

An analysis of how δίκη ('justice') and its associated values are presented and translated in two passages from Sophocles: Electra. What broader issues are raised and how would these be investigated further?

The concept of δίκη, or 'justice' has many subtle meanings and variations in Ancient Greek ranging from the primary definition given in LS (Liddell and Scotts, 'Greek-English Lexicon', Intermediate, 1889, page 202) of custom to right, judgement, lawsuit, penalty and vengeance. The OCD (Hornblower S, Oxford Classical Dictionary, 1996, Page 469) reference to Δίκη describes it as the, 'personification of justice' and the daughter of Zeus that, 'reports men's wrongdoing to Zeus'.

Sophocles' rendition of the tragic play Electra forms a useful focal point for the analysis of how dike and its associated values are presented and translated. As Kitto (Kitto, H.D.F, 'Greek Tragedy', 1997, Routledge Page 131, Section 4) pointed out, this play's, 'central problem is a problem of 'δίκη' ('Justice'). The play itself examines both the desire for justice by the children of the murdered Agamemnon as well as the arguments of justice by his wife (Clytaemnestra for his murder). All of this takes place under the watchful eye of Apollo, the God of both reason and prophecy, both of which play a part in the story that is told.

The first extract is that of the argument between Clytaemnestra and Electra (Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., 'Electra and other plays', pg 84-56, lines 518-543) concerning her justification for the murder of Agamemnon. In this extract we are presented with a selection of references to justice and how Clytaemnestra explains how she was right in her murder of her husband. At line 518 (Ibid.,) she complains at her portrayal as 'an unjust tyrant', presumably implying that she was not within her

right or custom to kill him. Between lines 524-526 (Ibid.,) she says that justice and duty are tied together and that her duty was to seek justice whilst Electra failed in this area. At line 535 (Ibid.,) she says, ‘why should he not be brought to justice for killing what was mine?’. In modern terms this could be considered simple revenge, or δίκην. She does not justify her action because of tradition or precedent, purely because he took something of hers. In lines 539-541 (Ibid.,) she argues that Agamemnon love might have been for the children of Menelaus and not his own, perhaps this is her argument for the murder being just, maybe justice on behalf of the unloved child. This is strange, especially as the remaining children conspire and eventually murder those responsible for their father’s death. They presumably feel otherwise. In just this one passage justice is used to mean custom, just, revenge and vengeance.

The second extract follows immediately after the news of Orestes death (Ibid., pg 91) when Clytaemnestra, after a brief moment of sorrow is joyous at the news that her life is now safe. In contrast we see that Electra is devastated (Ibid., line 789) at the news. The idea of justice and revenge is brought to a climax here as Clytaemnestra feels that, ‘Justice is done to him’. Would this be justice to Orestes for not doing ‘his duty’ or to Agamemnon for sacrificing his child? This compares well with the previous passage where Clytaemnestra accuses Electra of not doing her duty (Ibid., pg 84, line 526). Electra cries out to Λικη, ‘Goddess of Vengeance, hear and speak for the dead’.

It is clear from the many interpretations of δίκη and its use in Sophocles’ Electra that other, broader issues can be raised. The very concepts of justice, revenge, honour and

custom are exposed in detail. Understanding these issues and the language used requires further study of the period, language, laws, customs and traditions.

The most important issue raised by this play is that of how do we (or more specifically the Greeks watching the play) feel about matricide and its justification. Kitto (Kitto, H.D.F, 'Greek Tragedy', 1997, Routledge Page 131, Section 4) suggests that at the opening of the play that it is, 'the bright radiance of Apollo that prevails' and that he is appealing to the Homeric notion of Orestes act being one of 'simple merit'.

The portrayal of Orestes and Electra is also very interesting in that Electra's character is shown in a pitiful, depressed way and obsessed with vengeance upon her mother and her lover Aegisthus. Orestes, especially towards the play appears to take no pleasure in the task he must perform, as though it was his duty. The female is thus bent upon revenge whereas the male is merely carrying out his duty. This idea is consistent with Sophocles' target audience of male citizens but how close is it to the reality of that age? What other information is available on matricide and also the difference in attitude of the different sexes?

Sophocles was targeting a specific audience with his play but is his work a fair representation of the morals and attitudes of 5th century Athens. The story of Electra is based upon the legend of the house of Atreus and thus a portrayal of the earlier attitudes towards justice, revenge and order. The entire play is concerned with a series of murders and how just or unjust they are.

The ending of Electra produces according to Watling (Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., 'Electra and other plays', pg 215), a very, 'compact and completed story'. How do other plays deal with the final death scene and are Electra and Orestes as 'right' as Sophocles seems to suggest. To understand this concept of justice it

would be useful to find more information on Sophocles' contemporaries, especially other playwrights and their views on justice. This would be especially useful with *Electra* due to several other plays (Euripides melodrama *Electra* and Aeschylus' *Orestia*) covering the same material and period. These plays, specifically the *Orestia* cover the story after the final murder and give a much clearer account as to Orestes (and *Electra's*) justification.

