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Electra after Freud: 
Death, Hysteria and Mourning

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Centre for Comparative Literature
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0-612-53895-8
Electra after Freud: Death, Hysteria and Mourning

This study considers the importance of the Electra myth for the twentieth century, and in so doing resurrects a theme which has been curiously neglected despite the proliferation of modern adaptations. The myth and its heroine are located at the intersections of history and the feminine, eros and thanatos, hysteria and melancholia. At the point of departure is Hugo von Hofmannsthal's influential Elektra (1903), which introduces two important twentieth-century innovations to the Electra myth, the heroine's death and hysteria. Walter Benjamin's reading of allegory in Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels serves as a theoretical framework for a discussion of the significance of Electra's allegorical "Dance of Death" in Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, Sartre's Les Mouches and Heiner Müller's Hamletmaschine. This is followed by a consideration of the uncanny similarities between Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud's case study of the hysterical "Anna O." and Hofmannsthal's Elektra, where it is demonstrated that the mythological heroine indeed subverts her hysterical diagnosis by playing analyst to her own author. A further chapter shows the complexity of the interrelations of language, music and dance in Strauss's operatic adaptation of Hofmannsthal's fin de siècle play, and demonstrates that Elektra manipulates the Viennese waltz into an ironic reminder of naive frivolity, decadent decay, and omnipresent paternity. Ezra Pound's unconventional translation of Sophocles' Electra in turn transforms the heroine from a grief-stricken hysteric into an angry defender of civic responsibility, whereby the mourning daughter's predicament parallels the poet's own incarceration. Finally, the poetic
enactment of Electra's story is treated as the testimony of personal trauma in H.D.'s "A Dead Priestess Speaks" and Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems, in which these manifestations of melancholia arguably constitute a "poetics of survival." Overcoming hysteria and mourning in an ecstatic Totentanz, this century's Electra ultimately triumphs through courage, strength and her fierce determination to act.
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Acknowledgements

No thesis is ever really a solo project. While all the words were written by my own hand, many of the ideas are the result of ensemble work. First and foremost I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Linda Hutcheon, for her wonderful enthusiasm, her good judgement, and for her undying faith in my abilities and the project. I am also grateful to Augustinus Dierick and Heather Murray, who were generous with their time and who kept me on the right track. I owe a great deal to my friend and colleague, Anita George, who helped me overcome the hurdles of interdisciplinary work by showing me how classicists think and work. And Erika Reiman I thank for her constructive criticism and sound musicological advice. I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada and the Queen Elizabeth II Ontario Scholarships Fund. I also thank New Directions Press, the Firestone Library at Princeton University and Omar Pound for allowing me to cite the manuscripts of Pound’s Elektra.

Many friends came to the rescue when it all seemed too overwhelming, but my greatest thanks go to Marie Carrière, who was my constant companion and sounding board, and who kept me honest on central issues. It would not have been possible to complete this study without the loving support of my parents, Sylvia and John, Bill and Sandra, and my dear sister, Elin — my deepest gratitude to you all. Last but not least, I would like to dedicate the thesis to my partner and biggest fan, Stephen Oikawa. His constant encouragement, incredible patience and good humour saw me through tough times and celebrations alike.


**Introduction**

**The Anti-Oedipus: Electra's Century**

"Im Jahrhundert des Orest und der Elektra, das heraufkommt, wird Ödipus eine Komödie sein" ("In the century of Orestes and Electra that is rising, Oedipus will be a comedy") (Müller, "Projektion 1975" 16). This provocative statement on the part of Heiner Müller begs the question: Why is the twentieth century so obsessed with the Electra myth? An extremely popular figure in Attic tragedy, this mythological heroine was largely neglected by artists in subsequent periods. Like other vengeful women such as Medea or Phaedra, the defiant and courageous Electra seems to have been too controversial a character for audiences and authors alike. And yet this century has embraced Electra's capacity for cruelty and her naked pain, perhaps in an effort to come to terms with the appalling violence in our lives and in our world. The Atrean princess returns with a vengeance beginning with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's influential adaptation of Sophocles' *Elektra* (1903), which was followed in quick succession by adaptations of the myth by Strauss (1909), O'Neill (1931), H.D. (1934), Giraudoux (1937), Eliot (1939), Sartre (1941), Hauptmann (1947), Yourcenar (1949), Pound (1949), Plath (1959) and Fugard (1979), to name only a few. Despite the profusion of twentieth-century Electra adaptations, there has been relatively little comparative scholarship on the mythological heroine. This study attempts to address this scholarly lacuna by considering several key developments in the representation of the legend and its title character. The particular lacuna that interests me is the absence of any thorough investigation of the influence of psychoanalysis on the interpretation of Electra. This is a curious oversight because the interpretive vocabulary
introduced by Freud and perpetuated by many different schools of thought is perhaps the single most important contribution to the development of the Electra figure in this century. For this reason, the study begins with the radical new portrait of the Atrean princess as hysterical, and her ecstatic death. This investigation of the image of Electra as a melancholic trauma victim traces the parallels between the history of psychoanalysis and the representation of mythology's quintessential mourning daughter. Electra is best known for her complex; however, I argue that the character is indeed complex, but does not have one. Despite her reputation as a tearful lunatic, in the end the mythical heroine has all the dignity of a blue-blooded princess and the courage of a cold-blooded murderer. If any of the Attic models prevails, it is Sophocles' remorseless freedom-fighter. Electras of this century will fight to the death for justice.

This thematic study does not by any means consider all of this century's important Electra texts, nor does it attempt to create a typology based on the salient features of each adaptation. When dealing with a great many literary examples of the same motif, analysis can very quickly become bogged down with details. The major points can easily be eclipsed by the long explanations needed to guide the reader through the variations of plot and character representation. For these reasons, as well as considerations of space, I have

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1The Electra complex turns out to be less significant than one might think. Freud abandoned the term, which was originally Jung's, and replaced it with his own "female oedipal complex." The Electra complex is never fully explained by Freud, but can be loosely defined as a girl's fixation on the male parent. It is usually invoked in a popular sense and is of little value as a psychoanalytic concept. One of the points this study makes is that Electra is more than just a name attached to a particular disorder or construct, that upon closer examination she is neither abnormal nor sick, which thus debunks the myth of the Electra complex. I will later refer back to the famous term briefly in the context of Sylvia Plath's appropriation of it as a poetic trope.
chosen to focus on a limited number of significant examples. The Electra myth can
generally be said to be the story of Agamemnon's daughter who awaits the arrival of her
brother Orestes so that they can carry out the matricide that will avenge their father's
unjust murder at the hands of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Apart from this sparse
narrative skeleton, however, there are an infinite number of permutations and
combinations of traditional and non-traditional elements, and even the slightest
modification may have a considerable effect on the overall interpretation. And yet, in
order to come to any conclusions regarding the development of the character and the
legend, it is necessary to take a broad enough sample of texts. While I consider the works
of only eight authors, I have attempted to do justice to the complexities of individual
adaptations of the myth by emphasizing the thematic frames I consider most significant
and specific to this century's Electras: death, hysteria and mourning.²

²The best example of a broader and even more comprehensive approach is Pierre Brunel's
influential Le mythe d'Electre (1971), which offers no specific thesis but provides a semiotic
and structuralist analysis of the myth with reference to more than twenty dramas from
antiquity to the late twentieth century. While Brunel's study is very useful as a general
introduction to the mutations of the Atrean legend, it follows in the tradition of
Stoffgeschichte and what little commentary there is gets buried in the copious details of the
various adaptations. The title itself is somewhat misleading, as Lois Cech points out: "It could
as well have been called "The Myth of Orestes" (12). The author is less concerned with the
character per se than with dissecting the story and tracing its formal evolution. Brunel's major
shortcoming is that he does not ask enough significant questions. Despite the dearth of
commentary, Brunel does leave the reader with the idea that the myth's central question is that
of humanity's capacity for cruelty: "le mystère du mal et de la violence" (8).

Lois Cech's Becoming a Heroine: A Study of the Electra Theme (1984) also considers
a vast range of texts from all periods and genres, including drama, poetry and prose. Cech is
explicitly concerned with the notion of literary "theme," which she defines, following
Raymond Trousson, as "the pursuit of both more or less than a motif" (4). The theme of
Electra, then, is taken to mean the character as well as the events and circumstances that
surround her. Cech concludes that Electra is like many female characters in that she is
ultimately "bound to her situation" (512) and acts for the good of her family and her
In Part II, I focus on one of these important twentieth-century innovations to the myth, the heroine's death, introduced in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's fin-de-siècle play Elektra. There is no precedent that I am aware of Elektra's "dance of death," which I contextualize by reading it through Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory as "productive decay" and Nietzsche's vision of the ecstatic and nihilist dissolution of the principium individuationis, as well as Erwin Rohde and Johann Jacob Bachofen's anthropological approaches to the connection between femininity and death in antiquity. This analysis community, unlike male heroes who function as autonomous agents of their own destiny. The Atrean princess is Agamemnon's daughter, Orestes' sister, confined to the role of "mourning priestess" and "chthonian maiden" because "she does not have the personal equipment for a fully heroic and human context" (513).

The most recent of these comparative approaches, Batya Casper Laks's Electra: A Gender-Sensitive Study of the Plays Based on the Myth (1995), draws on nearly twenty plays to discuss how theatre acts as a performance of "mythical deep structure" and shows the continued resonance of ritual in dramatic form. Laks starts with the premise that the pre-story tells of "the murder of the male by the matriarch and the incorporation of his body into the mother earth for the purposes of fertility" and that the Electra myth recounts the sequel, namely "the patriarchal take-over of earlier female goddesses." She sums up the problem: "The story then becomes that of the repressed female (Electra) as emblem of the repressed emotional life of a people and its desperate attempt to be liberated and incorporated into some vision of the future" (6). Laks concludes in her analysis that the myth is essentially about the masculine struggle for control over the maternal force and laments "the voiceless nature of women throughout history" (179). Laks makes an important contribution with this study, pointing out that there is a gendered power struggle in the myth which should not be underestimated. I disagree, however, with Cech that Electra lacks the necessary qualities and circumstances to realize the status of true heroine. Indeed, none of these studies examines closely the representation of Electra's death, hysteria or mourning, innovations which I consider to be among the most fundamental to the Electra myth in this century. Nor, as mentioned earlier, have I encountered any serious attempt to deal with Freud's major influence on the representation of this mythological character. This study endeavours to address such gaps in the research on the Atrean legend and its title princess.

3 There are no clear dramatic sources for Electra's "dance of death" in Hofmannsthal, but it is fair to say that the character is veiled in morbidity from antiquity to modernity: for example, in Sophocles' Electra, where the heroine expresses a longing for her own death in her darkest moment (l.1170 ff.). Perhaps Hofmannsthal simply provided a logical extension to
questions the finality of Elektra's *danse macabre*. Her dead body, left unburied at the completion of the action, creates the same liminal ambiguity as does Polyneices' rotting corpse in Sophocles' *Antigone*. This supplement to the Aristotelian *peripeteia* precludes the possibility of absolute resolution and thus destabilizes the tragic genre itself, eliciting comparisons to Calderón's Baroque Tragic Drama, the subject of Benjamin's *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. The influence of Hofmannsthal's bold departure from the Greek versions of the myth can be seen in subsequent adaptations such as Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Sartre's *Les Mouches* and Heiner Müller's *Hamletmaschine*. Though the heroine does not die as such in any of these dramas, she ends up in the land of the living dead. Suspended between realms, Electra's indeterminate ontological state challenges the eternal return of the wretched Atrean curse with its cycle of revenge and hatred.

Part III investigates Hofmannsthal's portrayal of Elektra as a hyster. This revision of the myth was undoubtedly influenced by the new psychoanalytic theories of Freud and the *fin-de-siècle* obsession with the violent and seductive *femme fatale*. While the heroine

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the plot. Baudelaire recalled Electra's wretched story in the "Dédicace" for the second edition of the *Fleurs du mal*, where she is compared unfavourably to the "natural woman." It is implied that through her suffering, Electra has become unnatural, devoid of real life (Cech 346). Another possible influence for Hofmannsthal's morbid Electra is Mallarmé's "Hérodiade" (Kovach 201). Both Elektra and Hérodiade lament the loss of their physical attractions and are portrayed as unnatural and inorganic, more like walking corpses than vibrant women, "cadavres sans coffre" in Mallarmé's words ("Hérodiade" 25). And in Swinburne's incomplete novel, *Lesbia Brandon* (not published until 1952), the Electra figure longs for an end to her torment: "She lusted after death with the violent desire underlying violent fear" (qtd. in Cech 351).

*It is difficult to separate the blatantly erotic animality of Hofmannsthal's Elektra from her depiction as sick and diseased. This coupling is paralleled in Breuer's study of Anna O.*
of the Attic tragedies of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles showed visible signs of irrational behaviour, the next major period of the myth's literary exploitation presented a noticeably tamer and more refined Atrean princess. The great French classicists rejected Electra as unsuitable material for a theatre motivated by "grandeur, vraisemblance et bienséance." Her blatant displays of impassioned hatred and cruelty made her an inappropriate model of femininity, according to Corneille, who complains of "l'inhumanité dont elle encourage son frère à ce parricide" ("the inhumanity with which she encourages her brother to commit parricide") (qtd. in Hass-Heichen 74). The eighteenth century brought with it a relaxation of such strict codes of stage etiquette and once again Electra became a suitable heroine, inspiring dramas by Longepierre (1702), Crébillon (1708), Voltaire (1749), Bodmer (1760), Rochefort (1782) and others. These authors granted Electra the privilege of gracing the stage, but the character is more decorative than active. She is portrayed as passionate, with emotions ranging from love to fear and sorrow. However, her rage is largely stifled and she is far from the courageous and defiant heroine of antiquity. In the latter half of the century Electra's passionate nature was equated with moral superiority in a reading highly influenced by the Enlightenment values of individual

where the patient is at once helpless and overtly sexualized. Even if Hofmannsthal is following the example of Mallarmé's sensual Hérodiade or Oscar Wilde's child seductress, Salomé, there are earlier examples of Electra as femme fatale. In Les Fleurs du mal, Baudelaire compares her to the sirens in the Odyssey (see footnote 2), and in De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium-Eater the author pays tribute to his wife, "thou wast my Electra," because she cared for him as did the faithful sister for her Orestes. Here, Electra is tender and kind, but also voluptuous and an object of desire (Cech 345).

5Referring to Electra's expression of maternal hatred, Racine remarked: "Ce vers est un peu cruel pour une fille" ("This line is a bit cruel for a girl") (qtd. in Haas-Heichen 75).
determination (Haas-Heichen 148). Much like the protagonist of Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Taurus*, these Electras refuse to honour the authority of the gods, but develop a sense of human will and independence.⁶

It is this very vision of perfection and light that Hofmannsthal vehemently rejected in creating his violent and chthonian Elektra. Hysteria, it would seem, is not actually a mythopoetic development of the twentieth century, but returns in a new form following a long hiatus. In fact, the Attic tragedians portray the Atrean princess as irrational and unpredictable, with the difference being that in antiquity Electra's behaviour was likely not

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⁶This is not to say that there are not significant shifts in the representation of Electra throughout the eighteenth century. On the contrary, there emerged a strong polemic raised by Voltaire against the sentimentality of versions by Longepierre and especially Crébillon. He felt it was essential that the French stage be purged of the kind of tragedy portrayed as little more than a love intrigue: "Je ne sait pas si [ma tragédie] vaudra celle de Crébillon, qui ne vaut pas grand'chose, mais du moins Electre ne sera pas amoureuse et Oreste ne sera pas galant. Il faut petit à petit défaire le théâtre français de ces déclarations d'amour..." ("I don't know if [my tragedy] will be equal to that of Crébillon, which doesn't amount to much, but at least Electra won't be in love and Oreste won't be gallant. We have to rid the French theatre bit by bit of these amorous declarations...") (qtd. in Dutrait 116). Voltaire is referring to the addition in Crébillon's *Oreste* of the characters Irys and Iphiannasse, son and daughter of Egysthe, who are the respective love interests of Electre and Oreste. His Electre shows not hate but love, even going so far as to declare to Clytemnestre: "Je ne vous hais point" ("I don't hate you at all") (180). The purity of revenge is also complicated in that Oreste (named Tydée for most of the drama) learns from his teacher, Palamède, that his father is really Egysthe and not Agamemnon (an element also used by Marguerite Yourcenar in her 1949 *Electre*). He has to be cajoled by his tutor into committing the awful act of matricide. Voltaire sought to restore the "simplicité antique et le sublime tragique" ("the simplicity of antiquity and the tragic sublime"); as opposed to a frivolous romance, he aspired to a "dramaturgie de l'horreur" ("a dramaturgy of horror") (qtd. in Trousson 148). Voltaire heightened the tension of the tragedy by sketching a sympathetic Clytemnestre, and yet Electre's role is greatly reduced by delaying the recognition scene almost to the end. On the advice of Pylades, Oreste delays revealing his true identity, keeping Electre from the conspirators' plot and rendering her character superfluous. Rather than encouraging the matricide, she rebukes her brother for his part in the violent murder ("Qu'avez vous fait, cruel?" ["What have you done, cruel one?"]) ("Oreste" 96]), in full contrast to Sophocles' and Hofmannsthal's Electra, who shouts at her brother to strike again.
considered so much a disease as a social transgression. In classical Greece, flamboyant performances of grief were part of the normal process of mourning, though restrictions were imposed to curb particularly extreme displays. However, the twentieth century does not condone such visible emotional reactions as an acceptable practice of grieving. Indeed, when Freud and Joseph Breuer wrote up their case study of "Fraulein Anna O." in Studien über Hysterie (1896), they classified the young girl's sorrow at the death of her father as hysteria. The kind of irrational and inexplicable behaviour that might have been a legitimate or even expected reaction to the loss of a loved one was now deemed a disorder to be treated with clinical methods. I postulate that Hofmannsthal used Anna O. as a model for his Elektra, thereby medicalizing her aberrant actions. However, it quickly becomes apparent that the Atean princess is less a patient or victim of the psychoanalytic gaze than she is an analyst on her own terms. Her antagonistic encounter with Clytemnestra turns into a therapy session whereby it is the mother and not the daughter who takes her place on the couch. Sophocles introduced a Greek pun on the name

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7One of the major extra-domestic roles for women in ancient Greece was that of mourner. Women were responsible for washing, anointing and dressing corpses, tending graves and making offerings of food and drink. But they also sang special funeral laments, performed ritual dances, tore their hair and lacerated their bodies, beating themselves in exaggerated displays of grief (S. Blundell 72-73). Such spectacles of mourning on the part of women were perceived as a threat, as evidenced by Hesiod's account of the laws introduced in the sixth century BCE by Solon to control and repress these ceremonies of excess and extravagance (S. Blundell 75; Holst-Warhaft 3). These emotional outbursts of grief were among the only public activities carried out by women, and brought them social prominence. By curtailing such practices, legislators sought to discipline women and deprive them of their powerful position as communicators with the dead (Holst-Warhaft 144). Sophocles' Electra exclaims in her expressive lament for Agamemnon, "The wolf is savage, not to be tamed" (1.420), warning that her anguish will not be silenced. What was for ancient Greek women a normal reaction to death is not unlike the descriptions in Freud's early case studies of hysteria.
"Elektra": Ἡλέκτρα (Elektra) rhymes with ἡλέκτρα (a-lectron), meaning "without a nuptial bed." Sophocles refers to his heroine's virginity, which leaves her without the comfort and social status granted by the institution of marriage (l. 962). The tables turn in post-Freudian representations of the mythological heroine -- Elektra is no longer "without bed" but "without couch," freeing herself from the disciplining discourse of psychoanalysis by becoming master of her own destiny. She plays analyst not only to her family, but also at times to her authors.⁸

Taking Hofmannsthal's drama for a libretto, Richard Strauss created an operatic adaptation of Elektra. It has been suggested by many critics that the composer transposed the heroine's hysteria onto the orchestration, expressing psychological turmoil in a cacophony of dissonance. I question the assumption that Strauss's controversial harmonies and daring chromaticism mirror Elektra's tormented unconscious. Through an analysis of Strauss's subtle deployment of the Viennese waltz, the Atrean princess can be shown not to be the one who suffers from a neurosis. This overdetermined dance motif offers multiple messages as it is repeated in diverse situations throughout the opera; in the end, Elektra is at least as nostalgic as it is avant-garde. The waltz conjures up paternal images of the long-since faded Hapsburg empire, but also aurally recalls the composer's musical fathers including his namesake, Johann Strauss, as well as his own father. Agamemnon's presence in the opera is emphasized by the imposing leitmotif that begins and ends the opera; however, there are many more fathers in Elektra, albeit introduced through

⁸I will argue that Hofmannsthal turned to this drama of intense action after he lost faith in the expressive potential of language. With her determination to perform rather than speak, echoed in her final words "Schweig und tanze" ("Be silent and dance") (75), Elektra cures her author of his own aphasia by example, showing that actions speak louder than words.
encrypted musical messages.

 Similarly, Ezra Pound's Elektra displays little evidence of hysterical behaviour. Translated from Sophocles during the author's incarceration at St. Elizabeths Hospital for the Criminally Insane, this Elektra stifles the heroine's grief and fear, substituting these emotions with a fierce determination to get on with the job. She quickly dries her tears and puts all her efforts into righting the wrongs of civic justice. The parallels between Elektra and Pound are obvious: both were powerless in the face of authority, though defiant and unbending in their personal convictions; both were confined to a house turned against them, victims of circumstance; neither could be silenced; nor would the mythological character or her modernist translator submit to the accusation of insanity. A detailed analysis of the translation shows that, though Pound was meticulous about recreating the sounds of the Greek through melopoeia and maintained strict semiotic fidelity though logopoeia, he nevertheless managed to manipulate the text to create a distinct interpretation. His idiosyncratic use of dialect, colloquialism, elevated language and anachronism adds new dimensions to the tragic message. Just as Pound's translation poetics challenged the status quo and advocated a thorough search for the mot juste, so too his Elektra fought bravely for her vision of justice, never giving up until she had succeeded in cleaning up the "dirty dead."

 Electra has been viewed as the quintessential mythological hysterical of our century, and much feminist scholarship, from Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's Madwoman in the Attic to Luce Irigaray's Le Spéculum de l'autre femme or Shoshana Felman's Writing and Madness has highlighted the subversive potential of lunatic behaviour. Because it falls
outside the bounds of logic, because the hysteric speaks an incomprehensible babble known only to those who inhabit the realm beyond condoned discourses, hysteria can be a refuge for the oppressed. From this ex-centric position, the mad carry on a dissembling performance, destabilizing the structures of power that might propose to discipline them. My reading of Anna O. and the Electra texts I examine shows how these women use the discourse of psychoanalysis as a tool for their own defence. But to take the argument one step further: these Electras are not really hysterics at all. It is arguably their authors who suffer from some nervous disorder and turn to the Atrean Princess to work out their own anxieties. Hysteria only exists in contrast to what we perceive as rational or normal behaviour. Its diagnosis depends on perspective, which means that whoever controls the gaze has the authority to decide what constitutes reasonable conduct. All the rest is madness. Viewed from her authors' perspective, or from the vantagepoint of Clytemnestra, Aegisthus or Chrysothemis, Electra is a madwoman. If the tragedy of Argos is read through Electra's eyes, however, it is everyone else who appears a little unstable.

In Part IV, I consider H.D. and Sylvia Plath's poetic enactment of Electra. Both of these poets openly invoke the story of mythology's mourning daughter as a means to confront their own experience of trauma. While Electra has most often been characterized as a hysteric in this century, H.D. and Plath show a different side of her. In their work, she is portrayed as the melancholic, suffering from the mythological equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder. Again, it is perhaps useful to compare Greek culture to Western civilization at the end of this millennium. As I have already suggested, violent displays of grief seem to have been commonplace in classical times, and not only were such wild
antics normal but they were a necessary ritual honouring the dead. However, if we consider antiquity a "shame culture," then our century warrants the label "depressive culture." Obsessed with happiness and success, when we fall short of our expectations we turn to therapy to heal our ills. We have become Prozac junkies. Instead of turning to pink pills to heal their respective wounds, however, H.D. and Plath turn to words. While each underwent psychoanalytic treatment after a personal breakdown, both poets ended up writing Electra's story as analogous to their own, writing her pain as a means of eradicating theirs.

H.D.'s trauma was the result of the Great War, the agonizing frustration of senseless destruction and loss of human life. The poet's brother was killed at the front and her father died shortly thereafter. During this period her marriage to Richard Aldington also crumbled; she nearly succumbed to a life-threatening influenza and barely survived the birth of her daughter. All of this left H.D. "shell-shocked" and voiceless. No longer capable of writing, the poet suffered in silence. She was a prime example of a syndrome Freud had observed in his own clinical practice. In "Thoughts on War and Death," he documented a new kind of disillusionment resulting from the extreme brutality of the Great War, and particularly the behaviour of those who had lost someone close to them. Freud recognized that the sheer number of deaths--"often tens of thousands in a single day" (291)--caused undue stress not only on those who fought in battle but on those who remained at home to wait for news of the dead. H.D. sought psychoanalytic treatment in an effort to overcome her trauma, but in the end the professor, as she called Freud, counselled her to write, and write she did. Her poem cycle, "A Dead Priestess Speaks,"
was one of the first works she wrote after her sessions in Vienna, and it is here that she called upon Electra to guide her through her turmoil. The mythological heroine functions as a transitional figure, pivoting between the early H.D., who was fascinated by the Neoromantic Decadent trope of the androgynous male youth, and the more mature poet, who speaks from the perspective of a sexually mature and maternally-identified woman. This is reflected in Electra's shift in allegiance from Orestes (the siblings making up the two halves of the Platonic third sex) to Clytemnestra, now no longer the guilty murderer but the powerful priestess-prophetess-goddess.\(^9\) H.D. had found a new voice.

Similarly, Plath calls upon Electra to be her muse. Hers is no mere adaptation or translation from Aeschylus or Euripides, but an entire remodelling of the figure. In fact, the mythological heroine inhabits Plath's poems more as a mutating leitmotif than as a character \textit{per se}. This is evident from the poet's own description of one the most controversial poems in the century, "Daddy": "Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex" (\textit{Collected Poems} 293). Plath does not say the speaker \textbf{is} Electra, but that she \textbf{has} an Electra complex, invoking the discourse of psychoanalysis more strongly than mythology's hysteric. This parenthetical statement erases all other circumstances surrounding the character and transforms her into a father-obsessed daughter. She also automatically becomes a clinical case. Given the author's own preoccupations with Freudian concepts, I have chosen to read Plath's Electra poems through Julia Kristeva's re-

\(^9\)H.D. is not alone in this radical rewriting of the mother-daughter relationship. In her hard-edged poem, "For Elektra," Marilyn Hacker's mythological speaker says of Clytemnestra: "She did not kill or save him/ with her dry hands.... I would rather make love and poems than kill/ my mother" (13).
evaluation of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholy" in Black Sun. Both Freud and Kristeva show that the desire to incorporate the dead other is a sign of melancholia, mourning taken to its extreme. I read Plath's consistent metaphors of orality as a complex intertextual link to the cannibalism at the root of the Atrean curse. In the Oresteia, we hear the horrific details of the myth's prehistory, where generation after generation has been literally fed its own offspring. Ironically, while Plath's "poetics of survival" (Kristeva, Black 73) includes ingesting the dead father through metaphors of incorporation, in the Aeschylean tragedy it is the father who is fed his sons. But in Plath's poetics, devouring is a healing practice and no longer the source of evil. I argue that though this attempt at a self-cure could not prevent Plath from ending her life, it does present a powerful, if brutal, picture of Electra. The mythological heroine is stripped down to the bare essentials, a voice with an Electra complex, and the character throws off her depressive mask and speaks her naked anger with honesty and courage.

