end up pursuing Orestes for matricide (killing his mother). In Euripides's *Electra*, Electra and Orestes don't get off scot-free; they must somehow make up for murdering their mother. On the other hand, Euripides does not necessarily condemn the murdering siblings as strongly as Aeschylus does. Sophocles's *Electra* offers a third interpretation. First, Sophocles chose Electra rather than Orestes as the main character. Second, Sophocles's wasn't quite as concerned with morality as Aeschylus.

Or was he? Critics are divided in their readings of Sophocles's *Electra*. Some think that, like Aeschylus, Sophocles was concerned with the moral implications of matricide. Others think that he followed Homer in thinking that the murder was a noble and just act. There's only one way to find out... (Yes, we're talking about reading the play).

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Pylades never speaks or does anything except stand next to Orestes. What's the point of his character? Why have him in the play at all?
- 2 Does Sophocles give enough time at the end of the play for his audience to consider the moral implications of the murders?
- 3 What purpose do the choral songs have on our reading of the play?

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