Conflict is the essence of tragedy. When this conflict involves a clash between accepted social values, the dilemma is more acute than when making a simple choice between right and wrong. In a changing society the problem of conflicting demands on the individual often arises because traditional values still exert an influence while new obligations are being established within the society and have become equally demanding.

Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* describes the changing society of the 5th Century B.C.

'The simplicity which is so large an element in a noble nature was laughed to scorn and disappeared. An attitude of perfidious antagonism everywhere prevailed; for there was no word binding enough, nor oath terrible enough to reconcile enemies. Each man was strong only in the conviction that nothing was secure; he must look to his own safety, and could not afford to trust others. . . . At such a time . . . human nature, which is always ready to transgress the laws, having now trampled them under foot, delighted to show that her passions were ungovernable, that she was stronger than justice, and the enemy of everything above her."

These were the extreme conditions prevailing in a revolutionary situation in Corcyra. However, elsewhere in the Greek world the same kind of revaluation of accepted standards of behaviour was taking place. In the literature of this period, which abounds in the questioning of accepted values, one senses a new groping towards meaningful norms. Plato, for example, in his *Republic* seeks a new definition of justice. He attempted to strengthen what was of value in the traditional norms of behaviour, but at the same time he discarded much of it which was rotten. Adkins in his book, *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece*, notes a trend of this time:

'... all Greeks need to be convinced that the co-operative excellences are profitable before they will pursue them . . . ' 

Sophocles’ tragedies, written between 468 and the end of the 5th century B.C. (*Oedipus Coloneus* being produced posthumously in 401 B.C.), all grapple with a moral problem of some kind. Sophocles questions accepted obligations of individuals to gods and society. He seems not to be attempting to provide an answer to such problems, but rather to exploit the dilemma of man tragically facing options which allow of no clear solution. Unlike modern psychologists who provide simple causes and answers, Sophocles is aware of the complexity of human motivation and views man’s response to ethical problems from a variety of angles.

The *Electra* of Sophocles is essentially the tragedy of Electra confronted by conflicting but equally demanding obligations. However, Sophocles has also depicted the conflict in value judgements with their particular tragic consequences in the case of all other characters in this play. The tragedy of Clytemnestra may evoke less sympathy than that of an Electra, but the tragedy of her life is not less real. Aegisthus, Orestes, and Chrysothemis as characters all contribute to a reconsideration of moral attitudes prevalent in the time of Sophocles.

In ancient Athens success and wealth were the keystones to power and prestige. A successful and wealthy person could get away with outrageous behaviour because of the power which men of wealth wielded. A reading of Demosthenes’ *Speech against Meidias* (middle 4th century B.C.) indicates that murder and violence were not unknown among political classes and that, despite laws for the protection of citizens, pre-eminent members of a class of rich and unscrupulous citizens could use their wealth and influence to exalt themselves and to humiliate and dishonour others.

A man’s worth was judged often not by his moral character, but by his wealth and prestige. Demosthenes finds it necessary to say to the jurors:

\[\text{où δε ἔτι τὰ τοιαύτα ἐκάστοτε τιμᾶν οὐδὲ ἀθυμαίες ύμᾶς, οὐδὲ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἐκ τούτων κρίνειν, εἰ τις οἰκοδομεῖ λαμπρῶς ἢ θεραπείνας κέκτηται πολλάς ἢ σκεύη καλά, . . .}^{3a}\]

What is more, Demosthenes, although successfully rallying opinion against Meidias for his crimes, did not dare to prosecute him in view of his influence. It was a fact of life that a man whose wickedness and violence was supported by power and wealth was safe against onslaughts against him. The *Electra*, even though writing in the 4th century B.C., is a valuable source as he, like other Greek dramatists, questions the values of the time.

---

3.a Demosth. XXI, 159.
3.b ibid. XXI, 138. τὸ γὰρ ἐπ’ ἐξουσίας καὶ πλοῦτος ποιητῶν εἶναι καὶ ἐβριστὴν τείχος ἐστὶ πρὸς τὸ μηδὲν ἀν αὐτῶν ἐξ ἐπιδρομῆς παθεῖν.
orators of his time, illuminates practices known to have existed in the late fifth century B.C.

