

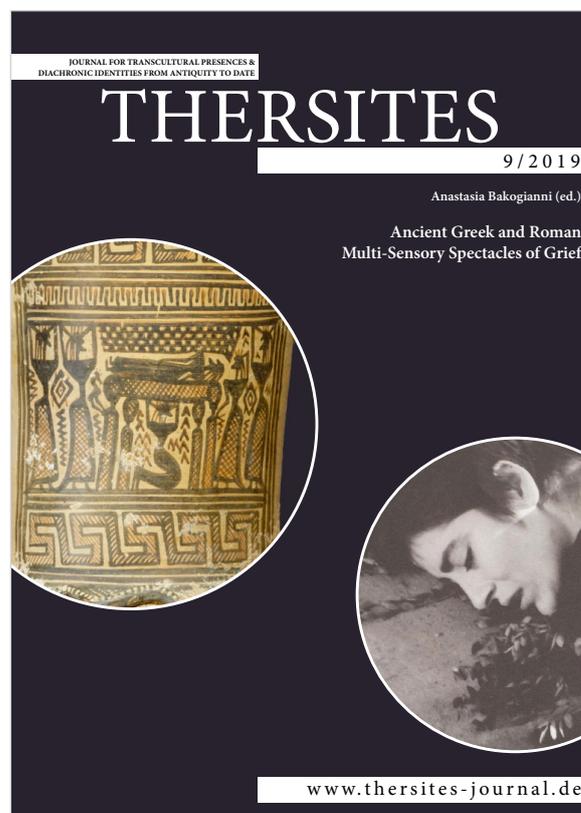
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**Performing Grief**  
Mourning Does Indeed Become Electra

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## **ABSTRACT**

Electra is Greek tragedy's mourner par excellence. In Sophocles' dramatic version she is portrayed as stuck in a state of never-ending grief that fuels her desire for vengeance. On the modern stage she captures audiences' imagination with her powerful, multi-sensory spectacle of mourning. Electra is a transgressive character precisely because she mourns too intensely and for too long. She is trapped in a liminal space where both her mind and body are adversely affected by her excessive mourning. But so enthralling is the portrayal of her grief that it has become the most prominent strand of the tragic heroine's reception. This paper investigates two examples of Sophocles' Electra in performance at the end of the last millennium, as a means of unpicking two very different approaches to the portrayal of 'tragic' grief on the modern Greek stage. At the end of the 1990s, the country's premier theatrical company, The National Theatre of Greece, staged Sophocles' Electra twice; in 1996 Lydia Koniordou highlighted female ritual, while Dimitris Maurikios' 1998 production featured an Electra that was labelled 'hysterical' by theatre critics. This paper examines how modern Greece's claim to a 'special relationship' with classical Greece has affected the performance of Electra's grief.

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## Performing Grief: Mourning Does Indeed Become Electra

### 1. Introduction

ELECTRA's personal grief acts as an emotional hook that allows modern audiences to connect with Sophocles' ancient tragic heroine. It is precisely because her unique circumstances have isolated Electra from her community and placed her outside it that she appears so modern. In many of today's developed societies, the emotional journey of grieving for a dead loved one has become an increasingly solitary one. We are not taught how to deal with grief and death<sup>1</sup> and urban individualism exacerbates the problem.<sup>2</sup> In ancient Greece family and friends, as well as the wider community, supported the bereaved. Electra's case is unique for a number of reasons. Her father was murdered and improperly buried and her mother participated in the commission of the crime. This terrible injustice remains unavenged when Sophocles' drama opens. Electra has also been forced out of the center of power (her former status as royal princess) and made an outcast, shunned by her mother and on the outskirts of her community. Her response is a never-ending lamentation for her father and the terrible circumstances she has had to endure. Electra weaponizes grief, using words to fuel her desire for vengeance and as a strident reminder to the wider community that their rightful king was murdered and his power usurped.<sup>3</sup>

We cannot reconstruct the ancient audience's reactions to experiencing Sophocles' *Electra* in performance for the very first time, but we can put forward informed hypothesis based on our surviving evidence about ancient

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In Memoriam: Daphne Ayles (1932-2019), wonderful London landlady and friend.

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<sup>1</sup> Gunzburg (2019) 197 and Holst-Warhaft (1992) 11.

<sup>2</sup> Davies (2002) 22.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of grief as a call to arms to take vengeance in Sophocles' drama see Abbattista's paper in this issue.

Greek values and beliefs. Electra is one of Greek tragedy's most transgressive tragic heroines, particularly in Sophocles' and Euripides' eponymous dramas,<sup>4</sup> because her grief is too intense, too long, and too personal. It transgresses ancient accepted norms for the display of grief and she never truly moves on from the personal phase of mourning (*goos*) to the communal (*thrēnos*) performed during the public phase of ancient funerary rites.<sup>5</sup> She is stuck,<sup>6</sup> and because she cannot even begin the process of reintegration back into her society she ends up trapped in this liminal phase.

As for modern audiences, recording spectators' reactions to watching a play remains challenging even with modern technology. As classical performance reception scholars we rely on theatre reviews and our own impressions of an ephemeral medium.<sup>7</sup> The recording and digitization process undertaken by a number of major theatre companies has greatly facilitated our research in recent decades, and this paper is an example of the type of work that repeated viewings of such archival resources now makes possible. Each recording of a theatrical performance comes with its own set of limitations, it is a record of one ephemeral performance and camera angles can and do restrict our field of vision and shape viewer response. Despite all these caveats Electra's grief dominates Sophocles' drama, both then and now, and how this is portrayed in performance determines audience reaction.

In this paper I draw on recent scholarship on ancient emotions, within a Cultural Studies framework, to examine the performance reception of Sophocles' *Electra* in modern Greece at the end of the last millennium. Sophocles' *Electra* is the most often-staged dramatic version of the story of Orestes' revenge featuring his sister. Modern Greece is no exception to this rule, but its claim of a 'special relationship' with ancient Greece complicates its reception of classical antiquity. On the modern Greek stage, the performance of ancient Greek drama has been characterised by an ongoing struggle between tradition and innovation. The traditional approach privileges 'authenticity', the attempt to bring the classical past to life on the theatrical stage, as part of a wider intellectual project that seeks to invest modern

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, Electra takes a more active role in Euripides' play. She places her hand on Orestes' sword as he kills Clytemnestra. Eur. *El.* 1224-25. See also Bakogianni (2011) 57-58.

