INNER NATURE AND OUTWARD APPEARANCE IN EURIPIDES’ ELECTRA

Abstract

This paper presents a new interpretation of Euripides’ Electra centred on the issue of hereditary excellence. The question of how nobility is to be defined and recognised forms a unifying theme of this work and is of crucial importance for the development of the plot. It is argued here that nobility is key to understanding two much discussed passages: the great speech of Orestes and the recognition scene.

Key words: Tragedy, Euripides, Greek Poetry, Electra, Orestes

Introduction

Nature (φύσις) was an abiding topic of interest for Euripides, as even a cursory study of his plays and fragments will confirm.1 ‘Nature’ refers to the belief that the behaviour of individuals can be determined by inherent character traits that are passed down through families. Though education might play a greater or lesser role in the transference of these characteristics, the Greeks also believed that they were inherited through the bloodline.2 Debates on the essence of nature and its identification form the crux of many tragedies, especially those where the noble hero is suffering from unexpected exile or poverty; where his identity (and therefore lineage) is unknown; or where the mettle of a youthful protagonist is still to be tried. In these dramas, the good birth and resulting inner nobility of the hero is either unproven or cannot be easily determined by outward signs, such as wealth or physique.

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1 E.g. Heracl. 297-328; JT 609-10; Or. 126-9, 1676-7; Alexander fr. 61b, 61c; Alcmeon in Corinth fr. 75; Antiope fr. 206; Archelaus fr. 231, 232; Bellerophon fr. 285.11-4; Captive Melanippe fr. 495.40-3; Stheneboea fr. 661.1-3; Phoenix fr. 810, 812 (all references to tragic fragments are to TrGF). For studies of φύσις in drama see Falkner (1983) 289-300; Conacher (1998); Carlevale (2000) 26-60; Egli (2003) 211-14.

2 Dover (1974) 83-95 provides a full list of relevant passages.
Here I suggest that Euripides has structured the action of his Electra around precisely this question of how to determine not just Orestes’ identity, but also his innate character and the consequences of such an inheritance.

The issue of the identification of innate character has not passed unnoticed in previous commentaries and discussions of the Electra: Denniston and Cropp, in particular, have provided very full discussions. Yet its significance for the interpretation of the play has perhaps not been fully realised. I suggest that an understanding of the concept of φύσις can provide answers to two problems that are fundamental to our interpretation of the play. First, why did Euripides invent a new character, the farmer, and so remove the action ‘from the epic-aristocratic world . . . into the realistic world of the fifth century’? Second, what is the purpose of two apparent digressions: a lengthy speech by Orestes on the identification of good character in human beings (367-400) and an apparently awkward parody of Aeschylus’ Libation Bearers in the delayed recognition scene (518-44)?

On the second of these two problems, the simplest but most radical suggestion has been to excise lines 373-9, 383-90 and 518-44 as irrelevant and, therefore, most probably inauthentic. Those who prefer less drastic remedies have claimed that the play’s supposed defects are in fact deliberate. In arguing against the proposed deletion of 518-44, Lloyd-Jones contented himself with observing that a parody of Aeschylus does not need to ‘expedite the action of the play’ if ridicule is its main or only aim. Alternatively, Goff has interpreted the

3 Denniston (1939) 80-2; Cropp (2012) 2-3; see also Egli (2003) 225-7.
4 Webster (1971) 34. On the methodological problems with applying the term ‘realism’ to the play, see Goff (2000).
5 The authenticity of 373-9 and 386-90 was first questioned by von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1875) 190-3; that of 518-44 by Mau (1877) 291-301, a suggestion revived by Fraenkel (1950) III 821-6. For recent summaries and bibliography see Cropp (2012) 161-2, 180 and Distilo (2012) 163-72.
6 Lloyd-Jones (1961) 179. On parody in Euripides, see Davies (1998) 395-400. Cropp (2012) 176 nevertheless deems humour alone as a ‘weak explanation’ for the oddities of lines 518-44.
‘perverse anagnorisis’ by means of the scar as an explicit ‘invitation to the audience to “recognise” the scene’s poetic pedigree’. In her recent study of metapoetry in Euripides, Torrance has similarly viewed the recognition scene in the Electra as an ‘invitation to reflect on the conventions of dramatic production’. Wohl echoes this approach in pointing out that the play raises and then seemingly dashes the prospect of a demotic hero in the farmer. The purpose of this volte-face is, she assumes, to show the limitations of a genre dedicated to the glorification of aristocratic heroes. From this perspective, the problem is not textual but a failure to understand the play’s metapoetics.

Halporn and Cropp, however, have stressed that, though Euripides may well be evoking previous versions of the myth, all parts of the text should nevertheless be relevant to the development of the plot in some way. What is needed is a coherent scheme or structure that might excuse the play’s eccentricities and explain elements seemingly unmotivated by the plot. Some have supposed that Euripides’ aim was to develop (and potentially highlight deficiencies in) the psychological character of his dramatis personae, an approach which has been endorsed most recently in Van Emde Boas’ examination of language and characterisation in the Electra. Cropp points out that Orestes’ apparently ‘snobbish and superficial’ musings on the criteria for nobility are in fact both a necessary part of his disguise and, ironically, a set of standards ‘applicable to his own conduct [that] will be

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7 Goff (1991) 261; cf. Goff (2000) 93.
8 Torrance (2013) 15.
9 Wohl (2015a); (2015b) 62-85; cf. Michelini (1987) 229-30.
10 Halporn (1983) 105-6; Cropp (2012) 176.
11 See e.g. Morwood (1981) 368 for a ‘pattern from allure to destruction’.
12 Van Emde Boas (2017) 61-2; on the negative portrayal of Electra see: Kitto (1939) 334 ‘callous to the verge of insanity’; Gellie (1981) 2-3: ‘very ordinary and silly’; on Orestes see Denniston (1939) xxvii ‘an unattractive character’; Kitto (1939) 338 ‘no bold hero’; Tarkow (1981) 147; Raeburn (2000) 155-6; on the deficiencies of such approaches, see however Lloyd (1986) and Michelini (1987) 187-98.
recalled when the matricide is revealed at the end as a pitiless and ignoble act.'

Similarly, for Goldhill the ‘trite’ and ‘clumsy’ rhetoric of Orestes in lines 367-400 is deliberate and central to his characterisation. Its overall purpose is to prompt the audience into questioning the heroes of myth, just as for Wohl the ‘empty heroism’ of Orestes, when compared to the farmer, is intended to show that elitism is equally ‘just an empty form’. In the case of Electra at 518-44, Gallagher believes that her ‘sophistic’ and ultimately erroneous logic looks forward to her later arguments for matricide and their disastrous consequences. The supposed parody has as its primary target not Aeschylus, but Electra herself and her model, the sophists.

Here I would agree with those who assert that Orestes’ speech and the recognition scene are both textually sound and integral to the plot. However, I suggest that this is a play less concerned with characterisation than what the Greeks would term character, that is the marks of inherent nature and the consequences that follow from being, and being identified as, a noble man. In the recognition scene of Aeschylus’ Libation Bearers, Orestes’ only concern is to establish his identity. For Euripides, the question of identity is linked in the Electra with the problem, equally common in tragedy, of determining a person’s nature.

1. Nature: what does it mean and why does it matter?

The part of nature (φύσις) that matters most in Greek tragedy consists of moral qualities. The heroes of tragedy are those who are inherently and unavoidably good men and women. The terms most commonly used to describe good nature are εὐγένεια and γενναίοτης, also translated here as ‘nobility’. Aristotle defines the former as specifically ‘being of good birth’,

13 Cropp (2012) 7; cf. Van Ende Boas (2017) 165-9.
14 Goldhill (1986a) 165, 170; Wohl (2015a) 69-70; cf. Tarkow (1981) 144, on Euripides’ desire to depict Orestes as ‘fundamentally unheroic’. On Orestes’ sophistic rhetoric, see also Egli (2003) 227.
15 Gallagher (2003).
and the latter as the quality of ‘not departing from one’s own nature (φύσις)’, be it good or bad. This ‘good birth’ or ‘nature’ is demonstrated by certain patterns of behaviour. Among animals, for example, the lion exhibits a brave, free and ‘noble’ character (τὰ δ’ ἐλευθέρια καὶ ἀνδρεία καὶ εὐγενή, οἷον λέων), whereas the wolf is wild, cunning and ‘true to his nature’ (τὰ δὲ γενναία καὶ ἄγρια καὶ ἐπίβουλα, οἷον λύκος, HA 488b16-18). For the tragedians, the distinction made here between εὐγένεια and γενναίος would perhaps have seemed overly nice, not only because they routinely use the adjectives εὐγενής and γενναῖος equally as terms of approval, but also because a protagonist of good birth aims to remain true to that nature. In either case these terms may designate individuals as those who are both morally and naturally good and who instinctively behave in a manner befitting their breeding.

