



Coo, L. (2021). Shifting sisterhood: Electra and Chrysothemis in Sophocles' *Electra*. *Ramus*, 50(1-2), 89-108.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2021.8>

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[10.1017/rmu.2021.8](https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2021.8)

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**SHIFTING SISTERHOOD:
ELECTRA AND CHRYSOTHEMIS IN SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA***

Lyndsay Coe

When Sophocles wrote Electra's story, he gave her a sister, Chrysothemis.¹ In their two scenes together, the sisters warn, entreat, cajole, insult, spar with, and proclaim affection for each other. While Electra maintains her public mourning for their father Agamemnon, Chrysothemis chooses not to openly defy his murderers, Aegisthus and their mother Clytemnestra, believing that resistance that accomplishes nothing is futile. Time has not been kind to this more pragmatic sister. In English-language criticism, she has acquired her own epithet, 'timid';² her femininity has been dismissed as vacuous and her morality as driven by material self-interest. For many critics, she is a shallow and conventional figure whose main

I am very grateful to Ben Folit-Weinberg, Lucy Jackson, William Kynan-Wilson, Anna Uhlig, the anonymous referees, and the editors of this issue, Johanna Hanink and Demetra Kasimis, for their insightful comments that have deeply enriched my thinking on this material. In particular, I thank Valentina Moro for a stimulating and constructive collaboration that made the writing of these companion (/sister!) pieces so enjoyable.

1. Chrysothemis is named as a daughter of Agamemnon at *Il.* 9.145 and 9.287, but Sophocles is the only playwright that we know of to create a speaking role for her.

2. For examples, which could be multiplied, see Blaydes (1873), 4 ('the timid irresolution of her sister Chrysothemis'); Jebb (1894), xlii ('her timid sister's sympathy is only secret'); Lesky (1966), 289 ('timid and temporizing character'); Downing (1988), 95 ('timid, sensible, and unattractive'); Sommerstein (1997), 202 ('cautious, not to say timid, sister'); Ringer (1998), 130 ('her more timid sister'); Foley (2001), 151 ('the timid Chrysothemis'); Bakogianni (2009), 200 ('her more timid sister'); Worman (2012), 354 ('far more timid in her convictions'); Van Nortwick (2015), 15 ('a conventional and timid young woman'), Roisman (2018), 67, 70 ('the timid Chrysothemis').

purpose is to act as a foil to the exceptional Electra. Since the pairing of a ‘stronger’ and a ‘weaker’ sister recurs in the depiction of Antigone and Ismene in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, this portrait of two contrasting sisters has been recognised since antiquity as distinctively Sophoclean, and the corresponding reduction of the sister-sister bond to a template has frequently precluded deeper examination of this relationship in both plays.³

Chrysothemis often fades from view when set against both her own sister, Electra, and that other ‘weaker’ sister, Ismene, and scholarly attitudes towards her tend towards negativity or indifference.⁴ She has also, thus far, escaped the expanding critical spotlight being shone on the representation of sisterhood in tragedy from outside the discipline of Classics, particularly in the fields of philosophy and political theory. While Antigone has long held a privileged place in explorations of politics, ethics, and kinship, recent years have witnessed concerted efforts to bring Ismene into these discussions and to re-assess this character — who is often dismissed as a colourless foil to her more vibrant sister — as a good, or even better, exemplar of ethical and political action. In one such study, in 2011, the political theorist Bonnie Honig set forth a startling reading of Sophocles’ text: Ismene, not Antigone, carried out the first burial of Polynices.⁵ This idea was first proposed exactly a century before but never gained traction.⁶ It is notable, therefore, that despite its resurgence from outside the traditional boundaries of the discipline, Honig’s provocative reading has attained a relatively high profile within Classics, in part due to her argument’s intersection with the work of Simon

3. The trend of comparing Electra/Chrysothemis to Antigone/Ismene goes back to the ancient scholia (Σ Soph. *El.* 328, pp. 162f. Xenis). For the assimilation of Ismene and Chrysothemis already in the early fourth century BC, see Coo (2013).

4. For Whitman (1951), 156, Chrysothemis is ‘almost the least attractive’ of all Sophoclean characters. More often she is damned with faint praise: Jebb (1894), xlii, calls her ‘a weaker, though amiable, sister’; Sheppard (1927), 6, ‘not unloveable in her weakness’; and Ferguson (1972), 540, ‘a nice girl, but weak’. For more positive assessments, see Shillington (1968), 139–42; Iriarte (2000); Apfel (2011), 291–3; Fornaro (2019); most recently, Roisman (2020), 11, views Chrysothemis as ‘the kinder, more flexible, and more realistic sister’, but Electra as having the ‘morally right’ response.

5. Honig (2011), revised as Honig (2013), 151–89.

6. Harry (1911); Rouse (1911). For rare wholehearted acceptance, see Macnaghten (1926), xvi; more representative is Kirkwood’s dismissal of the idea as ‘the wildest nonsense’ ([1958], 71).

Goldhill.⁷ For Honig, this interpretation of Ismene unlocks a reading of the play in which the sisters' apparently hostile exchange in front of Creon may be understood as a coded sororal conspiracy. Instead of dramatizing an irreparable rift between sisters, Honig argues, *Antigone* demonstrates the power of sisters acting together, and we should view Ismene's enforced survival as no less a sacrifice than Antigone's death.