The fact that wealth was to a large extent the measure of a man's worth is also evident from several sources of the 5th century B.C. In the famous speech of Orestes in Euripides' *Electra* (ll.367-400), he expresses surprise to find a man of good moral worth in the poor farmer caring for his sister Electra. In Aristophanes' comedy, *Plutus*, Wealth is a god whose blindness is responsible for the injustice of society, since he is unable to tell just from unjust men and reward them accordingly. Referring to Pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution of Athens*, Fisher in a study of social values in Classical Athens states:

'As late as the late fifth century, people were still prepared to assert an almost complete identification between large-scale ownership of property and moral virtue and between poverty and vice.'

However, such an equation of wealth and moral worth, prevalent since the time of Homer, was being questioned by the end of the 5th century B.C. For example, doubts occur in Euripides' *Electra* when Orestes asks:

\[ \text{πῶς ὁὖν τις αὐτὰ διαλαμβῶν ὁρθῶς κρίνει;} \\
\text{πλοῦτῳ, ποιημῷ τάρα χρήσται κριτῇ;} \\
\text{ἡ τοῖς ἔχουσι μηδὲν; ἄλλ' ἔχει νόσον} \\
\text{πενίᾳ διδάσκει δ' ἀνδρῇ τῇ χρείᾳ κακόν.} \]

A similar questioning is implicit in the role of Aegisthus in Sophocles' *Electra*, because he as a man of wealth is the most reprehensible character from a certain point of view.

Besides wealth, power gained by success had become the ultimate determinant. Readers of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* will recall the change from the lofty principles of the Funeral Speech to the grim realism of the Melian Dialogue. In the latter passage the Athenians say:

\[ \text{τὰ δυνατὰ δ' ἔξ ἔν ἐκάτεροι ὑληθῶς} \\
\text{φρονούμεν διαπράσασθαι, ἐπισταυρώσανς} \\
\text{πρὸς εἰδὸς ὅτι δίκαιοι μὲν ἐν τῷ} \\
\text{ἀνθρωπεῖσι λόγῳ ἀπὸ τῆς ἵσης ἀνάγκης} \\
\text{κρίνεται, δυνατὰ δὲ οἱ προϊσχόντες} \\
\text{πράσασθαι καὶ οἱ ἀσθενεῖς ἐγχώρουσιν.} \]

This is not unlike Demosthenes in his speech, *On the Freedom of the Rhodians*, stating that justice is measured with an eye on the actual powers which one

---

possesses. We find this refusal to recognise any scruples about the means by which the purpose is achieved in the Philoctetes of Sophocles. Odysseus finds it difficult to understand why Neoptolemus should have any scruples about a single act of meanness and treachery, when it will contribute to a desirable end. Callicles in the Gorgias ‘is not concerned with the rules of conduct for the ordinary man; he wants to explain and justify the behaviour of the autocratic ruler, who can afford to ignore ordinary ‘bourgeois’ notions of ethics; his crude theory of sovereignty maintains that the stronger or better man is entitled to have his own way by the law of nature. In the Republic of Plato the first confident attempt of Thrasymachus at defining justice is:

φημὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ εἶναι ὑπὸ δίκαιον οὐκ ἄλλο
τι ἡ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρου.

In Greek society the rights of the stronger and success over one’s foes were recognised as inevitable. Consequently there were many cases of wealthy and powerful individuals seizing in devious ways the possessions, land, and household goods of people unable to assert their rights. Isaeus in 354 B.C. related how the sisters of Apollodoros made no effort to ensure the continuation of Apollodoros’ household. He deplored the fact that their husbands squandered the property and possessions.

Aegisthus in the Electra of Sophocles is the epitome of the triumph of the powerful whose wrongs have proved no impediment to success and influence in society. Victorious over his foe Agamemnon, he has taken over his property and usurped his position as master of the house of Pelops. His coming onto the stage is heralded by Electra saying:

Χωρεῖ γεγηθὼς ὁδὸς εἰκ πρωτοσίου.