Aristotle’s lion finds many parallels among the heroes of tragedy. Their good birth means they are good: brave and strong, but also indefatigably loyal to friends and unable to act in a shameful manner. Those who come short of this demanding code of behaviour are dismissed as bad men (κακοί). Aeschylus has Eteocles describe the Theban Melanippus in just such a manner:

μάλ’ εὐγενὴ τε καὶ τὸν Αἰσχύνης θρόνον
timónta kai στυγοῦνθ’ ὑπέρφρονας λόγους,
aἰσχρὸν γὰρ ἁγγός, μὴ κακὸς δ’ εἶναι φίλει.

One truly well born who honours the throne of Shame and hates arrogant words, for he is idle in deeds of infamy and desires not to be a bad man.

(Sept. 409-11)

16 εὐγενής μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ γένους, γενναίον δὲ τὸ μὴ ἐξετάμονον ὡς τῆς αὐτοῦ φύσεως. HA 488b18-20; cf. Rhet. 1390b21-3.
17 For γενναῖος as a complimentary term, see Aesch. Ag. 613-14, 1305, Eum. 625; Soph. Aj. 1355, El. 129, 287, OT 1469, Trach. 308-9, Phil. 50-1, 475-6, 1068, OC 7-8, 569, 1042-3, 1636-40; Eur. Hec. 591-2, Ion 237-40, Or. 1060-4, fr. 232, 329, and 1066.
Iphigenia in Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris* reacts to Orestes’ determination to die for his friend by similarly praising his good birth and nature:

ὦ λῆμ’ ἀριστον, ὡς ἅπ’ εὐγενοῦς τινος

ρίζης πέρφυκας τοῖς φίλοις τ’ ὀρθῶς φίλος.

Oh stout heart, indeed you are grown from some noble stock, a true friend to your friends!

(609-10)

This mindset can lead to disaster for the hero and those around him, as in the case of Hippolytus, who according to Artemis was destroyed by his nobility (τὸ δ’ εὐγενές σε τῶν φρενῶν ἀπόλεσσον, *Hipp.* 1390). But even in the face of suffering and death, tragic protagonists cannot act in a manner contrary to this inherent nature: a disposition that is summed up in the pithy maxim of Ajax that ‘to live well or die well is what a well-born man must do’.18 Knox termed this attitude the ‘heroic temper’.19 Although he believed it to be most clearly shown in Sophocles’ heroes, it would be a mistake to view the inner nature that forms the basis for the ‘heroic temper’ as something uniquely Sophoclean. Rather, as we shall see, the idea of a heroic nature is equally central to many of the plays of Euripides.

If φύσις in tragedy refers to moral quality, then we might suppose that εὐγένεια or γενναιότης should as readily mean ‘noble in character’ as ‘noble in birth’. Yet moral character is not the result of chance or choice, but of good parentage. As the child of good fathers, a character in Euripides’ *Archelaus* (probably the Heraclid Archelaus himself) gives his host hope in his difficulties (πατέρων γὰρ ἐπιγενέων ἐλπίδας διδᾶς γεγώς, fr. 231.2). Good behaviour on the part of the hero reveals, and is explained by, good family background.

Euripides’ Orestes is thus the noble son of a noble father (εὐγενῆς δ’ ἅπ’ εὐγενοῦς, *Or.*

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18 ἄλλ’ ἢ καλὸς ζῆν ἢ καλὸς τεθνηκέναι / τὸν εὐγενῆ χρῆ, *Aj.* 479-80.
19 Knox (1964), especially 1-27.
1676), while in the *Rhesus* Hector is ‘an excellent son of an excellent man’ (ἔσθλος ἔσθλῳ παῖ, 388). Neoptolemus in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* is similarly styled as the son of an excellent father (ἔσθλῳ πατρῷ παῖ, 96) and is said by Philoctetes to have a noble nature derived from noble parents (εὐγενῆς γὰρ ἡ φύσις καὶ εὐγενῶν, 874). Antigone, by contrast, in her defiance of Creon, demonstrates to the chorus savage breeding derived from a savage father (τὸ γέννημ’ ὁμὸν ἐξ ὁμοῦ πατρός, *Ant.* 471).

All these examples betray a strong conviction that good parents should give birth to good children, as a character in Euripides’ *Alcmaeon in Corinth* makes clear:

ὦ παῖ Κρέοντος, ὡς ἀληθὲς ἦν ἄρα,
ἔσθλὼν ἀπʼ ἀνδρὸν ἔσθλὰ γίγνεσθαι τέκνα,
κακῶν δ’ ὄμοια τῇ φύσει τῇ τοῦ πατρός.

Oh child of Creon, how true indeed it is that from good men are born good children, but from bad men come offspring similar to the nature of their father.

(fr. 75)

This same conviction leads a speaker in Euripides’ *Antiope* to urge all mankind to sire noble children from good wives (πᾶσι δ᾿ ἀγέλλῳ βροτοῖς / ἔσθλῶν ἀπʼ ἀλὸχων εὐγενῆ σπείρειν τέκνα, fr. 215). Good character is thus something fundamentally concerned with hereditable nature.

It might be objected that ‘good birth’ is in fact a specious claim made only by families that have maintained their standing in society over more than one generation. This is certainly a possible argument, made in particular by a speaker (probably Macareus) in Euripides’ *Aeolus* (fr. 22). The claim to εὐγένεια is, in this view, merely intended to preserve a
monopoly on power and social status by restricting the title of εὐγένεις to select individuals. Nobility is thus determined by wealth, social connections and appearance.²⁰

Yet, while certain characters in tragedy may claim εὐγένεια on the basis of inherited wealth or power, this does not overturn the principle that nobility is an inherited moral quality. The Greeks, in fact, distinguished between those who were accounted noble and those who were actually and morally noble by nature. There is no inherent link between wealth or position and moral character, though those who are of good birth, such as the children of Heracles in Euripides’ *Heraclidae* (232-5), may deserve better fortune on account of their lineage. In fact, in tragedy the well-born can appear as indigent outsiders.²¹ The prologue of Euripides’ *Bellerophon* comments on three distinct sorts of people: the ignoble rich man, the poor man of good birth, and the pauper who has neither wealth nor nobility (fr. 285.3-5, 11-13).

Moreover, in several plays by Euripides protagonists assert that good birth endures in poverty and exile.²² The truth of this claim is seemingly proven when heroes who have suffered a reverse in fortune show their innate breeding. In Euripides’ *Alexander*, the poor herdsman who should be of poor breeding performs better than many of the nobility. The chorus note that nobility is a moral quality and not a matter of wealth (fr. 61b), yet it will eventually be revealed that the herdsman is also a son of Priam. The courage and strength of the sons of a slave woman in *Captive Melanippe* prompt a similar reflection from a messenger (fr. 495.40-3). He reports that they have killed the brothers of a queen, but these boys are also the sons of Poseidon. The charcoal-burner Syrus in Menander’s *Arbitration*

²⁰ Eur. *Ion* 237-40; *Aeolus* fr. 22; *Erechtheus* fr. 362.13-15; cf. [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.2 and 1.4; Arist. *Pol.* 1301b1-4; Plut. *Lys.* 2.1.

²¹ Eur. *Archelaus* fr. 232; *Danae* fr. 326; *Thyestes* fr. 395.

²² Eur. *Hec.* 596-8; *Archelaus* fr. 232; *Temenidae* fr. 739; fr. 1066
similarly fears that a recently exposed baby may turn out to be of noble birth and so in time
despise such working people, as he returns to his true nature (ἐἰς δὲ τὴν ἀὑτοῦ φύσιν / ἄξιος,
322-3). He adds that such plots are typical of tragedy (325-6). The earliest representation of
this type, however, is Eumaeus in the Odyssey (15.403-84), the virtuous swineherd who, it
transpires, is also a king’s son kidnapped by Phoenician traders.

Those excluded from power are thus still able to claim good lineage. Ajax, the son of
the Aeacid Telamon, is of impeccable birth but is accounted a mere demesman by the ruling
sons of Atreus (ἄνδρα δημότην, Aj. 1071). Parallels might include Eetion, the father of the
tyrant Cypselus, who was both a ‘member of the demos’, and thus excluded from the ruling
Bacchiad kinship group, but also a Lapith descendent of Kaineus (ὁ ἡμῶν μὲν ἐὼν ἐκ Πέτρης,
ἀτάρ τὰ ἀνέκαθεν Λασίθης τε καὶ Καινείδης, Hdt. 5.92 β 1). Similarly, bastards may be
deemed of lower social status than legitimate sons, but if they are born of a good father they
may inherit his qualities.23 The virtuous Teucer of Sophocles’ Ajax is a key example:
Menelaus and Agamemnon dismiss him as the son of a concubine, but he can point to the fact
that he is also a son of Telamon and a woman who was by birth a princess (ἡ φύσει μὲν ἤν /
βασιλεία, 1301-2). The sons of Atreus, though they may claim good birth, have not inherited
any moral quality worthy of the name and so are only noble in appearance (οἱ δοκοῦντες
eὐγενεῖς πεφυκέναι, 1095). Again, we need to distinguish between those who are noble by
nature (φύσει) and those who are called noble by convention (νόμῳ).

