Most critics agree that the ‘agon’ scene in the Electra of Sophocles is dramatically significant. Opinions about the result of this ‘agon’, however, range from that of Erbse (‘Elektra geht . . . als Siegerin aus dem Agon hervor’) and Minadeo, who calls Electra’s speech ‘an impeccable rebuttal’ and speaks of ‘the absolute . . . justice of her charges’, to the opinions of Kells, who says Sophocles did not expect any intelligent person to believe Electra’s account of the Iphigenia episode, and Winnington-Ingram (‘Sophocles . . . was making ironical use of the form of a sophistic (or forensic) debate, the entire rational aspect of which turns out to be a sham’). The fact that such difference of opinion exists, seems in itself sufficient reason to make a thorough study of this scene. However, there is another reason for such an inquiry: the different interpretations of the Electra correspond to fundamental differences of opinion concerning Sophocles’ presentation of a single issue, viz. whether the killing of Clytaemnestra is justified or not. The traditional view has been that Sophocles, not being concerned about the ethical or legal aspects of the story, took the act of vengeance simply as the basis of his play about Electra — suffering, helpless, but noble in her endurance. A radically different interpretation ranges Sophocles with Euripides as a critic of the matricide, asserting that the former makes use of ironic innuendo to show the heinous nature of such an act. This interpretation has called forth reaction from critics who stress that Sophocles is consciously justifying the act of vengeance. Finally, there is an interpretation to the effect that the Electra reflects an insoluble conflict between τὸ δίκαιον and τὸ κακόν, thus suggesting that her relentless pursuit of justice will destroy the nobility of her character. In sum, all these interpretations concern the justice (or injustice) of the matricide. Now the ‘agon’ is the only part of the play where the justice of the impending retribution for Clytaemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon is explicitly discussed. Hence a detailed study of this section may provide valuable clues to Sophocles’ attitude towards the matricide portrayed in the Electra.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the thematic structure and dramatic function of the ‘agon’. It will be argued that the verdict to which the dramatist is leading his audience depends on the dramatic effect of the total ‘agon’ scene, much more than it depends on the intrinsic persuasiveness of the individual arguments used by Electra. The dramatic effect of the ‘agon’, in its turn, is a product of the structure in which the dramatist has moulded this scene.
Consideration of these aspects leads to the conclusion that at the end of this scene, the full sympathy of the audience lies with Electra, who is shown to have justice completely on her side, but to whom this does not bring any relief of her plight, consisting of being treated as an outcast by the usurpers of Agamemnon's throne.

The scene opens with Clytaemnestra’s speech, which begins with an accusation of shameful behaviour on the part of Electra (516–20a), consisting of insulting statements about Clytaemnestra (520b–22). She denies having abused Electra; she only reacts, she says, to Electra’s abusive statements, especially the accusation that she is the murderer of Electra’s father (523–6a). She admits having killed him (526b–7), but claims to have done so rightfully, because of his sacrifice of Iphigenia (528–33). The motive for this sacrifice, she argues, was to please his brother Menelaus (534–45). She asserts that Agamemnon has shown himself to be an utterly depraved father (546). This is her view, to which, she claims, Iphigenia would have agreed, even if Electra is of the opposite opinion (547–8). By this line of thought she returns to the accusations being levelled against her by Electra. She does not regret what she has done, and Electra must not criticise her unless she is sure that she has justice on her side (549–51).

In this speech of Clytaemnestra, an attempt to justify her deed (528–48) is structurally and dramatically contained within references to an incessant altercation between Electra and herself (516–27 and 550b–51). Electra’s response reflects both these aspects: a reference to their altercations (552–3) is followed by a courteous request to be allowed to state the facts concerning Agamemnon and Iphigenia (554–5). Clytaemnestra then grants permission, on the grounds that this time Electra’s tone is not hostile, as it normally is.

The following speech of Electra is a carefully structured response to Clytaemnestra’s claim to δίκη. Electra’s first statement, πατέρα φης κτέναν, ‘You admit you killed my father’ (558), recalls Clytaemnestra’s words of lines 525–6.\(^8\) Electra clearly states her position regarding the killing of Agamemnon: Clytaemnestra did not kill him rightfully, but was lured on by her passionate love of Aegisthus (560b–62). This position then is motivated by the following arguments: Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia because he was forced to do so (563–76); if Clytaemnestra’s killing of Agamemnon was retribution for his sacrifice of Iphigenia, she will be the next victim of retaliatory killing (577–83); but this is only pretence (584): Clytaemnestra’s real motive for killing Agamemnon is proved by her adulterous relationship with Aegisthus, which Electra condemns (585–94).