There are several ways of interpreting what I view as a shift from Electra the hysterical to Electra the melancholic in the work of H.D. and Plath. In some respects this transition from disease to depression mirrors the development of psychoanalysis in our century. In Freud's early work, hysteria seemed to be a blanket diagnosis for an assortment of psychological disorders. The major discovery of Studien über Hysterie is the link between the repressed memory of traumatic experiences and subsequent somatic symptoms. It was felt that as soon as the disturbing events were articulated, the physical manifestations of distress would dissipate. Later, however, Freud's clinical experience forced him to change his view on many important issues, including the problematic theory
of wish-fulfilment.¹⁰ In particular, his experience during and after the war led Freud to revise his views on trauma, resulting in "Mourning and Melancholy" and "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In these two later works Freud outlined the effects of trauma in terms of the regressive tendencies of the ego, narcissistic cathexis, repetition compulsion and finally the death drive as the suspension of the pleasure principle.¹¹ These discoveries meant that Freud could no longer view compulsive behaviour as a symptom of "hysteria" as such. Instead these signs became part of a normal psychological response to personal crisis. My point is that H.D. and Plath's invoking Electra's story as an analogy to personal trauma may reflect a trend not only in Freud, but in general psychoanalytic history. Both of these poets were extremely well-read in psychoanalytic theory and conscious of the

¹⁰While Freud had already expressed doubt about his seduction theory in 1897, it was not until much later that he was able to bar it completely from his theories. The one-way flow of libidinal energy was ultimately contradicted by the experiences of shell-shocked soldiers, whose trauma could obviously not be linked to sexual repression. In a letter to Fliess, dated 21 September, 1897, Freud explained that his discovery of the Oedipus complex had led him to the realization that sexual impulses operated in children without the necessity of an external object ("Introduction to Three Essays" 36). Freud did return to the earlier theory in the case study of Dora, offering a not uncommon contradiction to his own thinking. His admission that the pleasure principle is suspended in favour of the death instinct as a result of trauma or melancholia precludes the possibility of a woman's being diagnosed with hysteria as a coded term for sexual repression or thwarted desires. Let me explain: Freud's "seduction theory," which painted many of his patients as willing participants instead of innocent victims, was based on the "wish-fulfilment" principle, dictating that all actions are a result of the libido or positive life forces. However, Freud was forced to admit that the regressive tendencies discovered in the death instinct exist alongside and can even overrule these sexual drives.

¹¹This is an extreme simplification of Freud's complex theories. However, for my purposes I want to clarify the transition between the early theories based on repressed memory and hysteria and the later works, which begin to treat such symptoms as signs of trauma not insanity. This parallels a shift in psychoanalytic treatment from the "mad" patient to the "sick" victim.
mythological heroine's connection with this school of thought, and hysteria was simply not as strongly present in the clinical vocabulary at the time they were writing.\textsuperscript{12}

Gender is also a major consideration in how Electra is represented. Most of the adaptations by male authors that I discuss have portrayed Electra as a hysterical to some degree or another, even though I read their versions of the character against the grain, demonstrating that she may not be the madwoman they think she is. The women poets H.D. and Plath, on the other hand, take Electra's perspective and allow her to testify to her trauma--in fact, to create her own "talking cure" by telling her own story. Far from remaining the victim, the mourning daughter shakes off her pain and offers alternative visions of the legend. Perhaps this is also a function of genre. Electra is traditionally a dramatic figure, born into tragedy and kept there for the most part. As such, she speaks her own lines, but has no opportunity to offer her narrative perspective in a candid off-side. This is precisely what H.D. and Plath offer their subject in their poetry. Though she does not speak directly to the reader, Electra's other story is told.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12}To be fair to Freud and Breuer with regard to their treatment of Anna O. (and their early theories of hysteria in general), psychoanalysis did not have the vocabulary to unravel the complexity of her disorder in these terms. With the wisdom of hindsight, perhaps Freud would have rewritten Anna's case in subtler and more sophisticated terms. And as Alice Miller has pointed out: "Wir können Sigmund Freud keinen Vorwurf machen, daß er ein Kind seiner Zeit war und, daß er als Schöpfer der Psychoanalyse noch keine Möglichkeit hatte, für sich eine Couch zu beanspruchen." ("We cannot blame Sigmund Freud for being a child of his times, for the fact that, as the creator of psychoanalysis, he had no opportunity to take his turn on the couch") (33).

\textsuperscript{13}Women authors often tend to treat mythological themes differently from their male counterparts. Women have consciously and irreverently subverted mythology's status quo, challenging the base structure and reception of characters and their circumstances. Examples of this are Christa Wolf's \textit{Cassandra}, Grete Weil's \textit{Meine Schwester Antigone} and Helene Cixous's \textit{Le Livre de Promethea}. 
The issue of the myth's evolution in new adaptations is the topic of Part I: the constant pull between tradition and innovation, between authenticity and fiction. I take the view that there is no "degree zero" of a myth; as Claude Lévi-Strauss has said: "Il n'existe pas de version vraie dont toutes les autres seraient des copies ou des échos déformés. Toutes les versions appartiennent au mythe." ("There exists no true version of which all the rest are copies or deformed echoes. All versions belong to the myth") (Anthropologie 242). In fact, myth is always already supplemental in nature. And yet there are specific events and circumstances which motivate mutations in the myth, be they political or personal. This study illustrates the role of historical context in shaping both character and plot, and in particular how the Atrean legend, with its backdrop of the Trojan battles, has been mapped onto the complex politics of war (for example in Sartre's Les Mouches, Virgilio Piñera's Electra Garrigó and Gerhard Hauptmann's Atriden Tetralogie). In other cases, the curse of Atreus has come to represent the social repression of a house divided against itself (such as in Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, Jean Giraudoux's Electre and Heiner Müller's Hamletmaschine). To my surprise, however, I discovered that the lives of individual authors significantly influence each remodelling of the mythological heroine and her negotiations with the issues of justice and freedom. I am conscious of the problematic nature of biographical interpretation in the case of the very intimate poetry of H.D. and especially Sylvia Plath, whose poetry has been dubbed "confessional" and whose life has been mythologized to voyeuristic extremes. So often this type of analysis leads into an interpretive cul de sac, revealing little about either text or author. And yet, my interest in the poetic enactment of Electra as personal testimony is
not limited to the gender and genre specificities of these two poets. This study reaches into the private personalities of almost all the authors in this study in an attempt to gain some insight into the motivation behind a particular reading of the Atrean character and the myth. Biography is not an end, but a means. Such personal details are invoked not to illuminate our understanding of the authors in question; rather, the aim is to provide a context for the reception of Electra, just as it is important to consider historical, social and political circumstances. During the course of my analysis of various Electra texts, it seemed to me that the authors had to struggle to maintain an objective distance from their character. Perhaps Electra's strong will eventually works its way under the skin of all those who encounter her story.

Most importantly, my aim in this study is to address what I view as key innovations in the Electra myth and its title character in the twentieth century. I do not propose to solve the mysteries of this most complex of myths, but instead wish to consider several significant questions: Why do Electras of this century die, and what are the consequences of this new final scene for the mythological heroine and the structure of the tragedy? Is Electra really a hysteric, or is madness merely a question of perspective? And, if she is not the crazed maenad some take her for, who is the true neurotic? Does Electra's hysteria give way to the trauma of mourning and depressive melancholia? And, if so, how does she succeed in healing herself through words? As with any literary trope or archetypal character, generalizations can be made about the twentieth-century Electra and her myth, and parallels can be drawn to historical, social and cultural developments: the influence of Freud and psychoanalysis, the prevalence of violence and cruelty, the
heroine's naked expression of pain. Still, the manifestations of the Atrean legend are just as diverse as they are similar. I endeavour here to present a plurality of perspectives on mythology's mourning daughter, employing a variety of lenses to view the character and her circumstances. I do not offer any conclusive statement or undertake to erase the muthos of myth and replace it with a determining logos. I attempt to provide a redeeming and optimistic reading, which emphasizes Electra's strength and her determination to pursue justice against all odds, to heal her own ills and act as an encouraging example to those around her in their own struggles.
The Myth of Electra
Chapter One

Mythos vs. Logos: Electra and the Re-mythification of Myth

A Myth is a Myth is a Myth

While there is no mention of Electra in Homer, her appearance and subsequent development as a significant figure in Attic tragedy strongly implicate her in the world of myth. Few subjects have been as fervently debated as myth and mythology, spawning such provocative statements as Max Müller's late Romantic view of myth as a "disease of language" or Jean-Luc Nancy's more recent and equally puzzling dictum, "Myth is a

1It is possible that Homer knew about Electra and the role she played in the matricide. In the Odyssey Orestes is set up as an example for Telemachus of a good son, an image that would have been considerably marred if he had been depicted as a murderer. Perhaps the legend is suppressed because the knowledge of the curse of Atreus would threaten the stability of Homer's mythological world.

2Often the words myth, mythology, mythography and mythopoeisis are used interchangeably and without clear definition. I intend to follow the O.E.D., which defines "myth" as a narrative form, "mythology" as either a body of myths or a department of knowledge which deals with myths, and "mythography" as to the representation of myths in various art forms. "Mythopoetics" is the general theory of the production of myth and "mythopoeisis" is the creation of new versions of already existing myths. The term is historically contingent in the sense that mythopoeisis means something vastly different in the eighteenth century than it does in the twentieth century. For example Hugo von Hofmannsthals's Elektra is a creative translation and interpretation, whereas for writers such as O'Neill or Sartre the boundaries of the myth are much vaguer, as they are in the poetic adaptations of H.D. or Sylvia Plath. But even Homer practiced mythopoeisis by structuring the oral culture of myths for a written format.

3This oft-quoted phrase (Puhvel 14, Slochower 19, Feldman xiv) is used to illustrate mythology's claims of self-importance. What Müller had in mind as a "healthy" base was a view of language as pure and uncontaminated by metaphor. Myth was for him a corrupting influence. Müller (1823-1900) comes at the tail end of a long line of Romantic philosophers intent on establishing myth as an absolute quality, capable of reflecting a transcendent human consciousness. It was their intent to keep the purity of myth intact and fend off any trend toward the interpretation of myth, which was viewed as a form of disease. This presents an obvious conundrum since Romantic philosophers needed to employ their own hermeneutic methods in order to prove the transcendence of myth.

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myth." Whatever the definition and consequences of myth might be, there seems to be general agreement that mythological figures are somehow different from those found in literature. Archetypes such as Hamlet or Faust are often treated as one would a mythological character, and some would argue that it is possible for them to transcend the limitations of their fictional context and achieve the same autonomy as the Oedipus of psychoanalysis or the Orpheus of poetry and music. Despite the relative freedom of these archetypes their scope is limited by the language that speaks them. Myth and mythological characters are always and only discursively available to us, and so it is in this light that they must be examined.

A closer look at the definition of the word "myth" will perhaps shed some light on the dichotomies the term has inherited. Derived from the Greek μῦθος (můthos), "myth" can mean: "[a] traditional story, either wholly or partially fictitious, providing an explanation for or embodying a popular idea concerning some natural or social phenomenon or some religious belief or ritual; spec. one involving supernatural persons,

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4This statement too has its origins in Romantic visions of mythology, to the extent that Friedrich Schelling's pronouncement of myth as "tautegorical" makes it endlessly and exclusively self-reflexive. Nancy quotes the phrase, as used by Georges Bataille, to mean the "absence of myth" (52), which is to say that myth is an unthinkable limit to presence and being, a suspension or interruption.

5See Harry Slochower on the topic of literary figures obtaining mythological status. Slochower maintains that it is through mythopoesis that a figure becomes an archetype. Also, Manfred Fuhrmann has done an in-depth analysis of the different methods of adaptation and variation of mythological subject matter. Examples of non-mythological characters who achieve a quasi-mythological status are found in Gottfried Herder's study of folk-mythology and the Grimm brothers' study of fairy-tales. It could also be argued that Wagner's adaptation of the Niebelungenlied in his "Ring Cycle" has achieved the same status of pseudo-myth.
actions, or events...a misrepresentation of the truth...fantastic, bizarre" (O.E.D.). And yet, if the truth-value of myth is so suspect, then why is it that myth carries such cultural weight? George Steiner poses this same question about the "unbroken authority of Greek myths over the imagination of the West," and responds: "Because Greek myths encode certain primary biological and social confrontations and self-perceptions in the history of man, they endure as an animate legacy in collective remembrance and recognition. We come home to them as to our psychic roots" (300-01). Steiner wavers between a Jungian viewpoint of the collective unconscious and a more liberal argument for historical continuity. His ambivalence is characteristic of many mythographers, who argue that myth is perpetually present, but that it is also a part of our past: our connection to it is the root of our cultural heritage. It is the trip home we think we are taking in myth that is the key to its prestige. Nevertheless, the link between myth and origin is an important one, for myth makes no pretence of having humble beginnings. And for Steiner this origin is tied to that of language: "the principal Greek myths are imprinted in the evolution of our language and on our grammars in particular... We speak organic vestiges of myth when we speak" (303-04). Steiner concludes that "[l]anguage and myth develop reciprocally" (135), but he is not alone in positing this close link between linguistic structures and those

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6Steiner uses Heideggerian philosophy to posit Greek grammar and vocabulary as the markers of personal identity in the West, and explains the prominence of Greek motifs: "Each recursion to a Greek mythical theme, even in variant or antinomian guise, represents, in Heideggerian terms, a literal homecoming: to the Lichtung ('the clearing') in which Being made itself manifest" (132). Is it possible to think of Electra in these terms, as permanently imbedded within the syntax of the myth, or does the character open up a diachronic dialogue with other Electras? This study will show Electra in the context of the myth but also as an autonomous archetype, as, for example, in poetry.
present or perceived in myth itself.

Neue Mythologie: from **muthos** to **logos**

The controversy surrounding myth has been with us since ancient times, long before the innovations of the German Romantics or Freud's psychoanalytic interpretations. It has been argued that literature since Homer has been nothing but an attempt to free humanity from the dark chthonian underworld of myth, from its mystic, non-rational qualities. Plato is among the first to warn of these seductive dangers of myth (Nancy 56), and points out the suspect nature of myth's transmission because of its origins in oral culture, which carries no more authenticity than rumour itself (Vernant, "Reflektierte Muthos" 9). Plato is responsible for the distinction between the two words **muthos** (μῦθος) and **logos** (λόγος), prior to which both terms were used interchangeably to mean both "speech" and "word" (Puhvel 1). While each can mean both "speech" and "account," later usage shows that **muthos** mutated to include "fiction" and "legend," where **logos** took on abstract meanings like "reason," "argument" and "law." **Muthos** is more of an account in the sense of a tale, whereas **logos** accounts for something as a kind of proof. The semantic linkage in the lexical roots of "mytho/logy" explains the extreme dichotomy in our cultural understanding of myth as both an exaggerated fictional narrative and a transcendental ideal.7

7The Liddell & Scott Greek Lexicon tells us that **muthos** originally meant "word, speech, fact, matter," but then later comes to mean "tale, story, report, fiction, historic truth, legend, myth." **Logos** similarly means "word, speech, language, expression, utterance, fable, account, tale, reputation, tradition," but also "relation, correspondence, explanation, oracle, proverb," and "theory, argument, discourse, principle, reason, rule,
It is the latter of these two that concerns the German Romantics, concentrating on the potential for transcendence in a dialectical relationship between myth as the origins of humanity and myth as articulated in German language and literature. Romantic thinkers were not as pessimistic as Plato about myth, but focussed on what they saw as the emancipatory potential of myth, its power to harness the forces of nature and unite them in the true spirit of human consciousness. In its own way, Romanticism relies on the Platonic opposition of mythos and logos, appropriating the power of myth to argue for the logic of the transcendental absolute. And like Plato, the Romantics turned to language to achieve their purpose. In "Origin of Language" (1772), Johann Gottfried Herder denies the commonly held view that language is either divinely and perfectly bestowed on man or merely contrived, instead proposing that through language humans do not imitate nature but divine creativity itself (Feldman 227). Herder does not view mythology as a static medium but as a "Neue Mythologie" ("New Mythology"), which can be lived and revitalized in the form of poetic works (Jamee 28). Goethe's conception of mythology closely follows that of Herder, also holding that the literary transposition of myth reveals its true and natural origin. Along with that of Karl Philipp Moritz, Goethe's conception of mythopoetics rests on the distinction between allegory, considered a one-dimensional

law, idea, etc." These examples suffice to show that mythos and logos have considerable common ancestry. Still, the terms are sufficiently blurred, leaving a grey area of intersection. In the Republic, Plato shows his suspicion of history, story, and legend: "we cannot know the truth (ἐλεγομεν) about the events of the past (μυθολογιας), so we make something up which approximates as closely as possible to the truth (ἀληθει), and that helps us, doesn't it? ...Which of these reasons, then, makes telling lies helpful to God? ...Whether in acting or speaking, then, God is entirely uniform and truthful (ἀληθεο") (382d.1ff.). Plato uses mythologias to mean much more than mere "events of the past," contradicting himself in his many highly politicized definitions of mythos (Zaslavsky 29).
mode of reference, and symbol, a mode of truth not to be reduced or referred to outside of itself, but which is rather "general ideas given from nature" (Feldman 262). Thus the simultaneous autonomy and polysemy of the symbol provide the means of expression necessary for the wild energy of myth to surge forth, as illustrated for example, in Goethe's poem "Prometheus," or Winckelmann's perfectionist vision of classical antiquity.

While "Neue Mythologie" can be used as a blanket term for the theories of the German Romantics, there are nevertheless considerable differences of opinion that are not to be ignored. Friedrich Schlegel, influenced by Herder and Goethe, advocated literary production as a means to mythic transcendence in a dialectical relationship with nature and the human spirit. His "Rede über die Mythologie" introduces a "Systemprogramm," whereby the mythological aesthetic is turned into a transcendental philosophy (Feldman 307, Jamme 33). Where Friedrich Schelling diverges from Schlegel is in his vision of mythology as "tautegorical," not allegorical or heuristic, because of its autonomous and self-reflexive nature. Myth becomes its own enunciation, realizing itself dialectically (Nancy 52, Puhvel 12) as a "wirkliches werden Gottes im Bewußtsein" ("a true becoming

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8 Manfred Frank comments on the Enlightenment tendency of Schlegelian mythology, rescuing both mythology and the human who sees himself reflected therein from the mystical depths of the supernatural through this dialectical operation (Kommende Gott 93-95).

9 "Tautegorical" is a term specific to Romantic philosophy, referring to the allegorical and self-reflexive character of myth. The O.E.D. cites a passage from Coleridge (1825): "This part of the mythus in which symbol fades away into allegory but...never ceases wholly to be a symbol or tauteogory."
God in consciousness") (Betz 14). Schelling opposes Schlegel's emphasis upon innovation, refusing to incorporate the fictional within the mythical. With "Neue Mythologie" Romantic philosophers linked the two fundamentally opposing aspects of myth, innovation and foundation, and hoped to achieve a transcendental ideal through this dialectic tension in literature. If I were to accept Schelling's view of myth as "tautegorical," I would have to abandon this study here, for the assumption that myth refers only to itself and is an absolute is diametrically opposed to my own view of myth and particularly the character of Electra as historically and culturally inscribed.

The fields of both mythopoesis and mythography have struggled constantly with the opposition between origin and invention, since repetition is always both a return and a difference. Eva Kushner aptly illustrates this point by arguing that permanence and transformation are not at all in conflict with one another, but merely function in tandem as elements in the same project: "the permanence of myths as they manifest themselves in modern literature lies not in fixity of narrative detail, nor in an ontological unity of the

10Schelling adds further: "Die Mythologie ist nicht allegorisch, sie ist 'tautegorical'. Die Götter sind ihr wirklich existierende Wesen, die nicht etwas anderes sind, etwas anderes bedeuten, sondern das bedeuten, was sie sind" ("Mythology is not allegorical, it is 'tautegorical'. The gods are their truly existing being, that are not anything else, do not mean anything else, rather mean what they are") (qtd. in Betz 15).

11Romantic philosophers from Schlegel to Creuzer have been blamed for the Nazi appropriation of their utopian theories of a unified nation, which the Romantics saw mirrored in the transcendentalism of myth. Harry Slochower, for example, points out the need to "rescue [myth's] living relevance from the romantic view" (40), and indeed much of the post-War scholarship on mythology has centred on an attempt to understand Nazism's reception of Romantic philosophy. From Horkheimer and Adorno's The Dialectic of Enlightenment to Manfred Frank's Der Kommende Gott, Karl Heinz Bohrer's Mythos und Moderne and Jean-Luc Nancy's The Inoperative Community, scholars have attempted to make sense of this horrific abuse of myth's power.
human mind as enshrined in the world of myths, nor again in the preservation of a
classical flavor, but in the very dynamics of myth itself" (201). Similarly Christopher
Bracken sees myth as the "collapsing of the border between 'truth' and 'lies,'" concluding
that "[w]hat myth's myth says is that myth is a force of 'invention': a power that founds
itself as its own absolute foundation" (1). As a founding fiction then, somewhere between
fixity and flux, myth must be a performative and self-perpetuating narrative, what Nancy
would call "auto-poetic mimesis" (56). This has an emancipatory potential in that it denies
any stable knowability of origin, although it can be said that our fascination with myth as
a self-engendering performance risks imploding the differentiating return of myth into its
own origin. It is this symbiotic and oscillatory relationship between fixed and transitory
elements, between origin and performance that will act as a frame for this study of
Electra.

The Tragic Transcendence of Myth

German Romanticism is just one among many important schools of
mythography.12 The dichotomous--not to say paradoxical--nature of their new

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12Mythography began in classical antiquity with Hesiod and his discussion of myth
and truth-value (Vernant, Myth and Thought 4; Schlesier 335). After Giovanni
Boccaccio's fourteenth-century treatise De genealogia deorum, the next major contribution
to classical learning took place in the later Renaissance works of Pedro Alvares Cabral
and Vasco Nunez de Balboa, spawned by the influence of colonization and missionary
intellectuals' encounters with myths from the East and the New World (Puhvel 11). The
concepts of mythogenesis and the complexity of creative imagination in reciprocity with
social institutions were first introduced by Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) (Puhvel 11,
Feldman 50). There are also culturally specific schools of mythography, such as the
French tradition's romantic concern for personal and private mythology as an extension of
and dialogue with Greek myth. As Paul Valéry writes: "Les mythes sont les âmes de nos
mythopoetics, with its desire for spiritual and literary transcendence, is particularly useful as a metaphor for mythopoiesis in general. The Romantic project, though concomitant with the Enlightenment humanism inaugurated in the eighteenth century, has its origins in Homeric epic itself with its endless battles over the distribution of power among the gods and the lesser mortals. Mere mortals can usurp the might of the Olympians only by stripping them and myth itself of all supernatural powers. This has partly been achieved by labelling myth false and fictitious, but it has also been achieved through the process of repetition and revision. Mythological adaptation, or mythopoiesis, is often complicitous in actions et de nos amours" ("Myths are the souls of our actions and our loves") (Cazier 16). Lévi-Strauss's structuralist interpretation of myth, the view of myth as a living sacred narrative in Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell and Jamake Highwater, and the psychoanalytic reception of mythology as collective unconscious in Freud and Jung have all had enormous influence on twentieth-century mythography.

G.S. Kirk calls the Iliad a legend but concedes that it overlaps with myth in the intervention of the supernatural (55). Nevertheless, Homer's Iliad is often considered myth, though it is a prime example of a struggle between the will of man and the will of the gods. And Jacob Burckhardt sees all literature as the attempt to rule over the gods, stating that from Homer onwards, Zeus and the other gods have never recovered their lost power (Blumenberg 18).

There are those who hold that myth is nothing but fiction because we have stopped believing in it as a form of religious practice (Pouillon 70). This would suggest that the moment we objectify something for long enough to discuss it in analytical terms, it must be myth and therefore untrue (see also Pettazonni 98). Jean-Pierre Vernant says of myth that it is "immer die Rückseite, das Andere des wahren Diskurses, des logos." ("always the reverse side of, the other of true discourse, of logos") ("Reflektierte Mythos" 9). Manfred Frank approaches the problem from another perspective, starting out with the premise that "[j]edes gesprochene Wort tritt nicht nur an die Stelle eines Schweigens. Es setzt immer auch ein fortwährendes Schweigen oder zumindest: eine Abwesenheit voraus." ("Every spoken word stands not only in the place of silence. It also always presupposes a further silence or at least: an absence") ("Neue Mythologie" 15). Seen from Frank's Derridean position, all graphic traces of myth are in a sense the reminder that myth no longer exists, and that we are left with nothing but a supplement. Frank sees the appearance of new literary adaptations of myth as erasure of the origins of myth. This has important consequences for a study such as this one, for it implies that there is no one
nature: while parasitic on previous versions, these new works can mock their treatment of character and plot, thus undermining the authority of those texts while expropriating their literary power.

For example, in Jean Giraudoux’s *Electre*, the Eumenides appear as three little girls, who mimic the other characters' gestures with increasing impudence. By the end of the play, they have transformed themselves into doubles of Electre in order to torment Orestes. These ambiguous characters undermine the significance of the Furies in the *Eumenides*, while simultaneously wreaking havoc with the order of the modern drama. Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Les Mouches* appropriates and corrupts both the myth of classical antiquity and the versions offered by his predecessors, especially Giraudoux, whose play directly predates his own. Sartre introduces two new sources of the supernatural into his rendering of the Electra myth: the first is Zeus as Beelzebub, the god of the flies who torments the people of Argos, and the second is the fake religion of the dead, invented by Egisthe to numb his subjects and perpetuate his own authority. By introducing this ludicrous worship of sacred corpses into the story, Sartre undoes the logic of the Greek classical tradition of the Furies and presents an encrypted critique of collaboration during the Nazi occupation of France.¹⁵

¹⁵Sartre’s *Les Mouches* was written and produced during the occupation which prohibited him from making a blatant critique and forced him to express his political views using the Atrean myth as allegory. Manfred Fuhrmann points out that the form of mythopoesis prevalent amongst the French dramatists of the twentieth century (notably Giraudoux, Sartre, Cocteau and Anouilh) is particularly clever at breaking through the barriers of convention through the use of "krasse und kapriziöse Anachronismen" ("blatant
Unlike the two French versions, Ezra Pound's *Elektra* is a translation and not an adaptation, suggesting a more faithful rendering of the source text in a new target language. However, it achieves an almost complete autonomy by putting the foreign text in the service of a modernist poetics. Rather than reproducing the strangeness of the original text, he simulates the same degree of alienation within his own poetic economy using colloquial language, dialect and neologisms. To put it in Lawrence Venuti's terms, he deterritorializes his language from within, becoming a nomad writer in his own tongue (Venuti 189). Venuti labels Pound's techniques of alienation and autonomy romantic and patriarchal, and accuses the poet of being more concerned with influencing the English canon than with creating new and politically engaged versions of the classics (191).

However, I hope to show through my analysis of this *Elektra* in chapter five that the translator's agenda is as much personal as it is poetic and political.

The aforementioned examples illustrate myth's constant struggle between repetition and revision. So too it is with the character of Electra. Though it is impossible to prove or trace the exact influences of any one portrayal of the mythological heroine, we have to assume some degree of reference if only to a name and its associations, which C. Kerényi calls a "mythologeme," the smallest indivisible unit of mythology (Jung 3). Thus we might

and playful anachronisms"), which shock the audience by linking the mythical world of the Greeks to the banality of everyday life (130).

16Pound's translation poetics are in contrast to many other moderns, including T.S. Eliot, whose adaptation of the Electra-myth in *Family Reunion* is a thorough domestication of the myth, so much so that one might not even recognize its intertext. Both Pound and Eliot sought autonomy for their literary adaptations of the Atrean legend, but they accomplished this through different means.
consider Electra an independent signifier or mythologeme, to which various characteristics may be attributed. Each new Electra is imbued with a different combination of her accumulated traits, paralleling George Steiner's statement that "New 'Antigones' are being imagined, thought, lived now; and will be tomorrow" (304).

And yet, an analysis of mythopoesis is more difficult than the linguistic dissection of a sentence. Jean-Jacques Wunenberger brings this process back to the distinction between muthos and logos:

La tache d'une "mythopoïétique" consiste donc à reconstituer les intentionnalités et les procédures mentales spécifiques à la voie mythique, qui doivent pouvoir distinguer nettement des visées et des méthodes de la pensée rationnelle. (The task of a "mythopoetics" consists then in reconstituting the intentionalities and mental procedures specific to the mythic medium, which should be able to distinguish clearly from the goals and methods of rational thought.) (35)

Wunenberger refers here to mythopoesis as a literary phenomenon that diverges from the rational elements of myth, the logos that Plato was so anxious to foreground. Prior to the fifth century BCE, the dichotomy between muthos and logos was less pronounced and both words were used interchangeably to mean "speech" and "account," with less emphasis upon the fictitious nature of muthos. The new mythopoetics of the fifth-century tragedians could begin their task of rescuing myth from its own muthos, rendering it a newly rationalized and legitimized logos, a regime that was repeated again in the nineteenth century by the German Romantics in their own project of "Neue Mythologie."
Birgit zu Nieden presents an alternative view mythopoesis, but follows Wunenberger in emphasizing the rational and the innovative:

Erst wenn der Muthos aus kultischen Bindungen entlassen ist, wird er zur mündlichen und schriftlichen Weiterverwendung freigegeben; wenn die Verpflichtung zu heiliger Scheu und Ehrfurcht entfällt, darf nicht nur weitererzählt, sondern es darf interpretierend weitererzählt werden. (Only when myth is released from its cultic ties, will it be free to be used in further oral and written forms; once the obligation to hallowed awe and reverence is repealed, not only can myths be retold, but they can be retold in new interpretations.)