A second objection is that the children of good parents can turn out to be bad. Once
again, however, it does not disprove the overall principle that excellence is hereditary. First, it
is accepted that the natural transference of good character can fail to take place, much as a
harvest can occasionally fail in previously good soil, and so a good family is not an absolute

23 Eur. Eurystheus fr. 377; Soph. Aleuadae fr. 87.
guarantee of a good nature. Demophon in Euripides’ *Heraclidae* proves, through his treatment of the children of Heracles, that he is no less a man than his father Theseus, but Iolaus indicates that sons rarely equal their fathers in the same way (324-8). For Antigone, Ismene’s behaviour will determine whether she is truly noble or a bad woman anomalously born from excellent parents (καὶ δείξεις τάχα / εἰτ’ εὐγενής πέφυκας εἰτ’ ἐσθλῶν κακή, *Ant.* 37-8).

Second, it is accepted that nurture has some role in the formation of character alongside nature. Ajax assumes that Eurysaces, as his son, will show no fear at the sight of blood, but acknowledges that his nature (φύσις) should also be trained in the customs (νόμοι) of his father.25 Nurture may thus make a person worse or better than they should be by nature.26 In Euripides’ *Antiope*, Zethus believes that the skill of lyre playing has this very effect:

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\pi\omega\varsigma\ \gamma\alpha\rho\ \sigma\sigma\omicron\phi\omicron\nu\ το\upsilon\tau’ \ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\nu, \ \eta\tau\iota\varsigma\ \epsilon\upsilon\phi\upsilon\alpha
\lambda\alpha\beta\omega\omicron\omicron\sigma\alpha\ τέχνη \phi\omicron\tau’ \ \delta\theta\eta\kappa\epsilon\ \chi\epsilon\rho\omicron\nu\alpha;
\]

How can this be a form of wisdom, a skill that takes a naturally good man and makes him worse.

(fr. 186)

In the same way, Sophocles’ *Neoptolemus* is led astray by Odysseus and, as Philoctetes believes, is not bad himself but has simply learned bad habits (οὐκ εἴ κακὸς σύ, πρὸς κακῶν δ’ ἄνδρῶν μαθῶν / ἐνοικάς ἥκειν αἰσχρά, *Phil.* 971-2). He is thus able to act contrary to his nature, even though it pains him to do so and even if, in time, his nature will eventually

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24 See Arist. *Pol.* 1255a39-b3; *Rhet.* 1390b24-31.
25 Ἀλλ’ αὐτίκ’ ὁμοίς αὐτών ἐν νόμοις πατρός / δὲ πολυδιαμενών κἀξιωμοίοθηται φύσιν, 548-9; cf. Xen. *Mem.* 4.1.3 on how the best natures need training most.
26 Cf. ἄμεινονες τῆς φύσιος, *Hdt.* 5.118.2, 7.103.4.
reassert itself (902-3). On the other hand, while it is accepted that the wrong education can make someone worse, no one who is by nature wholly bad (κακός) can be made good through education. This is broadly accepted as a fact not just by the heroes of tragedy, but even by the professional teachers of classical Greece, such as Isocrates (15.185-7). On this basis, Hippolytus (Hipp. 78-80) can reserve the grove of Artemis for those who are untaught but naturally good (ἐν τῇ φύσει), a concept that is well known also from the odes of Pindar. The consequences of one’s birth can be avoided temporarily, but eventually better instruction gives way to nature, just as the tame lion cub must in time inherit the character of a murderous beast from its parents (Aesch. Ag. 717-36).

Nature (and good birth or nobility), then, is a set of inherited moral characteristics that can determine behaviour. For both Euripides and Sophocles this was a useful concept around which to develop a dramatic plot. First, tragedy is concerned with mighty individuals with super-human characteristics that are frequently the cause of their destruction. This ‘heroic temper’ can be explained as the result of descent from still greater forebears and even gods. Second, since well-born men and women can be found even among the victims of misfortune and poverty, nobility can be hidden, as even a slave or beggar can be a prince or princess in disguise. The revelation of a noble identity thus forms the basis for several of Euripides’ plays, such as the Alexander, Telephus and, as we shall see, Electra. Finally, because the inheritance of good qualities from parents to children is not guaranteed, a major question for characters who are young and untried is whether they are worthy of their fathers. In these cases, they must show that their nature is in fact the same as their forebears. Neoptolemus does so when he restores to Philoctetes his bow (τὴν φύσιν δ’ ἔδειξας, ὦ τέκνον, ἐξ ἡς ἦς.

27 Eur. Hipp. 916-22; Hec. 591-8; Peleus fr. 617; Phoenix fr. 810; fr. 904; Soph. fr. 808; cf. Dem. 21.150 on Meidias’ inherently bad character and consequently suspect lineage.

28 Ol. 2.86; 9.100-101; Nem. 1.25; Rose (1974) 151-3.
Similarly, in Euripides’ Orestes the hero aims to show his nature through deeds worthy of Agamemnon (κἀγώ μὲν εὐγένειαν ἀποδείξω πόλει, 1062). We shall see that much the same concerns with revealing and identifying character govern the action of the Electra.

2. The Prelude to Recognition

Returning now to the Electra, the play may be divided roughly into three sections, each of which contributes to and makes inevitable the final tragic departure of Orestes and Electra. The first (1-486) forms a prelude to the recognition scene, the purpose of which is to establish the basic principles that will determine the action of the two subsequent sections – the recognition (487-595) and revenge (596-1359) – and their consequences. These principles are (a) that nobility (εὐγένεια) is inherited, but (b) it is an inner quality that cannot be determined by outward appearance, and (c) that the inheritance of good family characteristics is not guaranteed but must be proven by actions and behaviour.

The farmer opens the play and his speech directly introduces the question of φύσις that will dominate the subsequent episodes. Electra, the unwedded princess of myth, has found herself in a humble cottage married to a poor farmer. The reason for this, we are told, is Aegisthus’ regard for hereditary excellence: he is afraid that Electra may mate with a noble man (μὴ τῷ λαθραίως τέκνα γενναίῳ τέκοι, 26) and that the child born of this union will inherit the strength to become Agamemnon’s avenger. Prevented from killing Electra, Aegisthus tries to solve this problem by marrying her off to an obviously weak and ignoble citizen, the logic being that a weakling will beget in turn a weak son (ὡς ἀσθενεῖ δοὺς ἀσθενή λάβοι φόβον, 39 cf. Heracl. 468-70).

Here Aegisthus assumes that the strong, and therefore noble, are identical with the wealthy. In fact, as we have seen, a rich man can lose his wealth, but he cannot easily change
his nature. It is precisely this point that Electra will later make in her address to Aegisthus’ corpse:

ηὔχεις τις εἶναι τοίσι χρήμασι σθένων·
tὰ δ’ οὐδέν εἰ μὴ βραχὼν ὁμιλῆσαι χρόνον.
ἡ γὰρ φύσις βέβαιος, οὐ τὰ χρήματα.
ἡ μὲν γὰρ αἰεὶ παραμένουσ’ αἵρει κακά·
ὅ δ’ ὀλβίος ἀδίκως καὶ μετὰ σκαιῶν ξυνῶν
ἐξέπτατ’ οἴκων, σμικρὸν ἀνθήσας χρόνον.

You used to boast in being someone strong in wealth, but this is worthless except in the short time it abides with you. For nature (φύσις) is secure, not wealth: the one endures with you forever and alleviates misfortune, while wealth dwells unjustly with fools and flies from the house after flourishing for a short time.

(939-44)

The farmer actually has a hidden noble pedigree, and therefore has, at least potentially, inherited inner excellence.

ἡμῖν δὲ δὴ δίδωσιν Ἠλέκτραν ἔχειν
dάμαρτα, πατέρων μὲν Μυκηναίων ἄπο
gεγόσιν (οὐ δὴ τοῦτό γ’ ἐξελέγχομαι·
λαμπροὶ γὰρ ἐς γένος γε, χρημάτων δὲ δὴ
πένητες, ἐνθεὶ ηὗγενεὶ’ ἀπόλλυται)

To me, one born from Mycenaean ancestry, he gave Electra to have as my wife (for I cannot be faulted in this at least: my ancestry is impeccable, but in possessions I am poor, and it is here that nobility (εὐγένεια) fails).