<sup>5</sup> Giannopoulou (2017) 222.

<sup>6</sup> The mourning period in ancient Greece was thirty days. Stears (2008) 142.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greekplays/publications/essays/hardwick-using-reviews> (accessed 20/11/2019).

Greece with the glamour and cultural capital of ancient Greece. More innovative approaches seek new ways of performing the ancient dramas in response to contemporary trends in world theatre. Theatre practitioners have to find their own place within this spectrum. The National Theatre of Greece has a long tradition of staging Sophocles' tragedy, but my focus in this paper is on two examples located on opposite ends of the tradition vs. innovation spectrum. Lydia Koniordou's *Electra* (1996) drew on the company's long tradition of performing ritual on stage to highlight the connections to ancient communal funerary rites. Dimitris Maurikios' production (1998), on the other hand, introduced a number of innovations to give audiences an intensely personal take on Electra's grief. Contrasting these two performances is an opportunity to reevaluate our evidence for Sophocles' portrayal of Electra's grief and its impact on ancient and modern audiences.

## 2. Staging Electra's Grief in Modern Greece

In the twentieth century, the performance of ancient drama on the modern Greek stage was characterised by an increasing tension between traditional and more innovative approaches. At the National Theatre it was not until the end of the century that freer adaptations began to gain the upper hand,<sup>8</sup> although the glamour of 'authenticity' continues to cast its spell on the modern Greek stage, even in the twenty-first century. The desire to reproduce as closely as possible the original fifth-century BCE performance informs the quest of the proponents of the traditional approach to revive ancient Greek drama on the modern stage. Such attempts are inherently unrealisable, but both the belief in a continuous tradition that dates back to antiquity and its rejection help to illuminate modern Greece's relationship with the classical past.

Modern Greece offers us a distinctive example of the reception of ancient drama that testifies to the complications introduced by questions of national identity and vested ideological interests.<sup>9</sup> Conditioned by Western

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<sup>8</sup> In a personal interview granted to the author (15/8/2015), Stathis Livathinos (Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Greece between 2015 and 2019) pinpointed 1994 as the year when the company finally changed direction and opened itself up to more innovative approaches.

<sup>9</sup> On Greek national identity see Gourgouris (1996). On the importance of names in the cultural construction of self-identity see Kaplanis (2014) 81-111.

Europe's rediscovery of the ancient world,<sup>10</sup> modern Greece constructed the new nation's identity on the belief that the modern state is the rightful inheritor of ancient Greece via Byzantium. As Antonis Petrides has argued: 'Modern Greek national and cultural identities consist, largely, of clusters of cultural memory shaped by an ongoing dialogue with the classical past'.<sup>11</sup> This belief in the continuity between ancient and modern Greeks is a widespread and longstanding attitude, cultivated for centuries by both foreign and Greek intellectuals,<sup>12</sup> which gradually trickled down to the wider public.<sup>13</sup>

On stage, the continuity argument translated into productions with archaising ambitions.<sup>14</sup> Early productions of ancient drama in the modern state date back to the nineteenth-century.<sup>15</sup> They tended to celebrate their self-proclaimed connection to ancient Greece and ideologically positioned modern Greek theatre as the inheritor of ancient Greek theatre. Early twentieth-century modern Greek directors were influenced by Austrian and German practitioners and contemporary theatrical trends in western Europe.<sup>16</sup> However, even these elements were enlisted in the performance of the 'special relationship'. Gradually, Greek theatre practitioners began to free themselves from the shackles of the search for authenticity and responded

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<sup>10</sup> Western travellers to Greece in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries played a key role in this process. Brothers (2006) 9-19.

<sup>11</sup> Petrides (2017) 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> For the role played by intellectuals in shaping modern Greek identity, see: Ferris (2000), Güthenke (2008), Beaton (2009) and Van Steen (2010).

<sup>13</sup> On the reception of ancient Greece in modern Greek folklore and the oral tradition, see Kakridis (1997).

<sup>14</sup> For a recent analysis of the continuity debate and its impact on performance see Puchner (2017). He argues that Greek theatre is a unique 'study in discontinuities' (vii) and that a nuanced re-examination of the evidence reveals meaningful commonalities in the history of Greek theatre from ancient to modern times. For a summary of his arguments, see in particular 1-12 and 315-22.

<sup>15</sup> The first performance of an ancient drama featuring a mixture of professional actors and students was organised in 1867 by the University of Athens in the ruins of the Roman Odeum of Herod Atticus. It was a performance of Sophocles' *Antigone*, in a translation by Alexandros Rizos Rangavis, on the occasion of the wedding of King George I.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Dimitris Rondiris (an early National Theatre director, who subsequently became the company's Artistic Director between 1946-1950 and 1953-1955) studied under Max Reinhardt in Vienna (1930-1933). On the early history of Greek tragic performances in the Royal/National Theatre see Arvaniti (2010) and Antoniou on early productions of *Electra* (2011) 27-184.

more creatively to the challenge of staging ancient plays in the modern world.<sup>17</sup>

This clash of approaches to staging ancient drama in modern Greece was still being waged at the end of the last millennium, as can be demonstrated by a comparative analysis of the performance of Electra's grief in our two case studies. Linda Koniordou's production of *Electra* (1996),<sup>18</sup> which she both directed and starred in, added a new chapter to the National Theatre of Greece's long tradition of formalist productions of ancient Greek tragedy that highlight ritual elements and the chorus' interactions with the tragic protagonists.<sup>19</sup> In terms of staging Sophocles' drama in particular, this approach dates back to Dimitris Rondiris' landmark production of *Electra* (1936, and at Epidaurus in 1938),<sup>20</sup> using Ioannis Griparis' translation. Koniordou's production builds on this long tradition of performing Sophocles' drama by emphasising the relationship between Electra and the all-female chorus.<sup>21</sup> Dimitris Maurikios' 1998 production,<sup>22</sup> on the other hand, draws attention to Electra's isolation more strongly. As director, translator and dramaturg Maurikios deliberately sought to break with the modern Greek theatrical tradition for staging the ancient drama.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> On modern Greek reception history of ancient drama as a series of 'turns' and changes of direction, see Van Steen (2016) 201-220.

<sup>18</sup> This production was not digitised, but was recorded and is included in the NTG's digital archive: <http://www.nt-archive.gr/playDetails.aspx?playID=185> (accessed 04/07/2019). Due to legal reasons no photographs from this production can be reproduced.