Other scholars working in philosophy and political theory have recently turned to Ismene in the search for an alternative viewpoint within *Antigone*; particularly striking is the fact that, in the same year as Honig, Jenet Kirkpatrick also resurrected the idea that Ismene was responsible for the first burial.⁸ A common factor in many of these studies is the tilting of the play's ethical framework away from the individualistic, death-oriented heroism of Antigone towards the pragmatic survival instincts of Ismene, prompting a re-assessment of those aspects of her character traditionally cited as signs of weakness and apoliticism. Thus, Kirkpatrick sees Ismene's actions as a resourceful demonstration of the options for resistance available to the weak and disenfranchised, while Mary Rawlinson, in a challenge to the many feminist engagements with *Antigone* that take the titular sister as their focus, re-centres the play on Ismene. Viewed within the paradigm of an ethics of life, Rawlinson argues that this flexible and conciliatory sister, concerned with maintaining life and her relationship with her sibling, emerges as a more positive model for feminist philosophy than Antigone, who prioritises abstract principles over living kin and whose actions uphold the structures that enforce female subordination. In this issue, Valentina Moro examines how both sisters react

7. Honig (2011) engages with Goldhill (2006); Goldhill responded when revising his work ([2012], 231–48), and Honig responded in turn when revising her article ([2013], 151–89). Honig's monograph *Antigone Interrupted* was the subject of a panel at the 145th Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association in Chicago in January 2014, with the papers, including a reply by Honig, subsequently published in the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 21 (2014). Honig has received further critique within Classics: for contrasting approaches, see Wingrove (2016), who examines *Antigone Interrupted* within a broader dialogue between Classics and political theory, and Hahnemann (2019), who employs a philological analysis of the sisters' language, focusing on duals and μέν/δέ clauses, to refute Honig's claims of their solidarity.

8. Kirkpatrick (2011); see further Frank (2006), 339f.; Rawlinson (2014), revised as (2016), 83–105; Engelstein (2015); cf. Engelstein (2011), revised as (2017), 35–57; Moro, this issue.

creatively to each other, performing an agonistic model of sisterhood, rooted in the relationship's gendered connotations, that relies on its very duality in order to stage a political challenge to Creon.

These approaches gain particular pertinence when applied to Sophoclean tragedy, where an influential strand of literary criticism has viewed his plays as structured around the figure of a singular, solitary figure (usually male or displaying masculine characteristics) whose heroism is marked by uncompromising obstinacy, social isolation, and public suffering. The acknowledgement of collaborative, conspiratorial, and covert forms of resistance as valid political action thus invites new ways of reading Sophocles, especially with regard to recognising the complexity of his depiction of female characters and all-female relationships. While these ideas have thus far been used to re-evaluate Ismene, they bring new dimensions to the interpretation of Chrysothemis too. The latter's statement that εἰ δ' ἐλευθέραν με δεῖ | ζῆν, τῶν κρατούντων ἐστὶ πάντ' ἀκουστέα ('If I am to live free, it is necessary to listen to those in power in all matters', *El.* 339f.) has been condemned as exemplifying her subservience and materialism,⁹ but may be viewed more positively through a recognition that the model of activism endorsed by Electra and Antigone, which prioritises the enactment of principles over physical safety and even life itself, is often neither possible nor desirable. To borrow Rawlinson's terminology, Chrysothemis is a better model for an ethics of life than her sister: while admitting that Electra's attitude is morally superior, her own concern is with preserving life, even in intolerable circumstances. Similarly, Chrysothemis' willingness to carry out an under-the-radar act of rebellion — the substitution of Clytemnestra's funerary gifts with offerings from herself and Electra; a small action, but one that may bring punishment (*El.* 468–71) — may be read both within Honig's theme of sororal conspiracy and as the behaviour of what Kirkpatrick calls the 'unheroic disobedient': an act of resistance by a figure who is realistic in recognising their own limitations.

As part of this broader agenda to bring new political and ethical frameworks to the surface of canonical texts, my discussion takes the form of an enquiry into the representation of the sisterhood of Chrysothemis and Electra and couples the consciously rehabilitative impulse that others have applied to Ismene with a fine-grained reading of the text of *Electra*. This methodology is also employed by Moro in her companion piece on *Antigone* in this issue; in each case, we intend to show how approaches from political theory, which aim at disrupting established readings of sisterhood in tragedy, may be congruent with the traditional tools of

9. Kitzinger (1991), 309; MacLeod (2001), 63f.

philological analysis. Close examination of both sisters' language reveals Chrysothemis' repeated attempts to reach out to Electra through a collaborative delineation of their familial ties, whereas Electra contests and belittles their relationship, appealing to Chrysothemis as a sister only when requesting that she take dangerous action. Chrysothemis' choices are fundamentally shaped by her conception of her sisterhood with Electra, which prioritises their solidarity and survival. By contrast, Electra's political response is dictated by concern for her male kin, and she views her sisterhood with Chrysothemis as an instrument in service of this. In this reading, Chrysothemis is not seen as weak but as exemplifying a conception of female kinship that resonates with contemporary feminist ideals, where sisterhood often serves as a metaphor of female solidarity.

*

The similarities between Ismene and Chrysothemis are often noted by commentators on both plays: for example, both express conventional views on the weakness of women and the need to obey those in power (*Ant.* 60–64; *El.* 339f., 396, 997f., 1014), and are accused of maintaining family loyalty in talk rather than action (*Ant.* 543; *El.* 357f.). Consequently, Chrysothemis is frequently judged against standards of character and sisterliness set by Ismene in *Antigone* rather than on the terms required by the context in *Electra*, and is generally found wanting, with many characterising her as a less sympathetic, more peevish version of Ismene.¹⁰ This blunt comparison ignores fundamental differences in their situations: Ismene is reacting to Antigone's urgent response to a single event, the edict forbidding Polynices' burial, whereas Chrysothemis has been living with Electra's mourning for years and is weary of what she views as her sister's futile and repetitive behaviour (*El.* 330f.). When she explains to the chorus that ἐγὼ μὲν, ὧ̃ γυναῖκες, ἠθάς εἰμί πως | τῶν τῆσδε μύθων ('For my part, women, I am somehow accustomed to these speeches coming from her', 372f.), we suspect that the sisters have rehearsed these tetchy exchanges many times

10. See e.g. Winnington-Ingram (1982), 237: 'Ismene is infinitely more interesting, subtle and attractive than the time-serving Chrysothemis'; Blundell (1989), 158 n. 38: 'Ismene is much more sympathetic than Chrysothemis'; Jouan (1981), 274: 'Chrysothémis apparaît comme une Ismène moins naturellement affectueuse, moins dévouée, plus réfléchie et même plus raisonneuse'; Roisman (2018), 75: 'Ismene emerges as a much more noble and respectable figure than Chrysothemis.'

before. Their sibling dynamic must be viewed as one that has settled in response to a long-term condition of suffering, in contrast to the emergency that sparks the action of *Antigone*.

