There is almost no wrong way to approach the play. My way is traditionalist in that I try to understand the plays with the traditional conventions for which they were written, but people have been finding new ideas and new things to do with the Greek tragedies for 2500 years, and I encourage you to do the same.

What follows is background information of various sorts to get you oriented, and some ideas about the play. In most cases, I’ll use the Latinized versions of Greek names, which are usually the more familiar forms to Americans, but I’ll put alternate names in parentheses after the first occurrence of a name.

Much of this information is also available at http://www.randolphcollege.edu/greekplay

I. Basics of the Organization of Fifth-Century Athenian Tragedy
   How the Greeks put on the plays along with some basic terms.

II. Sophocles
   Who he was and what he did.

III. Elektra
   What’s this play all about anyway?
   a. Characters and plot summary
   b. Themes and dynamics
   c. Staging it—my thoughts

IV. Approaches and Classroom Activities
   A few suggestions on ways into the play and Greek drama.

V. The R(-MW)C Greek Plays
   What Miss Mabel did, and what we do now.
I. Basics of the Organization of Fifth-Century Athenian Tragedy

Aeschylus, Sophocles (Sophokles), and Euripides wrote their plays in verse for an annual five- or six-day spring festival of dramatic competition dedicated to Dionysus called the Great (or City) Dionysia, which began with a procession and a ceremony called a proagôn—a before-the-contest—which was a preview of the plays to come. Three playwrights competed at the festival, each presenting three tragedies and a satyr play (a tetralogy) over the course of a day.

An official (archon) of the city presided over the festival and chose the playwrights who would compete. Although it is not entirely clear who financed the productions, we do know that wealthy citizens, known in this capacity as choregoi, paid for and were responsible for the training of the choruses of the plays and received the prizes for the winning tetralogies. The chosen playwrights not only wrote and acted in their plays, they also directed and rehearsed the other actors. This involvement in all aspects of production earned them the name didaskaloi—teachers—since they taught the plays to the rest of their companies.

The plays and later the actors (one from each tetralogy from around 449) were judged by ten men, one chosen by lot from each of the administrative districts of Athens and sworn to impartiality. The winning playwright and actor each earned a place in the following year’s festival.

The productions took place in the Theater of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis. In the fifth century the natural curve of the land was enhanced to accommodate wooden seats that formed an irregular semicircle (known as the theatron or watching space) around the acting area they looked down on. That area—theorchêstra or dancing place—was a flat, generally round space with a diameter of at least sixty-five feet. Behind it was the skênê, which in the fifth century was probably a temporary wooden structure with one central door. The skênê provided the door as an entrance and exit, a “backstage” in which to change costume and store props, a simple backdrop for the action, and a roof-level surface for the occasional appearance above. By 431 some sort of crane allowed actors to appear apo tês méchanês—from the machine or ex machina—flying in above the skênê. In addition to the skênê door, two pathways to the left and the right of the skênê and just in front of the forward edge of the theatron—the eisodoi—provided ways to reach and retreat from theorchêstra (when I say “to come on stage” and “to go off stage” I will mean entering and exiting theorchêstra.

This is a schematic of the Theater of Dionysus. Theorchêstra was probably not so regularly round in the first hundred or so years of the dramatic festivals. The theatron is where the seats are, and it was also probably not so perfectly round, but it was very large, and as many as 15,000 spectators attended the plays. The Dell at Randolph College is really much like the Theater of Dionysus, except that our theatron is smaller (although we’ve played for an audience of 1100), and the surface of ourorchêstra is grass, not dirt.
with no implication of a raised platform). Part of the audience could see performers for much of the length of their entrances on these two paths.

Men performed the tragedies. Actors played the named roles and twelve or fifteen men sang and danced the part of the chorus; all wore costumes and masks (*prosôpa*), which covered their whole faces and head. The playwright was also probably the first and, at first, the only actor, in dialogue with his chorus. At some point someone added a second actor (Aristotle gives Aeschylus the credit), and then, by 458, a third (the addition of which is traditionally said to be an innovation of Sophocles).