<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to Giorgos Sampatakakis (Department of Theatre Studies, University of Patras) for sharing with me the manuscript of a forthcoming chapter on the chorus in modern Greek performance.

<sup>20</sup> Rondiris (1899-1981) returned a number of times to Sophocles' drama: <http://www.nt-archive.gr/playDetails.aspx?playID=874> (accessed 04/07/2019). Another important production of *Electra* that he directed was with the Peiraikó Theatro (1959). While on tour in the UK, this production was filmed and shown on British television (1962). For more information, see Wrigley (2015) 55-66.

<sup>21</sup> A number of Greek theatre critics commented on the 'traditional' style of the production. Some did so in positive terms, praising Koniordou's 'respect for tradition' (Vangelis Psirakis in the *Apogeumatini* newspaper, 14/7/1996), while others condemned her production as too conservative, finding it 'passionless' and criticizing it for failing to engage them as spectators (Rozita Sokou also in *Apogeumatini*, 8/7/1996).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.nt-archive.gr/playDetails.aspx?playID=617> (accessed 04/07/2019). Due to legal reasons photographs from this production cannot be reproduced.

<sup>23</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Mauronitis' production from a Theatre Studies perspective, see Antoniou (2017) 127-142.

The main strength of Koniordou's production is the well-trained and choreographed chorus and its interactions with Electra. But that is also, in a sense, its main weakness as the chorus and the performance of ritual comes to dominate her interpretation and smooths away some of the rougher edges of Sophocles' tragic heroine. The members of the chorus enter first and set the scene. In Sophocles, the chorus enters after Electra's first appearance on stage, signalling their subordinate position to the tragic heroine who dominates the drama.<sup>24</sup> Koniordou draws attention to the importance of the Electra-chorus relationship by having them enter in a procession in her production's opening moments. She herself appears for the first time as Electra through a gap in the centre of the chorus and onto the middle of the stage. The chorus joins in her *thrēnos* and a close relationship between them is immediately established, both visually and aurally.

On a number of occasions throughout the performance, the chorus mirrors Electra's gestures and more generally, echoes and reinforces the sentiments of the heroine. Working in concert, they perform a kind of ritual dance with Electra as the loadstone. The chorus thus has an essential, but reactive role to play in this choreography. I offer two examples from the production to illustrate the Electra-chorus relationship. When the chorus advises Electra not to act in such an extreme manner, Koniordou faces away from them. The members of the chorus are positioned on the opposite end of the stage from the heroine, thus visually reinforcing Electra's rejection of their advice.<sup>25</sup> The chorus' sympathy for Electra is evident in the scene that follows the false news of Orestes' death. Koniordou falls to her knees and, in Giorgios Chimonas' translation, utters the despairing cry 'εγώ είμε η αφανισμένη' ('I am destroyed', although 'annihilated' also works, particularly in this context). The chorus stands at her back, but they draw closer in sympathy. The actress turns to face them, clutching her outer garment to her middle in an attitude of pain. The stage lights are lowered and Electra approaches a wide golden bowl that dominates the centre of the stage and acts as a focal point. Electra buries her face in her garment, veiling her pain from the eyes of the chorus.<sup>26</sup> The chorus mirrors Electra's great anguish,

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<sup>24</sup> Soph. *EL* 86. Her first offstage cry is heard at l. 77. On the subordinate role of the chorus in the drama see Lloyd (2005) 38-39 and Finglass (2017) 499.

<sup>25</sup> Soph. *EL* 129-36.

<sup>26</sup> On the significance of this type of gesture in epic as a signal that a grieving in a solitary, non-normative manner, see Carruesco's discussion of Achilles (9-10 and 12) and Penelope (2-4) in this issue. For Electra in the iconographic record see below.

their hands are visibly trembling, and some of its members are on their knees. Their voices overlap as they desperately seek to comfort Electra who refuses to be touched, cutting herself off from all human contact, while she sinks back into her grief, now re-awakened by the ‘death’ of her brother, her last hope.

In Sophocles’ famous urn scene, Electra performs an unnecessary lament over what she believes is the vessel that holds her brother’s mortal remains.<sup>27</sup> In Koniordou’s performance this includes a kind of cleansing ritual, where she anoints the urn with water from the bowl, as if she was cleansing the body of her brother and preparing it for burial. Washing the corpse and laying it out was one of the religious duties assigned to women in the ancient world. The *prothesis* ritual was usually conducted in the privacy of the *oikos*,<sup>28</sup> before the more public *ekphora* (funeral procession followed by burial).<sup>29</sup> In Koniordou’s production the ritual anointing of the urn mirrors an earlier moment in the performance when Clytemnestra (Aspasia Papathanasiou) throws water on her face after hearing that Orestes is dead. If the hope is that these rituals can cleanse the *miasma* (ritual pollution) of crime and death that envelops the House of the Atreidae, they not only fail,<sup>30</sup> but are actually unnecessary since Orestes lives.

These two key moments in the production reinforce the sense that this is a ritual occasion. Indeed, one could argue that the performance itself becomes a ‘ritual’, performing the National Theatre’s relationship with Greek tragedy in the twentieth century. Modern Greek directors like Dimitris Rondiris, sought to revive ancient Greek drama by employing a ‘Greek’ performance style that stressed the continuities between the classical world, Byzantium and the modern state.<sup>31</sup> To that end, many directors sought to downplay foreign influences, stressing instead how their directorial vision was shaped by Byzantine and modern Greek folkloric elements. In terms of the performance of Electra’s grief these included elements drawn from

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<sup>27</sup> Soph. *El* 1126-67.

<sup>28</sup> Stears (2008) 140-141.

<sup>29</sup> Stears (2008) 142.

<sup>30</sup> Cleansing blood pollution through ritual acts of washing is an ancient tradition but for the modern Greek audience it also has Christian overtones.

<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of Rondiris’ productions of *Electra* in terms of his desire to create a distinctive ‘Greek’ style of performance, see Roilou (2003) 200-253.

Greek lamentation practices, thought to have their roots in antiquity.<sup>32</sup> These include ritual gestures such as raising the arms to the head, beating one's breast, tearing off one's garments and the singing of *moirologia* (laments often performed by or in conjunction with professional mourners). Koniordou's approach to staging Sophocles' drama combined this rich tradition of the emotive display of grief with the National Theatre's signature performance style, whose features include stylised acting, choreography, and an emphasis on ritual.