The first indication that Electra has living sisters is when the chorus consoles her at lines 153–7:

οὔτοι σοὶ μούνα,
τέκνον, ἄχος ἐφάνη βροτῶν,
πρὸς ὃ τι σὺ τῶν ἔνδον εἶ περισσά, 155
οἷς ὁμόθεν εἶ καὶ γονᾶ ζύναιμος,
οἷα Χρυσόθεμις ζῶει καὶ Ἰφιάνασσα

Not to you alone among mortals, child, has pain appeared, which you feel beyond the others who live inside the house, those to whom you are a blood-relation and from the same origin, such as Chrysothemis and Iphianassa...

The chorus' opening words suggest that this will be a conventional *consolatio*, comparing Electra's sorrows to those shared by several mythical exemplars or the human race as a whole. But this assumption is quickly dispelled as the comparison turns to the set of her own full siblings: Chrysothemis, Iphianassa, and, as will be stated in the following lines, Orestes. Far from being a universalising comparandum, the ἄχος referred to is the specific pain felt by the four living children of Agamemnon and his wife and murderer, Clytemnestra. Electra's grief is not unique to her, nor is hers the only viable response to the circumstances; indeed, she is 'excessive' (περισσά) compared to the apparently more moderate Chrysothemis and Iphianassa. By emphasising their shared blood (156), the chorus establishes siblinghood as an axis for comparing types of behaviour; and by the end of *Electra* the four siblings will have modelled a full spectrum of responses ranging from the hands-on violence of Orestes to the acquiescent inaction suggested by the absence of Iphianassa¹¹ — whose name, of course, contains an echo of their deceased fourth sister, Iphigenia. The chorus thus reminds us that while we might use Electra as a yardstick by which to judge her sister's behaviour as 'weak',

11. At 653f. Clytemnestra prays for a quiet life with those of her offspring who do not hate her. This may be a reference to her children with Aegisthus (589); but may we not also wonder (*pace* Finglass [2007], 293) if it includes Iphianassa?

we may equally use Chrysothemis as a yardstick by which to characterise Electra's behaviour as 'excessive'.

As Chrysothemis approaches, the chorus announces her as τὴν σὴν ὄμαιμον, ἐκ πατρὸς ταῦτοῦ φύσιν, | Χρυσόθεμιν, ἔκ τε μητρός ('your sister, born of the same father, Chrysothemis, and of the [same] mother', 325f.). The framing of her name by the constructions ἐκ πατρὸς ταῦτοῦ and ἔκ τε μητρός is meaningful, since the sisters' conflict arises precisely over the issue of whether their loyalties lie with their father or mother.¹² As this analysis will show, this question is explored as each sister constructs and negotiates their familial bond through the use of kinship terms (κασιγνήτη, ἀδελφή, etc.), φίλ- terminology, dual forms, and personal pronouns and adjectives (especially 'me'/'you', 'my'/'your') to delineate alliance or opposition.¹³ The view that the sisters are linked through shared loyalties and common enemies is the linchpin of Chrysothemis' conception of their relationship, whereas Electra's construction of their sisterhood shifts from hostility to solidarity and back again depending on her ulterior motives.

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Chrysothemis enters and begins speaking at line 328, having been sent by their mother to take offerings to Agamemnon's tomb. She addresses Electra as ὦ κασιγνήτη ('sister', 329) and when advising her to cease her public resistance to Aegisthus and Clytemnestra avoids any individuation of the latter as a mother, referring to the couple as αὐτοῖς ('them', 334) and τῶν κρατούντων ('those in power', 340). Chrysothemis, who admits that she knows justice lies in Electra's actions rather than in her own compliance (338), thus differentiates between 'us', the two sisters, and 'them', Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Her opening stance is one of identification with Electra, even as she advises her to moderate her behaviour.

12. Blundell (1989), 157; Finglass (2006), 195; although Kells (1973), 104, and Ierulli (1993), 222, see the construction as emphasising Chrysothemis' paternity and subordinating the mention of Clytemnestra.

13. These linguistic elements have been noted by e.g. Saïd (1993), 322f.; Lewis (2015); Finglass (2007), *ad loc.* However, to my knowledge, they have not previously been considered in terms of how they show each woman performing her own version of sisterhood. For a similar approach to *Antigone*, one which examines how kinship is enacted through language, see Moro (this issue).

Electra's scathing response outlines her own diagram of family relations, placing Chrysothemis firmly on the opposite side from herself (341–68):

δεινόν γέ σ' οὔσαν πατρὸς οὔ σὺ παῖς ἔφυς
κείνου λελησθαι, τῆς δὲ τικτοῦσης μέλειν.
ἅπαντα γὰρ σοι τὰμὰ νουθετήματα
κείνης διδακτά, κούδεν ἐκ σαυτῆς λέγεις.
ἔπει γ' ἔλοῦ σὺ θάτερ', ἢ φρονεῖν κακῶς, 345
ἢ τῶν φίλων φρονοῦσα μὴ μνήμην ἔχειν.
(...)
ἐμοῦ δὲ πατρὶ πάντα τιμωρουμένης
οὔτε ξυνέρδεις τήν τε δρῶσαν ἐκτρέπεις. 350
(...)
σὺ δ' ἡμῖν ἢ μισοῦσα μισεῖς μὲν λόγῳ, 357
ἔργῳ δὲ τοῖς φονεῦσι τοῦ πατρὸς ξύνει.
(...)
νῦν δ' ἐξὸν πατρὸς 365
πάντων ἀρίστου παῖδα κεκλήσθαι, καλοῦ
τῆς μητρὸς. οὔτω γὰρ φανῆ πλείστοις κακή,
θανόντα πατέρα καὶ φίλους προδοῦσα σούς.

It is terrible that you, being the child of the father from whom you were begotten, forget him and instead attend to the one who gave birth to you. For all of your rebuking of me is learned from her, and you say nothing that comes from you yourself. So then, you choose one or the other: either to think imprudently, or, being prudent, to forget the memory of your loved ones. (...) While I do all I can to avenge our father, you give me no cooperation and try to turn me aside from my action. (...) But you, who tell me that you hate them, hate only in word; in deed, you are on the side of the murderers of our father. (...) Now, although it is possible for you be called the child of a father who is noblest of all, be called the child of your mother! In this way, you will appear wicked to most people, having betrayed your dead father and your loved ones.