**Things you may have been taught about Greek Drama that Are Not True:**
1) Tragic flaw. It doesn’t exist.
2) Aristotelian Unities. They don’t exist. (The last play of *The Oresteia* changes scenes from Delphi to Athens, just to give one example.)
3) Chorus is a) Everyman or b) the playwright. Nope and Nope. The Chorus was the one element of a story that didn’t come from the myth. The playwrights exploited that freedom to do all kinds of things with their choruses.
4) Absolutely only three actors. Close, but not quite. More than one extant tragedy, and many comedies require at least four actors.
5) No one dies on stage. Well, Ajax does in his play. Just to name one we know about.

**II. Sophocles (Sophokles)**

Sophocles, an older contemporary of Euripides, was born 497/496 b.c.e. at Colonus outside Athens. He first competed in 468, when he won first prize and beat his great elder Aeschylus at the same time. He won eighteen victories at the Great Dionysia, and he never placed lower than second.

We know that Sophocles was active in Athenian public life: he was *strategos* (one of ten elected generals) with Pericles in 441/0, an office he probably held more than once. He was also personally involved in bringing the healing cult of Asclepius to Athens. He died in 406, soon after Euripides.

Aristotle admired Sophocles (and particularly his *Oedipus the King*) because he wrote good plots about important people. Many people share Aristotle’s point of view and consider Sophocles the greatest Greek playwright.

We know of a total of 123 plays written by Sophocles, of which a mere seven survive:

* Ajax*—the great hero, crazed at not being awarded Achilles’ armor, does harm to others and himself
* Antigone, 442?*—Oedipus’s daughter insists on burying her brother, in defiance of her uncle Creon’s decree
* Trachiniae [Women of Trachis]—Heracles’ wife, in trying to keep his affections, mortally wounds him
* Oedipus Tyrannos [Oedipus Rex, Oedipus the King], after 429?—the hero uncovers the terrible truth about himself and his family
* Elektra—our play; see below
* Philoctetes—Greek heroes appeal to their marooned comrade for help
* Oedipus at Colonus, 401—the miraculous end of Oedipus’s life
We often read *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* together, because they form a connected narrative, but Sophocles did not write them as a trilogy.

III. *Elektra [Electra]*

We don’t know when exactly the play was first produced in Athens, but we do know that it responds and reacts to Aeschylus’s version of the same story (*The Libation Bearers*), which was presented in 458 BCE. We are using H.D.F. Kitto’s translation for Oxford (ISBN 0192835882), but any translation would do, as long as it’s in clear, modern English (the Chicago translations, edited by David Grene, are widely available).

**a) Characters and plot summary**

**The Characters** (in order of appearance)

**Tutor:** a slave of Agamemnon’s, he has cared for Orestes since Agamemnon’s death  
**Orestes:** son of Agamemnon and Klytemnestra, he’s been living away from Argos since he was a young boy  
**Pylades:** Orestes’ best friend and constant companion (he never speaks)  
**Elektra:** Orestes’ older sister, who has been living unhappily in her mother’s house since Agamemnon died  
**The Chorus:** a chorus of Mycenaean women who have come to sympathize with her plight  
**Chrysothemis:** Elektra and Orestes’ sister, who has come to terms with living in Klytemnestra’s house  
**Klytemnestra:** queen of Argos and Mycenae, who killed her husband Agamemnon, in part to avenge the killing of their daughter Iphigeneia  
**Aegisthus:** lover of Klytemnestra, who has ruled with her in Argos since the death of his cousin Agamemnon

**The Plot of the Play**

*Before the play begins...*

Agamemnon, king of Argos, becomes the general of the Greek expedition against Troy, and he sacrifices his daughter Iphigeneia in order for the ships to sail. Klytemnestra, his wife, is none too pleased at this development, and when Agamemnon returns from Troy ten years later, she kills him. In his absence, Klytemnestra has also taken up with Agamemnon’s cousin Aegisthus, who did not go to Troy.

Klytemnestra and Agamemnon have three other children: daughters Elektra and Chrysothemis, who have been in the court at Argos since before their father left; and son Orestes, who has been raised by his Tutor in the house of Strophios, where he becomes friends with his host’s son Pylades.

*In the play today...*

Orestes, now grown, returns to Argos with Pylades and at the urging of the Tutor, and we hear about their plan to arrive in disguise and to gain entrance to the palace by announcing that Orestes is dead. Although they hear Elektra grieving, they go immediately to leave offerings at the tomb of Agamemnon.