(34-8)
Although he lacks the riches of the nominally well-born, his future actions will show that the farmer’s bloodline has endured the wreck of his family’s fortunes.

Some scholars have focussed on how the speech develops the farmer’s character. Denniston, for example, noted that ‘the Farmer is pleasantly drawn: a little self-conscious and priggish, perhaps, but honourable, warm-hearted, and considerate.’ Yet, in emphasising characterisation, we may overlook the connection between the prologue and the developing theme of hidden nobility, as well as its consequences for the plot. Euripides is careful to undermine any suspicion that the farmer is a pompous fool. If, as the farmer suggests (50-3), he seems foolish to some in not consummating his marriage, the true fool is the one who judges by appearances. He is genuinely noble and the blood of his ancestors, unlike their wealth, has not been lost in transition down the generations. We should not be surprised at the appearance of a man of hidden good birth in the costume of a peasant, since, as we have seen, this is a common feature of Euripidean tragedy.

If the farmer is not a fool, then neither is he a coward: the other explanation for his conduct suggested by Orestes (260). Electra insists that, though he may be concerned about how Orestes will react to news of his sister’s marriage, the real reason is that he is inherently a man of self-control (πρὸς δὲ καὶ σώφρων ἔφυ, 261; cf. πένης ἀνὴρ γενναῖος ἔς τ’ ἤμ’ εὔσεβής, 253). Orestes agrees: the farmer is a man ‘of good breeding’ (γενναῖον ἀνὴρ ἔλεξας, 262). Any remaining doubts are removed by his behaviour towards Orestes and Pylades. Despite his poverty, he refuses to act in the manner of a man of ‘poor breeding’ and deny his guests hospitality, even though it will cost him dearly (καὶ γὰρ εὶ πένης ἔφυν, ὥστε τὸ γ’ ἥθος δισεγενές παρέξομαι, 362-3). Denniston asserted that ‘γενναῖος clearly means here

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29 Denniston (1939) xxxi; this view is echoed by Cropp (2012) 137 and Van Emde Boas (2017) 79. See, however, Yoon (2012) 98-105, who argues that the farmer’s function and characterisation is more limited.
“noble-minded” . . . not “nobly-born”. The farmer has good blood in his veins, and is proud of it, but Electra regards him as an ordinary plebeian.\textsuperscript{30} To some extent this is true, since as one who has only lately declined in status she regards him as her social inferior. Yet the fact remains that the farmer is morally noble due not to money, or the lack of it, but to hereditary virtue.

The appearance of Electra develops this same theme in similar ways. She is also noble, but unlike the farmer her family’s misfortunes are recent and her lineage is well known. The farmer begins his prologue with the substantial achievements of Agamemnon at Troy (2-7). This victory is evidence of good blood within the family and will provide a precedent for Orestes’ later triumph over Aegisthus (206, 336-8, 880-2). However, Electra does not look like the daughter of a man of nobility and power, as she tells the chorus of maidens:

\begin{verbatim}
σκέψαι μοι πιναράν κόμαν
καὶ τρύχη τάδ’ ἐμῶν πέπλων,
εἰ πρέποντ’ Ἀγαμέμνονος
κούρᾳ τῇ βασιλείᾳ
τῇ Τροίᾳ θ’, ὡ μοὶ πατέρος
μέμναται ποθ’ ἀλούσα.
\end{verbatim}

Look at my dirty hair and these raggedy dresses, judge if they are fitting for the royal daughter of Agamemnon and for Troy, who remembers her capture at the hands of my father.

(184-8)

\textsuperscript{30} See Denniston (1939) 81; cf. 80 on 253:
Electra’s concern for her personal appearance (and her refusal to do anything about it by borrowing clothes from the chorus) has sometimes been viewed as a sign of weak character: she is a bitter snob who simply loves to complain. As with the farmer, however, Euripides’ concern is not exclusively the characterisation of one *dramatis persona*, but rather the development of a key theme that will run through the play to its conclusion. As Lloyd has argued, her reasons for continuing to live in squalor are perfectly intelligible within the context of the action: she is in mourning and, moreover, she wishes her lament to be a reproach on her enemies (just as in Sophocles’ treatment of the myth). It is more important for the development of the plot that she should not resemble a ‘noble’ woman, just as the farmer does not appear to be noble. In her present state, she is unrecognisable as a child of Agamemnon: so much so that Orestes assumes that the mournful girl approaching him, dressed in rags and carrying a water jar on her shaven head, is a slave (107-11). Electra’s pot is indeed, as Raeburn argues, a significant stage property, but its purpose is not primarily to indicate her poor character, but rather the inconsistency between Electra’s appearance and her known pedigree. This prop will provide a stark contrast to the sumptuous finery of Clytemestra (966, 1139-40), a woman who has demonstrated her true inner character through the killing of her husband.

The contrast between, on the one hand, the farmer’s actions, which reveal nobility, and, on the other, his appearance, which serves to hide this inner worth, leads Orestes ultimately to conclude that there is no accurate way to identify manly virtue (οὐκ ἔστ’ ἀκριβές οὐδὲν εἰς εὐανδρίαν, 367). As noted above, the authenticity of this difficult speech (367-400) has been questioned, especially lines 373-9 and 386-90. In terms of language and

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31 See n. 12, with Raeburn (2000) 152-4 and Yoon (2012) 99-103.
32 Lloyd (1986) 6-7; cf. Michelini (1987) 188.
33 See n. 33.
34 See n. 5.
style the speech is at least passable.\textsuperscript{35} The three principal objections therefore concern their apparent irrelevance, repetition (Orestes appears to comment on the inadequacy of wealth as a criterion for nobility in both 371-2 and 373-6, and of martial prowess in 377-9 and 387-90), and the fact that Diogenes Laertius attributes line 379 to the Auge. As is demonstrated elsewhere, the last two are not serious enough on their own to warrant deletion and need not detain us here.\textsuperscript{36} The third, irrelevance, is more concerning. In what follows, I shall attempt to demonstrate that the speech is not merely a rhetorical set-piece: rather the questions it raises are significant for the development of the plot.

Some critics have viewed the speech as an attack on the very principle of the hereditability of moral qualities. According to Wohl, the speech ‘undercuts one of the traditional props of elitism in Athens: the belief that aristocratic birth predicted moral worth and that wealth was its divine reward’.\textsuperscript{37} The farmer’s behaviour points to ‘a “reality” in which a man’s worth is judged only by his character, not by external tokens like wealth or birth’.\textsuperscript{38} Others have been equally willing to interpret the speech as a radical renunciation of previous assumptions. Basta Donzelli called the farmer ‘il campione della nuova eugeneia’, while Michelini alluded to ‘the new standard of heroism offered by the Autourgos’.\textsuperscript{39} Yoon has similarly argued that the farmer’s qualities, which are ‘not for the most part “heroic”’, highlight tensions between ‘conventional tragic ideals and the mundane realities’ in which the

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Pace} Reeve (1973) 152-3, on the use of γῶρ in 380; see Goldhill (1986a) 159 for a response. Slings (1997) 146 suspects that the lines are authentic, even if the style is ‘not Euripides at his best’.

\textsuperscript{36} Denniston (1939) 94; Basta Donzelli (1978) 239-42; Goldhill (1986a); Distilo (2012) 645-8.

\textsuperscript{37} Wohl (2015a) 66; cf. Arnott (1981) 180-2.

\textsuperscript{38} Wohl (2015b) 70.

\textsuperscript{39} Basta Donzelli (1978) 233; Michelini (1987) 198; cf. Van Emde Boas (2017) 182-3. According to Guthrie (1969) 250: the contemporary debate on inherited nobility ‘reflected the clash between older aristocratic ideals and the new classes which were then rising to prominence under the democratic system of government at Athens’.
protagonists find themselves.\textsuperscript{40} Yet this interpretation is unsatisfactory, since in the play character is determined precisely by birth. All the characters are in complete agreement on at least this one issue: that excellence is inherited, as it always has been. In fact, there is nothing particularly new about the farmer’s hidden nobility or the problem it poses, since he differs little from the disguised or impoverished heroes of other Euripidean tragedies. Orestes merely reaffirms the (in tragedy) well-established truth that good birth will endure vicissitudes of fortune.

Orestes does begin by acknowledging that family background, even when it is known, is not necessarily an indication of good character. The natures of men are muddled (ἔχουσι γὰρ ταραγμὸν αἱ φύσεις βροτῶν, 368): good fathers sometimes have bad sons and \textit{vice versa} (369-70). This is not a repudiation of the doctrine of inherited excellence, but in fact, as we have seen, it only proves that good breeding may skip a generation or diminish entirely.