Throughout this tirade Electra maps the sisters' opposing stances around the poles of whether they are loyal to their mother or the memory of their father. In syntax that replicates

the chorus' positioning of Chrysothemis between her parents (341f.), Electra accuses her of prioritising their mother to such an extent that she merely parrots Clytemnestra; and she contrasts her own absolute loyalty to Agamemnon (349) with Chrysothemis' complicity with his murderers (357). By accusing Chrysothemis of both forgetting (346) and betraying (348) her φίλοι, Electra makes it clear that she does not include Clytemnestra in that category. She thus categorically rejects Chrysothemis' presentation of herself, which had positioned the sisters as complicit in their shared knowledge of the injustice of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

Electra's scornful injunction to 'be called the child of [your/our] mother' (366f.) is the only time in this scene that she speaks the word μήτηρ ('mother'), and it is telling that it appears in relation to her sister and as an insult. Electra's use of this word is highly deliberate throughout.¹⁴ In this scene, she refers to Clytemnestra instead as τῆς ... τικτούσης ('the one who gives birth', 342), κείνης ('that woman', 344), ἐχθρᾶς ... γυναικός ('a hateful woman', 433), τλημονεστάτη γυνῆ | πασῶν ('the most shameless woman of all', 439f.), αὐτῆ ... ὑφ' ἧς θανὼν ἄτιμος ('her ... the one at whose hands he died without honour', 442–4), and αὐτῆ ('her', 447), or paired with Aegisthus as τούτους ('them', 355), τοῖς φονεῦσι τοῦ πατρός ('the murderers of our father', 358), and 'enemies' (ἐχθρούς, 454; ἐχθροῖσιν, 456); she groups

14. Almost without exception, Electra uses μήτηρ as a kind of paradox by employing it in contexts that highlight the inappropriateness of applying the term to Clytemnestra. Three times, she outlines how Clytemnestra does not merit the name of 'mother' (273f., 596–8, 1194). Elsewhere Electra refers to Clytemnestra as μήτηρ when describing some notably unmotherly aspect of her nature: 97 (the mother who killed the father), 261 (the relationship between mother and daughter has turned to ἔχθιστα, 'strongest hatred', 262), 1146 (the child Orestes was more φίλος to Electra than he was to his own mother), and when describing Clytemnestra's unnatural reaction to the news of her son's death at 790, 929 and, most strikingly, 1154 (μήτηρ ἀμήτωρ, 'the mother who is no mother'). Electra twice deploys a different use with her sister, whereby she associates Chrysothemis with — and by implication disassociates herself from — their mother (366f., 1033). Electra's only apparently 'neutral' use occurs when she tells Orestes that Aegisthus is away but 'our mother is in the house' (μήτηρ δ' ἐν οἴκοις, 1309); although even here the term is somewhat loaded, since it informs and precedes Orestes' entry into the house to commit matricide. In Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* the word is also marked: in the *kommos* sung by Electra and Orestes, Electra is the first to utter the word μήτηρ (*Ch.* 422), and Marshall (2017), 67 notes that this moment is marked by a 'significant musical shift' and has an observable psychological effect on both siblings.

Chrysothemis with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus when expressing the desire to be distant from ὑμῶν ('you', 391). In Chrysothemis' presence, the word μήτηρ necessarily implies *our* mother, and so recalls their shared maternal origin and Electra's blood relationship with the parent whom she despises. Instead, Electra avoids using the word, unleashing it only when attempting to deny that very relationship by lashing out at Chrysothemis as being her mother's child — the implication being that Electra herself is their father's daughter.

In the face of Electra's divisive language, Chrysothemis re-asserts their shared kinship. As their conversation progresses, her first utterance of 'father' directly echoes Electra's use of the same word (399f.):

ΗΛ. πεσούμεθ', εἰ χρή, πατρὶ τιμωρούμενοι.

ΧΡ. πατήρ δὲ τούτων, οἶδα, συγγνώμην ἔχει.

El. I shall come to grief, if necessary, pursuing vengeance for our father.

Ch. But our father, I know, makes allowance for these things.

Electra associates the desire to avenge Agamemnon with herself alone (cf. 349).¹⁵ But in response Chrysothemis professes parity with her sister: as a daughter of Agamemnon equally entitled to call him πατήρ, she too may claim knowledge of what is acceptable to him, even when it is the exact opposite of Electra's claim. This is a powerful retort to Electra's pose of exclusivity and a reminder that if the father-daughter relationship is based on blood, Chrysothemis cannot be excluded. She thus attempts to reinsert herself into Electra's conception of their familial group and to validate her own behaviour using the frame of reference that Electra has herself endorsed. This claim of solidarity through their paternal link is repeated as Chrysothemis reveals the details of Clytemnestra's ominous dream, in which Agamemnon returned and planted his sceptre beside the hearth (417–19):

λόγος τις αὐτήν ἐστὶν εἰσιδεῖν πατρὸς

τοῦ σοῦ τε κάμοῦ δευτέραν ὁμίλιαν

ἐλθόντος ἐς φῶς.

15. In line 399, Electra's use of the masculine plural indicates that she is speaking of herself in the plural: see Jebb (1894), 60; Finglass (2007), 210.

The story goes that she saw, for a second time, the company of your father and mine, who had returned to the light.

Whereas Electra used the fact of their parentage to oppose the two sisters, Chrysothemis uses it to draw them together: Agamemnon is their shared father, ‘both yours and mine’ (τοῦ σοῦ τε κάμοῦ, 418).

Electra grasps the implications of the dream, believing it to have been sent by Agamemnon, and as she instructs Chrysothemis to discard Clytemnestra’s offerings and substitute their own, a drastic shift occurs in her language. Having just scorned Chrysothemis as a traitor to her φίλοι, she now addresses her for the first time as ὦ φίλη (‘dear one’, 431). Also for the first time, Electra uses first person plural verbs to denote joint actions between herself and Chrysothemis when she imagines the honour that they will bestow together on their father (στέφωμεν ... δωρούμεθα, 458). And whereas Chrysothemis had called Electra ‘sister’ within her opening words (329), Electra only now reciprocates (461–3):

ὅμως δ', ἀδελφή, σοί θ' ὑπούργησον τάδε
ἐμοί τ' ἀρωγά, τῷ τε φιλότατῳ βροτῶν
πάντων, ἐν Ἅιδου κειμένῳ κοινῷ πατρί.