Two years later, Dimitris Maurikios took a different approach to staging Electra's grief.<sup>33</sup> Seeking to position himself at the opposite end of the tradition vs. innovation spectrum vis-à-vis the National Theatre's long history of staging Sophocles' tragedy, he heightened Electra's isolation by more emphatically separating her from the chorus,<sup>34</sup> and he deliberately drew attention to his use of modern technology. One critic even described the production as theatre with cinematic special effects.<sup>35</sup> The most striking example of his use of technology was in reality a decoy. On the right-hand side of the stage, prominently displayed, was a lighting, sound and video console, normally found in a modern theatre's control booth. At first it appears to work and is operated by a technician with a headset, who turns out to be Pylades (Laertis Vasiliou). As the performance unfolds, however, it quickly becomes apparent that the board is not operational. When the plan to tell the false story of Orestes's death is discussed in the prologue, the console goes haywire prompting Orestes (Nikos Karathanos) to rush to his aid. But the story of the House of Atreus cannot be controlled as its members continue to murder one another. As the performance unfolds the console is transformed into an altar and a visual reminder of Agamemnon's tomb that Electra does not get to visit in Sophocles' play.

Two other notable multi-media features in the production were the soundscape and the dramatic use of lighting. A crack of thunder officially began the performance, although in a nice metatheatrical touch the

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<sup>32</sup> On ancient mourning rites and their commonalities with modern Greek practises, see Alexiou (1974, rev. 2002), Holst-Warhaft (1992) and Sutter's edited collection.

<sup>33</sup> His was not the only *Electra* at Epidaurus in the summer of 1998. The other was a production by the experimental theatre company 'diplous eros', directed by Michalis Marmarinos and starring Amalia Moutousi. For more information, see Antoniou (2011) 332-341.

<sup>34</sup> This is discussed further below.

<sup>35</sup> Listed only as 'χ.σ.' (*Ethnos* newspaper, 24/08/1998).

audience were treated to the chorus' pre-performance warm-up, reminding spectators that they were in fact about to watch a play. Loud, sharp sounds punctuated the performance, contributing aurally to its disquieting effect. When the false story of Orestes' death in a chariot race at the Pythian Games was re-told,<sup>36</sup> sounds of hoofbeats, neighing and other sounds associated with the popular ancient sport were played over the sound system, accompanied by video footage to strengthen the illusion that this fatal accident really happened. This is a notable feature of Sophocles' drama, where the *paidagogos* builds up a masterful false narrative for the benefit of Clytemnestra. Maurikios alternated light, darkness and deep shadows to great effect in his production. The performance begins and ends in near darkness, as if the horrible crimes in the royal family cast a visible pall of darkness over the city. Beams of light throw some light onto the actors at key moments [for example, as Orestes is forcing Aegisthus (Aristotelis Aposkitis) into the palace to kill him], but at other times it was hard to work out what was happening on stage. This, however, serves to reinforce the overall effect of uncanniness.

At the heart of Maurikios' production stands the popular film, television and stage star Kariofillia Karabeti as Electra. Karabeti is well-known to modern Greek theatre audiences for playing many of the famous ancient tragic heroines (she was Medea the previous year).<sup>37</sup> Karabeti gives a disturbing and edgy performance in the central role. Her Electra is positioned closer to the ground, performing the Sophoclean Electra's wish to join her family in the underworld.<sup>38</sup> Karabeti is prostrate, face down, lamenting her 'curse', when the chorus enter. When she complains of her miserable circumstances she crawls along the ground. Even her costume, looks heavy and cumbersome. When she first appears Karabeti is wearing a heavy overcoat with a large shawl wrapped round her neck, her hair confined in a tightly bound scarf with a chin strap that resembles the bindings used to wrap a corpse's head. Visually these elements symbolise the heavy burden of grief she is carrying.

The juxtaposition between the tragic heroine and the chorus is sharper in this production, further isolating Electra and depriving her of even that

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<sup>36</sup> Soph. *EL* 680-763.

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of this production and its deliberate mix of Japanese and modern Greek theatrical elements, see Bakogianni (2013) 197-212.

<sup>38</sup> Soph. *EL* 820-822.

small connection to her community. In Sophocles, the chorus is Electra's only source of support for the majority of the play.<sup>39</sup> Maurikios added a new character, a blind old female seer (Lina Lambraki), dressed in a costume that resembles the bindings used to wrap a corpse, signalling her close association with death. This uncanny female with supernatural powers is portrayed as the only character in the Maurikios' directorial vision, who can penetrate the darkness cast by the crimes of the Atreidae.<sup>40</sup> The role of chorus leader is shared by Lambraki and another actress (Margarita Tzepa, who also has two facets to her character, the second being that of nurse).<sup>41</sup> This division of the role of the chorus leader fragments the cohesion of the chorus. Electra's attention as well as that of the audience is also divided and emphasis is placed on individual relationships rather than collective ones. The fragmentation of the theatrical space itself by the use of lighting further reinforces not only Electra's distance from the chorus, but also all the characters from each other, including the different members of the chorus. Maurikios' approach contrasts sharply with the closer relationship Koniordou enjoyed with the chorus in her production. It might only be a matter of degree, but in performance small changes have a big impact.

Karabeti plays Electra as a woman so traumatised by her father's murder that she exhibits characteristic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms.<sup>42</sup> She feels trapped in a miasma of bad thoughts, dwells constantly on the unfairness of her circumstances, has a dark view of the world, is disconnected from her community and when she thinks Orestes is dead she loses all hope. Electra's intense mourning keeps her constantly on edge and she is aggressive in thought and plans to be in deed. Sophocles' Electra is prepared to kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra even at the cost of her own life.<sup>43</sup> Although this is admittedly an anachronistic framework to apply to

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<sup>39</sup> Lloyd (2005) 38.

<sup>40</sup> This adds an Aeschylean touch to Maurikios' production, a glimpse of the wider implications of the family curse. The female prophetess is also reminiscent of Teiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

<sup>41</sup> Antoniou (2017) 139.

<sup>42</sup> The first edition of the DSM to include PTSD is DSM-III published in 1980 [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/history\\_ptsd.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/history_ptsd.asp) (accessed 20/11/2019).

