

Male and Female Initiatory Paradigms and the Ending of Sophocles' *Electra*

Presented by the Workshop in Ancient
Mediterranean Studies



Adriana Brook, Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor of Classics
at Lawrence University

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Orestes, Pylades and Electra at the tomb of
Agamemnon. Campanian red-figure hydria, ca.
330 BC. Louvre, no. K428.

By one reading, the *Electra* offers its audience an archetypal rite of passage narrative in staging Orestes' successful vengeance against his father's murderers. However, a reading that considers not just aspects of male initiation relevant to Orestes but also aspects of female initiation, particularly relating to marriage, relevant to Electra challenges this straightforward understanding of the play. From this broader perspective, it is clear that the play offers competing initiation stories, juxtaposing Orestes' successful rite of passage with Electra's failed one. Any assessment of the play as a whole (particularly the vexed question of how to interpret the ending of the drama) must take into account what happens when the siblings' initiation stories converge at the moment of recognition. Dr. Brook will argue that Electra's own initiatory failures as well as the role she plays in the denouement of Orestes' initiation ultimately deny the unmitigated success of the revenge plot and support a pessimistic reading of the play's *exodus*.

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