But all the same, sister, render this service for yourself and for me and for the dearest of all mortals, the father of us both who lies in Hades.

Electra’s language, which had operated through the demarcation of herself from Chrysothemis along parental lines, switches to the language of sharing: her sister (ἀδελφή) should act in a way that benefits both of them (σοί θ' ... ἐμοί τ').¹⁶ The parallel syntax of ‘you’ and ‘me’ stands in contrast to her prior use of the same terms to indicate opposition, and echoes Chrysothemis’ use of τοῦ σοῦ τε κάμοῦ (418) in denoting their father as someone who unites rather than divides them. The two sisters are syntactically linked to that which they share, κοινῷ πατρί (lit. ‘shared father’), the one who is ‘dearest’ (φιλότατῳ) to them both. This speech is effective: Chrysothemis immediately agrees, saying that when something is

16. Finglass (2007), 231, (citing Dickey [1996], 226f.) notes the extreme rarity of the address ἀδελφή and suggests that, like ἀδελφέ, the term probably signals ‘an especially close emotional bond’.

just it is not right for ‘two people’ (δύοϊν, 467) to argue. In this use of the dual she expresses her conviction — bolstered by Electra’s new, collaborative language — that the sisters are a united pair, which emboldens her to act despite her fear of Clytemnestra.

Electra has re-aligned their map of familial relationships to suit her new objectives. Her previous sharp division of the sisters is replaced with a model in which the two women are on the same side, bonded through their shared connection with Agamemnon: the very bond that Electra had denied for Chrysothemis and claimed possessively for herself. What is the reason for this change? The shift in Electra’s language may reflect a sudden rush of sisterly feeling in the light of hopes kindled by Clytemnestra’s dream; Jebb, for example, described it as a sign of Electra’s new ‘affectionate earnestness’.¹⁷ But, given the careful use of kinship language that Electra demonstrates elsewhere, we might also interpret her speech as more calculating, designed to appeal to her sister by embracing Chrysothemis’ conception of their relationship. If we see Electra as picking up on Chrysothemis’ own linguistic patterns as a deliberate tactic, then this sudden change suggests that we may read her words as a mimicry of collaborative sisterhood rather than an expression of genuine affection. Electra employs such rhetoric only when trying to persuade Chrysothemis to place herself at risk in the service of their father and brother. Her expression of collaborative sisterhood is functional and activated only within the context of her own need, in contrast to the consistency of Chrysothemis’ language — a pattern that we will see repeated and intensified in the sisters’ second scene together.

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After Electra has heard the false report of Orestes’ death, Chrysothemis rushes on in great excitement to bring her the exact news that she is now primed to disbelieve: their brother has returned. Immediately addressing Electra as φιλότατη (‘dearest one’, 871), Chrysothemis’ language again emphasises the things that she believes the two of them have in common: joy and relief at their brother’s return, with the ethical dative ἡμῖν in her declaration that ‘Orestes is present for us’ (πάρεστ’ Ὀρέστης ἡμῖν, 877) indicating their shared interest. Electra’s incredulous response is to ask whether Chrysothemis is laughing at ‘your miseries and mine’ (τοῖς | σαυτῆς κακοῖσι κἀπὶ τοῖς ἔμοις, 879f.). While this phrasing acknowledges their joint

17. Jebb (1894), 64; cf. Kyriakou (2011), 318, n. 7 (on Electra’s ‘deep and apparently genuine terms of sororal affection’); Fornaro (2019), 53.

investment in Orestes' wellbeing, Electra accuses Chrysothemis of misguided or inappropriate understanding, considering her to be either out of her mind or mocking their situation.¹⁸ In reply Chrysothemis forcefully asserts their commonality, swearing *μὰ τὴν πατρώαν ἐστίαν, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὕβρει | λέγω τάδ', ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνον ὡς παρόντα νῶν*. ('No, by our paternal hearth; I am not saying these things out of insolence, but I say that he is here, for the two of us', 881f.). The pointed mention of their father's hearth lays out their kinship in the terms that Chrysothemis knows Electra finds most compelling, and recalls both the location of his murder (see 269f.) and Clytemnestra's dream of Agamemnon planting his sceptre beside the hearth — the omen that had galvanised Electra into using her own language of collective sisterhood. Finally, Chrysothemis' use of the dual form *νῶν* ('for the two of us') collapses any distinction between the sisters and insists on their shared interest.

This articulation of their sisterhood, built on assertions of commonality as triangulated through shared care for their male family members, is reinforced as Chrysothemis proceeds to tell Electra about the lock of hair that she found at Agamemnon's tomb. She is certain that this sign was left by Orestes, 'the dearest of all mortals' (*φιλτάτου βροτῶν | πάντων*, 903f.) — her phrasing replicates Electra's description of their father as *φιλτάτω βροτῶν | πάντων* (462f.) — and insists that it can have meaning only for two of them, saying *τῷ γὰρ προσήκει πλὴν γ' ἐμοῦ καὶ σοῦ τόδε*; ('For whom can this relate to, except to me and to you?', 909). In contrast to Electra's use of *τοῖς σαντῆς ... τοῖς ἐμοῖς* (879f.) to highlight her sister's lack of comprehension, Chrysothemis uses *ἐμοῦ ... σοῦ* to draw Electra into the logic of her understanding. In her process of elimination — the hair must belong to Orestes, since Chrysothemis did not leave it, nor did Electra, and certainly not Clytemnestra (910–14) — we see her constructing an in-group consisting of herself, Electra, and Orestes as the only people alive who still honour Agamemnon (no mention here of Iphianassa). She ends with further reinforcement of their kinship, addressing Electra as *ὦ φίλη* ('dear one', 916) and referring to the two of them with the dual *νῶν* (918). Throughout this speech, Chrysothemis continues to construct her sisterhood with Electra in terms of solidarity, expressing both her commitment to her sister and their shared concern for their father and brother.