(12)

This process of interpretation and rationalization is said to have begun with Homer, transposing into poetic form the myths that had been passed down to him from other sources (Jauss 550, 552). So too, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno claim the disappearance of myth in the very work--Homer's--that recounts these same myths, because their diversity gives way to a unifying force: "In den Stoffschichten Homers haben die Mythen sich niedergeschlagen; der Bericht von ihnen aber, die Einheit, die den diffusen Sagen abgezwungen ward, ist zugleich die Beschreibung der Fluchtbahn des Subjekts vor den mythischen Mächten." ("In the layers of Homer's material, myth has

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17 Giambattista Vico was the first to cite Homer's texts as a work of the whole people, thus acknowledging collection as a component within the creative literary process. More importantly, Vico points to the anthropomorphism in the Iliad, where the gods lose their heroism and become subject to some of the same suffering that humans must endure (Feldman 54). Homer mocks the gods' naivety, for example, when he declares that Aphrodite has been "wounded" in battle with a minor scratch. The belittling of the gods' suffering serves to augment that of humans.
been suppressed; the account of them, however, the unity forced out of the diffuse legends, is at the same time the description of the subject's escape-route from the mythical powers") (Dialektik der Aufklärung 61).

This discussion of mythopoesis has important ramifications for Electra. In the Iliad, Agamemnon offers up one of his three daughters to Achilles as a reward to lure him back to war, but Electra is not among them: "Three daughters are mine in my well-built halls—Chrysothemis and Laodice and Iphianassa—and he may lead away whichever he likes" (9:287-289). Despite the fact that her name is never mentioned in Homer (although the stories of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and Orestes are all told in detail), Electra, first introduced in Aeschylus's Oresteia, becomes an important element of mythopoesis. In the Odyssey, Agamemnon's awful fate is filtered through the perspective of Zeus:

'Ah! The way mortals blame the gods! They say that it is from us that bad things come; but it is they themselves who by their own outrageous behaviour get pains beyond what is fated—as now Aigisthos beyond what has fated married the wedded wife of the son of Atreus, whom he killed on his return, though he knew of his own abrupt death, since we had told him earlier—slanding Hermes, the sharp-sighted killer of Argos—not to kill him and not to woo his wife. 'From Orestes there will be vengeance from the son of Atreus, when he grows up and desires his own land'. (1.32-41)

Homer mocks the Olympians by presenting Zeus as a myopic rather than omniscient narrator, demonstrating that while the gods may be blessed by free will, their misuse of this power is their downfall. Zeus cannot see that Aegisthus, although he has been warned,
takes no heed of these wise words and goes knowingly to his terrible fate. Aegisthus's willful defiance of Zeus's cautionary words illustrates the shift in power from gods to humans, from supernatural forces to the powers of reason.

The Oresteia portrays this struggle to free humanity from the hold of the gods, and implement a justice system to aid and abet the rationalizing forces of civilization. In his introduction to the trilogy, Robert Fagles sums up the relationship of Aeschylus to Homer: "Adapting Homer more and more freely throughout the Oresteia, he reverses the events and carries them from the darkness to the light—from the bloody return of Agamemnon to the triumphant return of Athena to Athens. The last is Aeschylus' ultimate expansion of Homer and departure from his master" (286). Fagles concludes that the work "celebrates progress,...not as a limp myth of perfectibility but as a march" (93), calling the Eumenides a "closing pageant" and a "civic marriage of men and gods, the civic birth of Athens" (96). The mythopoesis practised by Aeschylus aims at creating a humanist tragedy out of myth, separating it from its barbaric past. By the end of the trilogy, Athena has laid down the preliminary structures for a court of law, where justice will prevail over the fancy of Zeus and his entourage. In the Oresteia, the imagery of the movement from darkness to light is unmistakable, and it is into this primal scene of civic transcendence that Electra is born. She is the only new member of her family, a mythopoetic invention.\(^\text{18}\) I am

\(^{18}\)Electra did in fact exist before Aeschylus introduced her in the Oresteia. There were two earlier Electras, though they share nothing but the name. According to Hesiod, the first was the daughter of Oceanus, wife of Thaumas and mother of Iris and Harpyiae, a water goddess. The second was apparently a daughter of Atlas, one of the Pleiads, mother by Zeus of Dardanus and Iasion (Paulys Real-Encyclopädie). The first mention of Electra, daughter of Agamemnon, is in the Oresteia of Stesichorus, or possibly in his alleged predecessor Xanthus of Lydia, though it is unknown where either might have found the
proposing that, although she is implicated in this process of demystification and
demythification, Electra actually introduces a new element of muthos through her actions,
which are labelled irrational and even hysterical.

**Electra: The spark of ignition**

Electra plays a relatively minor role in the Aeschylean trilogy, appearing only in
the Choephoroi, and even there her presence is not as pivotal as in the two later Electra
tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles. Still, her part does not exist in a vacuum but must
be seen within the larger framework of the trilogy. At stake here is not only the struggle
between a mystifying mythological past and a just and rational civilization, but also the
social and political tension between the state with its patriarchal bias and the family with
its matriarchal roots (Fagles 22). The plot is driven by such conflict, but as in all tragedy
the real goal is resolution.

The Agamemnon tells the story of Agamemnon's homecoming from the Trojan
war, where a trap awaits him and his concubine Cassandra. The scarlet tapestry of honour
is exchanged for the sordid red of a bloody bath, where the war hero meets his end at the
hands of Clytemnestra and her accomplice, Aegisthus. More importantly for Electra's

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name. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* states that "one or the other made a bad pun on
[Electra's name] in defiance of quantity, interpreting the Doric form 'unwedded', from 'α'
privative + λεκτρον." David Campbell tells us that Xanthus, a lyrical poet preceding
Stesichorus, believes Electra was originally called Laodice, "but after Agamemnon had been
murdered and Aegisthus married Clytemnestra and became king, Laodice, unwed and growing old in
her virginity, was called Electra by the Argives since she had had no intercourse with any man
and had no experience of the marriage-bed" (27). In fact several hundred years hence in her
mythopoetic evolution, Electra is wed to Pylades, Orestes' companion and confidant in
Euripides' *Orestes*. 
future, Aeschylus recounts the history of the curse, a perpetual cycle of fear and hatred that spreads like an inherited birth-defect over the kingdom of Argos.

The curse begins with Tantalus, who offends the gods by feasting them on his son's flesh. As punishment for his wrongful act, he is condemned to starve in Hades, tortured by fruit and drink placed just beyond his reach. The gods finally resurrect Pelops, the subject of his cannibalistic offering, who then fathers two sons: Thyestes and Atreus. A feud arises between the brothers when Thyestes seduces Atreus's wife and attempts to usurp the throne, and the cuckold banishes his brother. Atreus then slyly lures Thyestes back with promises of reconciliation, but tricks him by serving up a stew of his own children at his homecoming feast. Aegisthus, the only surviving son, feels compelled to seek revenge for the terrible deceit played out against his father (Fagles 14-15). Electra finds herself entangled in this web of hubris and dike, forced now to revenge her own father's death, a role usually reserved for the son. Orestes' absence leads to her unusual involvement in the action of the drama that follows the Agamemnon: the Choephoroi. Whereas the Odyssey emphasizes Aegisthus's right to revenge, with little mention of

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15 Fagles contends that the Aeschylus trilogy transforms dike from the rule of "Might Makes Right" to that of true justice (21-22). Dike (δίκη) can mean "custom or usage, order or right, and punishment, vengeance and satisfaction" (Liddell and Scott). Fagles has a point in stating that Aeschylus was concerned with civilizing the pursuit of justice. Interestingly, the kind of dike we see at work in the Euripidean and Sophoclean Electra tragedies is much more in line with the concept of brute force in the punishment of the guilty and the satisfaction of revenge for Electra and Orestes.

20 Unlike Odysseus, Agamemnon was not warned of the potential dangers of coming home. Orestes, with the knowledge of his father's unhappy end, is justifiably wary of returning to Argos without a disguise. The curse of Atreus is passed down from father to son, but the effects are felt and endured by the women of the family, whose job it is to mourn their dead sons and fathers, but also to keep domestic order.
Clytemnestra save that she is the cause of the downfall of women,\footnote{Homer does not explicitly mention Orestes' slaying of Clytemnestra, but uses the plot as a foil to the Odysseus, Penelope and suitors plot. He does not want Telemachus to follow Orestes' example by killing his mother, Penelope, because she is held up as a model wife for her unfailing fidelity to Odysseus. Indeed, at the outset of the Odyssey, Clytemnestra is portrayed as the victim, unwittingly seduced by Agamemnon's vengeful cousin Aegisthus. It is not until the fifth century that Aegisthus becomes a fool and a coward. Agamemnon's ghost is the one first to tarnish Clytemnestra's reputation, painting her as the plotter against Agamemnon and against all of womankind: "I really thought I was going to come home as someone welcome to my children and household, but she with her utterly baleful ideas has shed shame on herself and feminine women," leading to his conclusive advice to all men: "So now, do not you either be gentle even to your wife, or divulge the whole of any story you know to her, but tell her part, and let part be concealed" (11.429-443).} Aeschylus places the blame on the wife, justifying the matricide before the fact.\footnote{Clytemnestra has her own reasons for revenge, none of which is emphasized over the others in the Odyssey. She has suffered the loss of her first-born daughter, Iphigenia, who was sacrificed by Agamemnon to Artemis at Aulis. Artemis is said to have withheld the wind necessary for the Greeks to speed off to war, until Agamemnon repaid his debt: Zeus had sent two eagles, representing the Atridae, who tore to pieces a pregnant hare, and Artemis, protector of wild beasts and motherhood, demanded Agamemnon to take his own daughter's life in return. Clytemnestra considered the children to be the sole property of the mother and not the father and thus justifies taking Agamemnon's life in return for Iphigenia's. The other reason for Clytemnestra's murderous anger was the introduction of a rival to her role as Queen; Cassandra's powers as a seer, regardless of the fact that she would never be believed, threatened Clytemnestra's status as the most powerful woman in Argos.}

The Oresteian Electra has been viewed as mournful, not vengeful. She would never consider wielding the murder weapon herself, preferring (like Antigone) to love and not to hate. She is obsessed with her father and not her mother, and places all her hopes in her brother's swift return. It is almost as if Aeschylus turned to Electra to speed along his drama, planting her as a reliable observer to piece together the evidence of Orestes' return: the lock of hair left on the grave, the unexplained foot-prints. She is less the heroine of...
revenge than the narrator of a mystery-thriller: "Footmarks...pairs of them, like mine/...
The heel, the curve of the arch like twins. Step by step, my step in his/..." (Choeophori 207, 209). Aeschylus has Electra play the role of the confidant, not the accomplice, placing her as a sounding-board for the dialogue that will reveal Orestes' mission. She does not even perceive herself as an individual but as part of a team with one purpose--to honour the father with tears of grief: "Your grave receives a girl in prayer/ and a man in flight, and we are one" (340-41).

And yet Electra is vicious and spiteful, at least in the sense of revenge: "Both fists at once, come down, come down--/ Zeus, crush their skulls! Kill! kill!" (389-90). These are surely not the words of an innocent girl. No, they are uttered by a woman who knows who her allies are, summoning the power of Persephone as goddess-sister in both suffering and strength: "O Persephone, give us power--lovely, gorgeous power!" (477). If Electra is missing from the action in the remainder of the play, she has indeed made her mark. Aeschylus could not have known the consequences of planting the narrative seed of this new sister. Even this relatively tame representation of Electra shows signs of her growing obsession, as she exclaims upon the recognition of her brother: "we meet--/ Oh the pain, like pangs of labour--this is madness!" (210-11).

As the new name in the Atrean family tree, Electra introduces an element of unpredictability into this dramatic ascent from darkness to light. If Aeschylus attempts to conquer the earthy origins of myth with the formal rule of the Athenian court, in Electra he chooses the wrong woman for the job. I am suggesting that Electra, though not in fact a mythological character in the strictest sense, will become a thorn in the side of the
civilizing, justice-seeking, *dike*-obsessed *Oresteia*.23 She threatens an entire system by refusing to remain the silent virgin-daughter, faithful to her father.

Those who oppose such a view would surely argue that the Athenian rule of the *Eumenides* renders Electra's influence null and void, since Orestes is exonerated of his crime. But while he may be allowed to walk away from the horrible matricide, Athena never declares Orestes' innocence. Her famous sentence justifies the acquittal by privileging civil institutions over divine law: "I honour the male, in all things but marriage..../Even if the vote is equal, Orestes wins" (*Eumenides* 752,756). Athena places the union of man and woman above the blood relations between mother and child, and Apollo argues that woman is merely a vessel for the man's seed. Half-goddess, half-woman, Athena does not hail the murderer as victor in a new world order; rather, she allows *polis* to triumph in a newfound balance between the sexes.24 The Furies, spirits of the dead conjured up to avenge the matricide of Clytemnestra, are turned into the *Eumenides* and the resolution is complete. But the balance established in the *Eumenides* is a tenuous one. What appears to be the defeat of *muthos* and the ascent of *logos* may

23Aeschylus uses Electra, Clytemnestra and the Furies to problematize gender throughout the trilogy. Clytemnestra and the Furies symbolize an ancient, primitive, female form of justice, and it is to this system of justice that Electra returns, despite the fact that she is now helping revenge Agamemnon's death.

24Johann Jacob Bachofen interprets the outcome of the *Oresteia* in a different light. For him, the acquittal of Orestes represents the shift from matriarchal to patriarchal rule. "Mutterrecht" or mother right is associated with the chthonian underworld, the material body of humanity, closely linked to primitive animal instincts and the forces of the earth. For Bachofen, Clytemnestra embodies the old system and Electra the new law of the father. I will discuss Bachofen's theories more specifically with reference to his influence on Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* in Chapter Two.
perhaps be nothing more than a measured attempt at repression.

**Euripides' *Electra*: The Seed Sprouts Weeds**

What was planted as a seed in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* becomes a weed in Euripides' *Electra*, by far the most daring of the three Greek versions of the play.²⁵ Here, Electra is granted a depth and clarity of character suitable for the title role. Euripides' language and poetry offer a breadth and range of psychological expression not present in either Aeschylus or Sophocles, which serve to draw in modern audiences and allow the dramatic family to function as a believable unit. Of the three Greek tragedies, this is the most conversational, using colloquial speech and a simplicity of voice to lend authenticity to the characters. Gone is the distancing solemnity of the Oresteian mythical world, and in its place is an almost banal domesticity, whereby the title character lives in poverty, clothed in nothing but rags and banished to a remote cottage. Electra must endure the life of a farmer's wife, though her humble husband honours her regal heritage by refusing to bed his bride. Electra describes the union as a "wedding much like death" (Grene, *Euripides' Electra* 247), and her virginity represents not a purity of spirit, but a wasted, dormant body: Electra pours the nourishment once reserved for her unborn children into her act of

²⁵There has been considerable dispute regarding the date of Euripides' and Sophocles' *Electra* plays, with some scholars insisting upon Sophocles' version as the earlier of the two (Brunel 17, Grant 119, Graves 62, Laks 37, 45, Eissen 245-246, Grene 182), while others maintain that Euripides' *Electra* predated Sophocles'. This controversy is due largely to the lack of a verifiable date for the Sophocles play, although recent scholarship now tends to lean more toward the view that this version postdated that of Euripides (Klimpe 5, Batchelder 2, Kells 1).
Given the dichotomy between the subject matter of quotidian misery and the formal elements of tragedy, when this Electra begins to assert her role and disturb the social hierarchy of the sexes, the effect is anything but subtle, as shown by her harsh message: "I will be the one to plan my mother's death" (647). She may not actually wield the weapon of her mother's fate, but her words are transformed into her brother's actions. As M.J. Cropp puts it: "The myth determined that Orestes should be the slayer of his mother. But Electra in this play 'grasped the sword' along with Orestes, virtually sharing the deed" (xxxvii).

Electra has no difficulty setting a death trap for her mother, telling the Old Man to summon Clytemnestra so that she can perform the appropriate ritual sacrifice for her

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26 Instead of equating virginity with powerlessness in antiquity, Jamake Highwater stresses the freedom and independence of the unmarried woman. According to Highwater, a virgin may not be required either to keep her chastity or to yield to undesired advances, but is granted ultimate control over her own body until the time of her marriage (40). Eva Cantarella in Pandora's Daughters presents a somewhat less positive view, stating that in Greek culture virginity was powerful because rare, and that virgins had even less independence than married women. Greek virgins never attended public events and lived mostly in seclusion, albeit without the burden of a demanding husband. On the other hand, Giulia Sissa in Greek Virginity proposes that the all-important "hymen" as sacrosanct evidence of intact virginity does not exist in Greek literature. The seduction of parthenos, the virgin, is nevertheless a social taboo, one that brings about the total destruction of a young woman's social status, which is not solely determined by the state of her physical body (87, 112). The authors of Women in the Classical World cite Persephone as an example of a powerful virgin role-model, saved by Demeter from Hades and the Underworld. In the end, both mother and daughter come to understand how marriage, though a trial, can also be used as a tool, and a compromise is reached, whereby the daughter spends two-thirds of the year with her mother and the remaining months with her husband (Fantham et al 27-30). While Electra does marry Pylades in Euripides' Orestes, it is not until she has carried out her revenge that she is forced into this union. One might argue that it would be totally implausible for a married woman (in real marriage, not a white one like Electra's) to act as Electra does. Perhaps she no longer needs her virginal status once her deed is done.
fictive newborn son. The daughter does not even flinch at the execution of this mean trick, but orders those around her to carry out the task in a cold and calculating manner, her careful deliberation never belying the true rage that motivates her. Euripides' Electra is wholeheartedly dynamic and forceful, with little room for hesitation or self-reflection, and even her tears of grief for the deceased Agamemnon seem charged with vengeful ammunition. Still, we glimpse a tender side to her treachery in her interactions with the Old Man, a mentor or father figure, who offers her kindness and wisdom. He is the one to show her the map of clues tracing Orestes' return, creating a catalyst for the life-giving anagnorisis, though Electra hesitates out of disbelief and abandoned hope. This same sage seer is the messenger of the Apollonian oracle, commanding: "Kill him. Kill Thyestes' son. And kill your mother" (613). He acts as catalyst for the siblings' vengeful act, providing a reflective conscience and a mature vision in contrast to Electra's youthful passion.

We learn that Aegisthus aids his own murderer by offering the slaughtering knife to Orestes, but Clytemnestra steps just as eagerly into her own fateful web, as Electra observes: "How beautifully she marches straight into our net" (965). The expectant grandmother arrives at her daughter's doorstep, her excitement overruling her fear that an heir to the throne would threaten her sovereignty, only to discover that she herself is to be the sacrifice.27 Electra has prophesied with the clarity of a seer: "She will come; she will

27Euripides subtly conveys the changing role of the myth, transforming it into the ancestor of bourgeois tragedy. On the whole he dispenses with the ritualistic, mystical aspect of myth, but there are a few key scenes that form flashbacks to the carnality of Homeric times: Orestes' brutal and crude slaying of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra's own harsh end. The incongruity of these elements in the otherwise dignified tragedy is
be killed. All that is clear" (660), and commands her brother with military precision: "Your task is ready. You have drawn first chance at murder" (668). Orestes, on the other hand, proves less easily persuaded than his mother; the murderer hesitates, though the victim does not. He is paralysed with trepidation, spurred on only by Electra's coaxing and prodding: "You may not play the coward now and fall to weakness" (982).

But, Euripides allows for a moment of poignant compassion before the murder as Clytemnestra softens her heart toward her daughter, perhaps in a desperate measure to save her own life. For once she puts herself in Electra's shoes and shows real understanding for her circumstances: "My child, from birth you always have adored your father./ This is part of life. Some children always love/ the male, some turn more closely to their mother than him./ I know you and forgive you. I am not so happy/ either, child, with what I have done or with myself" (1102-06). This inconspicuous passage is the one direct reference in all the Attic tragedies to what Jung and Freud would claim as the Electra complex some twenty-four centuries later. However, the daughter takes little heed of her mother's confession, declaring that it comes too late. Her actions prove nothing short of sadistic as she pursues Clytemnestra, cautioning her to take care not to soil her clothes in the dark hut. It is as if Electra ushers her unsuspecting mother into the chthonian cave of her own barren womb, only to turn the tables in a rude reversal. She cries out the commands and calmly narrates the scene: "The basket of grain is raised again, the knife is sharp/ which killed the bull, and close beside him you shall fall/ symbolic of the intense struggle to pay homage to mythical roots while at the same time moving beyond them. Electra's role mirrors this dichotomy; she is a demure genteel farmer's wife, yet fully capable of cold-blooded murder.
stricken, to keep your bridal rites in the house of death/ with him you slept beside in life" (1142-45).

When her revenge is complete, Electra condemns herself to suffer shame and guilt for her role in the matricide, following the Dioscuri's orders: "You shared in the act. You share in the fate" (1305). Euripides' chorus does not emphasize the curse of Atreus to the same extent as in Aeschylus, but here the cycle of suffering is made plain. There are no Furies in this drama, and yet the pain inflicted by the conscious mind is worse than any punishment by supernatural forces or the Athenian court. Both Orestes and Electra shudder at the horror of their actions, the sister pleading: "Weep greatly for me, my brother, I am guilty./ A girl flaming in hurt I marched against/ the mother who bore me" (1183-84). 28

Following the example of Athena in the Eumenides, the Dioscuri declare Orestes clean of the murderous blood, and Electra's story is resolved through a nuptial union with Pylades.

Euripides ignores the Oresteian precedent of a triumphant celebration of

28 Ruth E. Harder notes the importance of the chorus, spoken by women and constituting a collective female voice fully supportive of Electra's actions (331). Without this encouraging influence, it might have been much more difficult for the heroine to overstep the bounds of traditionally denoted female spaces. While Electra has a small role to play in the Oresteia, the women in the chorus provide a strong female presence and play a central role in narrating the events of past generations. The chorus provides historical continuity to the events of the drama. The furies appear in the Eumenides as the chorus and also symbolize a collective female consciousness. While Euripides greatly reduces the role of the chorus, it speaks in support of Electra and not as a neutral voice of authority. Sophocles also uses the chorus sparingly, but there is no question that it stands behind Electra and Orestes, wholeheartedly declaring them justified in their actions and applauding their newfound liberty at the end of the drama. The absence of the chorus in modern dramas forces Electra onto centre stage, left to speak for herself without their guiding voice.
transcendence out of the dark world of god-rulled mythology, and instead presents a human, psychological conflict, transforming the starkness of Aeschylean oppositions into the grey shadows of consciousness. In keeping with his more humane representation of characters, Euripides' Electra acts out of emotional rage rather than a pure sense of dike. She is unconcerned with Phoebus Apollo's oracle, and even her obsession with her father plays a lesser role. Here, it is her resentment for her pitiful circumstances as a deprived farmer's wife that motivates her, but also her jealousy, as she accuses her mother of having sold her body to Aegisthus, while envying Clytemnestra a lover's passion. While she is therefore less likely to gain the sympathy of the audience, Electra is concerned with action not image. Regardless of her reputation she manages to eclipse Orestes' once dominant role, leaving her own indelible mark. The Atrean myth may be about restoring the lost honour of the father, yet there is an equally significant shift from male to female as leader of the action. Sue Blundell confirms this trend in the classical world and describes its perceived dangers:

Women in Greek myth can be seen more often than not to be boundary-crossers: they are represented as anomalous creatures who, while they live in the ordered community and are vital to its continuance, do not belong there. They are always liable to cross over its boundaries into some disorderly state of being, and for this reason they are seen as highly dangerous. (19)

I would argue that Euripides was not only aware of the potential liminality of women, but used characters like Electra to stretch the consciousness of his viewers to incorporate new social and familial configurations. As I have already stated, Electra's emergence as the
heroine of her own tragedy lies on the cusp of these fundamental changes in attitude and social formation. The tragedy is no longer focused solely on revenge and justice but on defiance and determination. Perhaps Euripides' decision to bestow discursive power upon Electra is an indication that Agamemnon's murder and the subsequent matricide of Clytemnestra should be perceived as a family matter, that this is a social injustice rather than state legality. Electra can be seen as a facilitator of this hierarchical shift, but she can also be seen as a woman capable of playing a daughter and sister as well as a conspirator. She is at home in both the realm of murder and revenge as well as in her role as mediator of the family's needs.

Aristophanes, one of Euripides' harshest critics, suggested that the women in his rival's dramas were "unprincipled and shameless," far too clever for their own good. Certainly Euripides' Medea and Phaedra are among the most vicious heroines in all of antiquity, but though she may be ruthless, Electra is not ultimately sadistic (Cropp xxv). It almost looks as though Euripides is scoffing at Aeschylus's seeming obsession with the lofty mythical squabbles of gods and men. The younger tragedian appears remarkably enlightened and Aeschylus, in contrast, appears hopelessly mired in the cruel curses of the underworld. Euripides allows Electra to explore the full range of dramatic potential, dormant in her appearance in the Choephoroi.

**Sophoclean Matricide without Tears**

Although Sophocles' Electra forges ahead with the same unfailing ruthlessness as her Euripidean counterpart, there are fewer signs of psychological depth or self-reflexive
contemplation in this Atrean princess. It would scarcely be possible to find another
character in Greek tragedy equal to her calculating determination, although comparisons to
Sophocles' Antigone are possible. This Electra does not wield the whip on her brother as
in Euripides; nor is she the mastermind of the action per se. But she is most definitely the
driving force behind the matricide. While Sophocles among the Attic tragedians provides
the most sensitive portrayal of Electra's inconsolable grief at her father's death, her tears
are soon replaced by an obsession with punishing the perpetrators of his murder.

Sophocles provides his heroine with a sister and confidant, Chrysothemis,
mentioned in the Iliad as one of the three daughters Agamemnon offers to Achilles,
though she is nothing more than a name until the tragedian breathes life into the character.
For all intents and purposes, she performs the same function as Antigone's sister Ismene:
to act as the voice of reason and to try to save her sister from succumbing to the insanity
that threatens to consume her, issuing an uncompromising warning: "You're mad, and your
madness will destroy you" (Sophocles, Electra 398). Chrysothemis (Χρυσόθεμις), whose
name means "golden law/order, custom," is weak in comparison to Electra (Ηλέκτρα),
meaning "amber or" an "alloy of gold and silver" (Liddell), and Chrysothemis cannot put
out the flame inside Electra; neither is she prepared to join a battle she feels will end in
defeat. Her place is at the hearth, faithfully carrying out the domestic role given to
women. She reminds Electra: "You're a woman, not a man," making clear that important

29George Steiner, for example, sees Antigone as the most perfect of all Greek
tragedies in its subtle but terrifying resolution, ending with the heroine's death. Where
Antigone is defiant, Electra is violent, making her a less appealing subject. And perhaps
the heroine must die in order to qualify as a truly authentic tragedy. See Steiner 145, 159,
Sale 3-4 for comparisons of Antigone and Electra.
social distinctions are made on the basis of gender (995).

The agon between mother and daughter in Sophocles bears little resemblance to the version Euripides presents. Here it is less a question of romantic jealousy or of Electra's sorry state; rather, the two women leave out emotional issues and argue points of justice. Clytemnestra brings up the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis, which Electra counters just as swiftly with a defence of her father by laying blame on Artemis for withholding the wind needed to sail to Troy. There is no maternal tenderness in this most matter-of-fact of confrontations, and their cold hostility rules out any possibility of reconciliation. And yet, despite their hateful rhetoric that places them at opposite poles, they are nevertheless linked by the tasks they perform. As Mary Whitlock Blundell observes: "just as Clytemnestra took on the masculine task of killing her husband, so too Electra intends to defy her female phusis and kill another man, Aegisthus" (172). Though the two women fight viciously, they are nevertheless united through parallel intentions.