Elektra emerges, singing of her unhappiness living with the murderers of her father, and a Chorus of Argive Women try to console her. In their ensuing conversation, we learn that Klytemnestra blames Elektra for the threat that the absent Orestes poses, and that Aegisthus is not at home. When Chrysothemis joins the discussion, we find out that Chrysothemis does not share Elektra’s long misery, and that Klytemnestra and Aegisthus are ready to imprison the complaining Elektra. Chrysothemis, unable to convince Elektra to accept her situation, explains that she’s on her way to put offerings from
Klytemnestra on Agamemnon’s tomb. It seems that Klytemnestra has had a disturbing dream that seems to foretell the avenging return of Orestes. Elektra persuades her sister to substitute their own humble offerings--locks of hair and a belt--for the queen’s, and Chrysothemis leaves for the tomb.

The Chorus sing a song anticipating the return of Orestes, and then Klytemnestra comes out to confront her daughter. The Tutor, in disguise, interrupts them to announce and explain the supposed death of Orestes in a furious chariot race. Both mother and sister are upset by the news, to the surprise of the Tutor, who is invited into the palace.

Elektra and the Chorus are singing a song of grief for the dead Orestes when Chrysothemis comes running in with the news that Orestes must be home! Elektra protests that she must be wrong, since their brother is dead, and Chrysothemis explains that she has seen offerings that must be from Orestes, but Elektra does not believe her. Hopeless, Elektra plans to take revenge herself, and Chrysothemis refuses to help her.

The Chorus sing the praises of brave Elektra, and Orestes and Pylades come on with the “ashes” of Orestes. When he sees the grief this brings to Elektra, Orestes realizes that he is speaking with his sister, and eventually he reveals himself to her and lets her join the plot.

Elektra breaks into song in her happiness, and almost gives the game away. The Tutor enters to say that the time is ripe, and the confederates go into the palace. After the Chorus sing about the fulfillment of a vengeful vision, Elektra comes out to stand guard, and we and she hear the violence within. Orestes announces the death, at his hands, of his mother, and they prepare a ruse for the returning Aegisthus: they show him Klytemnestra’s shrouded body and say it is Orestes’. When the confederates have Aegisthus in their power, they reveal the corpse of his dead wife, and then Elektra, Orestes, and Pylades take him into the palace for their final revenge.

b) Themes and Dynamics

“Orestes’ tragedy is that, for all his purity of spirit, he becomes as guilty as his father.” (Garvie)

This scholar wrote this about Aeschylus’s version of the same story (The Libation Bearers), but it is clear that Sophocles also means for us to question the justness of killing Klytemnestra and Aegisthus in revenge for a death (Agamemnon’s) that was in part in revenge for another death (Iphigeneia’s).

I believe that Sophocles calls into question the whole action of the play, suggesting that we may not find heroes and villains where we expect to find them. There has been a long debate over the moral stance of Elektra, but I believe many of the choices Sophocles makes, particularly in the doubling of Orestes and Klytemnestra, give the play a definite moral argument.

Justice, Law, Revenge, Nobility

Elektra and the Chorus frequently talk about the justness of taking revenge for Klytemnestra’s killing of Agamemnon. But as Elektra herself points out,

Be careful; if you set
This up for law, Blood in return for blood,
You may repent it; you would be the first
To die.

She’s talking to Klytemnestra to counter the idea that Iphigeneia’s death was the reason for Agamemnon’s murder, but she might as well be warning herself and her brother about killing their own mother. While Sophocles has his heroine and hero and Chorus speak of the justice and nobility of what they plan and do,
I believe the play makes us extremely uncomfortable when they carry out that plan, and that he does that in a number of explicit and implicit ways:

- While Elektra tries to put herself and the revenge in heroic terms (and the Chorus accept this), her sister Chrysothemis—the only person in the play who seems to be grounded and mature—tries to make her understand that even planning such a course of action would destroy what is left of her noble reputation.
- Orestes himself needs to be prompted to carry out the plan by the Tutor, who is almost bizarrely focused on avenging someone who is not related to him.
- The plan includes one of the most magnificent and elaborate messenger speeches in extant Greek tragedy, but that speech—about Orestes’ death in a chariot race—is a giant lie that devastates Elektra and blinds her to the truth, reported by Chrysothemis, that her brother has returned. I think the audience can be equally horrified by the account of Orestes’ crash, even though we know that it’s a lie. Sophocles purposely puts us in the uncomfortable position between what we know and what we are being made to feel. He does that over and over again in this play.
- Sophocles, who directed his own plays, had the same actor play both Orestes and Klytemnestra (as we do). This means that, theatrically, the actor kills himself. The implication is certainly that this family is destroying itself, no matter how triumphant the children are about the success of the revenge plan. That same doubling of roles adds bitter ironies to the last scene when Orestes tells Aegisthus that Klytemnestra is close by.
- The happy urgency of the Chorus, Orestes, Elektra, and Pylades contrasts strongly with the bloody reality of Klytemnestra’s death, the shock of which we experience, and which we see Aegisthus, her husband, experience. Our understanding of the play makes us want to leave the audience uncomfortable and maybe even a bit shocked.

Many people, however, have seen in the play a simple validation of the idea that Klytemnestra and Aegisthus are guilty of killing one of the great Greek heroes and that they deserve their deaths.

What do you see?

Family

Rehearsing the play has made us realize that sibling dynamics are just as important in this play as parent-child dynamics. Chrysothemis and Elektra have clearly been locked in a pattern for years, in which Chrysothemis, although probably the younger of the two, behaves in a mature fashion and tries to get Elektra to listen to her, and Elektra seems stuck in adolescence. Only in the scene when Chrysothemis reports what she has seen at Agamemnon’s tomb do we see the roles somewhat reversed (Elektra looks after her younger sister), and then only briefly.

Orestes seems to us to be young: he’s clearly the youngest sibling, and he’s coming back to Argos/Mycenae just as soon as he can even start to claim to be a man. When Orestes realizes that his big sister Elektra is grieving for him, it causes him great confusion: should he adhere to his Tutor’s plan or reveal himself to his long-lost sister? Elektra’s joy at regaining her baby brother almost thrusts aside her desire for revenge, and Chrysothemis has her happiest, truest moment when she believes that Orestes is home.

All of them, of course, carry the loss of their sister Iphigeneia, but her sacrifice at the hands of Agamemnon seems to be a present grief only for Klytemnestra.
Received Expectations
Klytemnestra's grief at the news of Orestes' death comes as a surprise to her, and that grief is part of what undermines our expectations of her as a bad guy. She does not live up to her bad reputation: we can see why she's annoyed with Elektra; she seems to be treating Chrysothemis well; and her maternal feelings keep her from feeling joy at the death of the son who threatens her life. Over and over again, Elektra’s claims about her mother’s misdeeds seem overstated and even a little unfair.

Aegisthus, too, even in his brief appearance, shows that he is not monstrous: he knows his duty to family, even Orestes, and he is truly shaken by the death of his wife Klytemnestra—perhaps not the behavior we’d expect from this reputedly power-hungry usurper.

Orestes and Elektra both end the play seeming much less innocent in their desire for revenge than the plans at the beginning of the play—or the expectations we have of these famous sibling—would suggest.

c) Staging it—my thoughts
The questions I ask of a play are usually how do we practically stage it and how do we make it clear to an audience? The tools I try to use to answer those questions are the things we know about how the Greeks staged their plays and the clues I can find in the text—the very best evidence we have. I hope this study guide gives you some grounding in the things we know about fifth-century theater. The text of the play is available to you, too, and, as I always tell my students, your reading is as valid as anyone’s. Keep in mind that the stage directions are the translator’s additions and, of course, that you might translate the Greek differently if you get the chance.

That’s how I, as a classicist with theater leanings, approach Elektra. You, with your own background and expertise, will have quite different questions to ask.

IV. Approaches and Classroom Activities
I offer here questions you could ask of the play from all sorts of points of view, and you should look at it whichever way is the most interesting to you and your students. You will come up with much better questions from your disciplines than I can, but these questions might give you places to start. Below, find some suggestions for introducing students to the realities of Greek drama’s conventions.

psychology
Elektra doesn’t kill her mother, but might like to
does Orestes want to kill his mother? or is it the idea of the Tutor and/or Apollo
does Sophocles give us real people?

theater
how do you stage a recognition? an imminent matricide?
where do you put the guy who never says anything?
how do you build a device to let you reveal corpses in the doorway?