Electra informs Chrysothemis of Orestes' death and turns to her new goal, to persuade her sister to join her in assassinating Aegisthus, which she attempts to do by describing the marriage prospects and public veneration that this will bring them. Many scholars have found

18. Wright (2005), 179f., notes that this accusation of 'laughing' at their misfortunes casts Chrysothemis as an enemy rather than a φίλος.

Electra’s speech to be badly misjudged, citing Chrysothemis’ cowardice, worldliness, and conventional femininity as reasons why this entreaty, founded on an appeal to heroic modes of action and reward, was never likely to succeed.¹⁹ While Electra may pick the wrong incentives for persuading her sister, in her linguistic strategies she closely and cannily echoes her, couching her appeal in language that mimics Chrysothemis’ own in its construction of their relationship. Electra imagines a world in which two sisters may take powerful and publicly acclaimed action together, and the bedrock of this vision is a conception of sisterhood based on unity and collaboration.²⁰ It is only when Electra wants to obtain something from Chrysothemis that she uses the language of kinship to express this particular model of sisterhood, and her techniques are once more lifted directly from her sister.

In stating that the sisters are bereft of the support of φίλοι (948f.), Electra returns to the categorisation that she had once rejected: Chrysothemis is no longer one who betrays and forgets her φίλοι but may now be included among them. Earlier, Electra had only used the word ‘sister’ when trying to persuade Chrysothemis to engage in risky behaviour, and she employs the same tactic now: the shocking revelation that her plan is to kill Aegisthus is qualified as an action to be carried out ξὺν τῆδ’ ἀδελφῆ (‘with your sister here’, 956). Electra reverts to Chrysothemis’ use of personal pronouns and adjectives to align rather than to differentiate their experiences and prospects: Aegisthus will never permit the birth of ‘your offspring or mine’ (σόν ... ἢ κάμὸν γένος, 965), but if they murder him glory will accrue ‘to you and to me’ (σαυτῆ τε κάμοί, 974). She picks up on Chrysothemis’ use of νῶν (882, 918) by declaring μόνα λελείμεθον (‘the two of us are left alone’, 950), and then unleashing a barrage of fourteen dual forms as she imagines how the citizens will praise them (977–85; duals emboldened):

ἴδεσθε **τῶδε τῶ κασιγνήτῳ**, φίλοι,
 ὦ τὸν πατρῶον οἶκον **ἐξεσωσάτην**,
 ὦ τοῖσιν ἐχθροῖς εὖ βεβηκόσιν ποτὲ
 ψυχῆς **ἀφειδήσαντε προὔστητην** φόνου. 980

19. Macleod (2001), 140–2; Finglass (2007), 395f., 404. Juffras (1991) proposes a specific masculine frame of reference, arguing that Electra’s rhetoric recalls the cult bestowed on the Tyrannicides. On the mismatch between Electra’s plan and the sisters’ gender, see Goldhill (2012), 242–4; Mossman (2012), 497–9.

20. See further Coe (2020), with 60f. on this passage.

τούτω φιλεῖν χρῆ, **τώδε** χρῆ πάντας σέβειν·
τώδ' ἔν θ' ἑορταῖς ἔν τε πανδήμῳ πόλει
 τιμᾶν ἅπαντας οὔνεκ' ἀνδρείας χρεών·
 τοιαῦτά τοι **νώ** πᾶς τις ἐξερεῖ βροτῶν,
ζώσαιν θανούσαιν θ' ὥστε μὴ 'κλιπεῖν κλέος. 985

'Behold these two siblings, friends, who rescued their father's house, who, when their enemies were securely established, thinking nothing of their own lives, took a stand to avenge murder. Everyone should love the pair of them, everyone should revere the pair of them; everyone should honour the pair of them at feasts and among the assembled citizens, on account of their bravery.' All among mortals will say such things about us two, so that while we two live and when we two are dead, our fame will never perish.

This passage, the centrepiece of Electra's fantasy, hammers home the concept of the sisters as inseparable in both their actions and their perception by others. But if Electra intends to echo her sister's use of the dual, this is overkill: there are too many rare forms, too much emphasis on her unity with Chrysothemis at precisely the moment where the content itself is most delusional.²¹ In analysing the sisters' interactions from a sociolinguistic perspective, Virginia Lewis notes that these duals, as well as the use of kinship and friendship terms, are part of Electra's linguistic strategies to soften the impact of her commands and create an in-group consisting of herself and Chrysothemis.²² This clarifies how these forms work as a persuasive strategy, but cannot account for the reasons behind Electra's linguistic shift; elsewhere her language towards Chrysothemis is not just devoid of such markers but actively rejects her inclusion among Electra's φίλοι, making this change of rhetoric all the more

21. Such a sustained sequence of duals is remarkable; as noted by Hahnemann (2019), 3, although Sophocles commonly uses duals to refer to sibling pairs, the forms are nonetheless rare enough 'to stand out from the fabric of the text'. On the extreme rarity of the first person dual used at 950, see Finglass (2007), 397. The duals in 977–84 are all of the –ω form, which contrasts with Electra's use of distinctly feminine forms at 950 (μόνα) and 985 (ζώσαιν θανούσαιν); see Ierulli (1999), 493–5; Finglass (2007), 406; Goldhill (2012), 243. The piling up of these forms with their notably masculine tenor is another way in which Electra's insistence on the sisters' unity strikes a jarring note.

22. Lewis (2015), 232–5.

striking.²³ It is at this point when Electra’s speech reaches its most political — both in its demand for violent public intervention and its imagining of the sisters’ reputation πανδήμῳ πόλει (lit. ‘in the full-peopled *polis*’, 982) — that her language makes its strongest appeal to sisterhood and yet most strains under the weight of it.

The speech culminates in a surge of familial commands (986–9):

ἀλλ’, ὦ φίλη, πείσθητι, συμπόνει πατρί,
σύγκαμν’ ἀδελφῶ, παῦσον ἐκ κακῶν ἐμέ,
παῦσον δὲ σαυτήν, τοῦτο γινώσκουσ’, ὅτι
ζῆν αἰσχρὸν αἰσχυρῶς τοῖς καλῶς πεφυκόσιν.

But, my dear one, comply, labour together with your father, toil together with your brother, save me from my miseries, and save yourself, recognising this: that to live a shameful life is shameful for those who are noble by birth.