But by far the most intense and intimate dialogue in the tragedy takes place between Electra and her brother, Orestes, whom she has not yet recognized. J.H. Kells deems the recognition scene "one of the most moving in literature," capable of arousing the strongest emotions in both actors and audience (1). The suspense of the scene is heightened by the severity of Electra's suffering as well as the extreme length of the scene, and the tragic reversal of recognition is all the more shocking because the stakes are so high. The formality of the Aristotelian anagnorisis and peripeteia is often mentioned as one of the features that contributes to the tragic transcendence of Sophocles' Electra, and yet it could hardly be said to simplify the siblings' relationship. On the contrary, the
scene is a complex intertwining of heightened emotions and intense desire. This is one of the few moments where we see the other side of Electra, where her impetuous idealism gives way to a softer, moving poignancy. We are allowed to glimpse some of her points of weakness, as only now do we fully understand the psychological exhaustion caused by Orestes' feigned death.

Orestes' proclamation of his own death functions as a symbol of Electra's own misery, and in revealing his true identity he metaphorically resurrects his sister from her living grave. Her joy and relief at Orestes' return are expressed in passionate terms: "Let me hold you... kiss you... forever..." (1225). Describing her brother's double return, once dead and once living, Electra explains the co-dependency of their existence: "When you were dead, I was alone, I would have made my choice/ A glorious victory or glorious death" (1319-21). The key to the mutual understanding between Electra and Orestes is the urn the brother presents as his own body. The ashes dissolve into dust at the instant of recognition and the now superfluous receptacle is figuratively filled with the magic potion of their familial love sealed by a fate like that of Tristan and Isolde.30

Electra and Orestes are not merely the subjects of an innocent platonic union, but one linked by common emotions of love and of hate, which bears comparison with great incestuous pairs such as Antigone and Polyneices. Perhaps their bond is all the more intense because their incestuous desire is merely implied in the subtle exchange of words.

30 Ann G. Batchelder sees the recognition scene as an illustration of the misuse of speech. The disguised Orestes equates himself with the act of speech (1223), thereby drawing attention to the incommensurable relations of speech and truth (Batchelder 117). The audience hardly needs to be given clues to Sophocles' blatant use of verbal irony, most evident in the stychomythia between Electra and Clytemnestra.
As a result of this almost primordial bond of life and death, Electra and Orestes seem to abandon their individuality, united by a driving desire for revenge. Nothing clouds this goal and the two collectively move towards murder. Electra's satisfaction at the death of her mother is so powerful that it is as though she has wielded the murderous sword herself, but the victory is shared equally by the siblings. The last lines of the play leave little doubt as to the chorus's attitude vis à vis the conclusion:

Children of Atreus, from great suffering
You have won freedom at last
By what has been done here, today. (1508-10)

They are credited with having liberated themselves and their kin from the grip of the evil curse that has ruled the royal family for generations. The tragedy ends abruptly, as if Sophocles broke off midstream without a real conclusion. On the other hand, the concise rhetoric renders the shocking message of the last lines all the more unmistakable. Without doubt "freedom" is the reward, though just what kind of freedom is hard to say. Are Electra and Orestes free to begin new lives, or are they once again free to take their rightful places at the head of the House of Atreus? Unlike Aeschylus and Euripides' dramas, the play presents no sequel to the action and the audience is left to decipher the meaning for themselves. Sophocles does not leave it to the Furies, Apollo, Athena or any other higher power to judge the perpetrators for their crime, but forces his audience into

31 Kells holds the view that Electra acts from the standpoint of "noblesse oblige," in the sense that killing Clytemnestra is the only means of saving the family name, rather than out of true conviction (10). It is hard to believe that one could commit matricide out of a sense of obligation, and yet saving face was of primary importance in shame-driven Greek culture.
the role of jury. Perhaps his reticence to specify their fate is not a result of moral apathy but subversively draws attention to the monstrousness of the deed.\(^\text{32}\)

Where Euripides is applauded for his innovative dramatic technique and his daring illustrations of the psychological complexity of the mind, Sophocles is heralded for his insight into the perfection and sheer strength of the human spirit. The interpretation of the Sophoclean Electra depends largely upon its place in the sequence of plays. If we accept that Sophocles' version emerged somewhere between 416 and 411 B.C., subsequent to Euripides' 418 B.C. Electra, then we can view it in part as a polemic against the daring innovations of his contemporary. Sophocles' Electra has been read as an attempt to recapture some of the richness of true tragedy, with its lofty subject matter and the same untempered terror presented in Aeschylus's Oresteia (Steiner 236). There is a transcendent quality to the tragedy that underscores humanity as a powerful agent of change; it differs from Aeschylus's vision in the important sense that here the gods are faint figures of a forgotten mythical past. Neither Electra nor Orestes feels any remorse whatsoever even when surrounded by the carnage of their collective actions, but instead they embrace a newly-restored harmonious state. At last, justice has been enacted. It is generally believed that Sophocles was unconcerned with the morality of matricide: "We are driven, apparently, to conclude that Sophocles chose to treat his theme objectively, HomERICALLY, archaically, deliberately shelving the moral issue, content with giving his audience a

\(^{32}\)Mary Blundell presents an alternative reading, suggesting that the value of Sophocles' open-ended conclusion is that the characters "believe in their own justice, with their arguments, motives and passions" (179), ultimately taking justice into their own hands rather than handing over responsibility to the gods.
stirring play, lit up by the strength and tenderness of his heroine's character" (Denniston xxv).33

We might compare Sophocles' attitude toward ethics to that of the opening scene of the *Odyssey*, in which Zeus warns Aegisthus against seducing Clytemnestra and murdering Agamemnon, not on moral grounds but because of the consequences he will have to bear. My point here is that Sophocles is not merely showing his true colours of cruel insensitivity, but rather he is harkening back in dramatic form to an earlier cultural paradigm, one that accepts that a certain degree of violence is inherent in the mythological world. In fact, Sophocles too expands upon the dramatic potential of Electra and uses the character to bring about a re-mythification, a return to the very *muthos* that Aeschylus sought to transcend. Sophocles' return to *muthos* differs from the two earlier *Electra* tragedies in the sense that the harsh brutality of retribution does not come in the form of fate imposed by the gods, but surfaces from the darker myth-infested side of the human spirit itself. After all, it is Electra who condemns Clytemnestra to her suffering, responding to her mother's plea for Orestes' pity with: "Yes! As you pitied him! / As you

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33Kells summarizes three general theories with regard to the Sophoclean apparent lack of moral concern: 1. Sophocles was merely interested in showing his skill as a great master of drama and the details of morality would have clouded the issue unnecessarily; 2. The tragedy was practically a parody of Euripides' representation of a fearful, hesitant and conscience-ridden Orestes. His version would show human strength over the influence of either the gods or the tricks of the mind itself; 3. Sophocles uses irony to coerce the audience into a more intense reaction of horror and outrage. By figuring a complacent and nonchalant attitude toward matricide, Sophocles hopes to challenge his audience to see the true terror of the actions of men (2-4). Marianne McDonald presents us with yet another possibility: "[Electra] represents both the civilized incentives leading to justice and of the darker drives of human nature which actually delights in murder" (108). McDonald's hypothesis reads Electra as a player among poles, encompassing difference within her character.
pitted his father!" (1411-12).

As we have seen variously illustrated in both Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles' Electra injects a wild-card into the tragic appropriation of myth, performing against the grain of the shift from the muthos of speech to the logos of tragedy. I have attempted to show that, though it is simultaneous with the movement away from the dark supernatural elements of the mythical world, the introduction of Electra into the economy of the House of Atreus nonetheless disturbs the tragic transcendence. Be it by overstepping the prescribed bounds of her gender, through her ambiguous relationship with Orestes, or through her seemingly hysterical behaviour, Electra resists the efforts of the Attic tragedians to constrain her within logos, preferring to counter with the larger muthos that looms from within humanity itself. We are left to wonder if the tragic can ever transcend the mythical, or if the tragic is really contained within mythology itself so that it is up to characters such as Electra to illustrate how the spheres intersect.

The Mythological Supplement to the Tragic

What the three Attic versions of the Electra myth have in common is their commitment to a mythopoesis of difference. There is nothing static or dormant about myth in these tragedies any more than in twentieth-century adaptations of these texts. As Slochower puts it: "the myth unfolds the living chain which connects the recurrent recognition scenes of the human drama" (14). And as we have learned from Aristotle, recognition is always accompanied by the shock of reversal. Just as this scene must take place within the tragic paradigm, so too there is an on-going recognition scene among the
existing and future Electras. Such a condition is obviously one of intertextuality, described by Gérard Genette as a "transcendence textuelle du texte... tout ce qui le met en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d'autres textes" ("a textual transcendence of the text...
everything that puts it into relationship, apparent or hidden, with other texts") (qtd. in Thibeault-Schaefer 53). To Genette's five-part system of palimpsestic textuality (including intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality) Jacqueline Thibeault-Schaefer adds the corollary of "transtextuality," a relationships to a larger cultural text, a concept which illuminates the inherently incestuous nature of myths not as closed units but as cultural manifestations (54). For Thibeault-Schaefer, myth is always a performative inter-discursivity in the making, functioning both narcissistically and exoterically.

Manfred Fuhrmann invites us to view myth as a plasticity, malleable and intersecting, but with repetition at its root. In particular, he draws our attention to the constant polemic of poetics among the three Attic tragedians' treatment of the Electra myth (126). He reminds us of Aristotle's admission in the Poetics that "the soul of tragedy is plot" (51) and his encouragement to invent, warning that one cannot undo traditional stories (e.g. Clytemnestra is to die at the hand of Orestes and not by other means), but that plots "should not resemble histories" (71). My point is that a mythologeme may act as a guide, but the real drama derives from the way the plot unfolds. The purpose of this study, in keeping with Aristotle's advice, is not to establish with any certainty what the Electra myth's kernel or mythologeme consists of in the sense of Stoffgeschichte, but rather to explore the effects of mythopoesis in the Electra myth.
In other words, we might view myth, and particularly the case of Electra, as a perpetually deferred signifier, never to be fully determined. In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Jacques Derrida reminds us that myth need not be a totality with a centre and a fixed origin. He refers to Claude Lévi-Strauss's term bricolage, a system of trial and error which functions both as a critique of language and the critical language itself. Derrida comments that it is through the mythopoetic character of bricolage that Lévi-Strauss's discourse on myth decentres itself, drops all reference to origin, centre or absolute. Any unity within the myth is always tangential, a moment of myth, virtual and "non-existent in the first place" (233). Totalization within the myth is both useless and impossible due to the rhythmic continuity of movement both away from and toward itself in an oscillation of substitution and difference. Derrida concludes: "One could say...that this movement...is a movement of supplementarity. One cannot determine the centre, the sign which supplements it, which takes its place in its absence--because the sign adds itself, occurs in addition, over and above, comes as a supplement" (236-37; his emphasis). This theory suggests that the study of mythopoesis is more than a mere account of sources and influences. Perhaps it is fair to say that mythopoesis is both a perpetual textual deferral as well as a complex history of influence and intertextuality, both conscious and unconscious.

I would like to consider Electra, both the myth and the character, as a roadblock to the distinction between muthos and logos, origin and invention, truth and lies, challenging the very form of tragedy and unsettling the fictional world of the myth itself. George Steiner emphasizes that the magic of Greek myths is a certain existential idiom, one that
keeps alive our "fragile moorings to Being" (133). He speaks of this connection to myth as a human grammar, a language at its base level, though one capable of expressing immense concepts with great precision. I will be exploring these aspects of myth in the syntax of twentieth-century Electras. Rather than freeing herself from the myth—as Athena says of mythic speech that it is something "to free man from the bondage of irrational fears" (qtd. in Slochower 33) Electra keeps adding on to the myth, further supplementing its grammar in a myth without end.
Allegorical Death
Chapter Two
The Heroine's Death in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Elektra*

The Allegorical Exit

While I have already suggested that Electra's birth as a character in Attic tragedy has had a significant influence on the development of the legend as *muthos*, her magnificent exit from the stage of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1903 *Elektra*, *Tragödie in einem Aufzug frei nach Sophocles* is an equally powerful act of mythopoesis. Unlike the character from Greek tragedy, this Elektra ends life abruptly at the conclusion of this drama with an ecstatic dance of death. Hofmannsthal is breaking new ground with this plot innovation, ushering in a new century of Electras with the example of this triumphant, though morbid, exit.

Despite the finality of Elektra's last scene in the Hofmannsthal play, it does not signal the death of the character for twentieth-century literature. On the contrary, the plethora of Electras who emerge in the wake of the silence left by the corpse of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* has been affected greatly by the force of her inspirational end. Elektra's death in the Hofmannsthal play has become so important in the context of the myth that some critics seem to have forgotten that this was not part of the Attic tradition.¹ It is not only literary critics who have been struck by the Electra death-motif. Matthias Braun's play *Elektras Tod* (1970) makes the title character's end the central element of his drama. Braun's version differs significantly from that of

¹For example, George Steiner speaks of Electra's death in the myth while referring to the Sophoclean *Electra* (145).
Hofmannsthal, since the action begins after the murders of Klytämnestra and Ägisth, resembling the course of events in Euripides' Orestes. In this play, Elektra does not die of natural causes; nor does her life end in an ecstatic rapture. Rather, she is robbed of her life as part of the harsh new reality Braun creates for his characters. The stage directions indicate:

Elektra bleibt lange stehen. Dann geht sie langsam vor. Dicht vor ihr sieht man einen erhobenen Arm mit einem Messer aus dem Dunkel gegen sie hervorschneiden. Elektra geht mühsam noch einige Schritte und fällt tot zu Boden. (Elektra remains standing for a long time. Then she walks slowly forward. Directly in front of her we see an out-stretched arm with a knife coming swiftly toward her out of the dark, Elektra takes a few more arduous steps and falls dead to the ground.) (66)

While Braun's dramatic use and interpretation of Elektra's death differ markedly from Hofmannsthal's, they are definitely influenced by the earlier play, and the impact and meaning of the death would not be the same without the fin-de-siècle Elektra's example. Indeed, so potent is the addition of Hofmannsthal's epilogue to the legend that it not only shifts the structure of the myth, but ultimately permanently alters the shape of its tragic form. Elektra's death is a form of allegory, as the term is used by Walter Benjamin of German tragic drama in Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels.

Braun is by no means the only literary example in whose work we find the death of Electra as a naturalized element of the myth. In the last chapter I will be dealing with poems by Sylvia Plath which assume death as the eventual and unavoidable end for Electra.
Consequently it irrevocably alters the structure of the myth, because it no longer fits the Aristotelian transcendent tragic form. Elektra's death, as a supplemental element or plot innovation, causes an imbalance that bars Hofmannsthal's play from conforming to the strictly defined tragic requirements, and therefore disturbs the balancing effect of the *peripeteia* that determines true tragedy. Hofmannsthal was influenced by a number of contemporary writers popular in fin-de-siècle Viennese literary life, many of whom were fascinated by the new reception of myth. With research on artifacts from new archeological digs making its way into Europe, the classical world began to take on a different light, no longer resembling the enlightened perfection of Goethe and Winckelmann. Instead, myth became the subject of historical, sociological and psychological debate, with a renewed interest in the rough, unpolished and edgy nature of Aeschylean tragedy. Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* reflects these new concerns, yet the author is also intrigued by the work of Calderón and the temperament of Spanish baroque drama, the same genre that is the basis for Benjamin's observations on German *Trauerspiel*. Hofmannsthal's inclusion of his heroine's death is grounded in the obsessions of its socio-historic context, but also draws upon the generic qualities of *Trauerspiel*. Similarly, Benjamin uses baroque tragic drama as an analogy to illustrate fundamental shifts in the culture of modernity. Instead of allowing myth to become a

\[3\] Benjamin reaches back into the cultural vestiges of Baroque tragic drama to understand the commodity culture of nineteenth-century Paris in *Das Passagenwerk* and compares the destructive impulses of *Trauerspiel* to Baudelaire's morbid scenes. So too, Hofmannsthal adopts the allegorical mode of the mourning play in the Golden Age of Spain to address the simultaneous decay and renewal that epitomized Viennese modernity.
phantasmagoric sleep-dream that governs bourgeois consciousness, Hofmannsthal anticipates the meaning of Benjamin's words "Es ist in der Allegorie das Antidoten gegen den Mythos zu zeigen" ("It is in allegory to present the antidote to myth") (Gesammelte Schriften [GS] I: 677), by creating his Elektra according to the allegorical mode, rescuing both his heroine and myth from the fate of permanent sleep.4

Benjamin's model of allegory is the essence of specificity, echoing Goethe's distinction between symbol and allegory (with the former tending towards the general and the latter moving toward the particular). Allegory here is far more than a rhetorical trope, a figure which stands beside other kinds of tropes in the same text. As Benjamin testifies: "Allegorie...ist nicht spielerische Bildertechnik, sondern Ausdruck" ("Allegory...is not a playful illustrative technique, but expression") (Ursprung 339).

What is meant here is an aesthetic vision, one that is encompassed in the distinction of symbol and allegory, which Benjamin outlines as follows:

Während im Symbol mit der Verklärung des Unterganges das transfigurierte

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4It might be considered suspect to include Benjamin in a study of myth, since he considered myth a dreamlike trance of nostalgia for either origin or utopia that he labelled "phantasmagoria." In place of mythic vision, Benjamin called for a dialectic of past and present moments. He advocated taking a hold of the present (Jetztzeit) in order to learn from the past (McCole 177). For Benjamin, myth is present in everyday reality in the form of the commodity, things that are "in unmittelbarer Präsenz sinnlich 'verklärt' werden" ("sensually 'transfigured' in their immediate presence") (GS V: 61), but the antidote can be found in a kind of willed or self-inflicted mythic consciousness such as the Surrealists attempted. In many ways, Hofmannsthal's work rests on the cusp between the threat of the dream that keeps one from participating in life and the hope that is encompassed in the self-willed dream that was the laboratory of the Surrealists.
Antlitz der Natur im Lichte der Erlösung flüchtig sich offenbart, liegt in der Allegorie die facies hippocratica der Geschichte als erstarrter Urlandshaft dem Betrachter vor Augen. Die Geschichte in allem was sie Unzeitiges, Leidvolles, Verfehltes von Beginn an hat, prägt sich in einem Antlitz—hein in einem Totenkopfe aus. (Whereas in the symbol with the transfiguration of destruction, the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, we find in allegory the facies hippocratica of history as a frozen, primordial landscape in front of the observer's eyes. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, leaves its mark on a face—no, in a death's head.) (343)

Allegory is the visible representation of the abstract concept (rather than the ideal principle as in the symbol), and exists in the unresolvable tension between transience and eternity, between melancholy and hope, between destruction and redemption.

Elektra's death is an embodiment of these same tensions, where the corpse of the famed Atrean princess (like the slain bodies that litter the stage of baroque drama) is the visual manifestation of transience, melancholy and destruction, but simultaneously also embodies the abstract concept of eternity, hope and redemption.5

5Benjamin's thought revolves around the dichotomy between destruction and hope at opposite ends of the same spectrum. He introduces the idea of annihilation in Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels but later develops the concept further in "Der destruktive Charakter," where he writes: "Der destruktive Charakter ist jung und heiter. Denn Zerstören verjüngt, weil es die Spuren unseres eigenen Alters aus dem Weg räumt" ("The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destruction makes one young because it clears away our own traces of old age") (GS IV: 396). Complete eradication is never possible in Benjamin's world and, like Elektra's death in Hofmannsthal's play, it is never finished. There are always the fragmented remains of
Hofmannsthal's Elektra and its Literary Milieu

Elektra's fateful end marked the commencement of a new era in the myth, one intimately linked to the context of its inception. The young Hugo von Hofmannsthal was highly influenced by his milieu of fin-de-siècle Vienna, where—according to many accounts—decadence and death, eros and thanatos were unequivocal partners, scheming plots of perverse corruption. Vienna, at the centre of the Austro-Hungarian empire, was living in the frenzy of its penultimate moment of power, alternately indulging itself in forbidden fruits of all sorts, and repressing those desires beneath a veneer of refinement. And Sigmund Freud was the rising star of this neurotic, death-obsessed society, preparing himself for the diagnosis of the century.

It is out of such a diseased ambiance that Hofmannsthal's Elektra was born, or, to put it another way, it is out of such an atmosphere that his Elektra finds her exit. The direct intertext for this Elektra is the Sophocles play of the same name, though it is by no means a simple translation of the original Greek text. In fact, one should not overestimate the rigour of Hofmannsthal's interest or knowledge of classical languages and literatures. To be sure, he learned Greek during his Gymnasium studies and there is evidence that he read Pindar, Herodotus and Sophocles, and continued to read classics in the original after his schooling. However, Hofmannsthal did glean a fair

this redemptive violence, embodied in the slain corpses at the end of the Atrean tragedy.

By his own admission, Hofmannsthal's classical education was somewhat irregular (although his knowledge of European literature in general is legendary). As he confesses: "meine Bildung ist ein bißchen dilettantenhaft unausgeglichen" ("my education is rather dilettantish and uneven") (in Mueller 72). Martin Mueller suggests
degree of his understanding of Attic tragedy from popular literature in Erwin Rohde, J.J. Bachofen, Nietzsche and even Freud, as well as rely on standard translations, which he drew upon for his own plays.  

Far from the lofty and elevated rhetorical style used by Sophocles to create a highly formal tragedy, Hofmannsthal's language and style convey an atmosphere of dread and mystery. He cues his audience that the suffering in his drama is not of the cathartic, transcendent variety (as was the Sophoclean Electra), but a strange and awful experience, bordering on the sub-human. The author writes in his directions that the stage is to be lit in lines of black with spots of deep blood-red and that a deformed fig tree is to dominate the stage, crooked, bent and left on the roof of the palace like a crouching animal ("Szenische Vorschriften" 69). Already the spectator has a clear sense of the sick and crippled world where the action is to take place. Not only does the stage reflect the diseased milieu in which Elektra finds herself, but it conveys the terror of finding oneself lost forever in an endless labyrinth of horror without exit; we

that Hofmannsthal read the Greek classics in the original, but that he knew them better through contemporary commentaries (72).  

7 According to Klaus E. Bohnenkamp, Hofmannsthal used Georg Thudichum's 1838 translation of Sophocles' Electra, from which he frequently took words and phrases for his new version (198).  

8 Karen Forsyth comments that too many critics have emphasized the originality of Hofmannsthal's text with reference to his Viennese sources: Rohde, Bachofen, Bahr and Freud (20). While Forsyth is correct in pointing out that critics often concentrate more on the differences than on the similarities between the Sophocles and Hofmannsthal texts, I think she overlooks the fact that, while Hofmannsthal may have followed the Greek tragedy faithfully in some respects, the overall effect is entirely divergent. The matters of the plot alone are not the most significant aspect of the dramatic rendering of the myth.
are told that the set is to be narrow, closed-in and inescapable (69), a description conjuring up claustrophobic anxieties even through the printed page. All this is in deliberate, conscious contrast to Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, which Hofmannsthal held to be a benign and pristine drama, purged of all remnants of sexuality or human instinct. Goethe's *Iphigenie* offers space and light, and most of all a humanist optimism that strikes Hofmannsthal as naive. He comments to this effect in his personal writings:

> Als Stil schwebte mir vor, etwas Gegensätzliches zur "Iphigenie" zu machen, etwas worauf das Wort nicht passe: 'dieses gräsisierende Produkt erschien mir beim erneuten Lesen vertefelt human.' (As far as style goes, I had in mind to create something in contrast to "Iphigenie," something which does not merit these words: 'after re-reading it this hellenized product seemed to me devilishly humane'). (*Aufzeichnungen* 131)

It was inevitable that Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* would portray a different mood from the one he despised in Goethe's *Iphigenie*, if only because the two source texts were by different Attic tragedians. Goethe's play was taken from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Taurus*, whereas Hofmannsthal was following Sophocles' *Electra*. It is hardly surprising that Goethe chose a Euripidean tragedy for his humanist play, since it is this Greek author who is most noted for creating multi-faceted and psychologically complex characters.

Despite Hofmannsthal's pointed concerns about creating an *Elektra* who manifests a wholly different image of Greekness, he does remain faithful to the Sophocles tragedy to a certain degree. The two plays share the dramatic tension which
never lets up throughout the action, though Sophocles builds and draws out the energy of suspense throughout five acts, whereas Hofmannsthal squeezes his into a compact one act drama. Sophocles' chorus, crucial for his *Electra*, stands thoroughly on the side of Electra and Orestes, one might almost say condoning the siblings' actions; it is abandoned altogether in the Hofmannsthal version. The closest we come to a chorus in the later play is the opening scene where the maids speak about Elektra, preparing the spectator for her first dramatic monologue. There are other considerable omissions as well, including the famous speech of the messenger, who tells in epic fashion of Orestes' death in a chariot race at the Olympian games. This piece was noted for its reputation as a crowd-pleaser, contributing toward the immense popularity of this play with the Athenians. Hofmannsthal, however, is unconcerned with this kind of entertainment, preferring to reduce the action to its very essence, his economy of style adding to the intensity of its foreboding mood. In fact, in his collaboration with Hofmannsthal as librettist for the operatic version of *Elektra*, Richard Strauss remarks in their correspondence that the text would lose nothing in dramatic power, but rather gain in strength and conviction if Orest and Ägisth were entirely absent, leaving the action to the dynamic triad of women: Elektra, Klytämnestra and Chrysothemis (Forsyth 26). This extreme suggestion aside, the fact remains that Hofmannsthal hands

9 A brief but illustrative example of this economy can be seen in Hofmannsthal's choice of words for Elektra's famous line, boiling down a whole Sophoclean sentence into three powerful words: "Triff noch einmal!" ("Strike again!"), whereas the Sophoclean version in the translation Hofmannsthal used reads: "Schlage zu./Wenn du die Kraft hast, zum zweiten Mal!" ("Strike again./If you have the strength for a second time") (qtd. in Schadewaldt 581).
over the weight of the dramatic tension to his heroine. Elektra steals the show.