Denniston correctly interpreted these lines when he claimed that ‘all Orestes says is that the normal handing down of γενναιότης and κακία from father to son is at times (often the Old Man says at 551) surprisingly interrupted.’\textsuperscript{41} The prime example of someone from a good family who has not inherited good character is Clytemestra: as Electra confirms, she resembles more her sister Helen (δύο δ’ ἐφωτε συγγόνω, 1063) than her genuinely noble brother Castor. This awareness did not prevent, and does not contradict, Electra’s earlier discourse on the importance of nature (ἡ γὰρ φύσις βέβαιος, 941), since in this case Clytemestra’s wickedness is explained by her blood relationship with Helen. Similarly, nothing in Orestes’ oration seriously challenges the premise that nobility is inherited. What it does do is establish an additional premise: that nobility is hard to identify.

\textsuperscript{40} Yoon (2012) 99, 105.

\textsuperscript{41} Denniston (1939) 93.
Orestes continues to outline the problem by focussing on another difficulty: like the farmer, the good can be poor, while the bad can be rich.

\[\text{λιμόν τ' ἐν ἀνδρός πλουσίον φρονήματι,}\]
\[\text{γνώμην δὲ μεγάλην ἐν πένητι σώματι.}\]

I have beheld dearth in the mind of a rich man, and great thoughts in a poor body.

(371-2)

This again is entirely typical of Euripides and recalls the poor heroes of his other dramas. The contrast between the inner mind of the rich man and the body of the pauper alerts us to the fact that wealth is an outward symbol, whereas it is inner worth that matters. The same is true of Orestes’ choice of word for ‘virtue’ (εὐανδρία) at 367. This could be treated as a physical quality that could be assessed in terms of stature and beauty, as at the contests for εὐανδρία held at the Panathenaea and elsewhere. Yet Orestes here stresses that it is in fact a moral virtue that cannot be identified easily.\(^\text{42}\) As Van Emde Boas remarks, ‘Orestes is concerned not so much that there are no signs whatever that can help in ascertaining εὐανδρία, but . . . that there are no outward and easily discernible signs.’\(^\text{43}\)

Now that Orestes has explained the nature of the problem, he continues by suggesting, and then abruptly dismissing, common yard sticks for nobility (to borrow the farmer’s metaphor: γνώμης πονηρός κανόσιν ἀναμετρούμενος, 52). Wealth, we have already seen, is an external sign that does not necessarily reflect natural interior worth. Orestes adds that the same is true of poverty, for though good men can be poor, poverty is not itself a good and can teach bad habits (διδάσκει δ’ ἄνδρα τῇ χρείᾳ κακόν, 376). Once again, the difference between

\(^{42}\) For εὐανδρία as moral virtue cf. Eur. Supp. 911-15; for the contest at the Panathenaea see IG II 2 2311.75 and And. 4.42; at the second century Theseia see IG II 956.48; in general see Xen. Mem. 3.3.12-13; Athen. 13.565f; Crowther (2004) 334-6.

\(^{43}\) Van Emde Boas (2017) 178-9.
nature and education and the primary importance of nature, which education can either improve or mar, is emphasised.

Orestes then considers another symbol of nobility: physical courage in battle (ἁλλ’ εἰς ὀπλ’ ἐλθὼν; 377). Again, Orestes dismisses this test, though not the importance of martial valour itself, because it is unreliable: how can a man already engaged in battle see which of his companions is fighting well (377-8)? Physical courage remains an element of nobility and will prove essential in the killing of Aegisthus (itself a form of combat and judged worthy of comparison to Agamemnon’s victory at Troy). The problem is that there is no way of measuring warlike prowess.

Orestes abandons these signs of nobility and explains that the farmer’s conduct has ultimately led him to this conclusion. He then proposes a final sure test: a person’s character and the people with whom they associate (τῇ δ’ ὁμιλίαι βροτῶν . . . καὶ τοῖς ἠθεσιν, 384-5). The farmer has just denied that he possesses an ignoble character (ἦθος δυσγενὲς, 363) and has shown this to be the case through his generosity. A good person should, furthermore, only associate with people of his own kind. By contrast, those who are bad enjoy the company of the bad.44 These criteria are less immediately obvious but still observable signs of inner nature.

Lines 386-90 have proven hard to interpret and even the speech’s defenders struggle to explain their relevance.45 Due to similarities with fr. 282, a polemic against athletes from Euripides’ satyr play Autolycus, some critics have perhaps been too eager to dismiss these

44 Cf. Eur. fr. 812.7-9; Thdm 597-8, 1243-4.
45 Reeve (1973) 152 expresses this view most forcefully: ‘[the] reflexion on the superiority of moral to physical strength [is] irrelevant, and no more words need be wasted on [these lines].’ See also Denniston (1939) 97; Goldhill (1986a) 169-70.
lines as an irrelevant digression on a common theme.\textsuperscript{46} The men criticised in both passages are dismissed as ‘statues’ (πόλεως ἀγάλματα, fr. 282.10; ἀγάλματ’ ἀγορᾶς, 388), said to be little help in war (fr. 282.19-21; 388-9) and compared to others who are better suited to benefit the city, either the wise (ἀνδρας . . . σοφοῖς τε κἀγαθοῖς, fr. 282.23) or the noble (εὐγενεῖς, 385). Yet although Orestes’ targets may include athletes, at no point are his criticisms directly levelled at them.\textsuperscript{47} Rather the lines are appropriate to Orestes’ general discourse on the need to identify inner nobility and are less repetitive, and more in line with his train of thought, than some scholars have been willing to admit. On establishing a criterion for judging nobility, Orestes affirms that it is the noble men who are beneficial in public and private life. These are contrasted with those who are only outwardly good, that is those who possess fine bodies but who lack good sense inside (οἳ δὲ σάρκες αἱ κεναὶ φρενῶν / ἀγάλματ’ ἀγορᾶς εἰσιν, 387-8). The metaphor of statues in the agora is perfectly calculated to evoke the image of hollow but outwardly beautiful bronze artworks. It also links back to the notion of poverty as a physical sign (372) and the correspondingly empty opinions of those who would judge the poor farmer based on outward appearance (οἳ κενῶν δοξασμάτων / πλήρεσ πλανᾶσθε, 383-4).

In lines 388-90, Orestes returns to the topic of war that he touched on in 377-9, yet these lines have a different purpose. He is no longer questioning the standard by which nobility should be measured, but rather defending the criteria he has now adopted: i.e. the primary importance of inner character over physical strength. He thus pre-empts an objection: surely it is the men with good bodies who are most useful to the city in war? The response is that it is not bodily strength that really matters, but inner courage, since a strong coward will not await the blow of a spear in battle line any more readily than a weak one (οὐδὲ γὰρ δόρυ /

\textsuperscript{46} Pechstein (1998) 79-82; Lamour (1999) 63; Distilo (2012) 171-2.

\textsuperscript{47} As noted by Slings (1997) 147.
What is important is not the outer shell of the body but the inner nature (ἐν τῇ φύσει δὲ τούτῳ κἀν εὐψυχίᾳ, 390). Orestes is thus in agreement with Tyrtæus (fr. 12.1-9 West), who questioned whether athletic prowess, or even the stature and might of the Cyclopes, was genuinely equal to the rigours of combat.

Orestes’ oration is not simply the ramblings of a contemplative yet irresolute young man. It is carefully prepared for by the earlier contrast between the outward appearance of the poor farmer and his heritage: the inner nobility now proven by his correspondingly noble conduct towards Orestes. The speech is itself coherent and follows a clear train of thought. In doing so, it sums up the major conclusions the audience should draw from the first third of the play: that nobility, though hereditary, is hard to identify because it cannot be measured by external finery or even the physique of the body beneath. The importance of these conclusions will become clear in the second part of the play, the ‘recognition scene’, to which we will now turn. It is at this point that Euripides combines the testing of character with that of identity.

3. The Recognition Scene

The prelude to the recognition serves to raise a dilemma: how is Orestes to be recognised? This is because the question of Orestes’ nobility is closely linked to that of his identity. Orestes is the son of a king, Agamemnon, who was not only a man of great wealth but one who proved his nobility through his conquest of Troy. If Electra’s nameless visitor has inherited the nobility of Agamemnon, then he must also be Orestes the son of Agamemnon. This in turn looks forward to the final section, the revenge, for if Orestes has inherited Agamemnon’s nobility, then he will be able to bring vengeance on his father’s killers. The difficulty is that, just as for his nobility, it is hard to establish a criterion with which to judge Orestes’ identity.
Unlike the farmer or Electra, Orestes appears a nominally noble man. He has come with a train of servants and baggage (393-4), which presages the chariot and Trojan servants of his mother. He is also in his prime physically, as is demonstrated by the frequent use of athletic imagery (and perhaps in performance by costume). He skins the hide of Aegisthus’ sacrificial calf quicker than a runner could race two laps of a track (824-5). Orestes’ supposed destination of Olympia is another hint at his athletic prowess (781-2). Electra’s assumption that her brother will have the hair of a young athlete in the recognition scene (528) echoes this motif and prepares for her later declaration that Orestes, in killing Aegisthus, has gained a far greater victory than a mere runner at Olympia (862-4).