He exults in the belief that the last threat to his position of usurped power and wealth has disappeared with the news of Orestes’ ‘death’. He is described as towering in wealth and power over his foes.

In view of his position of power as the new lord of the house, it is expected to yield to him. To deceive Aegisthus and thus lure him to his death, Electra pretends to do what is expected of her:

τῷ γὰρ χρόνῳ
νοῦν ἐχον, ὡς τις συμφέρειν τοὺς κρείσσοιν.

12. Ibid. 1432.
13. Ibid. 1090–92.
In the roles of Electra and Chrysothemis Sophocles views the problem of power from the point of view of the subservient. Whether or not to yield to a powerful tyrant and thus to sacrifice those principles of right and wrong which an individual values most is an age old problem. The dilemma is greater when by yielding one ensures continued comforts in life, whereas adherence to lofty principles may cost the individual his freedom or even his life. In the Antigone of 443 or 441 B.C. Sophocles had already explored this theme from a certain angle. Antigone represented the stand of the high-principled individual against the demands of the state. Ismene was prepared to yield. She explains:

\begin{quote}
\text{άλλ’ ἐννοεῖν χρῆ τοῦτο μὲν γυναῖχ’ ὅτι ἔφυμεν, ὡς πρὸς ἄνδρας ὁ μαχουμένα}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\text{ἐπειτα δ’ οὐκ’ ἀρχόμεσθ’ ἐκ κρείσσονων καὶ ταυτ’ ἀκοίην κατί τὼν ἀλγίων.}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\text{.................. ὅς βιάζομαι ὅδε,}
\text{τοῖς ἐν τέλει βεβάσι πείσομαι.\textsuperscript{16}}
\end{quote}

The Electra of Sophocles, produced only a few years later in 411 or 410 B.C.,\textsuperscript{17} again picked up the moral problem of yielding to the mighty. However, this time the theme is to be seen against the background of the recent subjection of Melos where the higher principles of Athenian supremacy were set aside for the blatant power of the mighty over the weak.\textsuperscript{18} Perhaps against the background of the more recent oligarchic revolution this problem would have assumed yet another dimension.

Electra and Chrysothemis respond to the tyrant master in different ways, but each responds in a perfectly accepted manner. Neither response is ideal because each answer leaves a host of unanswered questions in its wake. The conflict between justice and expediency remains. Electra in seeking justice must in her loyalty to her father exact vengeance and thus cannot obey the man in power. Expediency dictates to Chrysothemis subservience. Each of these characters is equally convinced of the wisdom or rightness of her chosen course of action.

Chrysothemis states her viewpoint quite clearly:

\begin{quote}
\text{εἰ δ’ ἔλευθέραν μὲ δεῖ}
\text{ζῆν, τῶν κρατούτων ἐστὶ πάντ’ ἀκοιστέα.\textsuperscript{19}}
\end{quote}

She warns later that there are times when even justice brings harm with it.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15} T. B. L. Webster, An Introduction to Sophocles, London. 1973, 6.
\textsuperscript{16} Soph. Antig. 61–67.
\textsuperscript{17} Webster, op. cit. 5–7.
\textsuperscript{18} Thuc. V, 84–116.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 1042.
\end{flushright}
Her dictum is to yield to authority. She comforts herself that, while justice may be on Electra's side, her father will pardon her and that in the circumstances she must make her voyage with lowered sail.

For Electra submission for the sake of expediency is cowardice, she would fall if needs be in defence of her cause. Her refusal to bend before the might of Aegisthus is piety to her father, the espousal of the noblest cause.

Is not this issue of the justice of punishment and the expediency of not insisting on the demands of justice the very point of the debate on the fate of the Mytileneans given us in Thucydides III, 37-48? The older problem was the conflict between justice and revenge, the newer problem was the conflict between justice and expediency. Electra's portrayal by Sophocles may be said to express the traditional moral viewpoint, while the role of Chrysothemis the newer viewing of the problem. These were most relevant issues at the time when this tragedy was produced—it involved the recent justification of the treatment of the Melians, it questioned the whole matter of growing domination by Athens as mistress of an unwilling Empire, it reflected the question which the individual Greek had to face time and again in a situation of revolution and war.