<sup>43</sup> Symptoms of PTSD include: flashbacks, bad dreams, bad thoughts, feeling emotionally numb, guilt, depression, worry, showing no interest in activities one enjoyed in the past, having trouble remembering the traumatic event, feelings of helplessness, dwelling on the unfairness of the situation, distrust, viewing the world as malevolent, no hope for the future, alienation, no sense of identification with others (terminal uniqueness) difficulty returning

an ancient Greek tragedy, there is a case to be made for a meaningful connection, both in terms of relating Electra to modern performative trends, but also understanding why modern audiences find Electra such a disturbing character. When that is, she is allowed to give full rein to the intensity of her grief, rage and desire for vengeance, as she is in this production.

Maurikios' production challenged the National Theatre's signature style of acting, and was not as concerned with 'authenticity', which caused some controversy in the Greek press.<sup>44</sup> Karabeti's portrayal of the tragic heroine also divided the critics with some praising her performance of Electra's grief while others found it too extreme. The language in which criticism of Mauronitis' production and Karabeti's performance of Electra's grief is couched offers us a snapshot of the public debate surrounding the clash between traditional and innovative approaches to staging Greek tragedy on the modern Greek stage at the end of the last millennium. Some theatre critics took exception to the modern elements that Maurikios introduced into the production, which they thought pointless and/or distracting.<sup>45</sup> One reviewer singled out Karabeti's lamentation scenes for particular criticism. He labelled her performance during these moments of high emotion as 'hysterical', and not befitting the performance of a classical drama at the ancient theatre at Epidaurus. Another reviewer criticised Mauronitis for undertaking the translation of the ancient drama himself,<sup>46</sup> rather than commissioning a scholar to produce one for him, or using an existing one. The underlying message of these criticisms being that there is a 'right' way to perform Greek tragedy and Mauronitis and Karabeti did not adhere to it. In an earlier phase of their history the company would have been less accepting of productions that pushed boundaries in this way. But, in the closing years of the twentieth century, the National Theatre of Greece was in a position to

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into normal life, lack of attachments/broken attachments. Another pertinent symptom for our discussion is hyper-vigilance, the subject is easily startled, is constantly on edge, experiences sleep problems, and can become aggressive in both thought and deed. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd> (accessed 22/11/2019).

<sup>44</sup> On the production's reception see also Antoniou (2017) 141-142.

<sup>45</sup> Stella Loizou, argued that these modern elements were not properly intergrated into a convincing directorial vision (*To Vima* newspaper, 30/08/1998).

<sup>46</sup> Matina Kaltaki in *Ependitis* newspaper (19/09/1998). Maurikios even added lines taken from the modern Greek poet George Seferis's poem *Mythistorema* (section 16) to his performance text. This was an innovation that challenged the notion of fidelity to the ancient source texts, so important to many conservative modern Greek theatre critics.

accommodate productions at different points on the tradition vs. innovation spectrum.

### 3. *Electra, Greek Tragedy's Mourner par excellence*

Even in a 'highly emotional genre'<sup>47</sup> like Greek tragedy, Sophocles' portrayal of Electra's grief stands out because of its intensity. The different ways in which Lydia Koniordou and Dimitrios Mauronitis responded to the question of how best to perform Electra's grief for their audiences at the end of the last millennium, forms but one chapter in a much larger debate about how to portray emotion effectively on stage. Koniordou and Mauronitis highlighted particular aspects of Electra's grief, while downplaying others, within a specifically modern Greek cultural, political and social context. The fact that these productions were filmed means that it is still possible to watch and analyse them in detail. Contemporary theatre reviews also offer us a glimpse of how their audiences reacted. But what about ancient audiences, where such evidence is lacking and we rely almost entirely on internal evidence from our ancient dramatic source texts? If we adopt a Cultural Studies perspective we can synthesize a theoretical and methodological framework that allows us to approach this thorny, and essentially unanswerable question, from a number of different angles.<sup>48</sup> What follows is just such an experimental attempt that uses the portrayal of Electra's grief in our two modern Greek case studies, as a way into reflecting on its portrayal in Sophocles' drama and its impact on the ancient audience.

Grief is generally believed to be a universal emotion that all human beings can relate to. But as David Konstan has argued with reference to classical texts, grief is conditioned by cultural, moral and social values, beliefs and norms.<sup>49</sup> We cannot divorce the performance of Electra's grief from its fifth-century BCE historical, political and socio-cultural context. But translocating it to a different time and place helps us to tease out some of the commonalities and differences, and allows us to revisit the question of

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<sup>47</sup> Wright (2005) 174.

<sup>48</sup> On the difficulties involved when we are 'considering the possible responses of those who inhabited a very different culture from our own', see Yearling (2018) 130. She is discussing Shakespearean drama, but her observation applies even more forcibly to Greek tragedy, which is separated from us by nearly two and a half millennia, instead of a mere 400 years.

<sup>49</sup> Konstan (2006) 4-5. On the importance of considering how such contexts affect the act of spectating from a Cultural Studies point of view, see Yearling (2018) 129.

audience response both in antiquity and in the later period(s). Finally, it testifies to the continuing appeal of the tragic heroine. Modern audiences might experience and interpret Sophocles' drama in different ways than ancient audiences, but the theatrical spectacle of Electra's grief continues to enthral and appal.

Electra's status as Greek tragedy's mourner *par excellence* is attested to in the pictorial record.<sup>50</sup> Most of our evidence comes from ancient pottery, but we cannot tell which of her representations refer to the myth of Electra, and which depict specific scenes from the Greek plays in which she features.<sup>51</sup> Once Electra made her debut on the fifth-century BCE Athenian stage, her visibility in art rose dramatically. By far the most popular scene is the meeting of brother and sister at the tomb of Agamemnon.<sup>52</sup> The earliest surviving examples of vases that depict this meeting date to c. 440 BCE,<sup>53</sup> but the scene was particularly popular in the fourth-century,<sup>54</sup> especially among south-Italian painters.<sup>55</sup> Taplin argues that the depiction of the meeting of brother and sister on a Lucanian *bell-krater* (c. 350s BCE)<sup>56</sup> could be 'plausibly related to the urn scene' in Sophocles' *Electra*.<sup>57</sup> The attribution is reinforced because one of the male figures on this vase is carrying an urn that he presents to a veiled woman who is standing in front of a column. The urn that supposedly contains the ashes of Orestes is an essential theatrical prop in Sophocles' tragedy. Electra's moving, although entirely unnecessary, lament is one of the highlights of Sophocles' dramatic version.<sup>58</sup> The

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<sup>50</sup> On the depiction of Electra in ancient art, see LIMC, 1986, III1: 709-19 and III 2: 543-49 and 801. Knoepfler (1993) 58-65 (Electra and Orestes at the tomb of Agamemnon) and 96 (fresco of Electra at the tomb of Agamemnon from an ancient villa in Egypt). Taplin, (2007a) 50-56 and plates 1- 4 for Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, 96-97 and plate 25 for Sophocles' *Electra*. See also Bakogianni (2011) 20-29.