Yet on the other hand he also appears weaker than he should. As several critics have noted, Electra expects her brother to openly challenge Aegisthus and is disappointed when her expectations are not fulfilled.48 She complains of his tardiness, even though he is a young man and born of a ‘better father’ than his enemy (νέος πατρός κάς ὁμοίος πατρός, 338). This echoes her refusal to believe that Orestes would return in secret (525-6). Yet, Orestes cannot reveal his identity and strength as the son of ‘the better man’ Agamemnon. As the disguised Orestes reminds her, and as she herself will admit, her brother is an exile with a price on his head and, though not without means, he lacks the necessary supporters to launch a direct assault on Aegisthus’ tyranny (ἀσθενὴς δὲ δὴ φεύγων ἀνήρ 236; cf. 352, 605-11).49 Like the farmer’s poverty (cf. 38), Orestes’s circumstances make him appear weaker than he actually is. His stealthy assault on Aegisthus has outraged some critics.50 Yet as Orestes has

48 Denniston (1939) xxi; Lloyd-Jones (1961) 178; Basta Donzelli (1978) 126-7; Arnott (1981) 183; Wohl (2015a) 68-9; cf. Kovacs (1989) 68-9, who suggests that the contradiction between lines 336-8 and 524-5 is an argument for deletion of the latter; West (1980) 16-17 makes the case for retaining the lines.

49 As is noted by Lloyd (1986) 11.

50 Eg. Arnott (1981) 186-7: the ‘sordid viciousness’ of Aegisthus’ murder; cf. Kitto (1939) 336; Tarkow (1981) 145; Morwood (1981) 366-7; Michelini (1987) 214. On the murder as perverted sacrifice see Zeitlin (1970) 651-3.
no support in Argos and because the tyrant is ringed with bodyguards, the old man rules out any other option (605-17). Euripides’ intention here is not to highlight Orestes’ inadequacy when compared to a heroic ideal, but rather to show, again, how appearances can be deceptive.

It is not surprising, then, that the farmer is sufficiently impressed by the appearance of Orestes to declare that he and Pylades seem noble.

τί δ᾽; εἴπερ εἰσίν ὡς δοκοῦσιν εὐγενεῖς,
oὐκ ἐν τε μικροῖς ἐν τε μὴ στέρξουσ’ ὡμῶς;

What then? If they are noble as they seem to be, they will be equally happy in reduced circumstances as in its opposite.

(406-7)

The farmer judges by appearance that they are good by birth and will therefore not look askance at his home, given that nature is, as the farmer has demonstrated, unchanging. Yet the old man, like Orestes, is aware that things may not be as they seem:

ἀλλ’ εὐγενεῖς μέν, ἐν δὲ κιβδήλῳ τόδε·
pολλοὶ γὰρ ὄντες εὐγενεῖς εἰσίν κακοὶ.

Well they are noble, but this is a matter of uncertainty; for many who are noble are bad.

(550-1)

He is aware that what is called εὐγένεια can be nominal, rather than natural, and is wary of relying on appearances. The old man had asked to see (εἰσιδῷν, 547) the strangers, but a closer inspection is needed to verify the truth. This caution recalls the difficulties he has had in establishing Orestes’s presence and identity, which is in fact the reason why he wishes to speak to Electra’s visitors. Electra had also previously admitted that she would be unable to recognise Orestes by sight (εἰσιδοῦσα 283). The only person who can identify him is the old
man. Nevertheless, at first sight the old man is unable to recognise Orestes and is forced to look more carefully. Once again first appearances are unreliable, and the challenge is to find a visible sign that can be trusted.

Scholars such as Bain and West have assumed that the recognition scene (518-44) is an irrelevant parody of Aeschylus and much of the debate concerning its authenticity has centred on the question of whether Euripides could have gone so low as to make fun of his great predecessor.51 Yet, as Halporn has demonstrated, the scene does not closely conform to any generally recognised definition of parody: there seem to be deliberate echoes of Aeschylus’ play here, though there is little to suggest that humour was the principal object of such a comparison.52 The purpose of these lines, I suggest, is rather to confirm what has already been established: the inherent difficulty in determining Orestes’ identity and nature. The recognition scene highlights the problems of identifying Orestes by means of tokens (hair, footprints and clothing, 528-37). Her rejection of these three signs proposed by the old man recall Orestes’ rejection of the standard criteria for nobility (wealth, poverty and physique). Here we see that the two problems are interlinked and, in each case, a better method of testing is required.

While Orestes had proposed a man’s character and associations as the true yardstick for nobility, the old man discovers the scar. In ultimately revealing Orestes’ identity, it allows inferences to be made simultaneously regarding his character. Euripides’ mark evokes the scar of Odysseus (Od.19.386-466). Some have argued that this intertextual reference is intended to call into question the nobility of Orestes. For Halporn, the scar is a negative

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51 Bain (1977) 111: the author of 518-44 did ‘not greatly [care] whether what he wrote was integrated into its dramatic context or comprehensible to an audience in a theatre.’ West (1980) 18-19: the criteria proposed by the old man ‘have no roots in the present context but are dragged in solely to be ridiculed. No one disputes this.’

52 Halporn (1983) 11.
motif, one that, unlike Aeschylus’ garment, deliberately fails to mark any connection between brother and sister and ‘removes the sense of familial and domestic ties from the play entirely.’

Tarkow and Goff have compared the differing accounts of how the heroes receive their respective scars and come to similar conclusions: Odysseus is wounded by a boar during a hunt, while Orestes falls over rather pathetically while chasing a fawn indoors. Likewise, for Wohl, these ‘literary allusions and theatrical clichés’ reveal Orestes’s social status as ‘empty, based on the accident of birth and devoid of ethical content.’

Yet such a comparison between the heroes is unreasonable and it is unlikely that Euripides would have expected his audience to draw one in those terms. Odysseus was a young man (19.410) at the time of the hunt and, over twenty years later, a mature man when the scar is found by Eurycleia. Orestes, who in the Odyssey has recently accomplished his revenge, is a model for the youthful and insecure Telemachus. Odysseus’ boar hunt and journey to meet his grandfather, Telemachus’ voyage to Pylos and Sparta, and Orestes’ violent return to Argos all come under the same category of rites of passage for youths. Orestes would have had to have been unusually precocious to have joined a hunting expedition before he left Argos.

Why then does Euripides borrow the seemingly inappropriate motif of the scar? The answer lies in the term used to describe the mark for which the old man is looking:

Ορ. τί μ’ ἐσδέδορκεν ὥσπερ ἀργύρου σκοπῶν

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53 Halporn (1983) 113.
54 Tarkow (1981) 146 ‘the mythical foil which the scar suggests . . . serves to remind us of the essentially unheroic fellow Euripides is portraying in Orestes’. Goff (1991) especially 262: Electra ‘probes . . . the very concept of traditional heroism’; cf. O’Brien (1964) for a similarly unflattering comparison between Orestes and Perseus.
55 Wohl (2015b) 75.
56 Od. 1.296-305, 3.199-200, see Olson (1995) 24-42.
λαμπρὸν χαρακτήρ; ή προσεικάζει με τοι;

Orestes: Why is he looking at me as though he were looking at a bright mark (χαρακτήρ) on a silver coin? Is he comparing me to someone?

(558-9)

Πρ. ὁρὰν Ὀρέστην τόνδε τὸν Ἀγαμέμνονος.
Ηλ. ποῖον χαρακτήρ’ εἰσιδών, ὃι πείσομαι;

Old man: I say that I am looking at Orestes the son of Agamemnon.

Electra: What sort of mark (χαρακτήρ) have you seen that I can trust?

(571-2)

As line 558 makes clear, the metaphor is drawn from methods of establishing the purity of precious metals in coins by affixing an official mark of state coinage. Like a mark on coins, a scar is a permanent impression of a cut or blow onto the body. The old man is acting in a similar way to the public examiner (δοκιμαστής), whose job from at least 375/4 was to decide whether suspect coins brought to him at his seat in the market were genuine or counterfeit.57 Such a metaphor suggests that the scar is a sign both of Orestes’s identity and his moral nature. A χαρακτήρ, the term used to refer to the scar, indicates not identity but quality.

The scar, like the χαρακτήρ, is also markedly different from the other tokens dismissed earlier. It is not placed on the body, like a garment, nor is it separate from the body, like footprints or a shorn lock, but it is part of the body and yet a sign of quality within.