The obligation which rested on the individual to avenge the murder of a kinsman is well-known to readers of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles. In the Electra of Sophocles the themes of vengeance and justice appear side by side from the very beginning. For Orestes to kill the murderers of his father is a divine command of Apollo, the very god who approves codes of law, who inculcates high moral and religious principles, and who in matters of ritual and purification was regarded as the supreme authority. It was expected of Orestes to avenge the murder of his father. On him Electra pinned her hopes, on his action depended the future of the house of Agamemnon and the material well-being of his children. It was not merely a religious matter of requiting spilled blood with blood. There were very practical consequences since by killing Aegisthus the household and the rights of the children of Agamemnon could be re-established.

In the absence of the father it was the son who acted as kúpios to ensure the status and well-being of the family, to provide for the marriage of his sisters and the keeping of the ancestral graves. There was an impelling desire to see one's oikos continue after death and much of kinship and property obligations ensured just this in the face of forces (both death and malpractices) working against the continuance of a household. Lysias, Against Diogeiton (401 B.C.),

21. Ibid. 396.
22. Ibid. 335-339.
23. Ibid. 399.
24. Ibid. 947-989.
25. Ibid. 950 ff.
sketched the dilemma of children in danger of losing their ὀἶκος and the privileges which go with it—status, the assurance of marriage, children, wealth and power.

It was sanctioned by law to take vengeance on behalf of the dead. Demosthenes quoted the law in his speech against Aristocrates:

\[ τοῖς ἀνδροφόνοις ἔξειναι ἀποκτείνειν \]
\[ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ... \] 27

This duty rested on the kinsmen of the murdered man and hence on Orestes in the first place, and in the absence of a son on the nearest relatives and friends. On the news of Orestes' death the obligation to kill the murderers of their father devolved on Electra and Chrysothemis.

For Electra it was an obligation to her father with practical consequences to herself. The duty to ensure the continuance of the household, a good name, and hence marriage and children, became hers in the absence of a κῦρος. She exhorted her sister to take up the difficult task and her motivation clearly highlighted the important issues at stake.

\[ ἀλλ᾽ ἐὰν ἐπίστη τοῖς ἐμοῖς βουλεύμασιν, πρῶτον μὲν εὐσέβειαν ἐκ πατρὸς κάτω ἑανώτιος οἶα τοῦ κασιγνήτου θ᾽ ἐμαυτῇ ἐπιείται ὅπερ ἐξίφωσι, ἐλευθέρα καλῇ τὰ λοιπὰν καὶ γάμων ἐπαξίων τεῦξῃ· ὑλεῖ γάρ πρὸς τὰ χρηστὰ πᾶς ὀρᾶν. \] 28

She continued by suggesting that as champions against murder sparing no risk to their lives they would win reverence and love and would be honoured for their bravery at all feasts and public ceremonies. The decision of Electra to avenge her father by killing Aegisthus was acclaimed by the Chorus as winning the highest prize by piety towards Zeus for observance of nature’s greatest laws. 29

Aegisthus having succeeded in establishing himself as the new master of the house of Agamemnon and thus representing a man of power with wealth and influence would not be viewed entirely unsympathetically. By virtue of his being a murderer whom it was justified to kill, he would enjoy less sympathy. What made him particularly odious was the fact that he had won over the affections of the mistress of the household—a particularly heinous crime in Greek eyes.

'To rape a woman of citizen status was less heinous than to seduce her (Lys.1.32); ... because rape, an “involuntary misfortune” to the woman

27. Demosth. XCVIII, 28.
29. Ibid. 1093-97.
(Men. Epitr. 914), was not regarded as alienating her affection for her husband and was therefore less of an injury to him than her seduction.  

Aegisthus’ presence as usurper of the house and wife of Agamemnon provided the tragic element. It was the kind of tragedy men feared for themselves, while they (like Agamemnon) were away at war. It was against such an outrage that their laws and customs sought to provide protection.