Throughout the play we are told that justice is based upon what is set down as right or customary. Where does this definition of 'right' come from? It would be extremely useful to find out more of the specifics of Greek thought on maintaining a balance in society. Further investigation into the political debates in the law courts and the public discussions of the *Ecclesia* as to what the normal definition 'right' would be of much use. The philosophers Plato and by nature Socrates spent much thought on Greek morals and virtues and further reading, especially of Plato's *Protagoras* could shed light on Greek attitudes towards justice and the justification of murder. Havelock's work on the (Havelock. E. A, 'Greek concept of Justice', Cambridge, 1978) could assist here, especially comparing the contemporary ideas to those of legend.

Due to the subject matter being closer to the Heroic Age (around 1200 BCE approximately) of Homer it would also be important to study the actions of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra in more detail, especially in the account by Homer in his *Iliad*. A comparison of the attitudes towards justice then and those of classical Athens would put Sophocles' ideas into perspective.

The ethics of the murders and the justification of them have been investigated in much detail. Blundell (Blundell, M.W. *Block Three Offprints*, 'Helping Friends and Harming Enemies', 1989, pg 331) raises some interesting points comparing *Electra's*

admissions about her own faults yet placing justice for the murdered father higher in the scale compared to her faults. Electra suggests that, 'In evil circumstances there is a great necessity to practice evil things (Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., 'Electra and other plays', Lines 307-309) and Blundell (pg 331) says that this, 'denotes the force of principle' and this argument is certainly in keeping with the idea of a balance or custom. The comment of Electra's that, 'These things will be called insoluble.' is argued as Electra's own, 'characterisation of her misfortunes' thus showing that she herself is facing a moral dilemma and one that others may not fully appreciate. This work done by Blundell shows that further work in the area of principles and morals is of importance in understanding the issue shown in Electra. To understand more fully the idea of posed moral dilemma some reading in more recent literature would be advantageous.

An analysis of moral dilemmas portrayed by the Classical tragedians would be a start followed by a comparison of moral dilemmas in tragedy as compared to those in state life. Are there similar examples in the courts and if so what arguments were presented and what was the verdict? Adkins (Adkins, A.W.H. 'Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values', Oxford 1960) work appears to cover much of this ground and further reading here would be invaluable. His work in the area of (Adkins, A.W.H. 'Honour and Punishment') and (Adkins, A.W.H. 'Problems in Greek Popular Morality') also cover a great range of sources that could be of use. All of Adkins work is relatively old though and more recent study does seem more difficult to find. The bulk of research in this area appears to be between the 1950s-1970s with the odd exception. Williams. B has written several pieces on morality, ethics and luck and these may be of use to compare to Adkins.

The ideas presented in Electra would require further study in both modern literature concerning morals, ethics and justice whilst as well as comparisons to other plays of the same author and also plays of other tragedians. Ideally the analysis of the original Greek would help understand the context of some of the concepts but failing that, several different translations could assist.

Bibliography

Liddell and Scotts, 'Greek-English Lexicon', Intermediate, 1889, page 202

Hornblower S, Oxford Classical Dictionary, 1996, Page 469

Kitto, H.D.F, 'Greek Tragedy', 1997, Routledge Page 131, Section 4

Sophocles, Translator Watling, E.F., 'Electra and other plays', pg 84-56, lines 518-543

Blundell, M.W. Block Three Offprints, 'Helping Friends and Harming Enemies', 1989, pg 331

Bibliography for further study

Havelock. E. A, 'Greek concept of Justice', Cambridge, 1978)

Havelock's work is directly related to this study and thus should be of value. It is not terribly old (much research is from the 1950s and 1960s) and is a good starting area.

Adkins, A.W.H. 'Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values', Oxford 1960)

This study ties in perfectly with the idea of moral dilemmas, duty and especially justice. In 'Electra' we find our idea of our own values and those of the period to be challenged, this study may assist here.

Williams. B, 'Moral Luck', 1981, Cambridge

Williams. B, 'Problems of the self', 1973, Cambridge

Williams. B, 'Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy', 1985, Cambridge

Williams' work covered a wide range of ethical and morals areas and his research is relatively recent. 'Moral Luck', though not directly related will almost certainly have a few useful ideas concerning fate and possibly justification.

Plato, Translator Guthrie, W.K.C. 'Protagoras and Meno', 1956, Penguin Books

Plato discusses the idea of virtue in great depth in the 'Protagoras' and this could shed further light on the ideas of virtue, honour, duty and possibly justice.

Aeschylus, Translator Fagles, R, 'The Orestia', 1977, Penguin Books

Euripides, Editor Ferguson, J, "Medea and Electra", 1987, Bristol Classical Press

Another version of the story of Electra would be of great use, especially by another tragedian, in this case Euripides. This version is written as more of a melodrama.