music
how is the chorus a part of the play?
what should they sound like? should they sound Greek? foreign? old-fashioned?
why/when does a play need music?
how can music bridge a gap of 2500 years?

dance
how is the chorus a part of the play?
how should they move? should they look Greek? foreign? old-fashioned?
how does dance change the words?

religion
what kind of god asks you to kill your mother?
why do the dead matter?
how does religion change over time? what might that reflect? (better with the whole trilogy)

law/society/history
what do you do with a murderer?
old plan: murder her (and expect to get murdered in return)
new plan: the state decides whether you're guilty and then deals with you

literature
what kind of language does Sophocles use? why?
can we even experience it in English? what does translation do?
what can we say of Sophocles as a writer? what does it mean to read him?
does the poetry sound like people speaking? or something else?

American culture
why do Americans bother with 2500-year-old plays from six time zones away?
how has this play and these characters affected modern culture?
what problems of American society are reflected in the play?

**Things to do in the classroom:**
Move the chairs around in your classroom so that you make a playing space where the audience curves around the players. Do a scene from a play there and think about what the players have to do differently than they would on a raised stage with the “fourth wall” removed. If you have a proscenium stage (“fourth wall” stage) in your school, try doing the scene there, too. What different concerns does a player have? How is the experience different for the audience? What changes when you turn off the lights over the audience? What was it like for the Greeks, who couldn’t turn off the sun?

**Make masks!** Even paper bags will do, but this website has links to many different sorts of masks to make in the classroom: http://www.xanga.com/DEXTR/600776726/making-masks-in-the-classroom.html. How does your acting have to change when you’re wearing a mask? How do masks help you put on a play when you only have a few actors?

**Make Greek outfits!** Simple rectangles of fabric, twice the width from elbow to elbow, pinned at the shoulders and sashed, are genuine Greek costumes. Boys would usually have knee-length garments and girls would have longer ones. If you make them, wear them to the play!
V. The Randolph (-Macon Woman’s) College Greek Plays

Mabel K. Whiteside, professor of Greek, led her students in an annual production of a Greek play from 1909 until 1954. She was an innovator in teaching Greek conversationally, and she and her Greek students produced the plays in their original language. She presented her first full-length tragedy in 1910.

Over the years Miss Mabel (as she was affectionately known) led productions of tragedies and comedies by all of the great Greek playwrights, culminating in 1954 with Aeschylus’s trilogy The Oresteia—it was the first time the trilogy had been staged as a whole in Greek in the new world. Although there were a few interruptions in the annual schedule, R-MWC saw 40 Greek plays in 45 years. It rained only once.

The Dell was built in honor of Miss Mabel and this unparalleled series of productions. The Greek Plays inspired so much interest in the ancient world that by the end of her tenure, Miss Mabel taught Greek to a full ten percent of the R-MWC student body.

The revived tradition began in 2000 with Antigone, and continued in 2001 with Iphigeneia at Aulis. The Play is now a bi-annual in the fall. The renewed series produces the plays mostly in English. We adhere to most of the original conventions that governed theater in the time of the great tragedians (I believe that the best plays will emerge from the conditions for which they were written): we perform in the Dell, an outdoor Greek theater, which allows the plays to be performed in daylight for an audience seated in a semi-circle around the performers. We adhere to other ancient conventions as well: three or four actors play all the roles; the chorus—who sing and dance—remain on stage for most of the play; the performers all wear masks; and our players often have to impersonate the opposite sex.

Dates and stats since 2000:
- Antigone by Sophocles: April 7–9, 2000; 3 actors, 8 in the chorus
- Iphigeneia at Aulis by Euripides: April 20–22, 2001; 3 actors, 10 in the chorus
- The Libation Bearers by Aeschylus: October 11–13, 2002; 4 actors, 12 in the chorus
- The Bacchae by Euripides: October 8–10, 2004; 3 actors, 12 in the chorus
- The Clouds by Aristophanes: October 6–8, 2006; 4 actors, 12 in the chorus
- Elektra by Sophocles: October 10–12, 2008; 3 actors, 12 in the chorus

Naomi Amos collaborated on the first four plays: she wrote all the music and served as music director. Randall Speer has served as music director since 2006, with Chris Cohen as composer.

I am always happy to answer questions: acohen@randolphcollege.edu, 434/947-8306.