This theme of adultery appears in the work of all three dramatists as they deal with the story of Electra. It is a theme consistently associated with the vengeance of Aegisthus for the murder of Agamemnon. In Sophocles’ Electra it has become a dominant issue.

Electra, in her emotional outburst against her mother who seeks to justify the murder of her husband, says:

\[ \text{λέξω δὲ σοι,} \]  
\[ \text{ἀς σὺ δίκη γ’ ἐκτείνας, ἀλλὰ σ’ ἐσπασεν} \]  
\[ \text{πειθώ κακοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρός, ὑ τανὺν ἔσυε.} \]

The burden which Electra bears is made clear very early in the play:

\[ \text{ἐπείτα ποιάς ἡμέρας δοκεῖς μ’ ἄγεων,} \]  
\[ \text{ὅταν ὠρόνος Ἀγαμήθων ἐνθακοῦντ’ ὕδω} \]  
\[ \text{τοῖσιν πατρῷοις, εἰσίδω δ’ ἐσθήματα} \]  
\[ \text{φαροῦντ’ ἐκείνης ταῦτα, καὶ παρεστίους} \]  
\[ \text{στένοντα λοιβᾶς ἐνθ’ ἐκεῖνον ἀλέσειν,} \]  
\[ \text{ὑδω δὲ τούτων τὴν τελευταίαν ὕβριν,} \]  
\[ \text{τὸν αὐτοφόρτυν ἡμῖν ἐν κώτη πατρός,} \]  
\[ \text{ξίν τῇ ταλαιήν μητρὶ, μητέρ’ ἐλ χρεών} \]  
\[ \text{ταύτην προσαναθὶν τάδε συγκομισμένην.} \]

Clearly the weight of her burden is the adulterer in the house usurping her father’s role.

From Lysias, *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*, we gain some idea of the severity of the laws of adultery. He expressly states that a person who catches an adulterer with his wife and kills him is not guilty of homicide. The reason for this is given as the desire to ensure the continuation of the *oikos* in the hands of the legitimate offspring of the lord of the household. Euphiletus in speaking of the offence of Eratosthenes in seducing his wife speaks of it as a foul offence against his wife and children.

---

30. Dover, op. cit. 147.
32. Ibid. 266–74.
34. Ibid. I, 26.
'It was adultery to seduce the wife, widowed mother, unmarried daughter, sister or niece of a citizen.'

Adultery thus covered intercourse between a married woman, or an unmarried but respectable woman, and a man not her husband.

The husband without incurring the guilt of homicide could kill the seducer of his wife. The wife would not be killed but the husband was required to divorce her or risk the loss of citizen rights. The disgraced wife would return to her former ὀίκος dishonoured and be forbidden to attend public cult ceremonies. If the husband did not punish the adulterer anyone might prosecute. Aeschines, a writer of the 4th century B.C., points out that the strict laws ensuring the orderly conduct of woman date from Solon’s time and he continues:

Τὴν γὰρ γυναῖκα ἐφ' ἂν ἀλώ χωρὸς οὐκ ἔδω κοσμείται, οὐδὲ εἰς τὰ δημοτελή ἱερὰ ἔστεκα, ὡς μη τὰς ἀναμαρτήτους τῶν γυναικῶν ἀναμειγγυμένη διαφθείρῃ ἔδω δὲ εἰς ἡ κοσμήται, τόν ἐντυχόντα κελεύει καταρρηγώναι τὰ ιμάτια καὶ τὸν κόσμον ἀφαιρείσθαι καὶ τύπτειν, εἰργόμενον θανάτον καὶ τοῦ ἀνάπηρου ποίησαι, ἄτιμων τὴν τοιαύτην γυναῖκα καὶ τὸν βιόν ἀβιώτον αὐτὴν παρασκευάζων.

There is thus great justice in the action of Orestes and Electra in seeking to kill Aegisthus. His death would be a just punishment legitimately exacted by Agamemnon’s next of kin for his murder. As an adulterer, who had won over the affections of Clytemnestra, he was guilty of a crime which could be punished justly by death in certain circumstances. The doubly justified killing of Aegisthus provides no real conflict of obligations either to Orestes or Electra. His death is deserved and an honourable upholding of nature’s greatest law, it was piety to Zeus. The tragic element in the role of Aegisthus lies in his presence as murderer and seducer in the house of Agamemnon whose rights he has usurped, and subsequently the conflicting obligations created for Electra vis-a-vis her mother.