Addressing her sister as φίλη for only the second time after line 431, Electra sets out her clearest vision of how that φιλία should be enacted: through labour on behalf of the dead male members of their family, resulting in the sisters’ own liberation. Electra’s syntax embeds Chrysothemis into the unit of father, brother, and two sisters, implying that it is incomplete without her.²⁴

Once again, we may ask whether this shift in Electra’s language is meant to reflect a rush of genuine sisterly feeling or if her aims are more disingenuous. In this regard, the omission of Clytemnestra from her homicidal plan appears telling. Numerous critics have taken this as deliberate misdirection, arguing that Electra leaves out the crucial detail of matricide in order to better persuade her sister.²⁵ If this suppression of the most morally complex element is

23. Knox (1964), 179 n. 31, notes that this passage is the only time that Electra uses the dual to refer to herself and Chrysothemis. Hahnemann (2019), 7, discerns a similar strategy in Antigone’s use of the dual to describe herself and Ismene at *Ant.* 3, viewing it as ‘a tool of persuasion’.

24. Cf. Finglass (2007), 409: ‘The very symmetry of the syntax demands the participation of Chrysothemis’.

25. Friis Johansen (1964) 21f.; Kamerbeek (1974), 130; Segal (1981), 284; Sommerstein (1997), 210f.; Ierulli (1999), 488–90; Roisman (2018), 67f., (2020), 11; *contra*, March

intentional, then in the strongest form of this reading we might view Electra’s deception extending to the speech as a whole, and interpret her entire construction of their sisterhood as a façade. Knowing what their relationship means to Chrysothemis, Electra co-opts and intensifies her sister’s own language of collaborative kinship, turning it back on her as part of a deliberate manipulative strategy. We are reminded of what we witnessed earlier, where Electra’s articulation of this particular form of sisterhood also emerged only within a context of persuasion. Regardless of whether we choose to read this linguistic shift as accompanied by genuine affection, the volatility of Electra’s language mirrors that of her use of sisterhood.

This time, though, she has gone too far. Chrysothemis’ reply is vehement refusal, but even in her condemnation of Electra’s plan she never stops conceiving of the sisters as a joint unit with shared enemies.²⁶ Rather than simply recusing herself from the plot, Chrysothemis begs Electra to abandon it too (1003–6, 1009–11):²⁷

ὄρα κακῶς πράσσοντε μὴ μείζω κακὰ	
κτησώμεθ', εἴ τις τούσδ' ἀκούσεται λόγους.	
λύει γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν οὐδ' ἐπωφελεῖ	1005
βάξιν καλήν λαβόντε δυσκλεῶς θανεῖν.	1006
ἀλλ' ἀντιάζω, πρὶν πανωλέθρους τὸ πᾶν	1009
ἡμᾶς τ' ὀλέσθαι κάξερημῶσαι γένος,	
κατάσχεσ ὀργήν.	

See to it that the two of us, in our suffering, do not come to possess greater suffering, if anyone were to hear these words. It will bring us no relief or help if the two of us, after acquiring a fine reputation, die ignobly. But I entreat you, before we are utterly destroyed and our family is annihilated, restrain your anger.

Chrysothemis’ objection is not to the justice of Electra’s mission but the fact that it will fail and result in their deaths. Her primary motivation remains their joint safety and protection from the retribution that she anticipates rebounding on both of them, as expressed by her use

(2001), 197f., Finglass (2007), 398–400; Kyriakou (2011), 361–5; doxography at MacLeod (2001), 141 n. 7.

26. See her use of ἡμῖν (1000, in contrast with τοῖς μὲν, 999) and ἡμᾶς (1005, 1010).

27. I follow Nauck’s deletion of 1007f., as adopted by Dawe, Lloyd-Jones, and Finglass.

of duals (πράσσετε, 1003; λαβόντε, 1006) and first person plurals (κτησώμεθ', 1004; ἡμᾶς, 1005; ἡμᾶς, 1010). Even when contemplating an action in which she is manifestly not going to partake, Chrysothemis speaks of the sisters as a united pair, and in stating that their deaths will mean the extermination of their γένος (1010) she reiterates her conviction that they are the final two living members of their familial in-group. Instead of taking her words as an expression of cowardice and rejection, we should recognise her continued efforts to safeguard Electra and to present herself as a natural ally, even as she refuses to comply in this particular instance.

This entreaty falls on deaf ears, despite the chorus urging Electra to listen (1015f.), and in the sisters' final stichomythia the sense of an unbridgeable divide opens up between them. Electra charges Chrysothemis with cowardice (1027), while Chrysothemis anticipates Electra changing her tone when the murder proves unfeasible, looking forward to a time in the future when the sisters will agree (1028, 1030, 1044; cf. 1056f.). In response to Electra's accusation that she shows no ὠφέλησις ('helpfulness', 1031), Chrysothemis retorts that Electra herself possesses no μάθησις ('capacity for learning', 1032), which provokes her most stinging use of kinship terminology (1033f.):

ΗΛ. ἐλθοῦσα μητρὶ ταῦτα πάντ' ἔξειπε σῆ.

ΧΡ. οὐδ' αὖ τοσοῦτον ἔχθος ἐχθαίρω σ' ἐγώ.

El. Go then and tell all of this to *your* mother.

Chr. No, I do not feel such hatred as that towards you.

Previously, Electra used the word μήτηρ in front of her sister as part of an insult based on Chrysothemis' supposed devotion to Clytemnestra, which by implication disassociated Electra herself from the maternal relationship (366f.). The effect here is identical as she underlines her contempt with σῆ ('your' mother, not 'our'). Electra reverts to her original characterisation of Chrysothemis as a collaborator of Clytemnestra, showing that she has not understood, or is wilfully refusing to accept, her sister's repeated offer of the possibility for unity despite their differences.