The above-mentioned series of three arguments (563–76, 577–83 and 585–94) is clearly meant to support Electra’s claim (560b–62). However, the development of her line of reasoning through this series of arguments is not readily perceptible. It seems that critics usually regard Electra’s speech as consisting of three independent arguments by which she refutes Clytaemnestra’s claims.\(^9\) The way in which she expounds her view only becomes clear when her speech is viewed against the backdrop of Clytaemnestra’s claim and in the
context of the ‘agon’ scene as a whole. The author will attempt to show that there is a definite rhetorical and dramatic progression towards the third argument, which alone is meant by the dramatist to be felt as irrefutable.

Clytaemnestra’s claim to δίκη (justice) is based upon Agamemnon’s motives for sacrificing Iphigenia; it is not stated in terms of direct retribution for his deed. This makes the issue of justice more complicated. Clytaemnestra maintains that her act of revenge was justified because Agamemnon’s motives had been unacceptable, whereas Electra maintains that Agamemnon had acted under compulsion, not for the sake of Menelaus, thus implying that Clytaemnestra’s revenge was not justified. At this point (the conclusion of Electra’s first argument) an impasse results, because of the conflicting claims of both participants in the debate. Electra now implements the only means of advancing beyond this deadlock: she pretends to concede Clytaemnestra’s claim concerning the motives of Agamemnon — thereby incidentally anticipating a counter-argument. She then reformulates Clytaemnestra’s claim, pretending that it is based upon direct retribution: εἰ γὰρ κτενοῦμεν ἄλλον ἄντ’ ἄλλου... (582). The logical implication of this principle becomes a subtle threat against Clytaemnestra: οὔ τοι πράγμα δήνος ἂν, εἰ δίκης γε τοιχάνοις (582b–3). As if perceiving that Clytaemnestra shrinks from this threat, Electra proceeds to her third argument: ἀλλʼ εἰδώρα μὴ σκηνήν οὐκ οὐδεὶς τιθης, ‘Be careful: you are setting up a false pretext’ (584). She thus creates an opportunity to expound Clytaemnestra’s true motives for killing Agamemnon (585–94).

Note that it is Clytaemnestra who first mentioned Agamemnon’s motives for sacrificing Iphigenia. This theme provides a basis for the structuring of Electra’s speech. Her first argument concerns Agamemnon and his motives. In her second argument, she deliberately replaces the consideration of motives with a reference to the principle of retaliation. When she re-introduces the theme of motives (in her third argument), the motives she is discussing are those of Clytaemnestra. Her assertions are confirmed by dramatic facts: Clytaemnestra’s adulterous relationship with Aegisthus and her rejection of her own children (cf. 257–81 and 379–82). Both these facts and their position at the climax of the speech serve to strengthen the third argument.

The arguments used by Electra, then, do not seem to be individually irrefutable. The first is merely a counter-claim to the motives imputed to Agamemnon by Clytaemnestra. The second argument is a rhetorical device whereby Electra advances beyond the point where claim and counter-claim simply balance each other, both claims only reflecting personal views concerning an event of the distant past. Only her third argument is irrefutable, because it is confirmed by dramatic facts. The arguments gain effect from their rhetorical progression towards one irrefutable argument (the third); therefore their respective functions within this progression have to be taken into account when the implications of the individual arguments are investigated. It can be misleading to take these arguments one by one and on that basis to draw conclusions about logical or ironical implications they may have.
This is true especially of Electra’s second argument (lines 577–83), of which Johansen says: “Wenn wir Mord mit Mord vergelten sollen” — dies ist der νόμος der Klytaimestra — ‘dann wirst du das erste Opfer sein’, sagt Elektra. Falls aber auch Elektra — und Orestes — sich dem von der Mutter aufgestellten νόμος fügen, dann müssen wohl auch sie in irgendeiner Weise gestraft werden — εἰ δίκης γε τυγχάνοιεν!’ 15 This sounds convincing, but Johansen is overlooking one important point: ‘Mord mit Mord vergelten’ is not the νόμος to which Clytaemnestra has appealed — at least, not in the speech to which Electra is replying. The former has claimed δίκη on the grounds of the motives she imputes to Agamemnon for sacrificing Iphigenia. Electra’s awareness of the specific nature of her mother’s claim is reflected both in her first argument (563–76) and in the way she opens her second argument:

εἰ δ’ οὖν . . . κεῖνον θέλων
ἐποκεφαλήσας ταῦτ’ ἐδρα, τούτου θανεῖν
χρήν αὐτόν οὖνεκ’ ἐκ σέθεν;

— ‘Even if he had done it only to help him (i.e. Menelaus), should his life for that reason have been taken by you?’ (577–9). Why, then, her reference to the ‘ius talionis’ in the following lines? She is distorting the logic of her own argument: εἰ γὰρ κτενούμεν ἄλλον ἄντ’ ἄλλου. . . . ‘For if we are to take life for life’ (582) implies retaliation in its crudest sense, without any consideration of right and wrong. Now this logical distortion is precisely what causes Electra’s second argument to prevail, since it enables her to make the implication of the ‘ius talionis’ into a threat against Clytaemnestra. 16 In this argument, then, Electra is making rhetorical use of the ‘ius talionis’. She is not appealing to this law in such a way as to imply that this is the law according to which Orestes is planning to act. Consequently there seems to be no reason to see in this argument of Electra an implication of future punishment awaiting the avengers. The context in which Electra refers to the ‘ius talionis’ and the function of her second argument within the rhetorical progression of her speech do not support Johansen’s conclusion. 17

It seems that Kells also ignores the rhetorical function of Electra’s second argument, for he says about lines 582–3: ‘In these lines we have the crux of the whole ethical situation of the play: if retributive killing is wrong (δίκη in that sense), then Electra’s and Orestes’ killing of their mother is going to be just as wrong as was Clytaemnestra’s killing of Agamemnon. Electra condemns herself out of her own mouth.’ 18 When these lines are viewed within the context of Electra’s speech and of the ‘agon’ scene in its totality, it becomes clear that Electra is not saying that retributive killing is wrong. Her argument of lines 577–83 is not meant to be irrefutable; neither is it fully logical; but it is a show-piece of rhetorical skill, by which she gets the better of Clytaemnestra in the debate. It amounts to no more than pretending, for the moment, that Clytaemnestra has acted according to the rule of ‘an eye for an eye’ and extending this to ‘an eye for an eye for an eye’. The concepts of right and wrong are irrelevant to such an argument. Moreover, the fact that Electra proceeds to her third argument immediately after line 583, implies that the second argument has attained its goal
and can straightaway be dismissed. The audience is thus not encouraged to apply a further logical extension of this argument to the act of Orestes.

The *Electra* may indeed be described, in the words of Kells, as ‘a continuous exercise in dramatic irony’. However, the most striking irony in the play is produced by Sophocles’ structuring of the plot. The audience, who has seen the opening scene, knows that Orestes has arrived in Mycenae as avenger of his father’s death (14); Electra, the Chorus, and Clytaemnestra do not know. This is what makes lines 303–6, 603–5, and 648–9, among other passages, dramatically effective. The characters are unaware that what they hope, or fear, is already happening or about to happen. Similarly, when Electra says σὺ τοι πρῶτη θάνατος ἄν, εἰ δίκης γε τυγχάνοις — ‘you would be the first to die, if you get what is due to you’ (582–3), the audience knows better than she does that δίκη is about to catch up with Clytaemnestra. The dramatic context of these lines could quite naturally lead an audience to remember the presence of the avenger in Mycenae, but it does not invite them to think of possible implications of the ‘ius talionis’ for the avengers.

What, then, is the dramatic effect of Electra’s speech, and the function of the ‘agon’ as a whole? Electra wins the ‘agon’ — not by a series of irrefutable arguments, but by the power of conviction with which she moves from her opponent’s claim to an exposition of facts. ‘Facts’, that is, in the dramatic sense. The text of 516–633 is not a historical account of a lawsuit, but part of a play. What Electra says of Clytaemnestra in 585–94 tallies with the impression which the audience already has of her. Clytaemnestra is guilty of murder. She deserves to be punished. But what is the point in demonstrating a fact which no-one doubts — neither Electra nor the Chorus nor Chrysothemis, and accordingly, nor the audience? The dramatic significance of this debate, it seems, lies not so much in its judicial aspects as in Electra’s situation, her hope and despair. The thematic structure of the ‘agon’ emphasizes the futility of Electra’s position. It ends as it started, in mutual accusations between Electra and Clytaemnestra.19 Electra’s victory, the entirely convincing demonstration that she has justice on her side, leaves her in the same hopeless situation as before. This must have an effect upon the audience. If they identify with Electra at all, they will now feel the necessity of vengeance with much more intensity. The ‘agon’, then emphasizes the justice of Electra’s position, but also the futility thereof. It emphasizes the necessity of vengeance, but also Electra’s desperation. So Sophocles prepares his audience for the next scene: the messenger scene, which thrusts Electra into utmost despair and removes Clytaemnestra’s fear of retribution, but by which simultaneously the plan of revenge is put into action.