In some respects, it is not surprising that Hofmannsthal chose the Sophoclean version of the myth to stage his anti-Goethean polemic and to showcase his father-obsessed, half-crazed Elektra and her equally dysfunctional family. After all, as I have pointed out in chapter one, this Greek tragedy is known as offering "matricide without tears," and one could argue that Hofmannsthal is likewise unconcerned about that particular moral aspect of the drama. Instead, the emphasis is placed upon Elektra's violent anger and her determination to enact revenge. Like the Sophocles play, this version hinges on the recognition scene between Elektra and Orest, though the scene is considerably condensed and lacks the certain finality conveyed by the Greek tragedy. The dialogue achieves the important goal of restoring Elektra's resolution to act after Chrysothemis's blatant rejection of the murder plan, so that she can motivate her brother to perform the dreadful act. Characteristic of Hofmannsthal's oeuvre is his obsession with action as opposed to reflection. Elektra's failure to present her brother with her chosen murder weapon—the one that had killed Agamemnon—demonstrates this tension between action and contemplation: "Ich habe ihm das Beil nicht geben können!" ("I could not give him the axe!") (68). This turns out to be a mere hesitation on Elektra's part, and in the final analysis it is her determination to carry out the murders that drives the plot. While action is an important theme in the Sophoclean source text, Hofmannsthal makes more of this point, creating out of it an existential crisis, one that he manipulates to foreground the heroine's demise. Her earlier inaction is counterbalanced by Elektra's outrageous command to her murdering brother: "Triff
noch einmal!" ("Strike again!") (68), a display of her capacity for brutality, and
perhaps the most famous line in the play. Elektra's self-admonishment for having failed
to provide the ideal weapon is followed directly by this harsh demand that
Klytämnestra be spared no punishment, as if to show she has the strength of character
to condone boldly the cold-blooded violence of matricide.\(^\text{10}\) Perhaps this vicarious
encounter with death prepares Elektra for her own imminent end, or even sows the
seed of her own fate. With respect to the Sophocles version, Wolfgang Schadewaldt
holds Elektra's daring command that the axe be drawn one more time as virtually her
own death cry (581), suggesting that Electra's death is in fact implicit in the Greek
play. Martin Mueller contends that Hofmannsthal merely stages what is the logical end
of the heroine in the first place: "One may well argue that Elektra's death is the most
'Sophoclean' feature of Hofmannsthal's version" (86). And yet such an interpretation
ignores one significant difference: the tragic transcendence of Sophocles' drama indeed
depends on the fact that both Electra and Orestes are living and free at the end of the
action, as illustrated by the chorus:

Children of Atreus, from great suffering

\(^{10}\)The line in Sophocles' play, "Strike again, if you have the strength for a second
time" (1415), which inspired Hofmannsthal to put the words "Triff noch eimal!" in his
Elektra's mouth, is one of the most controversial in all of Greek tragedy, eliciting
criticism from the great writers of French classical tragedy, Corneille, who considered
her words an inhumane influence on her brother and a contradiction to her otherwise
virtuous demeanor, and Racine, who maintained that the words are wholly unsuitable
for a girl, though understandable given the aggravation and hatred she has felt for her
mother (Mueller 82). While Hofmannsthal's interpretation of Elektra may have been
irreconcilable in the context of the French reception of Sophocles, she is far from the
"virtuous girl" perceived by Corneille and the line is contextualized within the larger
framework of the action.
You have won freedom at last

By what has been done here, today. (1508-10)

It is for this reason that Elektra's death at the close of Hofmannsthal's version is the most un-Sophoclean element we can find. In Sophocles' Electra, the darkness of the curse of Atreus has at last been lifted and the siblings are elevated to a higher level of being, the violence of their collective act forgotten in the beauty of the moment. It would have been unthinkable for Sophocles to supplement this triumphant conclusion with the death of the heroine. The perfection of the tragic catharsis is wholly a function of the symbolic union of brother and sister in freedom and in life. The Sophoclean Electra is no Antigone, who must die in order to complete her defiance of Creon's rule and to meet her brother Polyneices on an equal plain. Hofmannsthal's Elektra is a striking departure from this Aristotelian tragic form, challenging the very genre with a radical reform. In fact, the heroine's final exit is almost a poetic act, relieving her of the horrific almost possessed state in which she finds herself throughout most of the drama. Hofmannsthal's detailed stage directions tell the story of Elektra's silent dance: "Sie wirft die Kniee, sie reckt die Arme aus, es ist ein namenloser Tanz, in welchem sie nach vorwarts schreitet... Sie tut noch einige Schritte des angespanntesten Triumphes und stürzt zusammen." ("She flings her knees up high, she stretches out her arms, it is a nameless dance in which she strides forward... She takes a few more steps of the most suspenseful triumph and collapses") (74-75). In an address much later in his life, the author describes Elektra's dance of death as akin to that of the drone after depositing his seed inside the queen bee, expiring from
exhaustion after his potent adventure:

Auch das Ende stand sogleich da: daß sie nicht mehr weiterleben kann, daß,

wenn der Streich gefallen ist, ihr Leben und ihr Eingeweide ihr entstürzen

muß, wie der Drohne, wenn sie die Königin befruchtet hat, mit dem

befruchtenden Stachel zugleich Eingeweide und Leben entstürzen. (Even the

end was immediately clear: that she can no longer go on living, that when

the deed is done her life and innards must gush from her, just as life and

innards along with the fertilizing sting must gush from the drone when the

queen has been fertilized.) (Aufzeichnungen 131)

The question remains, however, with respect to this analogy: if Elektra is the drone,

who is the queen bee? It is telling that Hofmannsthal uses the metaphor of a

copulating male insect to capture the essence of his leading female character. This has

important ramifications with respect to the representation of gender in the drama.

Hofmannsthal himself refers at least twice to Elektra's inability to hand over the

murder weapon to her brother as a sign of her feminine weakness: "Die Tat ist für die

Frau das Widernatürliche" ("The deed goes contrary to a woman's nature") ("Reden"

354) and shortly after mentions that she "vergiß das Beil, denn sie ist doch Frau"

("forgets the axe, since she is after all a woman") (355). It should be pointed out that a

span of more than a decade separates these two descriptions of Elektra, and that

statements made by the author about a fictional character should not be wholly trusted

as reliable interpretive information at any time. Nevertheless the contradiction is

striking; the first example paints the image of the drone, the equivalent of a slave in
the insect realm, using its last resources to fertilize the queen bee toward a new birth. The other image presents a stereotypically passive and incapable female. Has the wisdom of his years skewed Hofmannsthal's original perception of Elektra as a woman capable of engendering new life, making her over into a harmless creature with a weak mind and a mournful glance? Or has the character always embodied this contradiction, just as Vienna itself was struggling with new roles for women (as one element among the many challenges of modernity) while grieving a lost tradition that kept them "in their place"? Does this seeming paradox, the ambivalence her death invokes, lead to her eventual ruin? The answer to this last question is both "yes" and "no"; Elektra ends up in ruins, but her potency is far from being destroyed. In fact, it is the very mystery of her final exit that increases her power and grants her a position in history even in her absence.\footnote{Die Ruine" ("Ruins") is the term Benjamin uses in Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels and later in "Der destruktive Charakter" (GS IV: 396) for the important traces of destruction. Annihilation is a positive force that permeates all aspects of life, not unlike Freud's vision of the death-drive as a normal human instinct, and the remnants are not to be discarded as refuse. The ruin is a form of memento mori like the macabre skulls and skeletons prevalent in the Baroque era. Elektra's body is akin to this kind of ruin, a reminder of the new beginnings, the rejuvenation brought about by her death.}

Given the fact that there is no obvious precedent for Hofmannsthal's addendum to the legend, there has been relatively little critical attention given to Elektra's death as plot innovation, though interpretations of the final scene abound. There are the obvious sources of influence in this respect, namely Friedrich Nietzsche's Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik, Johann Jacob Bachofen's Mutterrecht, Erwin
Rohde's *Psyche* and Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* to mention only the most pertinent works (and each of these will be taken up as it relates to the textual analysis of *Elektra*). But apart from the philosophical and psychological context of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* there are two other aspects that are of considerable significance outside the immediate literary scene: the first involves the historical and cultural circumstances that precipitate Vienna's decadent aesthetics, and the second is the mythological context in which Elektra's death comes as the latest in a long line of female sacrifices.

**Viennese Decadence: Setting the Scene for Death**

Vienna did not embrace modernism with the vehemence and enthusiasm of rival European capitals, such as London, Paris or Berlin. The city did not share the optimism of Berlin about the future of its country's position in European politics, but rather found itself in the midst of a crumbling empire whose demise was inevitable. Rather than recognizing and attempting to bring about social change as did the Naturalists with their pseudo-scientific slice-of-life literary experiments, Vienna turned to the psyche, focusing on inner suffering and ignoring political reality; this *fin-de-siècle* society turned to art to aestheticize its own death-scene, creating a culture within a hothouse, according to Carl Schorske (xxvii). He extends this thesis to his analysis of Hofmannsthal, putting forth the hypothesis that the young aesthete held the beauty of art as the key to instinct and irrationality. These qualities, though presenting obvious dangers, are seen as the only true means of engagement with life in the form of action,
and it is through deeds that the world may be changed for the better (19). It is in this form of aestheticism that action comes to take on meaning for Hofmannsthal in his drama Elektra.

While Hofmannsthal never made any direct reference to the particularities of Viennese politics, he was intensely aware of the crisis at hand. Within a framework of Old World decay and sociopolitical transition, Viennese "moderns" looked to tradition to ease the pain of change. Fearing the consequences of technical rationality, a general feeling of malaise prevailed over the apocalyptic fin-de-siècle atmosphere, hence the renewed interest in myth with its associations of universality functioning as a stabilizing factor amid cultural chaos. Instead of embracing the social as an arena for change as did the Naturalists, Hofmannsthal and his contemporaries viewed modernity in aesthetic, psychological, but mostly in individualistic terms (Le Rider 2). If we take this hypothesis, which revolves around a crisis of individualism to a symbolic dimension of ontological doubt, then it is not surprising that "thanatornia" reigns triumphant in the Viennese literary scene in general and specifically in the works of Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Viennese authors and artists had no control over the real or

12Jacques Le Rider conceives of Viennese cultural life circa 1900 in terms of a crisis of this newfound individualism; the genius artist with fragile nerves and a marked obsession with his own personal aesthetic epitomized everything about this new-found subjectivity (3).

13It should be noted that the general atmosphere of and obsession with death and decay did not emerge from nowhere at the turn-of-the-century, but that the fixation is grounded in Romanticism, with contributions from Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth, Hugo, Novalis, Schlegel and Schopenhauer. These thinkers among others were responsible for bestowing upon death a special status that was linked to transcendent and mythical qualities. Death was no longer to be feared, but embraced for its imaginative and
perceived decay of empire in the larger sense, be it political, social or moral, but they could influence the cultural representations of the mourning over lost identity, personal and national. And they chose to do so through the aestheticization of individualism and its crisis of self-destruction.

Hofmannsthal's Elektra finds itself caught in this web of cultural ambivalence and loss of identity, culminating in the oscillation of eros and thanatos as literary tropes. While at first glance it would appear to have little to do with its social milieu of fin-de-siècle Vienna, removed in time and space from the diseased local environs, the story of the Atrean princess responds to the desire on the part of its audiences to escape their social reality. Set in antiquity, the play potentially maintains a comfortable distance from everyday problems while conjuring up myth's associations of moral stability and fixed cultural codes. However, Hofmannsthal preyed on this false sense of security created by the classical setting, thereby destabilizing representations of gender, and sexuality as well as subjectivity itself; hence the liberties he took with his source material.

Spiritual potential. Hofmannsthal was no doubt familiar with this tradition (as well as with the death-inspired work of later authors such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud), and had his roots firmly anchored in this strong literary history. It is also worth clarifying that Vienna was not alone in its embracing of morbid decadence, but that this manifestation of the fin-de-siècle was a sensibility that permeated European culture.

Fin-de-siècle art transforms raw sexuality into pure eroticism through its distancing aestheticization, thus rendering it acceptable in the scrutinizing eyes of the public. There is a voyeuristic fascination with the spectacle of the female body, which becomes both object of desire and dangerous seductress. Despite the display of apparent openness, what applies to representations of sexuality does not transfer to the social mores that govern sexual conduct.
My point in this discussion of fin-de-siècle life has been to contextualize Hofmannsthal's inclusion of Elektra's death as part of the plot in his version of this Greek myth. It must be remembered, however, that this is not Hofmannsthal's first or last brush with dramatic death. In fact, it is a theme that preoccupies him throughout his lifetime. His early dramatic works, Der Tor und der Tod (1894) and Der Tod des Tizian, deal explicitly with death: in the former, Death appears in personified form to Claudio, whose shortcoming is his failure to act; he prefers to be a spectator in life and has never really ventured into action. When Death comes to him, therefore, he is ill-prepared. Claudio pleads with him, demanding he be given a second chance at life. All is not lost, however, as his final tragic speech belies: "Erst da ich sterbe, spür ich, daß ich bin" ("Only as I die, I feel that I am") (Gedichte 292). Thus we witness a precedent in Hofmannsthal's oeuvre for a positive dynamic in death; Claudio does not die in the usual sense of culmination and finality, but instead gains a heightened sense of awareness, a new and ready state that had not been available to him in his waking life.15

Hofmannsthal's last and, according to many critics, most important work, Der Turm, returns to these same considerations. The play is a loose adaptation of Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca's La vida es sueño, which Hofmannsthal had begun

15Wolfram Mauser remarks that the critics have often viewed Hofmannsthal's early work as an obsession with aestheticism as "Krankheit des Geistes" ("disease of the spirit") (45), but that Der Tor und der Tod in fact illustrates that the poet's main concern was an attempt to find a way out of aestheticism and into life. This play is not so much about an adolescent retreat from identity as it is an attempt to ground identity in action, and as such, can be seen as a precursor to similar concerns Hofmannsthal voices in Elektra.
translating just prior to his work on the Elektra material (Curtius 184). The protagonist Sigismund is a dreamer just like Claudio, though his problem is not that he has remained a spectator in life, but that he cannot distinguish clearly between the real world and the dream, between the outside world and his self-contained existence of the tower to which he has been confined for most of his life. His death shows that the dreamer is doomed to perish in the chaos of the modern world, but at the same time this death bears witness to the fact that those who do not dare to dream will commit terrible acts. Again, his death does not indicate a radical finality, but hints rather at his return to the liminal\textsuperscript{16} state of the dream in a different extra-earthly realm, one where there is still hope for the future of the dream.\textsuperscript{17}

Given this context, we can consider Hofmannsthal's Elektra as caught in a similar battle between the urge to dream, wallowing in her suffering for her lost father,

\textsuperscript{16}"Liminal" is Victor Turner's term, initially used in an anthropological context. From the Latin limen, meaning "threshold," the liminal or liminality refers to a state of "betwixt and between," an ambiguous realm of transition invoked through the practice of "tribal and agrarian ritual and myth" (37). Here, however, I use the term to denote the ontological indeterminacy that Elektra's death brings about and the atmosphere of ludic play (also characteristics of liminality [25]) inspired by her dance.

\textsuperscript{17}Hofmannsthal is not the sole author in his literary circle to demonstrate a fixation with death as a literary metaphor. The central character in Arthur Schnitzler's novel, Sterben, asks for the works of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to be brought to his deathbed. He has read only a few sentences when he is elevated to a level of heightened awareness brought on by the imminence of death and decides to read only novels from that point forth. Schnitzler's narrator leads the reader to understand that, while these philosophers may provide valuable theory toward a deeper understanding of the divine nature of death, the dying man can find solace only in literature, in the aesthetic realm. Death itself is portrayed as an aesthetic experience. Schnitzler's treatment of death is typical of the fin-de-siècle period, and Hofmannsthal has obviously read the same sources. And yet for him, it is much more than an aesthetic form: it does not merely function as a literary device of mode, but acts as a signifying agent.
and her calling to enact revenge on his behalf. The first image of Elektra is the mourning daughter, almost in trance, deeply fixated on her anger-infused pain. Unlike Hofmannsthal's male characters, Claudio and Sigismund, Elektra succeeds in shaking off this hypnotic state and seizing the opportunity to move the action forward to its cruel end.

**Elektra's Mythological Sisters: Brides of Death**

Perhaps there is more at work in the advent of Elektra's death than the question: to dream or not to dream? While Electra's life is spared in the Attic tragedies, she is witness to a tradition of female sacrifice that must have had a marked effect on her character. It is just possible that this Elektra harkens back to the fates suffered by women in her mythological lineage, following those whose lives had been taken in the stories leading up to her entry on the Attic stage. In order to contextualize fully Hofmannsthal's choice of ending for his drama, Elektra's surrogate sisters, the other "brides of death" should not be left out of the equation, for she is not alone in her fate. Though Electra has only a minor part to play in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the character inherits the legacy of incest and parricide and, in many ways, takes on the curse handed down to her, thereby granting her twentieth-century death more significance than can be gathered from Hofmannsthal's play alone. In the horrible legend of Atreus as told in the Homeric legends, a cycle of sacrifice and terror becomes a way of life for generation after generation.

Surely the most traumatic of these is Iphigenia's slaughter at Aulis, her life
offered up as a gift of appeasement to Artemis. The goddess denied the Greek army
the necessary wind to reach their battle destination unless the daughter of Agamemnon
and Clytemnestra was sacrificed for her cause. The legend tells that Agamemnon
hunted down and killed the prized stag of the hunter goddess, thus summoning the
wrath that would lead to Iphigenia's eventual end. She becomes a "bride of death,
wed to her destiny, which clears the way for the ships to make haste and to establish
Agamemnon's honour.

In this world of cruel justice, two wrongs do not make a right, but inevitably
lead to further bloodshed, this time stemming from Agamemnon's war prize, his
concubine Cassandra. Aeschyleus's Agamemnon tells of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus's
ironic welcome of the adulterous couple, whereby the purple robes of victory are
bestowed upon the war hero, Agamemnon, only to be transformed into his own red
blood when he is murdered. But he is not the only victim of this fateful home-coming;
in her final moment, Cassandra lets out a blood-curled scream, the kind that echoes
throughout the memories and imaginations of future generations. Her terrifying cry is a

18It goes without saying that the notion of revenge was different in classical times.
The curse of Atreus that inflicts suffering upon all those born into the family is not
merely a case of "tit for tat," but a reasoning programmed into the entire cultural code.
Given this fact, modern audiences will never be able to read mythological stories as
they were once received—in a context that simply accepts such brutality as a fact of
life. Elektra's death in Hofmannsthal's play throws the legacy of revenge off its tracks
by stealing the main attraction from what would have been the sequel tragedy in the
Greek context. What I mean by this is that, given that Elektra is the main guilty party
(at least when intention is considered) in this drama, the next logical dramatic
progression would be a tragedy devoted to the revenge of the gods or the Furies for
Clytemnestra's death. Hofmannsthal stops the war-machine by having Elektra dance
herself to her own demise, thus stealing the thunder from those who might seek
restitution for the crime of matricide.
purging akin—_in function though not mood—to that of Elektra's ecstatic dance which acts as a prelude to her death: both reveal the intensity of emotion these women can muster.

There is yet a third maiden of death in this story even if only by way of analogy, for Persephone, daughter of Demeter, is involved by implication since her tale is told at the outset of Aeschylus's _Eumenides_ for its relevance to Athena's triumph over Apollo at the end of this drama. Persephone was abducted to the underworld by Hades, causing her mother grief and prompting her to inflict a blight on the earth. Zeus finally relented so that mother and daughter were at last reunited, though the agreement required Persephone to descend to the bowels of the earth as "bride of death" each year thereafter. This ritual enactment of death grants her strength and she rises each spring bearing the harvest grain as gift of her grateful mother's thanksgiving.

It is perhaps significant that the accounts of all of these sacrificial offerings are found in Aeschylus's _Oresteia_. It is not certain whether or not Hofmannsthal actually read the first of the Greek Electra tragedies in the original, though he would have been familiar with the Aeschylean version of the Atreus legend, since there is a strong connection to it throughout German literary history from the eighteenth century onward, facilitated by Alexander von Humboldt's writings on antiquity (_Lexikon der Weltliteratur_). However, Hofmannsthal was likely influenced by Nietzsche and by J.J. Bachofen's enthusiastic response to Aeschylus:

Ich war ein nochjunger Mensch, als mir das gewaltige Mythenwerk, 'Das Mutterrecht', in die Hand kam.... Es war noch ein Exemplar der völlig
vergriffenen ersten Ausgabe von 1862.... Was das Buch mir bedeutete, lässt sich kaum sagen. Ich rechne diesen Mann seit damals wahrhaft zu meinen Lehren und Wohltümern, und ausgelesen habe ich seine Bücher bis heute nicht." ("I was still young when I got hold of the tremendous work on myth 'Mother Right' [...] It was a copy of the out-of-print first edition from 1862 [...] I can hardly say what this book meant to me. Since then, I do indeed count this man among my teachers and benefactors, and to this day I have yet to finish my readings of his books.") (Prosa IV 477-78)

In Mutterrecht (1861), Bachofen attempted to discover a universal law of history through a systematic reading of mythology as the key to the origins of such a history. His reading of myth was evolutionary, in the sense that, as society advances, it liberates the human spirit "aus dem lähmenden Fesseln einer kosmisch-physischen Lebensbetrachtung" ("from the crippling fetters of a cosmic-physical view of life") (286). For Bachofen, death is unequivocally linked with life as a play of opposing forces in a single process of transformation (Boas xv). The mythographer used Aeschylus's Oresteia to illustrate the transition from the second of the three phases of humanity to the third, from "mother right" to "paternal law."

Maternal law is, for Bachofen, the law of the material-corporeal, the maternal-tellurian fecund earth, the dark aspect of death opposing the luminosity of growth.

\footnote{Hofmannsthal was not alone in his enthusiasm for Bachofen. The group of poets led by Stephan George rediscovered "Mother Right" in the early 1890s and found it useful for their symbolist poetics, since one of Bachofen's principal views is that the world of myth functions as the exegesis of the symbol (Campbell, "Introduction" xxv).}
mourning instead of rejoicing (86). The only light amid this darkness is the ethical relationship between mother and child fostering moral development according to the mysterious powers of the maternal. Maternal right manifests itself through "das Wechselverhältnis von Tod und Leben den Untergang als die Vorbedingung höherer Wiedergeburt, als die Verwirklichung des 'höheren Erwerbs der Weihe'" ("the reciprocal relation between death and life in destruction as the condition of higher rebirth, as the realization of the 'higher good of consecration'") (100). And this play of life and death is deeply connected to the materiality of the chthonian-feminine which is never transcended.

There are strong parallels between Hofmannsthal's conception of Elektra and this description of maternal law, though there are differences as well. The feminine is very much connected to the chthonian, physical and material side of human nature in Hofmannsthal's play. This is clear in the constant images of animals, as well as in the scene where Elektra, filled with rage and frustration, literally digs her way into the earth in search of the murder weapon. A general atmosphere of darkness prevails throughout the action. Bachofen confirms the connection between darkness and the matriarchy: "Mit der Erde identifiziert sich die Nacht, welche als chthonische Macht aufgefaßt, mütterlich gedacht, zu dem Weibe in besondere Beziehung gesetzt und mit dem ältesten Zepter ausgestattet wird." ("The earth is identified with night, which is interpreted as a chthonian power, maternally conceived, establishing a special relation to woman and is adorned with the oldest sceptre") (135).

Where Hofmannsthal's play differs from Bachofen's description of matriarchy is
the link between mother and daughter; it cannot be said that Elektra's relationship to Klytämnestra in any way resembles that of Demeter and Kore. On the contrary, it is fraught with hatred and ill-will. As mentioned earlier, Bachofen uses the example of Aeschylus's Oresteia to illustrate the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, arguing that, while Clytemnestra avenges the murder of her daughter Iphigenia who is her offspring alone according to maternal law, the fact that Orestes was acquitted by Athena for his act of matricide confirms the primacy of paternal law. \(^{20}\) Apollo is behind this new social hierarchy as he declares: "Nicht ist die Mutter ihres Kindes Zeugerin,/ Sie hegt und trägt das auferweckte Leben nur;/ Es zeugt der Vater" ("The mother is no parent,/ She merely cares for and sustains the newly awakened life; / The father begets [the child"] (191). Bachofen concludes that the institution of marriage attains its full height because he wants to convince his reader that this shift from maternal to patriarchal law is in fact a teleological advancement whereby rational civic structures prevail. He structures his argument entirely around Aeschylus's Oresteia, but instead of interpreting Athena's judgement of Orestes as a compromise, whereby the maternal-chthonian powers of the earth and celestial paternal logic are mediated and

\(^{20}\)Bachofen also includes Electra in his interpretation of the move to patriarchal law, concluding that, because her allegiance lies with Agamemnon and not with her mother Clytemnestra, Electra is the first woman to embrace father-right. For Luce Irigaray, this is not at all the case; she views the myths of the house of Atreus as an attempt to erase systematically the memory of a female genealogy, beginning with the rape of Persephone/Kore, onward through the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the "legalized murder of Clytemnestra." She blames psychoanalysis for furthering this trend, pitting mother and daughter against each other (Sexes and Genealogies 134). What both of these authors overlook, however, is that Electra does not embrace patriarchal law as such, but rather her father's honour; the two are not synonymous.
united, he claims this mythological example as proof of a complete break with
maternal law and a move to the primacy of the civic law of the sky. Elektra's death in
Hofmannsthal contradicts this easy conclusion: while she does stand on the side of the
father, perhaps strengthening the social institution of marriage, the presence of her
corpse at the end of the tragedy introduces a liminality and forestalls the neat transition
from the subterranean, material right of mother to the celestial, Olympian right of the
father. Her dying is caught up in the dichotomy of death and life, representing a
"coming into being" through perishing, but simultaneously a movement toward a
higher rebirth.

Nietzsche: Bringing Myth to Tragic Forms

Such power through death is particularly germane to Nietzsche's thought.
Strongly influenced by Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy, the philosopher
developed a theory in Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik based on the
opposition of Apollo, the god of higher civilization, sponsoring the rise of the
individual, and Dionysos, the god of nature, fertility, intoxication and orgiastic
worship, promoting the dissolution of subject boundaries. Like Bachofen, Nietzsche too
turns to Aeschylus to illustrate his theories of tragedy as born out of what he terms the
Dionysiac chorus as the archetypal drama. The ritualistic aspect of myth transposed to
tragedy via the chorus unveils the power that hovers below the surface of humanity,
buried under layers of individuation. For Nietzsche, the connection between myth,
tragedy and the truth of the Dionysian is a strong one:
Die dionysische Wahrheit übernimmt das gesamte Bereich des Mythus als Symbolik ihrer Erkenntnisse und spricht diese teils in dem öffentlichen Kultus der Tragödie, teils in den geheimen Begehungen dramatischer Mysterienfeste, aber immer unter der alten mythischen Hülle aus. (The Dionysian truth appropriates the entire realm of myth as symbolic of its own insights, and expresses this partly in the public rite of tragedy and partly in the secret celebrations of dramatic mysteries, but always under the old mythic veil.) (63; his emphasis)

The decay of myth must be arrested and brought to a halt through its salvation in tragedy, not the counterfeit transcendence of the tragedies of Euripides, whom Nietzsche accused of squeezing the last drops of myth from his dramas, but those of Aeschylus and Sophocles, which retain strong mystical elements and foster Dionysian truth.  

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21Benjamin’s Der Ursprung der deustchen Trauerspiels, discussed at the start of this chapter, is a direct criticism of Nietzsche’s blind faith in the power of mythic ritual in Geburt der Tragödie. For Benjamin, myth represents a dangerous dream-state that paralyzes people and keeps them slaves to a belief in origin or utopia. It is all that is wrong with our view of history as a seamless continuum. In opposition to Nietzsche’s view, Benjamin sees ancient tragedy as a victory for humanity over the forces of myth. It is precisely the repetitive rewriting of myth through tragedy in a new context that is the redeeming victory (McCole 293). Benjamin condemns Nietzsche’s reading of tragic myth as a "rein ästhetisches Gebilde" ("purely aesthetic creation") and criticizes him for his "Verzicht auf eine geschichtsphilosophische Erkenntnis des Mythos der Tragödie" ("renunciation of any understanding of tragic myth in historical-philosophical terms") (Ursprung 281). And yet both Nietzsche and Benjamin have valid and useful points to make. Both rail against modern teleological notions of history, albeit from opposite sides. While Nietzsche praises what he sees as the aliveness of ritual in myth, it is the freshness of tragedy that Benjamin sees as keeping it from taking on what he sees as the static structure of myth; where Nietzsche calls upon myth to counteract the transcendence of tragedy, Benjamin looks to Trauerspiel
It is this tragic force of myth that Hofmannsthal takes from Nietzsche and transposes onto his Elektra figure, and her death restores the mythical element of what he regarded as the cool Platonism of humanist tragedy (as in Goethe's Iphigenie). The Atrean princess ushers in the muthos of myth like a warrior endowed with the calm wisdom of dying. I argued in Chapter One that the introduction of the character into the Homeric legend of Atreus inserted an element of muthos into the Attic tragedies even as there was a shift away from the ritualistic aspect of myth to a Platonic logos in the later Greek plays. Hofmannsthal's inclusion of the heroine's death is a similar return to this aspect of muthos, be it from the perspective of Bachofen's material-chthonian earth-bound maternal law or in the sense of the Nietzschean Dionysian myth-inspired tragic force. Given the precedent of Elektra's mythological sisters, the "brides of death," all taken from Aeschylus, to which both Bachofen and Nietzsche refer in their arguments, it is a logical extension to read Hofmannsthal's Elektra's death in light of the Oresteia and not simply in terms of the transcendental finality or cathartic redemption that ends Sophocles' Electra.

Thus, if we consider Elektra's death in terms of both Bachofen and Nietzsche's views, we encounter a contradiction in the sense that, like all women, she is strongly connected to the material-chthonian, while in the ecstatic moment of her dance she is forced to relinquish her earthly existence, becoming other to herself and to the world. We might consider Elektra's death a metaphorical recapitulation of Persephone's descent into the underworld, her life not ended but rather apprehended and placed in a
liminal state of ontological uncertainty. Hofmannsthal plants this seed in his text by omission, which is to say that nowhere does the text state that Elektra actually dies. The stage directions tell us that she collapses, and to all intents and purposes she is dead, and yet her exit lacks finality not only because it contradicts the terms of Aristotelian tragedy but also because her body is left unburied.