This accusation of enmity is immediately denied by Chrysothemis,²⁸ who goes on to insist that she is acting out of ‘foresight on your behalf’ (προμηθίας δὲ σοῦ, 1036) and that when Electra is capable of thinking more rationally, she will be the leader ‘of both of us’ (νῶν, 1038). In this, her final use of the dual, Chrysothemis again promotes the concept of the sisters as a pair despite their current acrimonious exchange. After another fruitless attempt to get Electra to reconsider (1045), Chrysothemis exclaims φρονεῖν ἔοικας οὐδὲν ὧν ἐγὼ λέγω (‘You seem to have no understanding of anything that I say’, 1048), shortly before entering the house, not to return. Given the reading advanced here, we might hear this as an expression of frustration not only at Electra’s inability to acknowledge the foolishness of her plan, but also at her refusal to accept the offer of an unchanging, collaborative form of sisterhood that Chrysothemis has made throughout. In the end, the two part on bad terms not only because of their failure to join together in overthrowing their father’s murderers, but also because their conceptions of sisterhood prove incompatible: Chrysothemis offers a baseline of unity despite their differences, whereas Electra only wants a sister who will act with her and on her terms.

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This discussion has aimed to develop an interpretation of Chrysothemis that approaches her as a character in her own right rather than as a weaker anti-type to Electra (or worse, as a less memorable doublet of Ismene), and to show how the relationship between the two sisters is more complex than commonly acknowledged. In their scenes together, a pattern emerges in each woman’s use of language. Chrysothemis continually speaks of herself and Electra as a united pair and members of the same familial in-group, even when expressing disagreement. Far from her usual characterisation as a spoilt pragmatist preoccupied with her own comfort, Chrysothemis emerges as remarkably consistent in her open, affectionate and collaborative

28. Finglass (2007), 420, writes that ‘rather than deny her hatred, she merely qualifies its extent’. But Chrysothemis offers no other statement that comes close to expressing hatred (by contrast, Electra says ‘I hate (στυγῶ) your cowardice’, 1027). Rather, I read her response as acknowledging that revealing the plot to Clytemnestra would be the ultimate sign of ἔχθος, and expressing hurt and exasperation that Electra would even consider her capable of this, given her efforts to offer solidarity up to this point. For the same biting effect, cf. *Ant.* 549, where Antigone groundlessly sneers at Ismene that she cares for Creon, prompting similar dismay.

language towards her sister, albeit tempered at times by exasperation. By contrast, Electra's language is marked by division and accusation except when trying to persuade her sister to do something risky in the service of their male kin, in which case it starts to resemble that of Chrysothemis.

Electra's language of sisterhood is thus revealed as opportunistic, functional, and disposable, a tool with which to chastise or entreat: on the turn of a phrase, Chrysothemis can be addressed as friend or enemy, father's child or mother's daughter, 'we two' or 'you'. Perhaps this is unsurprising coming from the same character who coolly explains how Agamemnon's sacrifice of another sister, Iphigenia, was justified (*El.* 564–75): Electra displays the same sororal asymmetry — unchanging *φιλία* for her male, but not female, kin — that is often noted in Sophocles' *Antigone*. While scholarly tradition has viewed Chrysothemis as pragmatic and Electra as driven by passion, where their sisterhood itself is concerned we might say that Chrysothemis is the one who shows genuine emotions and Electra the pragmatist. Moreover, for Chrysothemis the performance of sisterhood is not just implicated in her political and ethical choices but is shown to be essential to them: her responses to her circumstances, both long-term and immediate, are embedded in and expressed through her care for Electra and her conviction that their solidarity can persist even when they disagree, because of their shared blood, friends, enemies, and concerns.

The contrasting attitudes of Electra and Chrysothemis go to the heart of a question that undergirds both this enquiry and that of Moro: where does sisterhood begin and end? If our definition of sisterhood starts from societal family structures, Electra's emphatic rejection of Chrysothemis raises the issue of whether such sisterhood remains truly impervious to the emotional damage that one woman can inflict upon another. Can Electra ever successfully disown her sibling, or does Chrysothemis' refusal to accept this highlight the impossibility of renouncing kinship? Alternatively, if we conceive of the relationship primarily as brought into being through practice (as discussed by Moro with reference to *Antigone*) we may ask if Chrysothemis' collaborative language is indeed sufficient for creating a relationship with Electra: does sisterhood require positive reciprocation in order to exist — or can the practice of sisterhood accommodate conflict without resolution?

If this pair's fraught exchanges are difficult to reconcile with our notions of 'sisterhood', this may suggest a failure of our definitions rather than a failure of sisterhood itself. The contemporary notion of sisterhood implies affection and nurture, in part as a legacy of its adoption by Western feminism as a metaphor for female solidarity, for which it often acts as a byword. In reality, sisterhood often fails to live up the ideals of its metaphor: the

relationship between sisters is no less susceptible to antagonism, betrayal, rivalry, and other corrosive emotions than any other human bond.²⁹ In *Electra* we find sisterhood presented in all its contradictions, not as a simple contrast between the sisters' opposing stances but rather as a living relationship continually enacted by their dialogue and interaction, where together they create a complex, shifting sisterhood that is constantly under scrutiny and negotiation.

In both this analysis of *Electra* and Moro's discussion of *Antigone*, the use of close reading inflected by political theory pays dividends by demonstrating that Chrysothemis and Ismene should not be dismissed as identical, apolitical stock types, nor should their relationships with their sisters be characterised as straightforward contrasts intended to highlight the 'stronger' of each pair. Instead, sisterhood proves to be the foundation of meaningful political choices, as well as a site of conflict and collaboration that can no more be taken for granted than can any other familial relationship explored in these dramas. A willingness to embrace tragic modes of action beyond that of the singular hero enables other kinds of characters and forms of resistance to speak to contemporary concerns. Using these frameworks, instead of decrying Chrysothemis' attempts to ensure both sisters' survival as evidence of her timidity and moral failure, it is possible to see in her unwavering care for a living sister the potential to act as a paradigm for thinking about the nature of female allyship in the face of hostility, rejection, and danger. For all of *Electra*'s powerful declarations of family loyalty, we should consider that it might be Chrysothemis — whose care is offered without qualification, whose language reflects this without pretension, and who tries until the last to protect her sister from harm — who offers us something new and positive as a model of sisterhood in contemporary political thought.

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29. The challenge that the complexity of the sister relationship poses for its use as a metaphor in feminist thought has been explored from several disciplinary perspectives: see e.g. Downing (1988); Michie (1992); for a sociological study, see Mauthner (2002).

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