NOTES

1. Cf. in this respect J.C. Kamerbeek, *The plays of Sophocles: Commentaries: Part V: The Electra*, Leiden 1974, 78: ‘... the placing of an ἀντίποιν-scene at this moment of the action (between Electra’s hope and her despair) is of course highly effective’; or R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: an
interpretation, Cambridge 1980, 220: ‘... the form is used — like any other convention — to make valid dramatic points’.


5. R.P. Winnington-Ingram, op. cit. 222.


10. It seems reasonable to assume that Sophocles consciously made Electra say πατέρα ... κτεῖαν — but his purpose was surely not to suggest to his audience the notion of μητέρα κτεῖαν! (Cf. R.P. Winnington-Ingram, Sophocles: an interpretation, Cambridge 1980, 221 n. 17) Kells, in his commentary (Cambridge 1973), obscures the poignancy of the word πατέρα as Electra uses it here, by his explanation ‘the father of Clytaemnestra’s children, and also her husband’ (ad vv. 558: see p. 125). By saying πατέρα φίλος κτεῖαν Electra expresses her own relation to the murdered Agamemnon, thereby revealing how she is affected by Clytaemnestra’s boasts.

11. Johansen, for instance, says: ‘Elektra begegnet dem Iphigenie-Argument mit mehreren Gegen­argumenten, die alle unwiderruflich sind’ (H.F. Johansen, op. cit. 16). Webster gives a brief exposition of Electra’s speech, but does not indicate any meaningful relation of the different arguments to each other. He simply states: ‘Electra’s speech again is a careful and relevant piece of argument. The prologue states the divisions of the speech — justly, unjustly, Aegisthus. The first argument starts after a clear break and has its own four-line conclusion. The second argument is introduced by δ’ οὖν. A single line introduces the third argument which again has its clear conclusion. Finally, the argument ‘ad hominem’ is developed’ (T.B.L. Webster, op. cit. 150).

12. This is noticed by Kells (op. cit. ad vv. 534–545: see p. 122), but not by Johansen (op. cit. 15), who says: ‘... dass Klytaimestra nur ein Argument, die Opferung der Iphigenie, zur Verteidigung des Morodes an Agamemnon anführt’.

13. Note how skilfully Electra echoes Clytaemnestra’s words: lines 577–8 in 577–9a, and Clytaemnestra’s claim τι δύνη in ... τι δύνης γε τυχάνως (583b).

14. If Electra’s argument concerning the motives of Agamemnon were meant to be irrefutable, the remarks of Kells (op. cit. ad vv. 566–633: see p. 126 f.) about Electra’s account being incredible to ‘any intelligent Greek’ would at least have been relevant. As it is, this argument merely indicates that there is also a view which differs from that of Clytaemnestra. Electra’s words δες μητέρας ας οικόειν ‘as I am told’ (560), moreover, are meant to place her argument on the same level as that of Clytaemnestra and need not be discredited as an indication of ‘hearsay evidence’.


16. Winnington-Ingram ignores this logical distortion in Electra’s argument, commenting: ‘What kind of law? ... It is the law of retaliation ... on which Electra and Orestes intend to act, and under which, if the law is generally valid, they will themselves be liable to retaliation’ (Sophocles: an interpretation, Cambridge 1980, 221).

17. Erbse opposes Johansen’s conclusion on the grounds that in these lines Electra argues from a false premise: op. cit. 291. He adds that the act of Orestes and Electra cannot be compared with the murder of Agamemnon by Clytaemnestra, since the former act is presented by the dramatist as being divinely sanctioned. However, the premise being false does not preclude the possibility of irational allusion to future punishment awaiting Orestes. The false premise from which Electra argues at least has a very real implication for Clytaemnestra.

18. J.H. Kells, op. cit. 128.
19. Cf. lines 622 ff., where reasoning is seen to have given way to emotional outbursts. Note also that this change of tone is brought about by the last section of Electra’s speech (lines 595–609). When the text of the Electra is read, these lines seem to constitute a rather abrupt return to the accusations being levelled at Electra by Clytemnestra. On stage, however, it can be presented quite convincingly: Clytemnestra, who has granted Electra permission to address her, may betray through her gestures her own inability to listen to reason (cf. 628–9). To this Electra may naturally react in the way suggested by the text of 595–609.
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