It was the duty of Electra and Orestes to punish Clytemnestra, who as murderer of Agamemnon and as a woman living with her seducer, was guilty of outrageous crimes. However, by virtue of her being their mother they owed her the greatest respect and honour.

The story of Cleobis and Bito, who honoured their mother by inspanning

35. Dover, op. cit. 209.
themselves to draw her cart so that she might be assured of attending the festival of Hera, is well-known from the pages of Herodotus. Their deed won them great fame and the Argives viewed them as the best of men. Herodotus relates the story with approval.

An Athenian felt that his first duty was to his parents who should be honoured on a par with gods, his second duty was to his kinsmen, and his third to his friends and benefactors. Maltreatment of parents was worse than the maltreatment of anyone else. Lysias speaks of such behaviour as meriting execution:

Aristophanes, in *The Frogs*, has Heracles directing Dionysus to the palace of Pluto:

In the *Clouds* Aristophanes judges the beating up of one’s mother as being worthy of punishment normally meted out to criminals. Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* makes clear the honour which is a mother’s due.

Antiphon shows that this respect is also due to step-parents. He says on occasion that he finds himself at odds with those with whom it is least appropriate, his step-brothers and their mother.

40. Demosth. XXIV, 60 & 102.
41. Lys. XIII, 91.
42. Aristoph. Frogs, 145–150.
The predicament of Orestes and Electra is reflected to some extent in the dispute between nephews claiming their uncle’s property. In the speech of Isaeus the one party says:

'Εγὼ μὲν γὰρ οὐχ ὅτι ἀδίκως κινδυνεύω, τοῦθ᾽
ήγοιμαι μέγιστον ἐναι τῶν παρόντων
κακῶν, ἀλλ᾽ ὅτι ἀγνωστοὶ πρὸς οἰκείους,
οὐδ᾽ αὖ ἀμίνισθαι καλῶς ἔχει ὦ γάρ ὡν
ἐλάττων ἀναφορὰν ἢ γηγαιμνήν κακῶς ποιεῖν
τούτους ἀμιμνόμενος, οἰκείους ὄντας, ἡ
κακῶς παιδεύει ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὡπὸ τούτων.46

It is this conflict between requital for such wrongs as adultery and murder on the one hand, and on the other hand the respect and honour due to a parent, which is crucial for a proper understanding of Electra’s tragedy. She is tragically compelled to flout the traditions requiring the mother to be respected and honoured as the only way to honour the memory of her father.

In Sophocles’ Electra there are two great climaxes. The one is the confrontation between Clytemnestra and Electra in which each of them seeks to justify her actions (II.514 ff.). The other culminates in the murder of Clytemnestra (II.1376 ff.). Both scenes represent the worst outrage of accepted custom and tradition.

In her first appearance on the stage Electra prays to the gods:

αἱ τοὺς ἀδίκως δυσκολούσαν ὄφαδ᾽,
αἱ τοὺς εὐνάς ὑποκλεπτομένους,
ἐλθέτ᾽, ἀρῥήστε, τείσασθε πατρὸς
φόνον ἡμετέρου, . . . .47

In absolute dedication to this principle of just vengeance Electra is propelled into a situation which allows her no alternative but to do wrong in respect of another traditional moral obligation. She is tragically aware that in doing right she is also doing wrong, but cannot do otherwise. Sophocles affords us this glimpse into her soul from time to time.