Stieber correctly notes a major difference between a mark (χαρακτήρ) and a seal (σφραγίς): the seal imprints a sign upon another object to mark possession or identity or may act as a

57 A fourth century inscription from the Athenian Agora lists the duties of the δοκιμαστής and, in doing so, employs very similar language to Euripides’ text. The δοκιμαστής is to examine both coins that have the public mark (τὸν δημόσιον χαρακτήρα) and those foreign coins with the same mark as Attic owls (ἐχον τὸν αὐτὸν χαρακτήρα τὸ Αττικὸν) and to cut in half any deemed counterfeit (κίβδηλον). For the text see RO 113-18, no. 25.
token in itself, as in Sophocles’ *Electra* (1223).\(^{58}\) The token (σύμβολον), the term used by Euripides’ *Electra* (συμβόλοισι 577), also usually describes an external object granted to another as a proof of contract or a sign of identity. These include clay plaques that have been deliberately cut in half: a description that would fit the lock and even the garment well.\(^{59}\) Alternatively, σύμβολον may refer to a password which may be discovered and used to disguise an enemy as a friend, as in the *Rhesus* (573). The scar, on the other hand, cannot be separated from Orestes and so misused.

It might be objected that the scar is hardly a valid sign if a χαρακτήρ can be forged on coins. Cropp characterises this metaphor as a traditional ‘comparison between deceptive human character and counterfeit metal or coinage’.\(^{60}\) This would seem to complement Goff and Tarkow’s belief that the scar in some way ‘hints at Orestes’ less than heroic stature’.\(^{61}\) A similarly negative interpretation of the motif of ‘coins and character’ is provided by Stieber. For her the significance of the motif is in demonstrating the difficulty of identifying human character ‘just as it is impossible to gauge the value of a coin by its χαρακτήρ alone: the coin may in fact be fraudulent.’\(^{62}\) Yet, even allowing for forgeries in daily life, it is still possible to read the metaphor more positively. The χαρακτήρ, once affixed to metal, now provides a clear indication of worth that is normally accepted, even if further tests may be necessary should a dispute arise. The Athenian owl mark, as Ober has shown, became a brand that

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58 Stieber (2009) 256, citing Eur. *IA* 155-6, *Or*. 1188 and fr. 781.223. However, the seal is not, as Stieber claims, a more reliable sign than the mark in regard to quality: contrast Soph. *Trach*. 614-15 where the imprint of the seal points to the clothes sent to Heracles as the possessions of Deianeira, but fails to indicate their lethal qualities and indeed serves to deceive him.

59 See Thompson (1951) 51-2. The term συμβόλοισι is ultimately ambiguous and the plural could potentially encompass all or only one item: see Bain (1977) 106.

60 Cropp (2012) 182.

61 Cropp (2012) 176-7; cf. Tarkow (1981) 151 ‘[Orestes’] heroic mettle is as counterfeit as is the coin in the metaphor’.

62 Stieber (2009) 255.
‘stood for solid quality’ throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Orestes’ scar indicates that he is the son of Agamemnon and that, as such, he should have the strength to kill Aegisthus, even if this will only be confirmed through the final trial that is the killing itself.

The value of a χαρακτήρ as a possible indicator of quality is clearly demonstrated by a passage in the Medea:

ὦ Ζεῦ, τί δὴ χρυσοῦ μὲν ὃς κίβδηλος ἦι
tekμήρι’ ἀνθρώποισιν ὀπασας σαφῆ,
ἀνδρῶν δ’ ὅτωι χρῆ τὸν κακὸν διειδέναι
οὐδείς χαρακτήρ ἐμπέφυκε σώματι;

Oh Zeus, why have you given clear signs to mortals for gold to tell when it was counterfeit, but for mortals there is no mark (χαρακτήρ) implanted by nature onto the body by which it is possible to identify a bad one.

(516-19)

The image of the counterfeit (κίβδηλος) gold resembles the old man’s concerns that Orestes’ character may be similarly corrupt (ἐν δὲ κιβδήλωι τόδε, 550). While there is no mark of quality for people, there are methods of assessing the purity of gold that include the χαρακτήρ. Marks on coins, it is assumed, can normally be trusted.

Medea wishes a sign would naturally occur on human bodies (ἐμπέφυκε): a choice of verb suggesting that such a mark would reveal, and be part of, a person’s internal φύσις –

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63 Ober (2008) 227.
64 Stieber (2009) 259 is aware of the difficulties this passage poses for her argument and tries to reconcile the two: ‘if, in the best of worlds, “character”, emanating from within, gravitated to the surface to reveal itself as opposed to being imposed artificially by external forces from without, it could be trusted, whether it appear on a coin or a human body’ [my emphasis]. Yet Medea explicitly contrasts coins and human bodies and implies that different rules apply in each case.
whether good or, in this case, bad. Similarly, Theophrastus states that it is the nature of touchstones to reveal the natural quality (φύσις) of precious metals. It is thus that part of the nature of metals that admits of such assaying and stamping that she wishes were replicated in human beings. She does not deny that additional signs (such as that provided by the touchstone) were available to the δοκιμαστής. Medea’s point is rather that the entire purpose of the χαρακτήρ on coins is to act as a guarantee of quality and that, in an alternative world, a mark of that kind would be a generally reliable (though she does not say infallible) indicator of human worth. For the same reason, Electra asks the old man to produce such a mark to justify his identification of Orestes (572). Although in most cases people do not have the mark of Medea’s fantasy world, Orestes is the exception. The scar is the external mark (χαρακτήρ) of internal character for which Electra, the old man, and even Orestes himself have been looking.

The mark is also bright (λαμπρόν χαρακτῆρ’, 559). This brightness is obviously appropriate to precious metal, yet it has a double meaning as an adjective commonly applied to an elite, either a natural one defined by birth and excellence, or a nominal one defined by wealth and beauty. It is also used to describe the farmer’s ancestors (λαμπροὶ γὰρ ἐξ γένος γε, 37), the lustre of whose birth was obscured by poverty. The scar of Orestes thus appears as an indicator of the excellence of Orestes’ bloodline. Medea, in the passage cited above, is most concerned with discovering bad character, as she has been lately deceived by Jason. Yet a test for metals can as easily be used to describe the identification of good nature. Such is the purpose of the touchstone in the Theognidea:

εἰς βάσανον δ’ ἐλθὼν παρατριβόμενός τε μολύβδωι

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65 Theophr. de lapidibus 45: θαυμαστή δε φύσις καὶ τῆς βασανιζούσης τὸν χρυσόν . . . δύναται γὰρ ὡς δοικεν ἐκλαμβάνει τὴν ἐκάστου φύσιν.
66 Supp. 222; Tro. 992; frs. 184; 282.10; 683a.
χρυσὸς ἄπεφθος ἐὼν καλὸς ἅπασιν ἔσηι.

Once you have gone to the touchstone and are rubbed next to lead, as refined gold you will appear fine to all.

(1105-6, cf. 415-18, 1164e-h)

Euripides may have had this or parallel passages in mind. In an unknown Euripidean tragedy, a character is similarly urged to prove his mettle in good and bad fortune:

ἀλλ’ αὑτὸς αἰεὶ μίμνε τὴν σαυτοῦ φύσιν
σῷζων βεβαίως ὥστε χρυσὸς ἐν πυρί.

But remain yourself always the same, preserving your nature forcefully as gold in fire.

(fr. 963.4-5)

Here the ideal is that the best men should resemble the highest quality metals in being free of corruption and, moreover, remain so even under pressure. This final test of Orestes’ quality will come in the concluding part of the play, the act of revenge.

4. The Revenge

Before Orestes departs for his deadly rendezvous with Aegisthus, Electra tells him that it is his task to be a man (πρὸς τάδ’ ἄνδρα γίνεσθαι σὲ χρή, 693): to show, that is, the virtue of εὐανδρία. The killing of Aegisthus will prove him a man and, moreover, one of the same kind as his father. The hero and his friends celebrate the new victory as an achievement that continues the run of successes begun by Agamemnon at Troy.

ὦ καλλίνικε, πατρὸς ἐκ νικηφόρου
γεγώς, Ορέστα, τῆς ὑπ’ Ἰλίου μάχης,
δέξαι κόμης σῆς βοστρύχων ἀνδήματα.

Oh Orestes, glorious in victory, born from a father victorious in the battle at Ilium, receive these garlands for your locks of hair.

(880-2)
The blood of Agamemnon does indeed run in his son’s veins. The assassination has fulfilled Electra’s initial expectations of Orestes based upon the previous excellence of his father:

αἰσχρὸν γάρ, εἰ πατὴρ μὲν ἐξεῖλεν Φρύγας,
ό δ’ ἄνδρ’ ἐν εἶς ὡν οὐ δυνήσεται κτανεῖν,
νέος πεφυκὼς κάς ἀμείνονος πατρός.