<sup>51</sup> On the difficulties of relating vase scenes to our dramatic texts see (2007a) 2-4 and (2007b) 178-79.

<sup>52</sup> Taplin (2007a) 96 and March (2004) 10.

<sup>53</sup> Taplin (1997) 72.

<sup>54</sup> Lucanian *pelike*, c. 350 BCE: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orestes\\_Elektra\\_Hermes\\_Louvre\\_K544.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orestes_Elektra_Hermes_Louvre_K544.jpg) (accessed 25/11/2019).

<sup>55</sup> On the popularity of scenes from tragedy among south-Italian potters, see Taplin (1997) 88-90.

<sup>56</sup> Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (ANSA IV 689) <https://www.khm.at/objekt-datenbank/detail/57936/> (accessed 25/11/2019).

<sup>57</sup> Taplin (2007) 96-97.

<sup>58</sup> Soph. *El.* 1126-70.

inclusion of the urn suggests that the artist used Sophocles' drama as his source of inspiration. There are also some vases that depict Electra alone at the tomb of her father in a mourning attitude.<sup>59</sup> This depiction of Electra without her brother emphasises her devotion to her dead father and highlights her isolation. Such scenes would also have had 'a general appeal for the market for funerary offerings'.<sup>60</sup>

Electra's relationship with the chorus and on-stage ritual, are crucial to understanding modern Greek audience response to the performance of grief in Koniordou's and Maurikios' productions. In what follows, I outline some of the key elements in our Sophoclean source text that would have conditioned the ancient audience's response.<sup>61</sup> Audience members in antiquity (and in later periods), can take a measure of consolation from the fact that they are watching the Sophoclean tragic heroine's suffering, rather than experiencing it for themselves. This would have been especially true for those members of the audience who had recently suffered the death of a loved one.<sup>62</sup> Having said that, the Sophoclean version of the tragic heroine would have been particularly disturbing for ancient audiences because she violates so many societal norms. Electra has been mourning for so long that her never-ending grief has transformed her into an outcast. To be cut off from one's community was a terrible fate in ancient Greece and was used as a deterrent to bad behaviour. Electra chose her path willingly and refuses to change course, despite both the chorus' advice to moderate her behaviour and Clytemnestra's admonitions. In other words, Electra has, at least to a degree, brought her suffering upon herself.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> On the popularity of depictions of Electra and Penelope as mournful female figures in ancient Greek art, see Robertson (1981) 60. On Penelope's iconography, see also Carruesco in this issue (2 and 16-17).

<sup>60</sup> Taplin (1997) 72.

<sup>61</sup> Our lack of evidence makes it nigh impossible to account for the 'diverse and mixed responses' [Yearling (2018) 131] to Electra's grief that different audience members would have experienced in the theatre of Dionysus, when the drama was first performed. I do mostly refer to the ancient audience in a homogenizing way, but acknowledge that this does not do justice to the richness and variety of ancient audience responses.

<sup>62</sup> Munteanu calls this the 'practical purpose' of these tragic narratives: (2017) 79.

<sup>63</sup> Wheeler (2003) 378.

Electra problematises her own behaviour, by reporting her mother's words,<sup>64</sup> leading the audience to reflect on how and why she mourns so deeply in Sophocles' drama:

ὦ δύσθεον μίσημα, σοὶ μόνη πατήρ / τέθνηκεν; ἄλλος  
δ' οὐτις ἐν πένθει βροτῶν; / κακῶς ὄλοιο, μηδέ σ' ἐκ  
γόνων ποτὲ / τῶν νῦν ἀπαλλάξειαν οἱ κάτω θεοί.<sup>65</sup>

Oh godless, hated being, do you think you are the only who has / lost a father? Does no other mortal mourn a death; / May you be destroyed, and may the gods of the underworld / never release you from your weeping.

Electra argues that her grief is exceptional, because of the unique circumstances surrounding her father's death. She continues to mourn precisely because she is convinced that her grief is not like that of other people, but deeper and therefore unique. This belief isolates her from her community and leads her to reject all attempts to console her, even by the sympathetic chorus.<sup>66</sup> For ancient spectators, Electra's self-proclaimed exceptionalism and defiance would have been especially problematic. She is knowingly breaking the rules of her society,<sup>67</sup> as she herself admits to the chorus,<sup>68</sup> and even to her mother.<sup>69</sup> Sophocles' Electra has become addicted to mourning,<sup>70</sup> especially the public performance of her grief, as it gives her the only small measure of emotional release she enjoys until Orestes avenges their father near the end of the play. But given how long she has been stuck in this liminal place of never-ending grief, it is doubtful that even the fulfilment of

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<sup>64</sup> We cannot be sure that Electra is a reliable narrator, but the verbal confrontations between mother and daughter that follow, suggest that she accurately represents Clytemnestra's point of view.

<sup>65</sup> Soph. *El.* 289-92.

<sup>66</sup> For Electra's steadfast rejection of all consolation, see Munteanu (2017) 82-92.

<sup>67</sup> On Electra's self-awareness see Lloyd (2005) 83-84.

<sup>68</sup> ἐν δεινοῖς δεῖν' ἠναγκάσθην· / ἔξοιδ', οὐ λάθει μ' ὄργα. 'I resorted to fearful deeds born out of terrible suffering; / The truth about my disposition does not elude my notice.' Soph. *El.* 221-22.

<sup>69</sup> Soph. *El.* 605-609.

<sup>70</sup> Wheeler (2003) 379 and Wright (2005) 182.

all her hopes will alter her underlying condition.<sup>71</sup> Sophocles' Electra is damaged beyond repair by her performance of grief. To mourn, as Electra does, is also a call for revenge and an act of vengeance. Electra hopes that her mourning will summon her brother home to fulfil his duty to avenge their father. Her never-ending lamentation hurts Clytemnestra's standing in the city and is an uncomfortable reminder of the queen's past criminal behaviour. She would not mistreat or verbally attack her daughter, if Electra's words did not hit their target.