εἴτε μ᾽ ὄδ᾽ ἄλλειν she implores the chorus. They respond:

. . . . ἀλλ᾽ ἀπὸ τῶν μετρίων ἐπ᾽ ἀμήχανον
ἄλγος δεῖ στενάχουσα διάλλυσαι.
ἐν οἷς ἀνάλυσις ἐστὶν οὐδεμία κακῶς48

46. Is. 1. 6.
48. Ibid. 135 and 140–142.
Later as Electra seeks to do right in accordance with the highest dictates of piety to gods and father we witness the destruction of her soul because of the ever increasing hostility and disrespect towards her mother. Yet there is again the reminder that she is aware of the evil engulfing her. Living with a mother who has become all hatred and being under the same roof as the murderers of her father she complains

The turmoil in Electra’s own mind is heightened by an unusual metrical line very effectively concluding the above quotation. Tragically we see the noble Electra so hardened by her grim circumstances that she dramatically and in the most abusive outburst against her mother screams words which would have chilled a Greek audience to the bone.

At the blasphemous outburst, the chorus, which has hitherto been most sympathetic to Electa’s cause, have their doubts.

Consequently there is some justification for Clymnestra’s response to this outburst which was such a grave transgression of deep-seated tradition.

Electra by her abusive outburst against her mother has committed the ultimate sin against a parent, even if it is a parent such as Clytemnestra. This is the one....
deeply moving tragic moment in the play—a more shocking climax follows with the murder scene.

Electra who upheld the greatest law in her piety to Zeus and knowingly acted in dastardly fashion towards her mother; she who tragically referred to her mother as a mother in name who was like a mother in nothing, is portrayed in a final horrific outburst against her mother—a parent who ought to have the greatest respect. In vile hatred and bitter triumph she urges Orestes, who has already dealt his mother a fatal blow:

\[ \text{παίσου, εἶ σθενεῖς, διπλήν.} \]

Soon afterwards she enquires eagerly:

\[ \text{τέθυηκεν ἡ τάλαινα.} \]

Sophocles has presented the sequence of events in such a way that the main responsibility for the matricide is that of Electra. She had taken the decision to avenge her father’s murder at the news of Orestes’ death; when she discovered the truth she ardently supported Orestes in his task. Finally during the murder scene, it is Electra who remains on stage, ever before the eyes of the audience and with continuous soul shattering comments (ll. 1410–2, 1415, 1426) she directs the murder of her mother while Orestes performs the actual deed offstage.

Electra had in piety sought to fulfil the high demands of Zeus, she had been the best of daughters in one respect, but at what a cost to herself. In striving to restore the house of Agamemnon she had destroyed herself and it. Her nobleness was the quality to be admired most and yet at the same time the cause of the most reprehensible action. This tragedy, the dilemma of Electra, offers no answer as to what justice is, it provides no solution to the problem of conflicting demands of gods and society, it merely questions accepted values prevalent in Athens during the late 5th century B.C. Precisely because the moral problems remain unanswered, the Electra is a tragic play.

Sophocles in his Electra has used the traditional theme of vengeance and not only questioned it, but by contrasting the high-principled stand of Electra with that of Chrysothemis he has probed very topical moral problems of his day, namely the prevailing idea of might is right and the justice of expediency. Again the traditional theme of vengeance for murder is used, but by exploiting much more than other playwrights the theme of adultery, Sophocles has created a more poignant tragic situation for Electra. Furthermore in Sophocles’ hands Electra has become the central figure in a tragic clash of accepted social

---

54. Ibid 1154 and 1194.
55. Ibid. 1415.
56. Ibid. 1426.
obligations. She responds more tragically than an Orestes to impossible circumstances which compel her to do wrong in her desire to do justice to her father, her household and the gods. The tragedy of an Electra driven to abuse her mother and finally urge on the murder of her mother who has become no mother is far more striking a questioning of traditional obligations than an Orestes even if the latter’s role does imply a questioning of Apollo’s command. Athens at this time during the Peloponnesian War would have many a household deprived of father and brother through the ravages of war and civil strife. There would be many a household where a lone woman would be struggling to maintain the status and well-being of her household in the absence of a κύριος. Thus by focussing the attention on the dilemma of Electra Sophocles has skilfully utilised the poignancy of a tragic reality of his time. As a master craftsman, Sophocles has adapted the traditional story and given it greater relevance and tragic impact.
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

For further information go to: http://www.casa-kvs.org.za/acta_classica.htm