Erwin Rohde's *Psyche, Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, popular at the time when Hofmannsthal was working on *Elektra* and part of the author's library (Worbs 274), may shed light on the liminal nature of the heroine's death. According to Rohde's study of classical antiquity, the Greeks did not believe in the finality of death, but perceived death as a creation of a shadow of the original person, a double released only in the moment of perishing. Death was accompanied by important rituals, including a sacrificial burning of the corpse (Psyche 204). As with Bachofen and Nietzsche, there is an emphasis here upon the earthly aspect of death, its material and corporeal quality. Again, the fact that Elektra's body remains on stage until the curtain closes on the scene leaves much unfinished business and a general atmosphere of unease.

Prior to her final moment, Hofmannsthal's Elektra recoils at the strangeness of her own body. Chrysothemis, attempting to involve her sister in the celebrations, reports that the ground is littered with dead bodies and asks if Elektra hears the joyful cries of the citizens. Elektra seems incensed at such a question and responds instead that the music comes from inside of her. She continues:

*Die Tausende, die Fackeln tragen*
und deren Tritte, deren uferlose
Myriaden Tritte überall die Erde
dumpf dröhnen machen, alle warten sie
auf mich: ich weiß doch, daß sie alle warten,
weil ich den Reigen führen muß, und ich
kann nicht, der Ozean, der ungeheure,
der zwanzigfache Ozean begräbt
mir jedes Glied mit seiner Wucht, ich kann mich
nicht heben!

(The multitude who carry torches
and whose steps, whose endless
myriad of footsteps make the earth
resound with muffled droning everywhere, they all are waiting
for me: I know very well that they are waiting,
because I must lead the round dance, and I
cannot, the ocean, the enormous,
the twenty-fold ocean buries
my every limb with its weight, I cannot lift
myself up!) (74)

It is as if Elektra has internalized the dead bodies, her body resounding with the cries
of the dead, just as the earth resounds with the footsteps of the multitude. She
acknowledges her duty to fulfill the promise she made to Agamemnon in her first
monologue: to dance around his grave in celebration of his restored honour. But she is
held back by a terrible weight, the burden of the ocean that buries her in her
identification with the chthonic-maternal imagery. Elektra seems to carry her shadow
of death with her throughout the play, becoming heavier and heavier until she can
barely lift her very limbs, as her final speech implies: "Ich trag die Last/ des Glückes,
und ich tanze vor euch her." ("I bear the burden/ of happiness, and I dance before
you") (75). Her dance symbolizes a Reigen, initiating the community into her
ceremony to help her to handle this weight. And yet it is not; it is in fact a maenad's
dance of dionysian ecstasy. Elektra twirls alone, oblivious to those around, though she
sacrifices herself for them. Hers is not to be compared to Salome's light and airy
dance, shedding veils and relieving herself of earthly clothing. Elektra's dance is hardly
graceful; it more closely resembles a death march than the first waltz at a debutante's
ball, and it ends when she collapses. While this may not be death as such, the very
moment of her dead fall is perhaps when Elektra is truly relieved of the weight she has

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22 Reinhold Schlötterer points out the contradiction in Hofmannsthal's understanding
of Elektra's dance as both a "Reigen" and that of a "Mänade," two very separate and
even contradictory forms of expressive movement. The former is a round dance,
indicated by the Greek choréuo, meaning a kind of slow and methodic dance
performed by the chorus, hand in hand and often accompanied by song. On the other
hand, the orchéomai is the solo mimetic dance of the maenads, the women who
followed Dionysos and celebrated his rites in ecstatic frenzy (48). Schlötterer
postulates that the orgiastic chaos of the maenad's trance-like state is a departure from
a rational consciousness (55). It is not difficult to see that Hofmannsthal attempts to
dramatize the Nietzschean example of Dionysian principles, destroying the boundaries
of the Apollonian principium individuationis in the ex-stasis of dance. Schlötterer's
distinction between the two dance forms is useful to illustrate what Sarah Webster
Goodwin calls a "threshold space" (45) between the subject and community, between
life and death, delaying and denying the finality of death.
been carrying. Just as Nietzsche's Seiltänzer ("rope dancer") must risk falling to his death, so too, Elektra dares to dance her way to her end. Nietzsche praises dance above all other arts in Also Sprach Zarathustra, where he uses the rope-dancer as a metaphor for humanity's potential for transcendence. The rope-dancer, in his defiance of gravity and his acceptance of the imminent danger of falling, seizes the opportunity to liberate him (or herself) from the meagre earth. Aside from the more philosophical interpretation of dance on the part of Nietzsche, it is likely that Hofmannsthal's idea for Elektra's last fateful steps was influenced by the innovations in dance at the time by such figures as Loie Fuller, Ida Rubinstein and Isadora Duncan. Hofmannsthal's play is like a pressure gauge rising toward the inevitable explosion of the danse macabre. Elektra's triumphantly maenad-like performance of the dionysian principle shatters the logos of tragedy and introduces a new form of hysteria, much more potent than any disorder diagnosed by Freud.

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23"Duncan-dance," as Isadora's idiosyncratic style of maenad-like gestures became known, swept through Europe at the turn of the century and Hofmannsthal may even have witnessed one of the performances in her Austrian debut of 1903. We also know that Hofmannsthal was a fan of Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse, the latter of whom is the subject of two short prose pieces, in which he describes her portrayal as Nora in Ibsen's "The Doll's House," whom he described as "eine hagere Bacchantin" ("a gaunt Bacchant") ("Eleonora" 71). Hofmannsthal may not have been directly influenced by Ibsen's fatal dancer, but the cultural currency of deadly dancing women from Strindberg's The Dance of Death to Wilde's Salome and later in Wedekind's Lulu plays and Stravinsky's death maiden in The Rites of Spring made for a climate that fostered such morbid performances.

24Further chapters will consider Elektra's representation as a hysterical, but perhaps it is worth mentioning that dance was one of the important expressions of grief in Greek funeral ceremonies. Women danced, sang and tore their hair as a means of honouring the dead (Blundell 73). These practices became so extravagant that they were eventually outlawed (Holst-Warhaft 3) in the same way that the this century has
Trauerspiel vs. Tragödie: Walter Benjamin’s Allegorical Mode

Elektra’s death is allegorical in the sense that Benjamin uses the term when discussing baroque tragic drama. Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels revolves around the assumption that the baroque era lacked the certainty of redemption which was felt to be sure to follow the suffering of humanity in the Middle Ages, and yet baroque Trauerspiel is determined not to give up hope of redemption in some form. For Benjamin, tragic drama and its allegorical aesthetic, unlike Greek tragedy, does not give credence to a cosmic order that issues decrees of fate, but rather illustrates the condition of those who inhabit the earth as horrid, corrupt and transitory. There is no direct route to a heavenly realm; instead mortals are subject to a perpetual struggle in the in-between, the tension of which results in a melancholy state of mourning. Hofmannsthal’s Elektra embodies Benjamin’s understanding of allegory at the level of this constant struggle within the liminal and the in-between. She is not allowed to die literally, but dances herself into an alternate state that is beyond the individual, where she becomes a representative of the collective suffering and celebration of the group.

The dance itself is already an important link to the tradition of the Trauerspiel in contrast to classical tragedy. The Dance of Death is most prevalent in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art and literature, roughly the period of the mourning plays of the Spanish baroque, upon which Benjamin bases his theory of tragic drama.

attempted to frame female hysteria with a psychoanalytic straight-jacket. With her dance, whether as expression of grief, as an extension of hysteria, or as a display of pure dionysian ecstasy, Elektra exceeds the bounds of rational discourse and also escapes from the grips of the Atrean curse.
Hofmannsthal's inclusion of Elektra's fatal performance can be seen in the light of the Trauerspiel aesthetic and its epoch. The Dance of Death mimes a physical and sensual relationship with death, a mysterious and ritualistic practice which contradicts the transcendent quality of death in tragedy, partly by the very fact that the dance itself perpetually defers the finality of death.

Given the fact that the Dance of Death habitually depicts humans of various social ranks encountering death personified as a skeleton or a mobile cadaver (a central element in the woodcuts of Hans Holbein [1538]), Elektra's own Reigen is not a Dance of Death in the strictest sense, but rather a modernized version in the form of a solo act rather than a two-step with a Death-figure. While Elektra cannot be placed within the Christian tradition of the Dance of Death, with its aim to inspire discipline and devotion, certain secular elements are common to both: the emphasis upon the materiality of death, the decay of the physical body, as well as the struggle between the living and the dead, and the liminality that it imposes.

This liminal or threshold space is animated through the dance that combines the symbolism of the collective round dance within the ecstatic movements of the maenad. Elektra is the medium of the dance as it takes over her body, just as she is the resonating chamber for music. When Chrysothemis asks if she hears the sound of the celebrating masses, Elektra responds by saying that it is coming from inside herself, as if echoing through her body itself. She is transformed into an instrument though the audience is deaf to the wondrous sonoric melody the sisters hear. This is a silent form of communication, one that transcends language, as in Benjamin's description of the
speechless quality of allegory.\textsuperscript{25} Elektra issues the following order, simultaneously addressed to Chrysothemis and to all people: "Schweig und tanze. Alle müssen/ herbei! hier schließt euch an!" ("Be silent and dance. All must/ come here! here join behind me!) (75). Her final speech extols the virtues of speechlessness, the dance taking over where words left off.\textsuperscript{26}

The allegorical, then, is the residue of the material suffering which cannot be sublimated into an abstract ideal; it is like the blood of Ágisth spattered over the masses, staining them with the memory of pain that reverberates throughout Argos:

"[Ü]berall/ in allen Höfen liegen Tote, alle,/ die leben, sind mit Blut bespritzt und

\textsuperscript{25}If we read this Elektra's death in terms of Benjamin's allegorical mode of expression, the productive decay of materiality, it is also possible to conceive of the materiality of Elektra's body as produced in language. For Benjamin, the sorrow and melancholy of the allegorical mode leads to speechlessness (Bolz 32), but it is this very silence that issues the essence of language itself. For Judith Butler, on the other hand, it is not only the destruction and the decay of matter that lead to new forms of representation, but rather all matter is created in and through language. Butler views the creation of matter as a "citational practice," one that materializes bodies as a process of signification (12-16). In this way, then, Elektra's body can be seen as a two-way street, no longer allied with origin, but created through and by language; her corpse is a citation. Butler also considers this "citational practice" a performance that produces subjects in language. If Elektra's death begins with a dance of death, the performance does not end with her collapse; on the contrary, the allegorical ruin is yet another form of citational performativity, by which Elektra's signifying presence continues.

\textsuperscript{26}The connection between Elektra's dance and the tradition of the Dance of Death as depicted in the Middle Ages lies in the oxymoronic image of the lively corpse, wherein the tension between life and death is most vivid. In Elektra's case, however, it is not the figure of Death who encounters the living; rather the entire struggle takes place within one individual. We might consider this as a struggle of the other within the self that forces a Nietzschean overflowing of the boundaries of the self. It is as if Hofmannsthal takes the case of Claudio and Death in Der Tor und der Tod and embodies the conflict within the single character of Elektra.
haben/ selbst Wunden, und doch strahlen alle." ("[E]verywhere,/ in every courtyard, lie the dead, all/ who live are spattered with blood and have/ wounds themselves, and yet their faces glow") (73). The corpses, including that of the heroine, highlight the transient nature of organic matter and the inevitability of decay, and yet it is precisely destruction itself that makes redemption possible in Benjamin's system; hence the smiling faces that bear witness to renewed optimism. As in baroque tragic drama, there is no sure way to such redemptive freedom. Elektra must literally bear the burden of happiness, using it to fuel her dance. One of the concerns that runs isotopically throughout Hofmannsthal's oeuvre is precisely the theme of hope spawned by alternative states of being, be it the dream, the unconscious, the unreality of the stage. For example, at the end of Der Turm when all appears lost and Sigismund is about to die, the two small boys cry: "Lasset ihn sterben!--Freude!" ("Let him die!--Rejoice!") (207). Sigismund dies because of his inability to distinguish between the real world and his interior world within the tower, and yet his death, like Elektra's, is imbued with a sense of optimism that borders on the utopian.

For Benjamin, the melancholy nature of allegory is joined with the joy it promises. It is sorrow that affirms one's relationship to the source of all creation and this force rescues the lost from their abyss of suffering. And yet there can be no rejoicing without the destruction of the material world. Allegory redeems by holding on to the ruins left in the wake of destruction, represented in Elektra by the corpses strewn in front of the palace, including her own body as a reminder of the unresolved nature of her death. For Benjamin, the corpse is the ultimate allegorical residue:
Produktion der Leiche ist, vom Tode her betrachtet, das Leben. Nicht erst im Verlust von Gliedmaßen, nicht erst in den Veränderungen des alternden Körpers, in allen Prozessen der Ausscheidung und der Reinigung fällt Leichenhaftes Stück für Stück vom Körper ab. Und kein Zufall, daß gerade Nagel und Haare, die vom Lebenden weggeschnitten werden wie Totes, an der Leiche nachwachsen. Ein 'Memento mori' wacht in der Physis, der Mneme selber. (The product of the corpse is life, from the point of view of death. It is not only in the loss of limbs, not only in the changes of the aging body, but in all the processes of elimination and purification that everything corpse-like falls away from the body piece by piece. And it is no accident that precisely nails and hair, which are cut away from the living body as dead matter, continue to grow on the corpse. A 'memento mori' is awakened in the physis, in memory itself.) (392)

Elektra, who has been plagued with haunting memories of her father since the beginning of the action, has now come to embody memory herself. Her body serves as physical evidence of that memory, that which is at once present and absent, fragmenting human experience for all time.²⁷

It is impossible to read Hofmannsthal's Elektra as an example of tragedy in the

²⁷The concept of the fragment is important for Benjamin. For him, totality is not based upon synthesis but upon an arbitrary plurality made up of fragments. The allegorical is expressed in terms of fragmented ruins as citations of the decaying physical world. Thus it is that Elektra's corpse becomes a physical memory (for herself and her community) of such productive decay, in the same way that the fixation on memento mori was for a baroque sensibility focused on the tangible evidence of death.
sense that Sophocles' drama deploys the genre, precisely because of the nature of Elektra's physical body as memento mori. Hofmannsthal violates important formal traditions. In the Poetics, Aristotle makes clear that the success of tragedy depends on certain key elements. One of these is the motivation of death. When this has been made clear, order will have been restored and the action comes to a close. The kind of order that is established varies in each of the Attic tragedies, but what they share is the cathartic sense that each death is accounted for. Not so in Hofmannsthal's Elektra. Here the heroine's death throws the entire tragic peripeteia off balance, opening up a gap that is left unfilled. Her death is a supplemental coda to the drama that cannot be accounted for within the confines of the balances of the tragic genre.

Instead of putting an end to things, Elektra's death works to unveil the fundamental ambiguity of fate within the modern world, the same radical incommensurability of hope and mourning, dream and waking, truth and fiction that characterizes Benjamin's sense of allegory. And it is the liminality of her body, the incomplete nature of her death, that forestalls any cathartic finality, as Benjamin explains with respect to the difference of death in Trauerspiel:

Wenn dann im Tode der Geist auf Geisterweise frei wird, so kommt auch nun der Körper erst zu seinem höchsten Recht. Denn von selbst versteht sich: die Allegorisierung der Physis kann nur an der Leiche sich energisch durchsetzen. Und die Personen des Trauerspiels sterben, weil sie nur so, als Leichen, in die allegorische Heimat eingehn. (And if it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the
body too comes properly into its own. For this much is self-evident: the allegorization of the physis can only be carried through in all its vigour with respect to the corpse. And the characters of the Trauerspiel die because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. (391-92)

The spin that Hofmannsthall puts on Elektra's death as corporeal allegory is further illuminated by the somatic ecstasy (ekstasis) of the dance. Even if destruction is a necessary component, as Benjamin tells us, the end result of the death dance is a freedom made possible through the sorrow of allegory.

**From Baroque Drama to Mythic Death**

Hofmannsthall had no knowledge of Benjamin's vision of allegory as a mode of expression when he wrote his Elektra, though many years later the two men became friends and greatly admired each other's work. The intersection of their thought, however, is in their considerations of Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca's baroque dramatic works. For Benjamin, Calderón's plays typify his understanding of allegory as exemplified in baroque tragic drama. While German Trauerspiel is taken up entirely with "die Trostlosigkeit der irdischen Verfassung" ("the hopelessness of the earthly condition"), in Spain, "in welchem die barocken Züge so viel glänzender, so viel markanter, so viel glücklicher sich im katholisch kultivierten Land entfalten" ("a land of Catholic culture in which the baroque features unfold much more brilliantly, clearly, more happily"), Calderón is guaranteed "einen Ausgang, der deutschen Trauerspielen
überlegen ist" ("a conclusion, which is superior to German Trauerspiel") (Ursprung 260). Benjamin envisioned Calderón's La vida es sueño as the supreme example of such excellence, a mystery play in which "der Traum als Himmel waches Leben überwölbt" ("the dream vaults like heaven over waking life" (81). Trauer-spiel: The word speaks for itself. This is a mourning-play. It is the gaze of melancholy that renders the object allegorical, devoid of its own meaning, but in a ready state to receive the significance granted by the allegorist (359). In this case, Hofmannsthal is the allegorist and Elektra the discursive field that begins to take on new significance under the melancholy gaze of her author.28

Hofmannsthal had begun his translation of Calderón's La vida es sueño a little over a year before beginning work on his Elektra (Curtius 184), and we can see remnants of the baroque idea of tragic drama as a play of mourning in his own drama.29 Hofmannsthal had been drawn to Calderón's brilliant use of language, his allegorical figures and use of parable in the place of metaphor or symbol (Schwarz 25). Baroque tragic drama helped Hofmannsthal revolt against both the Romantics and

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28In Spain, there exist no pictorial representations of the Dance of Death. Instead, the same themes manifest themselves in the literary mode known as Danza de la muerte, prevalent in the fifteenth century. It is reasonable to believe that Calderón was considerably influenced by this genre, which shares with his later tragic drama a stock cast of characters, including the tyrant, the martyr, bishop, prince, etc. (Clark 41).

29Hofmannsthal declared an affinity between Spanish and Austrian history, a conviction he shared with Grillparzer (Curtius 183). He did not see Spanish drama of the baroque and Middle Ages in its historical context, but as a timeless element of European mythology (200). Hofmannsthal's appropriation and recovery of tragic drama in Elektra grants us insight into his understanding of tragedy, not as a genre limited to antiquity, but as a form capable of mediating contemporary world views.
Naturalists alike, and gave him an example of theatre where life is a dream and the dream a play.\(^{10}\) In his discussion of Hofmannsthal's use of allegory, Ernst Robert Curtius affirms: "Die Allegorie ist hier keine Schwächung der Lebensfülle und die Maske kein Schein. Umgekehrt verhält es sich: erst wenn wir die Maskenhaftigkeit unserer Existenz erschauen, gewinnen wir die tiefere Wahrheit und den Sinn" ("Allegory here is no weakness in the fullness of life and the mask is no appearance. Reversed, it functions [as such]: it is only when we look upon the mask-like aspect of our existence that we gain a deeper truth and sense") (165). Part of the power inherent in the allegorical mode is the tension that it exposes between the mask (material substance) and the masked (abstract concept). In this case, Elektra's dead body is the organic mask and what it masks is an abstract state of mourning, the sorrow that announces the real possibility that there will be no final redemption. And yet, as Benjamin tells us, despite the despair that this knowledge engenders, it is in destruction itself that hope is to be found ("Destruktive Charakter" GS IV: 396). Thus, regardless of their antithetical nature, hope and destruction, love and violence are inextricably linked, and function in a dialectical relationship of productive decay.

\(^{10}\)In fact, Benjamin wrote to Hofmannsthal upon reading his first stage version of Der Turm, the play loosely based on Calderón's La vida es sueño, praising it as a fine example of allegorical Trauerspiel: "In Wahrheit sehe ich in Ihrem Werk ein Trauerspiel in seiner reinsten, kanonischen Form. Und zugleich emfinde ich die außerordentliche dramatische Kraft, deren diese Form, der verbreiteten Bildungsmeinung zum Trotz, in ihren höchsten Repräsentationen fähig ist." ("In truth, I see in your work a tragic drama in its purest, canonical form. At the same time, I sense the extraordinary dramatic force, of which this form, despite the widespread belief, is capable of its highest representation") (Briefe II 385). Though Benjamin specifically praises Der Turm for illustrating his allegorical thought, this concern was a life-long obsession for Hofmannsthal.
Hofmannsthal's own words affirm a similar conviction: "Wer die Gewalt des Reigens kennt, fürchtet nicht den Tod. Denn er weiß, daß Liebe tötet" ("Whosoever knows the violence of the Reigen does not fear death. For he knows that love kills") (qtd. in Potter 18). We can understand Elektra's allegorical death as the alchemical moment such that even as we recognize the mask of appearances, it too is being destroyed because of its organic, transient nature.

Unlike French classical drama, the Spanish baroque pays no heed to the tragic models of antiquity or the system of unities outlined by Aristotle. Instead, Calderón's dramas subtly, allegorically, question the established order of church and state. Hofmannsthal appropriates the character-types that appear in these dramas, figures who are not slaves to their fate, but who function rather as agents of their own fate (Curtius 193). Elektra falls into the category of characters, like many found in Calderón, who are trapped in a blind alley, imprisoned by their circumstances, but who are released into the world to have their eyes opened. Only in Elektra's case, the moment of awakening is also the moment of death.

Elektra's death as allegorical moment refuses the tragic structure of logos (discussed in Chapter One), instead affirming her role in re-establishing the muthos of myth. The drama denies an Aristotelian peripeteia that would have had the action culminate with the death of Ágisth, and thus inhibits the possibility of tragic transcendence. Hofmannsthal's Elektra reaches for her chthonian roots, be they in Aeschylus' "brides of death" or in his contemporaries' contexts (Bachofen, Nietzsche, Rohde). Going beyond influence or intention, an understanding of such "chthonian
roots" is enhanced by reading Elektra's death in the context of Walter Benjamin's allegory, whereby the heroine's corpse is a superfluous element. Elektra's unburied body is a scar, marring the surface of tragic form, and leaving the character in a permanent state of unresolve.
Chapter Three

A House of Ruins: Cadaverous Electras

Shakespeare's Electra: Hamlet Upstaged

It is perhaps surprising to skip directly from one of this century's earliest depictions of the mythological heroine to one of the most recent, and yet the progression from Hofmannsthal's to Heiner Müller's Elektra is not arbitrary. While the Atrean princess does not exit in a triumphant dance of death in Müller's Hamletmaschine (1977), she threatens to take her own life and finally directs her rage toward the violent destruction of her own body as the construction machine for future generations, leaving her in a cadaverous but living shell.¹ The two authors share a vision of this character as one who is not afraid to confront the horrors of death, presiding over scenes of cruelty with poise while taking responsibility for a community and its history. The Elektras of Hofmannsthal and Müller can be seen to intersect through Benjamin's notion of allegorical tension between destruction and hope, catastrophe and rescue.² Hamletmaschine's Atrean princess can also

¹Elektra's revolt against the production machine is mirrored in the form of Müller's work. It has been described as a "theatrically impossible text" (Wirth 215) because it is highly dense and revolts against all dramatic conventions. Often, there is no indication of who is speaking. Even the deconstructionist director Robert Wilson expressed helplessness when first confronted with the enigmatic text (Wirth 215), and yet Wilson further fragments the text by staging it in a highly choreographed manner, separating audio and visual tracks, thus stretching the shrunken eight-page text to a two-and-a-half hour production. Müller's text and Wilson's self-conscious production escalate the machine metaphor to the point of dysfunction. Elektra's refusal to play a part in the machine of history takes on greater meaning in the context of extreme automation; she must preside over and orchestrate the destruction of the machine, thus contributing to Benjamin's allegorical and redemptive destruction.

²Benjamin's thought runs throughout Müller's oeuvre with the constancy of a leitmotif (he began reading Benjamin in the 1950s, despite the fact that most of Benjamin's works
be compared to the character as represented in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mouches* and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Electra's death will be examined as part of the murderous finale that is perhaps the only mandatory and constant element of the myth.

Like Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, Müller's *Hamletmaschine* is deeply rooted in its historical context: the social circumstances of the German Democratic Republic at the height of the Cold War. To call *Hamletmaschine* a play is to stretch the definition of the dramatic genre too far, for it stages a blatant revolt against plot, character development, tragic resolution or any other standard convention (although the division into five "acts" is a sarcastic reminder of tragic form). Instead, the author demonstrates that he is serious about his irreverence for this canonical work, as evidenced by Hamlet's first lines: "Ich war Hamlet. Ich stand an der Küste und redete mit der Brandung BLABLA" ("I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and spoke with the surf BLABLA") (11). In what appears at first glance to be a nonsensical and anarchic text, Müller presents his audience with a rich conglomeration of historical and literary citations, a deliberately constructed puzzle with

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were banned in the former German Democratic Republic [Müller/Opitz 349]). Müller embraces, in particular, Benjamin's conception of history, as well as the precarious dichotomy of hope and destruction (history as an endless chain of catastrophes "die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft" ["which incessantly heaps ruins upon ruins"] [GS I: 697]), themes very much evident in *Hamletmaschine*. Müller's play is much more a *Trauerspiel* than a tragedy, following the formula Benjamin sets out in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*: "Man glaubte, im geschichtlichen Ablauf selbst das Trauerspiel mit Händen zu greifen" ("It was believed that the *Trauerspiel* could be grasped with one's own hands in the course of history") (243). Following this description, *Hamletmaschine* articulates the events of history in a bald and undistorted manner.
no simple solution.\(^3\) Elektra is injected into this intertextual labyrinth, a character without
a plot and seemingly out of context, in a play which takes its title from one of
Shakespeare's greatest plays rather than from any Attic bard. And yet, this is a Hamlet like
no other. Müller's disturbed protagonist not only challenges his mother, raping her to
punish her crimes, but also revolts against his father, here portrayed as a tyrant fully
deserving of the brutal homecoming he receives.\(^4\) This play is about the real situation of

\(^3\)Müller quotes in a figurative way from the tortured legacy of European history in the
twentieth century, at once refusing this history coherence and at the same time jostling his
audience out of complacency and forgetting. But he also quotes quite literally from
Shakespeare's Richard III, Hölderlin, T.S. Eliot, Andy Warhol, Sartre, e.e. cummings,
tabloid journalism, common proverbs and, of course, himself. (For a full account of these
references see Arlene Akiko Teraoka's The Silence of Entropy or Universal Discourse:
The Postmodern Poetics of Heiner Müller.) The richness of this intertextual network
further destabilizes his already fragmented text, functioning as a form of Brechtian
Verfremdungseffekt while rooting it firmly in a strong literary tradition. Müller's use of
citation is also his way of paying homage to Benjamin's interpretation of history as
anything but a continuum of progress. Benjamin advocates that history be interrupted by a
"Stillstellung" ("Standstill") that demands reflection (Maier-Schaeffer 23).

\(^4\)Müller models his Hamlet around several historical characters, including the son of
the Hungarian dictator Rajk. This Hamlet must return to Budapest in 1956, knowing full
well that he is the son of a tyrant; hence the reference in the play to "Pest in Buda" (17).
(The fact that Hamlet rapes his mother in the first scene effectively places him in the role
of the father, the upholder of traditional authority, and renders him guilty by association.)
Müller also includes allusions to Gustaf Gründen, an important actor in the history of the
GDR, who played Hamlet in 1936 and was later arrested and imprisoned for involvement
with the Nazis during the Third Reich. And yet Hamlet is also an autobiographical figure,
in the sense that Müller writes his own past onto his character. His father was sent to war,
and later died in a prisoner-of-war camp. Müller imposes upon himself the guilt of an
intellectual and a writer in the GDR, who had been granted certain privileges denied to
others. The testimony to this admission of guilt is evident when Müller states in the stage
directions that a picture of the author is to be torn apart by the actor playing Hamlet. It is
also no coincidence that the author's initials, H.M., mirror those of his play
Hamletmaschine.
socialism gone awry, Stalinism, and a politics devoid of dialogue. Müller had translated Hamlet in the early 1950s and also composed a poem on the subject, projects out of which Hamletmaschine emerged. He confessed that he was motivated to distill the canonical work down to a few scant pages by the silence imposed by Stalinist politics in Budapest in 1956, and by the signs of state corruption following the terrorist crisis involving the Rote Armee Faktion. Müller admits his obsession with the Shakespearian archetype: "Dreiβig Jahre lang war Hamlet eine Obsession für mich, also schrieb ich einen kurzen Text, Hamletmaschine, mit dem ich versuchte Hamlet zu zerstören" ("For thirty years, Hamlet was an obsession for me, so I wrote a short text, Hamletmaschine,' with which I tried to destroy Hamlet") (qtd. in Wieghaus 268-69).