Electra's only power might lie in her words, but they are also the source of all her troubles. The anthropologist and theologian Douglas J. Davies calls attention to the importance of 'ritual language' in funerals, as a key coping mechanism for those left behind.<sup>72</sup> The closer the relationship with the dead person, the worse the burden of grief and the greater the need for 'words against death'.<sup>73</sup> But, Electra's words are not adequate to the task because her father's death ritual remains incomplete until his murder is avenged. The fact that the vengeance has been delayed for so many years stretches out the mourning period for Electra, well beyond ancient norms. As we have seen, her despair further isolates her from her community, who has accepted the rule of his murderers, while she remains trapped in grief, longing for a past way of life that has been irrevocably lost. The second reason why her words are ineffective is that ancient and modern funerals are construed as public events that should involve a network of family, friends and members of the community.<sup>74</sup> Electra mourns alone, long after her father's death and even the sympathetic chorus of Sophocles' *Electra* tell her she is grieving excessively.<sup>75</sup> They advise the tragic heroine to curtail her lamentations for her own sake, but Electra, fuelled by a potent cocktail of grief and anger refuses to listen. In the end the chorus give in and agrees to follow her lead,<sup>76</sup> an early indication of the power of Electra's rhetoric over the all-female chorus.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Wright (2005) 192-194.

<sup>72</sup> Davies (2002) 1-4.

<sup>73</sup> Davies (2002) 1.

<sup>74</sup> Davies (2002) 7-8 and 16-17.

<sup>75</sup> Soph. *El.* 137-144, 213-220 and 233-235.

<sup>76</sup> Soph. *El.* 251-253.

<sup>77</sup> Soph. *El.* 1081-89. Gardiner stresses the importance of the chorus' support of Electra at this critical point despite their earlier words of caution. Gardiner (1987) 154. See also Burton (1980) 208-9 and March (2004) 14.

The attempt to limit female lamentation in the archaic and classical times testifies to the power of female lament and how patriarchal societies sought to bring it under control.<sup>78</sup> Electra, supported by an all-female chorus in performing her grief, is a force to be reckoned with.<sup>79</sup> Her relationship with the chorus in Sophocles' drama, and how this is performed, shapes audience response to Electra's grief. Her Electra's long isolation from her family means that she is no longer capable of interacting fully with other members of her society, even the sympathetic chorus. When Electra believes her brother dead, not even the chorus is able to comfort her.<sup>80</sup> What adds significantly to Electra's distress is that she did not have the opportunity to bury Orestes herself, and send him to the underworld with full mourning rites.<sup>81</sup> What happened to her father, now appears to be happening to her brother. The opportunity to fulfil her religious ritual duties is thus denied Electra. All the chorus can do, is to join in with her as she laments.

Orestes' decision to deceive even his sister about his 'death', further isolates Electra and pushes her closer towards becoming her father's avenger;<sup>82</sup> in deed as well as in word. This aspect of Sophocles' portrayal of Electra, her bloodthirsty desire for vengeance, is one that modern audiences tend to find more disconcerting than her endless mourning. Ancient audiences are more likely to have sympathised with Electra's desire for revenge, despite her gender, because there was a strong societal and moral obligation to avenge crimes committed against ones' *philoï*.<sup>83</sup> Family and friends normally fell into this category, but the Atreidae are a family where kin, has turned against kin. Electra is firmly on the side of her father and brother. When she believes Orestes to be dead, Electra proposes to Chrysothemis that they avenge their father themselves,<sup>84</sup> knowing full well that any such attempt will most likely result in their own deaths. As Agamemnon's only surviving children (or so Electra thinks), they cannot let their father's

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<sup>78</sup> On the legislation restricting female lamentation, see Stears (2008) 143 and Hall (2010) 74-75.

<sup>79</sup> On the affective capacity of music and of the human voice, see Strumbl (2018) 205-225. She refers to modern examples, but her discussion of how music and singing can affect the body and shape its emotional response is worth exploring further in relation to the performance of Electra's grief.

<sup>80</sup> Soph. *EL* 834-36.

<sup>81</sup> Soph. *EL* 869-70.

<sup>82</sup> Ringer (1998) 164.

<sup>83</sup> Blundell (1989).

<sup>84</sup> Soph. *EL* 954-57. See also McHardy (2008) 11.

murder go unpunished.<sup>85</sup> Sophocles' heroine thus moves from a suicidal desire to join her brother in death, to a suicidal desire to try to avenge her father, and back again. Her mind is disordered and her behaviour extreme.

The construction of gender roles and ancient Greek society's view on normative female behaviour is essential for understanding how transgressive Electra would have appeared to an ancient audience. As Sophocles' Electra herself admits, she is only able to grieve out in the open, because Aegisthus is away.<sup>86</sup> The fact that she remains outdoors/on stage for nearly the entire play is a direct challenge to his authority, as the *kurios* of both her *oikos* and the city (even if he is a usurper in both the private and the public spheres of Electra's life). The ancient audiences' negative responses to Electra's grief were further reinforced by contemporary medical thinking. Women's health was interconnected with their primary function in society, producing children to perpetuate the family bloodline.<sup>87</sup> But Aegisthus and Clytemnestra have forbidden Electra from marrying, because any noble-born male child that she produced is a potential avenger.<sup>88</sup> As Edith Hall argues 'every single transgressive woman in tragedy is temporarily or permanently husbandless'.<sup>89</sup> It was believed that women, like Electra, who remained unmarried would eventually go mad.<sup>90</sup> The extreme emotions of Sophocles' Electra is a cautionary tale that reinforces ancient gender norms.

Just as the Sophoclean Electra is poised on the verge of action, Orestes returns in disguise with the urn that supposedly contains his ashes.<sup>91</sup> This destroys Electra's heroic resolve and throws her back into fresh paroxysms of grief.<sup>92</sup> Ultimately, even Sophocles' Electra returns to her traditional role

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<sup>85</sup> For Electra's role as *epikleros* see Ormand (1999) 72-73 and Foley (2001) 162-63. Foley refers to modern cases from Corsica, Mani and Albania where women have carried on a vendetta themselves because all their male relatives had died.

