

Dramatic space in Sophocles' Electra is handled in an unusual way that is interesting in its own right and contributes both to the concentrated portrait of its protagonist and to the difficulty of clearly judging the act of revenge.

Electra's sense of isolation helps to drive Sophocles' emotional and strong-willed character, and Walton ("Actors in Space") has noted the connection between her thematic alienation from other individuals and certain features of the staging. I first extend this argument by showing how the staging leaves Electra in limbo by blurring the boundary between inside and outside (compare Easterling, "Women in Tragic Space") and, more importantly, keeps her apart from the play's meaningful spaces (outside the family house, absent from her father's tomb, and present at neither murder she has passionately longed for).

Electra's situation -- in what I would call a negative dramatic space -- is in striking contrast to that of her counterparts in Aeschylus and Euripides. In Libation Bearers, Electra's position at her father's tomb is crucial, since here she first converts the libations into a prayer for revenge and then joins with her brother in summoning Agamemnon's assistance before finally leaving the tomb to take up her place in her father's house. Euripides subverts this central location by placing Electra before a farmer's cottage on the outskirts of Mycene and by substituting for the seat of paternal power a female and domestic scene of carrying water and preparing for childbirth. Sophocles' Electra, by contrast, occupies neither kind of space but is always on the margins (with the result that as Rehm, "Public Spaces, Private Voices," and Lloyd, Sophocles, Electra, both observe, the most significant feature of the staging is the central door as a boundary between inside and out).

It follows that the drama requires an unusual understanding of theatrical space. Whereas readings of stage action (as in Taplin, Stagecraft) assume what we might call a stage language constructed from meaningful spaces (tomb, palace) and meaningful things (hair, footprint), Sophocles' stage language in this play proceeds by negation -- an effect that extends to the tomb of Agamemnon (the tomb is unseen and the grave-offerings are considered meaningless by Electra), to the play's central property (the urn, we know, is not really an urn), and to the remarkable account of Orestes' death (the scene at Delphi, we likewise know, is a fiction). I suggest in conclusion that this negative use of dramatic space not only accentuates Electra's isolation but separates the plot of revenge from those theatrical markers (e.g. Agamemnon's tomb in Aeschylus) that would give it meaning and make it intelligible.