If Hamlet is doomed, it is up to Elektra to preside over the destruction scene--hers is the task of aiding in Hamlet's defeat and finding hope in the ruins she is left with. Hamlet admits to putting his back to the devastation: "im Rücken die Ruinen von Europa" ("my back to the ruins of Europe") (11). But Elektra embraces the challenge, not flinching at the naked pain she witnesses, setting her stage with Conrad-inspired imagery: "Im Herzen der Finsternis. Unter der Sonne der Folter" ("In the heart of darkness. Under the

5Most critics have viewed this drama in highly pessimistic terms: "Die 'Hamletmaschine' ist das mit Abstand negativste Stück Müllers" ("Hamletmaschine' is by far Müller's most negative play") (qtd. in Raddatz 193). My own interpretation attempts to salvage the dialectic of despair and hope as embodied in the characters of Hamlet and Ophelia/Elektra.

6The original text of Hamletmaschine numbered some 200 pages which Müller condensed into a handful of dense pages that the author calls a "Schrumpfkopf" ("shrunken head") (Girshausen et al 26). The five sections present a multiplicity of images that create a complex web of intertextual and self-reflexive associations. The richness of the text lies in the layering of Müller's finely tuned tableaus.
sun of torture") (23). Lest we get the impression that Elektra is an afterthought in a play mostly about the decline and fall of yet another male hero, Müller's own words signal his conviction with regard to her crucial role: "Im Jahrhundert des Orest und der Elektra, das heraufkommt, wird Ódipus eine Komödie sein" ("In the century of Orestes and Electra that is rising, Oedipus will be a comedy") (Projektion 1975 16). Elektra is not alone in upstaging Hamlet, but is joined by women in general. Using his mythological heroine's courage as a metaphor, Müller illustrates his conviction that women have a special role to play in taking over the revolution where men have failed: "[W]enn auf der Männerebene nichts weitergeht, muß den Frauen etwas einfallen.... Lenin hat immer gesagt, die Bewegung kommt aus den Provinzen, und die Frau ist die Provinz des Mannes" ("[W]hen the men can't do anything more, the women have to think of something.... Lenin always said the movement comes from the provinces, and woman is the province of man") (Krieg ohne Schlacht 295).² Elektra is just the woman to lead the way.

**Incestuous Characters: Electra in a Trousers Role**

Müller's literary marriage of Hamlet and Elektra is not arbitrary; indeed, there is a long history of incestuous textuality linking Shakespeare's play to the Atrean myth, whereby the principal characters overlap in terms of both plot and psychological development. We have noticed a shift in the characterization of Electra within the Attic

²This last statement, which implies that woman is the other to man, the second sex, so to speak, may anger many feminists in its inherently dualist thought. But in the case of Müller's Elektra, he means to give her the credit for the action, and the chance to lead the movement.
tragedies, where increasingly she assumes responsibility for the Apollonian oracle and with it the ensuing psychological turmoil. Shakespeare's Hamlet, full of melancholic despair bordering on hysteria, resembles the Electra of later antiquity. Wolfgang Schadewaldt observes: "[Sei] hier bemerkt, wie die eine Gestalt von Shakespeares Hamlet dramatisch dem Geschwisterpaar von Elektra und Orest bei Sophocles entspricht" ("It should be noted how the one character from Shakespeare's Hamlet dramatically corresponds to the sibling pair in Sophocles") (591). And yet what of Ophelia? Is she to be relegated to an insignificant role? Schadewaldt claims of the Shakespearean Ophelia: "Das Leid der Ophelia ist weiblich dumpf, elementar, naiv, unreflektiert und in seiner Erscheinung von unsagbarer Süßigkeit" ("Ophelia's suffering is femininely oppressive, simple, naive, unreflective and unspeakably sweet in its appearance") (594). This description could not be further from the truth when it comes to Müller's Ophelia in Hamletmaschine, about whom the author says: "The main character here could rather be Ophelia than Hamlet" admitting that she is "a criticism of Hamlet" (Hamletmaschine and Other Texts 51,50). If we witness the blurring of Elektra and Hamlet's subjectivities, we are equally confronted with the conflation of Elektra and Ophelia. In fact, this play could be said to have just one character, albeit with many faces.

Just when we begin to understand Ophelia, she introduces herself as Elektra: "Hier spricht Elektra" ("This is Electra speaking") (Hamletmaschine 23). Throughout this most condensed of Hamlets we are bombarded with conflicting images of the two principal

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5 The irony is that for a play that heralds the destruction of its own main character and the author behind it, the secondary literature on this work is surprisingly Hamlet-obsessed, remaining largely silent when it comes to the Ophelia/Elektra character.
characters' gender and identity. When Ophelia/Elektra reveals in the Scherzo that she is prepared to sacrifice a vital organ as a cannibalistic offering, asking, "Willst du mein Herz essen, Hamlet" ("Do you want to eat my heart, Hamlet"), her partner seems not to hear the question. Instead he responds with the wish: "Ich will eine Frau sein" ("I want to be a woman") (15). He doesn't want to eat her; he wants to be her, a desire which is reinforced when he appears dressed in the clothes Ophelia/Elektra has already shed in her "Striptease" that acts as a prelude to their role reversal.9

This third act, labeled a Scherzo, is something of an enigmatic void, not a middle but a muddle. It is the only time Hamlet and Ophelia/Elektra appear on stage together, though unlike the moving recognition scene we have come to expect, the two characters do not even acknowledge each other. Whereas the tragic peripeteia is consciously ruined in Hofmannsthal's Elektra by the heroine's death, in this version the stiff structure of tragedy implodes when Hamlet is erased by the female lead, who quite literally makes him up as a whore.10 Finally, he explains that he is no longer Hamlet:

Ich bin nicht Hamlet. Ich spiele keine Rolle mehr.... Ich gehe nach Hause und

9Teraoka reads the play as a christological allegory, whereby Hamlet the corporeal son is sent by the ghostly (spiritual) father to complete a mission of redemption for the world, a vision that emphasizes the divine teleology of the Judeo-Christian view of history (116-17). In offering up her heart, Ophelia/Elektra usurps Hamlet's role as sacred martyr, and Hamlet willingly abdicates by declaring his desire to be a woman. Ophelia/Elektra takes over where Hamlet left off, but she does not consent to the teleological mission, instead engaging in a different reading of history, as illustrated when she strips her old clothes and steps out in naked freshness.

10Robert Wilson's production captures the virtual atmosphere of the scene by inserting it as a film segment, allowing language to take a back seat by having the words scroll by as unobtrusive subtext, replacing linguistic acoustic with the emotional sonority of opera music.
schlage die Zeit tot, einig/mit meinem ungeteilten Selbst.... Ich will eine
maschine sein. Arme zu greifen Beine zu gehn kein Schmerz kein Gedanke
(I'm not Hamlet. I'm not playing a role anymore.... I go home and kill time, at
one/with my undivided self.... I want to be a machine. Arms for grabbing legs
for walkin', no pain no thought.) (17-21) 11

Ophelia/Elektra willingly takes over responsibility for the drama, making up for Hamlet's
lack of conviction with the angered determination and sheer violence that permeate her
every word.

Suicide/Not-suicide

Like Hofmannsthal's heroine, this Ophelia/Elektra toys with her own mortality,
though not as a victorious culmination twirling in ecstatic dance as for her predecessor.
This rebellious woman shows none of the sadness of the young maiden mourning her dead
father, but instead relates her own suicide attempt with sullen coldness:

Ich bin Ophelia. Die der Fluß nicht behalten hat. Die Frau am Strick Die Frau

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11This line is yet another of Müller's inconspicuous allusions, this time to Andy
Warhol's famous line: "I want to be a machine." If Hamlet wants to be a machine, it is
Elektra who vehemently refuses this role, preferring to flirt with self-destruction than to be
captured in the endless cycle of production. The particular motivation for the machine
metaphor, Müller tells us, is that during his stay in Bulgaria in 1956 when he was first
engaging with the Hamlet material, there was a nuclear power plant directly across from
the building where he was living (Krieg ohne Schlacht 293). This impetus, coupled with
the experience of his first trip to the United States, where he was confronted with
television-obsessed American audiences who had no respect for or understanding of
theatre, left Müller with a rage against the tyranny of the machine, one further emphasized
by Robert Wilson's exaggerated robot-inspired production.
mit den aufgeschnittenen Pulsadern Die Frau mit dem Überdosis AUF DEN LIPPEN SCHNEE Die Frau mit dem Kopf im Gasher. Gestern habe ich aufgehört mich zu töten. Ich bin allein mit meinen Brüsten, meinen Schenkeln, meinem Schoß. (I am Ophelia. Whom the river didn't keep. The woman hanging by a rope The woman with the slashed arteries The woman with the overdose SNOW ON THE LIPS The woman with her head in the gas oven. Yesterday I stopped killing myself. I'm alone with my breasts, my thighs, my womb.) (15)

This is a matter-of-fact account of self-destructive behaviour, the kind that leads to the original Ophelia's death. With Müller's character, however, it is ambiguous whether she ends up dead or alive, or if she hovers in some liminal corpse-like state. This Ophelia is no benign appropriation of her Shakespearean namesake, rather the character serves as a palimpsest of three powerful historical women. The first is the revered socialist leader, Rosa Luxemburg, "Die der Fluß nicht behalten hat" ("That the river didn't keep"), murdered but not forgotten, the second, the haunting figure of Ulrike Meinhoff, "Die

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12Müller confesses that he seeks to reproduce a Kafkaesque language, which, in contrast to Brecht's style is "geräumiger... [und] mehr Realität aufnehmen kann" ("roomier... [and] can take on more reality") (qtd. in Wieghaus 268). The author also cites Gilles Deleuze's Toward a Minor Literature, in which Kafka's style is investigated as a form of covert critique, as an inspiration for his language experimentation in Hamletmaschine (Krieg ohne Schlacht 295).

13Rosa Luxemburg, assassinated on January 15th, 1919, was thrown into the Landwehr Canal in Berlin, where her body remained uncovered until May of that year. In this sense she resembles the unburied corpse of Hofmannsthal's Elektra: unfinished business. The legacy of Luxemburg's socialist ideals were far from dead, but remained as visible as her body, which is referred to later in the play: Ophelia in "Tiefsee"("Deep sea").
Frau am Strick" ("The woman hanging by a rope"), a prominent member of the RAF terrorist group which threatened the authority of the Bonn government, the third, the author's own wife, Inge Müller, "Die Frau mit dem aufgeschnittenen Pulsadem Die Frau mit dem Überdosis...Die Frau mit dem Kopf im Gasherd" ("The woman with the slashed arteries The woman with the overdose...The woman with her head in the gas oven"). All of these women died, but their influence has not diminished. The horror of their respective demises grants credence to their memory. The very fact that this Ophelia/Elektra is modelled on a proliferation of cultural icons and personal loss contributes to the liminality of the character, whose constantly shifting identity hovers on the cusp of life and death. The image echoes the author's conviction that "es ist ein Irrtum, daß die Toten tot sind" ("it is a mistake [to believe] that the dead are dead") (qtd. in Kluge 145).

Müller means to emphasize the capacity of collective cultural memory to transgress

\[\text{14\footnote{Müller mentions Ulrike Meinhoff in his journal on Hamletmaschine (Krieg ohne Schlacht 294), citing the incident when the apartment she shared with her husband was raided and the furniture thrown out the window. He interprets this event as the final destruction of any bourgeois existence on their part and their collective entry into "Illegality" ("Illegality"). Meinhoff fits well with the image of Ophelia's suicide attempt, as it is unclear whether or not she took her own life in prison. This is what was reported by the authorities, although there was suspicion that she was killed. As with Luxemburg, Ulrike Meinhoff's death did not lessen her influence. It was Müller's plan to have Meinhoff's picture appear in the Suhrkamp edition of Hamletmaschine, but when the publishing house refused to allow this addition, Müller cancelled the project (Krieg ohne Schlacht 295).}}\]

\[\text{15\footnote{The effect of Müller's historical loading of his Ophelia/Elektra by linking the character to the stories of many women is strengthened by Robert Wilson's production, which has no fewer than three actors playing the part (he also allows for four different Hamlets). In another production (Berlin, 1995), the director chose to have both Hamlet and Ophelia/Elektra played by women, thus underlying Müller's own belief in the revolutionary capacities of women, made clear through his own description: "Das Europa der Frau" ("The Europe of Woman") (15).}}\]
and destabilize boundaries when he transforms his suicidal Ophelia into the aggressively violent Elektra. She (Elektra) stopped killing herself (Ophelia) to live her dying in a more visceral way, as her words testify: "Ich lege Feuer an mein Gefängnis. Ich werfe meine Kleider in das Feuer. Ich grabe die Uhr aus meiner Brust die mein Herz war. Ich gehe auf die Straße, gekleidet in Blut" ("I set fire to my prison. I throw my clothes in the fire. I dig the clock that was my heart out of my breast. I go into the street dressed in blood") (15). The new Elektra is up front about the intensity of her rage, using her own body as a theatre of cruelty. She is unafraid of the pain and danger of writing a new form of history, one that involves wrenching out one's own pacemaking device.

**Queen of the Ruins: My Body as Waste-site**

Ophelia/Elektra may have stopped killing herself, but her body shows obvious signs of abuse, for it is confined to a wheelchair from beginning to end. Just before her last lines the stage directions read: "Tiefsee. Ophelia im Rollstuhl. Fische Trümmer Leichen und Leichenteile treiben vorbei...während zwei Männer in Arztkitteln sie und den Rollstuhl von unten nach oben in Mullbinden schnüren." ("Deep sea. Ophelia in a wheelchair. Fish ruins corpses and dead limbs hurry past...while two men in white smocks wrap bandages around her and the wheelchair, from bottom to top") (23; his emphasis). The proliferation of dead bodies surrounding this Ophelia-cum-Elektra drags her down with them. They initiate her into the decaying world of allegorical ruin, though there is still breath within her. If Ophelia/Elektra has halted or postponed her own death, she is unequivocal in her own destructive conviction. Instead of pitying herself as the
victim of the cruel world, enslaved within a chthonian realm, she reappropriates her body, not as a baby-machine, but rather as an organism intent upon annihilating all life-forms. She prophesies an apocalyptic end, ironically transforming her nourishing womb into a death-cave of its own:

Im Namen der Opfer. Ich stoße allen Samen aus, den ich empfangen habe. Ich verwandle die Milch meiner Brüste in tödliches Gift. Ich nehme die Welt zurück, die ich geboren habe. Ich erstickte die Welt, die ich geboren habe, zwischen meinen Schenkeln. Ich begrabe sie in meiner Scham. Nieder mit dem Glück der Unterwerfung. Es lebe der Haß, die Verachtung, der Aufstand, der Tod. Wenn sie mit Fleischmessern durch eure Schlafzimmer geht, werdet ihr die Wahrheit wissen. (In the name of victims. I eject all the sperm I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into deadly poison. I take back the world I gave birth to. I choke between my thighs the world I gave birth to. I bury it in my shame. Down with the happiness of subjugation. Long live hate, contempt, rebellion death. When she walks through your bedrooms carrying butcher knives you'll know the truth). (23)

The last line is another of Müller's citations, this time from a less lofty author than Shakespeare or Eliot. It is part of the testimony made by Susan Atkins, a member of the Charles Manson "family" responsible for the Tate-LaBianca murders in 1969 (Müller, Über die Schlacht 294). We can almost hear the author's ironic laughter as he puts such violent words into the mouth of a corpse-like invalid physically incapable of carrying out her promise of destruction. In this ultra-serious scene, a metaphor for the unbearable
weight of the ruin of history, Müller's inconspicuous use of a tabloid quote from *Time* magazine instantly reminds us that history is made with kitchen knives. The author lightens his heroine's load by using a playful juxtaposition of cultural frames (American TV kitsch/ German history) to confront her own maimed status and the collective ruin over which she presides. Even though Ophelia/Elektra willfully sabotages her own body in order to squelch the possibility of producing future generations, Müller's dark humor keeps morbidity at bay.\(^{16}\) History with a capital "H" suffocates between her clenched thighs, and yet the invisible ruinous heaps are the raw material for new histories. If Hamlet expresses a desire to become the machine, Ophelia/Elektra distorts the purposes of the machine, producing alternative versions of history with her body as anti-baby-machine.

**Destruction Machine vs. Totenkitsch**

The portrait of Elektra in *Hamletmaschine* initiates an alliance with other female mythological figures such as Medea and Phaedra, who take control of their circumstances through violent acts rather than give in to their fate. Müller is at pains to portray mythology not as some idyllic origin of humanity, but as a truly imperfect world impregnated with horror and destruction. Unlike Bachofen's vision of the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy as an evolutionary progress, Müller reminds us of the proximity of myth's brutality to the quotidian by infusing his drama with references to contemporary

\(^{16}\)Müller is clear about how he wants his audiences to view his work: "Wenn man die 'Hamletmaschine' nicht als Komödie begreift, muß man mit dem Stück scheitern" ("If you don't understand 'Hamletmaschine' as a comedy, the play will be a failure") (Müller, "Schreiben aus Schadenfreude" 3).
political circumstances. His Ophelia/Elektra's role underscores the *Jetztzeit* of myth in the sense that her suicide/non-suicide is destined to repeat itself indefinitely in a cycle of destruction without end. For Müller, as for Benjamin, death is never a reason for sentimentality or nostalgia, for this is precisely the sleep-inducing reaction that stifles any opportunity for reflective redemption, as he warns: "diese Beinhäuser, dieses Museum, der Versuch, Tote zu ehren durch Monumentalisierung... Das ist Totenkitsch" ("these charnel houses, this museum, the attempt to honour the dead through monumentalization... This is death-kitsch") (qtd. in Kluge 146). Müller disallows the kitschification of the dead by

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Müller is not alone amongst writers of the former GDR in his appropriations of mythological subject matter. Christa Wolf, Anna Seghers, Volker Braun and Peter Hacks are just a few of the many writers who turned to myth as a means of illustrating what could not be said in plain terms under the socialist regime. As Müller explains: "Ich möchte heute kein antikes Stück, keine Bearbeitung eines antiken Stoffes mehr schreiben. Aber in den frühen sechziger Jahren konnte man kein Stück über den Stalinismus schreiben. Man brauchte diese Art von Modell, wenn man die wirklichen Fragen stellen wollte" ("Today, I don't want to write another play of antiquity, not one more re-working of a Classical theme. But in the early sixties you couldn't write a play about Stalinism. You needed this kind of model in order to ask real questions") (Lothringer 98).

This is Benjamin's term for the dialectical conception of history as both an interruption and a construction from multiple and simultaneous viewpoints, best exemplified by the image in his "Theses on History" of the angel glancing back to the past while being bombarded by the storm of the future. His perception of history as *Jetztzeit*, literally "time of now," denies both origin and *telos*, while containing the entirety of history and the eternal present at once. At the heart of the simultaneity and repetition that constitutes *Jetztzeit* is the expression of irreconcilable difference. *Jetztzeit* is intimately connected to Benjamin's understanding of allegory as an inevitable backward glance, a return to the scene of ruinous disintegration. Müller literalizes Benjamin's now-time through endless repetitions of the adverbial signal in Hamlet's angry words directed at his mother: "Jetzt binde ich dir die Hände auf den Rücken.... Jetzt zerreiße ich das Brautkleid. Jetzt beschmiere ich die Fetzen deines Brautkleides.... Jetzt nehme ich dich, meine Mutter, in seiner, meines Vaters, unsichtbaren Spuren" ("Now I tie your hands behind your back.... Now, I rip up the wedding gown. Now, I smear the shreds of your wedding gown.... Now, I take you, my mother, in his, my father's, invisible tracks") (13; my emphasis).
refusing his Elektra a glorified and sanitized death; instead, we get to see her in a semi-mutilated state, mummified in bandages. He wants us to smell death, not the perfume of funeral flowers.19

Les Mouches: From Maggots to Flies

At first glance, Jean-Paul Sartre's Les Mouches (1943) does not appear to coincide with the plays of Hofmannsthal and Müller because his Electre is not the central character, nor can she be said to triumph in any way at the conclusion of the action.20 Oreste is the

19Müller's Elektra is introduced in the small vignette simply entitled "Elektratext." This is as concise a version of the Atrean myth as one could possibly conceive, consisting of a sequential list of violent acts beginning with Tantalus and ending with the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The tone is as boldly flat as the one Ophelia/Elektra uses to report her own destructive activities. It is reminiscent more of a bored broadcaster than of a tragic heroine. Elektra's anguish is reduced to a single sentence: "Elektra, zweite Tochter Agamemnons, rettet Orestes, ihren Bruder, vor dem Schwert des Aigisthos und schickt ihn nach Phokis" ("Elektra, Agamemnon's second daughter, saves Orestes, her brother, from Aigisthos's sword and sends him to Phokis") (119). This piece could equally be seen as a sister-text to Peter Hacks' quasi-"reader's digest" version of this same myth entitled: "Ophelia oder: Über die Wiederverwendung der Mythen": "In the unmittelbaren Begebenheiten dieser fünf Herren ereigneten sich die Schlachtung und Verspeisung von 6 Knaben... 2 Schändungen von Töchtern durch ihre Väter, 1 Vatermord, 1 Muttermord, 1 Gattenmord, 1 Tochtermord..." ("In the immediate events of these five men there took place the slaughter and consumption of 6 children... the rape of 2 daughters by their fathers, 1 patricide, 1 matricide, 1 husband-murder, 1 daughter-murder...") (qtd. in Emmerich 139). The horror of this brutality is brought out by the ironic deadpan tone used to list off the acts of violence, similar to the voice Müller adopts for his Hamletmaschine.

20Lois Mary Cech argues that the reason why Sartre's Electre does not triumph is because he has created her as a symbol of "natural, human sensuousness and primitive emotions," traits she claims were introduced by Hofmannsthal and characterize the archetype throughout the twentieth century (452). I disagree with Cech's statement that these traits hinder Electre from reaching her full potential as a heroine. Her reasons for not following Oreste are more the emotional strain she must bear. Sartre's Electre, far from being a slave to her natural instincts, is the one who manages to convince Oreste, the tourist passing through, of the urgency and necessity of action.
hero of what could be called an existentialist manifesto in dramatic form. What does link this play to the other two I have discussed is her proximity to the chthonian aspect of death. The entire drama is pungent with the stench of rotting corpses feasted on by the flies, the signature insect of Argos, which welcome all visitors. Oreste and his tutor announce themselves as tourists making a stop at the death-infected city and are greeted by Jupiter. The Olympian informs them of the curse that haunts the kingdom, telling them of the people who have become slaves to their fear, caught in a useless cycle of confession and repentance. They worship the dead, carrying out the rituals of the fake religion set up by Egisthe to tame the people with their own anguish. Mourning is a way of life, and the flies are a reminder that the corpses are not imaginary. And yet they are alive enough to propagate the terror that has become the norm, as Oreste observes:

Des murs barbouillés de sang, des millions de mouches, une odeur de boucherie, une chaleur de cloporte, des rues désertes, un dieu à face d'assassiné, des larves terrorisées qui se frappent la poitrine au fond de leurs maisons—et ces cris, ces cris insupportable... (Blood-smeared walls, millions of flies, a stench of slaughter, and the stifling heat, empty streets and a god with an assassin's face, and terrorized worms beating their breasts in the core of their houses--and those screams, those unbearable screams). (61)

21Marc Eli Blanchard remarks that Sartre, like his contemporaries (twentieth-century French dramatists who use mythological sources), is more interested in plot than in character: "Orestes is merely a character in search of a significant act" (46). I agree with Blanchard, though I would say that in the case of Les Mouches it is the plot that ends up creating the character, that the character emerges from the interaction with other characters who are mutually engaged toward a collective end. One might see Electre, then, not merely as a weak character, but rather as a figure embedded within the action of the play.
Oreste is horrified by what he witnesses and contemplates leaving Argos at frequent
intervals, for he feels no attachment to his former home. The prodigal son claims to have
no memory and thus no sense of engagement with the godforsaken city.

Electre, on the other hand, is determined to get her revenge and, unlike the rest of
the people of Argos, has not been brainwashed by Egisthe's phony ceremonies for the
dead. She spits in Jupiter's face and taunts him with her youthful body, the antithesis of
the walking corpses all around her: "Eh bien, sens-moi, à présent, sens mon odeur de chair
fraîche. Je suis jeune, moi, je suis vivante, ça doit te faire horreur" ("Well, smell me, now,
smell my odour of fresh flesh. I myself am young, I'm living, that should horrify you")

Like Hofmannsthal's and Müller's Elektras, this young woman enters the scene
knowing no fear; she dares to mock the most powerful of the gods, and impresses Oreste
with her frank impudence. She and her mother exchange caustic insults as Clytemnestre
attempts to convince Electre to obey Egisthe's orders to attend the annual ceremony
honouring the day of Agamemnon's murder. Electre explains to Oreste that on this festive
occasion the stone is rolled away and the dead are allowed to roam the city for one night,
terrorizing the citizens of Argos by reminding them of their collective guilt. The scornful
daughter finally agrees to attend the orchestrated ritual though she infuriates Egisthe by
turning up in a white dress, marking her refusal to join the mourners in their fear and
repentance. She chooses this moment to expose the ludicrous annual ritual by performing
a dance of joy, exclaiming: "Je danse, voyez, je danse, et je ne sens rien que le souffle du
vent dans mes cheveux. Où sont les morts? Croyez-vous qu'ils dansent avec moi, en
mesure?" ("I'm dancing, see, I'm dancing, and I feel nothing but the wind blowing in my
Where are the dead? Do you think they're dancing with me, in step?"
(85). Instead of dancing herself to her own death as does Hofmannsthal's Elektra, this character cavorts in defiance of death, at once warding off the spirits of the dead with her ecstasy, while at the same time seducing them into playing her game.

Although her life is endangered by Egisthe's decree to have her killed on sight, Electre refuses Oreste's offer to rescue her and take her to Corinthe, claiming that he has ruined her plans. She wants to carve a new history from the maggoty destruction scene that prevails over the kingdom. Unlike the obedient yet mindless citizens of Argos, Electre appears to have escaped the dreamy trance that paralyzes the rest of the people.22 Her fatal flaw, however, is that she clings to her hatred as if she is afraid of the freedom that matricide might bring. Electre falls prey to a utopian ideal which collapses into her worst nightmare. She feels joy at the murders of Clytemnestre and Egisthe, but soon enough she succumbs to her guilty conscience, symbolized by the buzzing flies, hot on the trail of the fresh corpses Oreste has provided them. Electre exclaims:

Écoute!... Écoute le bruit de leurs ailes, pareil au ronflement d'une forge. Elles nous entourent, Oreste. Elles nous guettent; tout à l'heure elles s'abattront sur nous, et je sentirai mille pattes gluantes sur mon corps. (Listen! The sound of their wings is like a roaring furnace. They're all round us, Orestes. They're waiting for us; soon they'll swoop down on us and I shall feel thousands of

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22 Benjamin names this state "phantasmagoria," the negative aspect of myth, insisting that: "die Menschheit solange der mythischen Angst ausgeliefert sein wird, wie die phantasmagorie in ihr eine Stelle hat" ("humanity will continue to be at the mercy of mythic fears as long as phantasmagoria has a place in it") (GS V 61).
Sartre maps out his existentialist code, in which he shows Oreste embracing the néant of freedom, engaging himself and making choices that inevitably leave him alone in the world. Electre represents those who succumb to fear and withdraw in a safe but cowardly enslavement to the familiar cycle of suffering and hate; in black and white Sartrean terms, Electre is essence and Oreste is existence. Sartre's use of the Atrean myth is a harsh criticism of collaboration in Nazi-occupied France, taking liberties with the legend to get his point across. His version can be compared to Sophocles' Electra in that, even after having committed two murders, Oreste feels no remorse, while the significant role of the Erinnyes is reminiscent of Aeschylus's Eumenides. The difference is that Sartre has his Electre pay the price of Oreste's freedom.

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23 Electre's essence represents the static finitude of Being (Dasein) as transcendence, whereas Oreste succeeds in achieving a transitive state, an emergence from Being to becoming (Slochower 310).