<sup>86</sup> *EL* 310-13. Dunn explores the key question of what sort of space Electra occupies in this tragedy. He argues that she is actually 'nowhere', which only serves to reinforce Sophocles' portrayal of Electra as someone who is permanently excluded. Dunn (2009) 345-55.

<sup>87</sup> Hipp. *De Mul.* viii.12-22, 30-34, 60-62, 64-68, 78 and 126. According to the Hippocratic corpus and Aristotle 'the female body is shaped to procreate and, only if it procreates, can it be healthy'. Sissa (2013) 106.

<sup>88</sup> For other mythical examples of the fear of a daughter's child, see Hall (2010) 263-64.

<sup>89</sup> Hall (2010) 128.

<sup>90</sup> Hipp. *De Virg.* viii 466-70.

<sup>91</sup> For a discussion of how Electra 'nearly upstages Orestes as avenging hero' see Foley (2001) 163.

<sup>92</sup> Soph. *EL* 1126-70.

as the ‘arch mourner of Greek tragedy’,<sup>93</sup> and once again she gives voice to a desire for death.<sup>94</sup> Orestes’s decision to reveal his true identity, makes Electra’s assumption of the role of the avenger ‘unnecessary’<sup>95</sup> and after the *anagnorisis* scene, Electra is relegated to the more traditional role of a ‘female supporter’.<sup>96</sup> But such is the intensity of Sophoclean Electra’s hatred for her mother that when she follows her brother into the palace even the ancient audience would have been in a state of suspense about whether she would actively participate in the act of matricide.<sup>97</sup> Instead, she comes out again to act as a messenger to the chorus, but remains emotionally involved with Orestes’ action. Her shocking, obsessive cry ‘παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν’<sup>98</sup> (Strike with redoubled force, if you have the strength) captures her joy in the accomplishment of the longed-for vengeance. The intensity of her passion, and the fact that through her interactions with the chorus she acts as an emotional conduit to the audience, makes Electra feel like she is killing Clytemnestra herself.<sup>99</sup> There is no time to contemplate the matricide in Sophocles’ drama,<sup>100</sup> before Electra has to help her brother lure Aegisthus to his death.<sup>101</sup> Electra anticipates her release from all her troubles, but the play ends without a re-enactment of this resolution on stage.<sup>102</sup> I agree with the ‘dark’ interpretation of Sophocles’ ending, as a prelude to more suffering for Electra and her brother. How can it be otherwise when the proper funerary rituals were never observed, and Electra’s grief has permanently damaged her relationship with her family and the chorus.

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<sup>93</sup> Ringer (1998) 187.

<sup>94</sup> Soph. *EL* 1168-70.

<sup>95</sup> Ringer (1998) 180.

<sup>96</sup> Foley (2001) 166 -167 and McHardy (2008) 109.

<sup>97</sup> Electra goes into the palace after l. 1383, but returns after the choral interlude, which ends with l. 1397. On the question of when exactly Electra leaves the stage in Sophocles’ play, see Dunn (2009) 352. He believes that the chorus address the last lines of the play to both Orestes and his sister: n. 13 on p. 352. If this was indeed the case then Electra acts as a silent witness to the ending of the play, but is excluded from the action.

<sup>98</sup> Soph. *EL* 1416.

<sup>99</sup> Blundell (1989) 175 and Ringer (1998) 201.

<sup>100</sup> Even March admits this despite her ‘light’ reading of the play: (2001) 18.

<sup>101</sup> Ringer (1998) 209.

<sup>102</sup> Wright (2005) 172.

#### 4. Conclusion

Over the long course of her reception history,<sup>103</sup> the tragic heroine Electra, has come to both embody and symbolize mourning. In the visual and performative arts, she exemplifies the otherness and isolation produced by extreme states of grief. In the post-classical era her passionate anger and desire for vengeance was whitewashed thus confining her to the more passive role of mourner, deemed more acceptable for women.<sup>104</sup> Beginning in the nineteenth century but gathering momentum in the twentieth with the popularity of psychoanalysis the process of unleashing Electra's anger returned to the fore of her reception especially on stage and in the visual arts.<sup>105</sup> Sophocles' portrayal of the tragic heroine was instrumental in this transformation. Mourning does indeed become Electra, but let us not forget so does vengeance. Balancing these two elements is what gives the Sophoclean' Electra's grief its particular power to emotionally engage audiences.

The study of the history of the emotions can aid us in our quest to locate Electra's grief within her fifth-century BCE context, and to reflect on how audiences have responded down the centuries to her grief. Koniordou's more traditional approach to staging Electra's grief emphasised the communal aspects of mourning and funerary rites as performed by Electra and the chorus. Ironically, this traditional interpretation distances her production from Sophocles' fifth-century BCE drama and its audience, where Electra's separation from her community would have been one of the most disturbing elements for ancient spectators. In Sophocles it is not normative communal lamentation that brings Electra a measure of consolation but vengeance and even that is left incomplete at the end of the drama. Maurikios was well served in Karabeti's more extreme portrayal of the ancient tragic heroine. However, in his production he severed the majority of her ties to the chorus. Sophocles' drama requires a balance be struck between Electra's connection to and disconnection from the chorus. Electra's unusual degree of isolation from her community in Sophocles is also what makes her interactions with the chorus so important. This is the only semi-functional relationship she has with members of her community. She longs

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<sup>103</sup> On the reception of Electra, see Bakogianni (2011), on Sophocles' *Electra* specifically, see Lloyd (2005) 117-135 and Finglass (2017) 475-511.

<sup>104</sup> For examples of this phenomenon in eighteenth-century British art, see Bakogianni (2009) 19-57; in Victorian art, Bakogianni (2011) 119-151.

<sup>105</sup> Landmark receptions of Electra in the first half of the twentieth century that bring to the fore her passionate desire for vengeance are Richard Strauss' opera *Elektra* (1909) and Eugene O'Neill's play *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931).

for, but cannot find her way back into either her family or city. Her grief has made her a permanent exile, even if she lives within the boundaries of her city. Ancient audience members are more likely to have been repelled by the extreme ways in which Electra performs her grief and her disregard for societal norms, and codes of behaviour. Modern audiences, on the other hand, seem more disturbed her desire for vengeance, fuelled by her endless supply of grief.

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# Performing Grief: Mourning Does Indeed Become Electra

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