For it will be shameful, if his father conquered the Phrygians, but he is not able to kill one man one-to-one, though being young and born from a better father.

(336-8)

It is now clear that he is noble in nature as well as status and wealth.

The use of athletic imagery emphasises the importance of good birth in winning trials of combat. In honouring his boy victors, Pindar frequently stresses the earlier achievements of the athlete’s family. Such a tradition provides these youths with a significant advantage in the gymnastic trials that will see them pass from adolescence into manhood.67 The eventual victory is the natural continuation of a family tradition and further vindication of the inherent strength of the clan. The Theban boy runner Thrasydaeus in Pythian 11 is said to have cast another wreath onto the ancestral hearth, capping two previous triumphs (possibly by his grandfather).68 It is not surprising that Pindar juxtaposes his achievement with the myth of Orestes. In Euripides, by contrast, the killing of Aegisthus is more glorious, according to Electra, than an unproductive running race (οὐκ ἄχρειον ἐκπλεθρόν δραμὼν 883).69 Her main aim is not to make a serious attack on athletics, which would undermine the comparison between Orestes and athletic victors,

67 See e.g. Nem. 3.40-2; 4.78-80, 5.40; Isthm. 6.57-65, 8.71-2; on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, see Burnett (2005) 48-51.
68 Θρασύδαιος ἔμνασεν ἑστίαν / τρίτον ἐπὶ στέφανον πατρῷ πάλιν 13-14; on the previous victories see Finglass (2007) 3.
69 Cf. 862-4; other athletic references: runner 824-5, 953-6; crown 854, 872, 882; see Egli (2003) 229-33.
but to stress the superiority of Orestes’ victory above and beyond what is normally regarded as one of the highest human achievements. Both ThraSydaeus and Orestes have lived up to their family traditions, but Orestes has won his victory in actual combat.

Some have been unwilling to take Electra’s statement at face value. We have become so used to identifying Orestes’ unheroic aspects that we are unable to accept her evaluation of her brother as εὐγένης after what, to some, has seemed an ignoble murder. Wohl expresses this feeling of disappointment: ‘we ourselves have bartered away the possibility of non-elite agency when we mistake this worthless aristocrat for a “dear treasure” and this “weak” character for a tragic protagonist.’ The universal acclamation of Aegisthus’ former servants (854–5) should not deceive us, says Wohl. Orestes’ subjects believe in his triumph ‘so we won’t have to, they pay the political price while we enjoy the spectatorial profit’. The play has lost in its final scene what Edith Hall has termed a ‘utopian tendency’ to express ideas that are ‘vastly more politically advanced than the society which produced Greek tragedy’.

Wohl’s disappointment, however, betrays the attitudes and concerns of twenty-first century liberal academics, not fifth-century BC Greeks. As Wohl admits, none of the characters treat the killing of Aegisthus as anything other than a noble and just act. She assumes that the murder is self-evidently wrong because Orestes tricks his victim and strikes him in the back, and so transforms the deed into a perverted and impious sacrifice. But is this assumption really justified? As Lloyd has noted, the death of an enemy at a sacrifice could as easily be taken as evidence for divine sanction or even connivance in a just killing.

Sacrifices and festivals presented good opportunities for the assassination of tyrants: the

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70 For the passage as a critique of athletics, see Arnott (1981) 188-90.
71 E.g. Egli (2003) 228 ‘er entspricht also in keiner Weise einem wirklichen εὐγένης’; see also n. 12 and n. 50.
72 Wohl (2015a) 70, 72-3.
73 Hall (1997) 125.
74 Lloyd (1986) 16 cites examples from tragedy, including Soph. Trach. 753-66 and Eur. HF 922-30.
Athenian tyrannicides murdered Hipparchus during the Panathenaea, yet they were still lauded as heroes. Trickery was similarly used by Greek horsemen at the battle of Himera to strike down the Carthaginian general while he was in the act of sacrificing to Poseidon. Far from committing a sacrilegious act, Gelon had saved the Greeks of Sicily. This story, told by Diodorus (11.21.4, 22.1), is partially corroborated by Herodotus (7.167), who states that Hamilcar threw himself onto the sacrificial fire, an act which led to the establishment of hero cults in Sicily and Carthage.

It is also not necessarily immoral to use cunning against a villain. However welcoming Aegisthus may be to unidentified strangers, he is himself a murderer and usurper. Trickery need not imply cowardice either. In fact, Orestes, as the messenger relates (844-7), very nearly meets the same fate as the Harmodius and Aristogeiton, who were respectively struck down and captured by Hipparchus’ bodyguards. By contrast, Orestes in the Andromache is accompanied by a band of assailants, while his victim, Neoptolemus, fights alone on the sacrificial altar (1114-24). Because of this, the messenger explicitly views as the killing a shameful act (1161-5), even if one sanctioned by a vengeful Apollo. In the Electra, however, it is Orestes and Pylades who manfully (ἀνδρείας ὕπο, 845) stand alone against Aegisthus’ slaves.

A negative reading of Orestes’ actions in the Electra is still possible, but it is not inevitable; indeed, such an interpretation finds no support from within the text itself. Nevertheless, Orestes’ inheritance is by no means entirely positive. The matricide is undoubtedly a crime and this action, as Cropp and others have noted, overshadows Orestes’ victory parade. As Castor will acknowledge at the end of the play, Orestes and Electra will

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75 A skolion (PMG 895) specifies that the assassination took place in a ritual context (Ἀθηναι ἐν θείας).
76 Cropp (2012) 203.
be crushed by a familial curse (ἅπατηρόν, 1307). It is precisely Orestes’ inherited nobility and bloodline that will tragically force him to avenge his father by killing his mother.

Nobility, as we have seen, is destructive for the hero himself, and not merely his enemies. Electra shames Orestes into performing the deed with a charge of cowardice (οὐ μὴ κακισθεὶς εἰς ἀνανδρίαν πεσῇ, 982). Here she accuses him of the very opposite of εὐανδρία. Now his courage and strength are required to perform an act that is entirely impious. It is against Orestes’ nature to be κακός, but he can barely endure to kill his own mother. Mossman’s comment is apt: ‘I am inclined to think that the term ‘anti-heroic’ is something of a red herring . . . What is wrong with Electra and Orestes is not that they are not heroic, but that their heroism is horribly misdirected.’

The nobility of Orestes becomes an essential part of the tragedy because it is the very thing that makes the killing of Clytemestra both inevitable and heinous. If Orestes is the son of Agamemnon, he is also the son of Clytemestra. In the final episode of the play, it is the familial relationship between Orestes and Clytemestra that is stressed, rather than Agamemnon. Orestes expresses his reluctance to commit matricide as an unwillingness to kill the one who nurtured and bore him (ἡ μ’ ἔθρεψε κάτεκεν, 969). Electra’s immediate response is to point to his equally pressing duty to avenge his father (970). It is her φύσις that impels her and Orestes towards the murder, as Clytemestra unwittingly reveals: she is by nature disposed to love her father (ὁ παῖ, πέριφας πατέρα σὸν στέργειν ἀεί, 1102). The horror of the matricide only becomes fully apparent through the recognition that Clytemestra gave birth to her killers: the siblings are only too aware of this by the exodus, where it is stressed three times (ἄ μ’ ἔτικτε κούραν, 1184; ἄ σ’ ἔτικτεν, 1212; φονέας ἔτικτες ἄρα σοι, 1229). Orestes’

77 Mossman (2001) 376-7.
heritage both enables the glorious victory over Aegisthus and, by the same token, draws him inevitably to the act of parricide.

Conclusion

Aeschylus had created a tragedy of interfamilial strife caused by pollution and the family curse, which called for revenge from generation to generation. Euripides tells the same tragic story and creates the same effect in a startlingly original way. He has crafted his plot not around the crimes of previous generations, but rather the difficulties in identifying inherited nobility or moral excellence. The farmer demonstrates through his poverty and noble actions that wealth does not equal worth. A better criterion is needed to prove that Orestes is indeed the son of Agamemnon and that he has inherited from his father the family traits needed to win victory. After Electra’s rejection of the old man’s tokens, the final test, the scar, proves Orestes’ identity and, by extension, his nobility as surely as a mark upon a coin. This heritage is both a boon and a curse: it means that the final blow is struck against Orestes’ own family, the very source of strength that had proved so potent against the clan’s external enemies. Like Aeschylus, Euripides traps Orestes with his own bloodline and uses it to propel his hero towards matricide and the consequences of kin-killing: pollution and exile.

Euripides’ Electra is a play of great subtlety and careful artistry. Some critics may object that it is too clever; yet this drama is at least intelligible, if we are willing to understand it on its own terms.

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