24 Specifically, Sartre targets the Vichy government because of its adoption of national repentance, acknowledging past sins and pleading forgiveness (Hobson 86). Similarly, Cuban playwright Virgilio Piñera targets the oppressive regime in his 1943 version of the Atrean legend, Electra Garrigó. The setting is as claustrophobic as that of Hofmannsthal's narrow stage, but this time Electra finds herself surrounded by white colonial columns much like those in O'Neill's New England milieu in Mourning Becomes Electra. Although the characters are from antiquity, their names are cubanized, and the chorus sings to popular music to contextualize the action, and to heighten the political critique. In the end, Orestes feels liberated by the murders (like Sartre's character) and Electra is left on her own to live with the haunting memory of the awful curse. Like women in her culture, she is left to care for family home and the dead. Like O'Neill's Electra character, Lavinia, Piñera's heroine identifies her fate with the tomb-like enclosure of the house: "Hay esta puerta, la puerta Electra" ("There is this door, the Electra door") (84).

25 Sartre's decision to make Oreste the principal character follows the example of Crébillon's Électre (1708) and Voltaire's Oreste (1749), both of which favour the male sibling and make him the leader of the action.
However, Sartre's decision to characterize Electre as the sacrificial lamb is not arbitrary. *Les Mouches* is as much a reaction against Jean Giraudoux's *Electre* (1937) as it is a camouflaged call to engagement in the resistance movement. His treatment of Electre as ultimately weak and incapable of true commitment opposes Giraudoux's, whose heroine becomes the symbol of a transcendent and perhaps nationalist idealism. Giraudoux's play is concerned with showing the dangers of leaving justice in human hands,\(^{26}\) which he illustrates by showing the cancerous sickness that the secrets of one family inflict upon a whole nation.\(^{27}\) Here, Electre is obsessed with uncovering the hidden "truth" of her father's murder and her brother's disappearance; hers is the task of "unmasking" the assassin and putting the dead to rest so that the requiem can begin at last. The murders are followed by a sense of resolution and relief, expressed by the wise Femme Narsès: "l'air pourtant se respire" ("even so, the air breathes") (685). And yet Oreste suffers nothing but guilt and shame over his deed. Overwhelmed by remorse, he lacks the courage to stand behind his act, a cowardice shared with Egisthe and, in the end, Electre in Sartre's version of the myth. Through her struggle to shed light upon the dark past, Giraudoux's Electre is raised to the level of saviour, symbolizing the hope for the nation of Argos. In view of the

\(^{26}\)Sartre directly contradicts this sentiment with the words he puts into Oreste's mouth: "La justice est une affaire d'hommes" ("Justice is a matter between men") (106).

\(^{27}\)Giraudoux claimed never to have read any contemporary Electra plays prior to writing his own: "De tous ces ouvrages, je n'en ai encore ouvert aucun" ("Of all these works, I haven't yet opened any of them") (La Pléiade 1548). Nevertheless, strains of the theme of family secrets from O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* seem to appear in his *Electre*, where hidden knowledge also plays a role in poisoning future generations. In O'Neill's case, however, he is referring specifically to the repressed nature of the New England protestant family, whereas Giraudoux is more concerned with the relationship between family and nation.
polemic Les Mouches mounts, it becomes clear that Sartre was much less interested in making a statement about Electre per se than he was in countering her depiction as a redemptive role-model.

On the surface, it may appear that the final scene of Les Mouches has nothing in common with Elektra's end in Hofmannsthal or Müller. Sartre's heroine neither dies triumphantly nor ends up a wheelchair-bound invalid; Electre is alive at the end, though as a mere shadow of her former self. What unites all three of these Electra figures, however, is the liminal state they finally inhabit, leaving the respective dramas in an indeterminate state. The irony is that Hofmannsthal's Elektra achieves a certain freedom from the confining boundaries of her individual subjectivity in death alone, and Müller's character is unconcerned by her own corpse-like state, while Sartre's Electre is left to suffer in the prison her life has become.  

Mourning Becomes Electra: Haunting heredity

Life also becomes unbearable for Eugene O'Neill's Electra-character, Lavinia, in Mourning Becomes Electra (1931). When the carnage is over her whole family is dead, either through murder or suicide, and she is left to suffer in the void that remains. Like

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28Volker Roloff remarks that Sartre, like Hofmannsthal, had an interest in baroque Spanish theatre and in particular Calderón's La vida es sueño. Sartre took from this example, amongst other things, the conception of a person as a persona, so that the characters appear almost as marionettes without autonomy, independence or individuality (97). As with Calderón's theatre, there is no finality in death in Sartre's dramatic world; on the contrary, his characters remain within the fictional world of the play even after they are physically dead, most notably in Les Jeux sont faits. This has important ramifications for my argument because it provides a link with the kind of death Hofmannsthal (also influenced by Calderón) had in mind for his Elektra.
Sartre's Electre, Lavinia is destined to carry on the family tradition, as is made plain by her remarkable and eerie resemblance to her mother Christine, a resemblance that is first apparent when she and her brother Orin embark on their journey to an island in the South Sea. From the characteristic green dress Christine wears to her graceful movements, Lavinia becomes a carbon copy of her mother. As Orin observes: "You don't know how like Mother you've become, Vinnie. I don't mean only how pretty you've gotten.... I mean the change in your soul, too. I've watched it ever since we sailed for the East. Little by little it grew like Mother's soul—as if you were stealing hers—as if her death had set you free—to become her" (827). Contrary to Orin's first impression—that Lavinia has been set free by her mother's death—she has become as much a slave as Sartre's Electre to the smothering hatred and anger she feels towards her mother. While the Clytemnestre of Les Mouches (like Hofmannsthal's) bears the signs of decay, the ugliness of her physical body mirroring the rottenness at her core, O'Neill's Christine masks the poison in her blood with stunning looks and the charm to match. And yet both their daughters inherit an equally

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29While Giraudoux might have taken from O'Neill the legacy of family secrets and the poison caused by repression, Sartre possibly appropriates the idea of "like mother like daughter" from his American predecessor. Like Lavinia, who emerges after the matricide as the spitting image of Christine, the Sartrean Electre begins to display an uncanny resemblance to Clytemnestre. While O'Neill draws attention to the inherited curse, Sartre seems to emphasize that fear forces his character to fall back into the straitjacket of essence, adopting her mother's look of guilt. The daughters take on the moral traits of their respective mothers as well as the physical ones. In the case of O'Neill this is clearly an indication of the doomed psychological family: Lavinia demonstrates the cycle of suffering that follows from one generation to the next without end. The family portraits that appear as visual links to the past are like mirrors that recall the psychological vortex of the repressive New England society. In both Sartre's and O'Neill's Electra characters, however, the cyclical nature of physical resemblance hints at a kind of resurrection and denies the finality of death. Both women are destined to live as the walking cadavers of their mother's bodies, dwelling permanently in the maternal chthonian realm.
dismal plight as they take on their mothers' burden of guilt. Both Electra figures are
overwhelmed by the weight of the family's crimes. As Lavinia testifies:

I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here is a worse act
of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone! I'll have the
shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the
dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out
and the last Mannon is let die!...I know they will see to it I live for a long
time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born! (866-7)

This does not mean that Sartre's Electre can be compared to Lavinia in general, since
Mourning Becomes Electra does not in any way offer the hope of the existentialist
perspective. O'Neill uses the myth as a metaphor for the repression of the New England
family at the time of the civil war and offers his characters little room to manoeuvre
around social determinism. Because Orin commits suicide shortly before the end of the
play, leaving Lavinia to suffer on her own, there is no hope for the pseudo-salvation
Sartre attempts in Les Mouches. Like Electre, Lavinia is nothing more than a walking
corpse. The house that was once a refuge has now become her tomb, as the stage
directions reveal:

She ascends to the portico--and then turns and stands for a while, stiff and
square-shouldered, staring into the sunlight with frozen eyes. Seth leans out of
the window at the right of the door and pulls the shutters closed with a decisive
bang. As if this were a word of command, Lavinia pivots sharply on her heel
and marches woodenly into the house, closing the door behind her. (867)
Lavinia does not have the good fortune of Hofmannsthal's heroine, but is destined to endure a lengthy death-in-life rather than a new life in death. Even her body now moves "woodenly," as if rigor mortis has already set in. And while she resembles Müller's Elektra, in that both women appear to be living their own deathscenes, burdened by the weight of a history replete with horrors, O'Neill's heroine seems unable to manipulate or distort the past from a vantagepoint of the present (Jetztzeit), and therefore succumbs in the same way as does Sartre's Electre to fear and phantasmagoric guilt. The family and its dwelling place have no history and no future in O'Neill's plays, but are caught in a neverending spiral of inherited horror. In this respect, Morning Becomes Electra resembles the legacy of terror told in Aeschylus's Agamemnon. Lavinia tells Seth, the wise hired-man: "There's no rest in this house which Grandfather built as a temple of Hate and Death" (859). The ghosts that inhabit the house cannot be easily persuaded to find other lodgings.30

Traces of Antigone

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30 Benito Pérez Galdós's 1901 Electra presents a character who, like Lavinia, is burdened by a legacy of social and domestic repression. The Atrean myth is barely recognizable in the story of an orphaned girl who returns to Spain from France, where she has lived most of her life in boarding schools, only to find that her family has conflicting expectations of her. Electra's mother gave birth to her out of wedlock and it is feared she will have inherited this waywardness: one faction wants her to enter a convent and the other tries to marry her off. She does marry and face a domestic fate as "ángel de hogar" ("angel of the house"), a caged bird in a strict society, though she does find solace in her mother's voice from the dead: "Mi voz desolverá la paz á tu consciencia" ("My voice bestows peace upon your conscience") (279). Like O'Neill's character, this Electra is confined to a house by the repression of a society, alive though lifeless. The difference is that she is not haunted by the dead, but comforted by a voice from the grave.
Everywhere in these Atrean dramas we encounter images of enclosure almost to the point of suffocation, which alerts the reader to the obvious intertextual link between Electra and her mythological counterpart, Antigone. The daughter of Oedipus defies Creon's prohibition against the burial of her brother Polynices, and is imprisoned in a cave as punishment for her actions, where she commits suicide before she can be killed. Electra's death is and is not like that of Antigone. Both women are fatherless and are obsessed with the defiance of authority. Each of them looks to a brother for inspiration, either dead or alive, though each must also endure an antagonistic relationship with their sisters (Ismene, Antigone's sister, is the equivalent of Chrysothemis in Sophocles' Electra). And yet, the difference is that Antigone's death is motivated, whereas Electra's is not; that is, the conditions of the tragic peripeteia are never fulfilled for Electra. However, the various depictions of Electra's end do coincide with that of Antigone. Electra's confinement either in death or in a tomb-like existence simulates the cave where Antigone dies, and similarly her self-destructive suicide can be compared to Elektra's willed end in the Hofmannsthal play, as well as her chosen corpse-like existence in Mourning Becomes Electra, Les Mouches or Hamletmaschine. When Antigone hangs herself in the cave, she

31Steiner tells us that from c.1790 to c.1905 Sophocles' Antigone was widely held to be "a work nearer to perfection than any other produced by the human spirit," as the nineteenth century attempted to come to grips with a new view of Hellenism in general (1). I agree with Steiner that there is a sublime quality to the Antigone seldom found in a work of art, be it tragedy or otherwise. While the Electra myth does not achieve the kind of closure Antigone does, it unsettles its audiences perhaps to a greater degree. How can the act of burying one's brother compete with matricide?

32It is quite likely that Hofmannsthal had Antigone's fate in mind when working on his Elektra, since it was only a year since he had written a verse-prologue to the Antigone for a 1900 performance in Berlin. Instead of writing his own version of Antigone,
is literally in a suspended state, her body symbolizing the limbo between realms. It is as though she has been buried alive and now inhabits an ontological indeterminacy, her decaying body reminding all of her fateful pride. One of Hegel’s most important points in the Aesthetics is that burial provides a kind of sanctity for the body, saving it from physical and spiritual decay, keeping it in/raising it to (in the sense of aufheben) an ideal state. The difference between Antigone’s exit and the departure of the Electras in the plays I have discussed is that, while the Oedipal daughter’s death can be read as either Aufhebung or ontological indeterminacy, Agamemnon’s offspring is left forever in the liminal realm of allegory. She represents the “double articulation” of hope and destruction, the refusal of a reduction to one or the other. Electra is both forever of the flesh, allied with chthonian materiality and ruin, and is also master of her own self-willed death, figured as both a productive decay and a joyful disruption.

Hofmannsthal chose the Electra material, perhaps because of his abhorrence for Goethe’s Iphigenie auf Tauris, with its reputation as a work of poise and grandeur. Despite Antigone’s renowned strength, she does not have Electra’s violent streak.

33Hegel’s considerable commentary on Sophocles’ Antigone in the Aesthetics presents an alternate view of this tragic death. For him, Antigone’s act raises the question of Kriegstaat vs. Privatmensch in the sense that, in burying her brother, Antigone is defying the laws of Sittlichkeit (ethics or morality grounded in cultural codes) (Steiner 26).
Hysteria and Beyond
Chapter Four

Elektra and "Anna O.": Images of Hystery

The Myth of the Wandering Womb

If twentieth-century representations of Electra are characterized by the omnipresence of death in its proximity and affinity with the materiality of the flesh, revisions of the myth are equally permeated with associations of hysteria: the Electras of this century are mad. But is it possible to mistake death for hysteria? One would think not, and yet the fourth-century BCE philosopher Heracleides of Pontus writes the story of the apparently dead woman who is subsequently revived. Galen recounts the incident: "[Heracleides] says that woman who had neither breath nor pulse could only be distinguished from a corpse in one way: that is, that she had a little warmth around the middle part of her body" (qtd. in King 34). There are numerous stories of women "without breath or pulse," who are nevertheless revived. The evidence of this false death lies in the innate heat in the womb-area, apparently a sign that hysteria invades the body.

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1When I use the term hysteria with respect to Electra, I am referring equally to the social and cultural construction of hysteria as a phenomenon as well as to the clinical disorder. Freud linked hysteria to repressed memories and fantasies that were converted into somatic behaviour and symptoms. He outlined two kinds of hysteria: conversion hystery and anxiety hysteria. In both, Oedipal conflict is blocked by repression, although in conversion hysteria a mental conflict is displaced by a bodily symptom through dissociation, whereas in anxiety hysteria the ego does not overcome anxiety despite obsessive phobic mechanisms (Laplanche and Pontalis 194-95; Moore 89). In Freud's early work, hysteria was used as a blanket term for psychic disorders, though he differentiated numerous forms of neuroses that might previously have been labelled generally as hysteria. In lay terms, hysteria is used to describe irrational or inexplicable behaviour. When speaking of Electra's hysteria, I will mostly refer to this general usage, although it should be taken into account that Freud's medicalization of behaviour has permeated both language and culture in the twentieth century. And, this latter context will also be significant to my argument in this chapter.
Although Electra is never diagnosed with the ailment described by Heracleides and Galen, this example offers a useful analogy for illustrating the intersection of death, hysteria and femininity. Hysteria is not only linked to femininity, but specifically to the organs of maternity. The womb and its affliction connote the maternal and all its irrational forces. This is a designation given to hysteria by the Greeks, who believed that the disorder could be treated by putting the wandering womb back in its place. Mostly virgins and widows were found to be afflicted with the ailment and so marriage was thought to be the best remedy (Bennett 238). Perhaps the womb's waywardness is in fact the means by which an alternative maternal force is actually strengthened. Such a concept will gain more significance in the context of later discussion, where it will be clear that Elektra subverts her role as hyster in Hofmannsthal's drama, where she subtly manipulates Klytämnestra into relinquishing her maternal forces. The formidable power of the maternal does not die even when matricide has left Klytämnestra's physical body slain and inert. The Furies, embodying the dead mother's spirit and chthonian forces, aim to avenge her death, and although they are absent from the fin-de-siècle Elektra, I propose that they symbolize the same rage-filled frenzy that typifies the hyster. If this is the case, the negative connotations of Elektra's so-called madness can be seen in an entirely different light.

Section II dealt with the significance of the heroine's dance of death in Hofmannsthal's Elektra, and this chapter will focus on the character's representation as a hyster in the same work. On the surface, Elektra's ecstatic exit performance seems unrelated to the fact that she is portrayed as a madwoman, but I would like to establish a
covert link between her death and her portrayal as a hysteretic. Elektra's maenadic dance bears some resemblance to the somatic symptoms of hysteria: both are displays of erratic and uncontrolled bodily movement. The dance has puzzled and shocked audiences just as the jerky and involuntary movement of limbs has perplexed medical doctors. Perhaps Elektra learns to use her hysteria as a means of controlling her audience and physician alike, deliberately eliciting their fears through her inexplicable dionysian outburst. This is one link between death and hysteria, but the other is through the intersection with Clytemnestra's Furies. Traditionally, the chthonian spirits come to avenge the death of the mother, and I propose that through her hysteria and subsequent self-willed death, Elektra appropriates the role of the irrational Furies and thereby gains access to their maternally identified power. Elektra not only subverts her role as hysteretic to control those around her, as I will show, but she also revises the concept of hysteria, transforming it from the plight of a helpless victim into a symbol of mythology's powerful female spirits and suggesting a new maternal allegiance.

For Juliet Mitchell, the link between hysteria and its resonances of childbirth, maternity and reproductive sexuality is an important one. She notes that in Shakespeare's time the disease was known as "suffocation of the mother" (91). Mitchell also forges a vital connection between the trauma that precipitates hysterical symptoms and a symbolic confrontation with death: "The interaction between death and sexuality (and their relationship to the final two basic drives of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the death drive and Eros) is, I believe, particular and of particular importance to hysteria" (92). She goes on to say that the threat of death initiates a dialogue with the maternal as an integral
component of the hysteric's journey: "Death: the return to Mother Earth" (92). As I too have argued, Electra's madness is a substitute for the Furies, demonstrating an allegiance to Clytemnestra's maternal powers.

Luce Irigaray exposes the strong link between the womb as source and keeper of hysteria and the iconography of the cave which imprisons women in Western cultural consciousness. In her critical investigation of philosophical and psychoanalytic inscriptions of femininity, Irigaray reads Plato against himself:

C'est du mythe de la caverne qu'on peut par exemple, ou exemplairement, repartir. Pour le lire, cette fois, comme la métaphore--en toute rigueur impossible on le verra inscrit dans le texte--de l'autre ou matrice, ou ἀντίστερα, parfois terre. (It is from the myth of the cave that we can, for example, or as example, begin again. To read it, this time, as a metaphor--in all impossible rigour we will see it inscribed in the text--of the other or womb, or ἀντίστερα [hystera], sometimes earth.) (Spéculum 301)

The cave becomes a means of blocking all forms of mimesis, all systems of representation that would seek to put woman in her place as man's opposite but equal. This inner space is both a kaleidoscope and a labyrinth, disorienting all those who enter it in order to manipulate the message. It is a distortion machine capable of subverting the myth of the hysterical wandering womb. Symbolically speaking, now the wandering womb cannot be found, pinned down, or made to conform to the discursive parameters of psychoanalysis or
any other institution that holds power over the hysteric.²

Almost every study of hysteria begins with a consideration of its etymological origins, derived from the Greek *hystera*, meaning womb. Helen King sets the record straight on this account, revealing that the Greek *hysterika* in fact refers to a disease known as "suffocation of the womb" or problems with the afterbirth (5). King's detailed study argues that the concept of hysteria, despite its indisputable etymology, was not invented by Hippocrates, but that later practitioners were responsible for reading hysteria into and subsequently out of his writings.³ Indeed, it was not until the Middle Ages and Renaissance that hysteria appears as a recorded illness with symptoms and suggested treatments. And the gendering of hysteria as a specifically women's disease did not come

²In many ways the wandering womb functions in the same way as does Irigaray's notion of the "blindspot," that which evades and deflects the probing male gaze through distortion and inversion. Irigaray turns this "nothing to be seen" into a powerful elliptical mystery, the locus of a completely separate feminine discourse incomprehensible to men. Elektra subverts the authority around her through her role as female hysteric, usurping the power of the Atrean household and its curse.

³Many writers take the etymological link between the word hysteria and the Greek *hystera* or *hysterika* for granted. For Luce Irigaray, the hysteric is a "méthaphorisation de l'υστερα [hystera]" (Spéculum 303). Juliet Mitchell makes the same connection: "The Greek hystera, the uterus; the mother, or 'suffocation of the mother'" (91). In her introduction to Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément's *The Newly Born Woman*, Sandra Gilbert centres her whole argument around the wandering womb: "Since the etymological root of the word 'hysteria' is the Greek *hyster*, or womb, the hysteric is, after all, the creature whose wandering, even wondering, womb manifests the distinctively female bonding, or bondage, of mind and body, the inescapable female connection between creation and procreation, the destiny that is inexorably determined by anatomy" (xiii). There are plenty of other examples of this perpetuation of the hysteria myth and its Greek sources (see also Bennett 238; Friedman 7). Even if, as we will see, Helen King does pour cold water on the coupling of hysteria with its etymological cousin, the "womb" has been a powerful source of subversion in much feminist revisionary writing on hysteria.
about until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\footnote{Relatively little material exists on the classical understanding of hysteria. Simon Bennett's \textit{Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece} distinguishes between Greek thought and what modern psychology and psychoanalysis has extrapolated from the Greeks. He credits the Cambridge School of Frazer, Harrison, Comford and Murray with initiating a new understanding of the Classics that would include the irrational as an important and legitimate aspect of Greek thought (45), congruent and complementary to the work that Freud was to begin.}

We are left with a contradiction: the myth of the wandering womb and its alleged origins in Hippocratic writings bears little resemblance to what we understand today as hysteria, and yet the womb as cave or receptacle, with its chthonian earth-bound associations, has become a powerful symbol of subversion and resistance. Without dismantling the positive feminist appropriation of the hysteria myth, it is important to acknowledge King's findings regarding the false origins of the term hysteria. Her report allows for a separation between the depictions of Electra in Greek tragedy as the maniacal, vengeful daughter and the conception of the hysterical in the twentieth century. This does not mean that Greek Electras are any more rational than those of this century, but it does mean that in classical times Electra would not have been seen within the same medical or psychoanalytic discourses of hysteria which have dominated and obscured the figure in many post-Freudian works.\footnote{To assume that hysteria in classical times was any less a social and political construction than in a modern context is somewhat simplistic. Bennett points out that hysteria "must be understood in the context of the intrapsychic and social conflicts that accompanied relationships between men and women" (238). He argues that the Greeks disguised the social origin of conflicts by using the idiom of physiology, making of psychic phenomena a physical illness. Greek medicine permitted doctors to heal the symptoms of a wandering womb (shortness of breath, pain in the chest, lump in the throat, pain in the groin and legs, fainting and seizures) with certain muted sexual gratifications (242). Although hysteria in Greek culture was not medicalized in the same way as in...}
Strangely enough, Sigmund Freud does not dwell on the Greek origins of hysteria. He is at pains to show that he is the inventor of modern hysteria and its clinical cure, barely acknowledging the contributions of his greatest influence, Jean-Martin Charcot, and distancing himself from his most faithful mentor, Joseph Breuer. Clearly Freud does not share the opinion of Charcot, who declares that: "L'Hystérie a toujours existé, en tous lieux et en tous temps" ("Hysteria has always existed, in all places and in all times") (qtd. in Porter 231), for if this were true then Freud could not take credit for discovering modernity's ailment and its therapy.

**Hysteria and the Literary Freud**

It is hardly coincidental that literary Electras began to show signs of hysteria during psychoanalysis, Bennett maintains that "hysteria is a culturally sanctioned dumb show in which patient, doctor, and family all participate" and has a continuous history from antiquity to the present (243).

*Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen provides us with new evidence that Freud spread malicious rumours about his friend and colleague Joseph Breuer in order to discredit his reputation. Breuer's patient Anna O. had staged a false pregnancy at the end of her treatment, naming Breuer as the father, and Freud chose to circulate this information broadly. Borch-Jacobsen also quotes a letter from Breuer's daughter-in-law, Hanna Breuer, stating that, after the rupture of the working relationship between the two men, Freud refused to acknowledge the presence of Breuer when they met in the street (110). This break between the two doctors is of significance because it means that verifying what actually happened in the case study of Anna O. is particularly difficult.

*The underlying question regarding Freud's work is: why hysteria? William McGrath presents an alternative view to the standard belief that psychoanalysis merely began with studies in hysteria and quickly moved beyond that as Freud's theories developed. He proposes that Freud saw Vienna as the site of a "politics of hysteria" which could be of use to him in his struggle for power in a society that would require him to prove himself, since he was both a Jew and a member of a non-elite class (16). Freud's desire for the title of professor was political, McGrath argues, but it required his scientific treatment of sexuality to be taken seriously; in short, Freud had to politicize hysteria.*
shortly after the introduction of Freud's theories in *Studien über Hysterie*, published together with Breuer in 1895. Although Freud was very much interested in Greek antiquity and had a particular fascination with archaeology, he did not choose a mythological character as a model for his theories of hysteria in the way that he based his theory of human sexual development on Oedipus. In fact, if the speculation that Hofmannsthal modelled his *Elektra* on the first and perhaps most famous of all hysterics, "Fräulein Anna O.,” is correct, the playwright reversed the pattern by using the clinical observations of a psychological disorder as the model for his mythological character.¹

Freud was interested in the literary aspects of psychoanalysis and felt that certain comparisons could be made between his work and the literary production of a true poet, although he was adamant that his work was pure science and was taken aback when people said his case studies read like novels:

Ich...bin bei Lokaldiagnosen und Elektroprognostik erzogen worden, wie andere Neuropathologen, und es berührt mich selbst noch eigentümlich, daß die Krankengeschichten, die ich schreibe, wie Novellen zu lesen sind, und daß sie sozusagen des ernsten Gepräges der Wissenschaftlichkeit entbehren. (I...was brought up with local diagnoses and electroprognosis, just like other neuropathologists, and it moves me in a unique way, that the case studies that I write read like novellas, and that they reveal the honest opinion of scientific

¹Lorna Martens, Michael Worbs and Berndt Urban are among the scholars who suggest a link between Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* figure and Freud's case study of "Anna O." To my knowledge, Hofmannsthal never admitted using the psychoanalytic patient as a model, and I do not wish to prove here that this was the case. I invoke Anna O.'s story as an analogy to the representation of Elektra as a hysterical.
While he was willing to entertain literature as an important support for his own theories, when it came to literature appropriating the techniques of psychoanalysis, Freud was considerably less positive: "Die Kunst des Dichters bestehe nicht darin..., Probleme zu finden und zu behandeln. Das soll er den Psychologen überlassen." ("The art of the poet does not consist in... finding and dealing with problems. He should leave that to the psychologists") (qtd. in Worbs 265). But if Freud was sceptical about the ability of the writer to shed light on the inner psychological makeup of fictional characters, Hofmannsthal was equally suspicious of Freud's theories, as he states in a letter to O.H. Schmitz, five years after the first production of Elektra: "Freud, dessen Schriften ich sämtlich kenne, halte ich abgesehen von fachlicher Akribie (der scharfsinnige jüdische Arzt) für eine absolute Mediocrität voll bornierten, provinzmäßigen Eigendünkels..." ("I hold Freud, whose writings I know somewhat, apart from professional meticulousness (the clever Jewish doctor), for an absolute mediocrity full of bigoted, narrowminded arrogance...") (qtd. in Hirsch 74).

Freud seems to have been caught in a web of his own making: he was determined to forge a science of hysteria, while at the same time coming to terms with the fact that narrative was a significant part of the convincing power of his own case histories. In his preface to Studien über Hysterie, Freud links the patient's ability to connect his or her own narrative to possible traumatic events in the past, thus enabling a release from "repression" (Freud uses Schopenhauer's term Verdrängung [1844] [ed. comment SE II: xxii]), with the patient's subsequent improvement:
[W]e found, to our great surprise at first, that each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying effect, and when the patient had described that even in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words. (SE II: 6; their emphasis)

As we shall see, it is significant for both Hofmannsthal's Elektra and "Anna O." that Freud links hysteria and its cure to the recollection of repressed memories ("Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" [7; their emphasis]) and their subsequent articulation in language. Freud certainly recognized the similarities between the suffering described in fiction and the symptoms of neurological disorders.⁹ Manfred Schneider even suggests that clinical observation is in fact a poetic process, a negotiation in the complex relationship between doctor and patient: "Auch in der psychoanalytischen Wahrnehmung entfaltet der poetische Überschuß des Unbewu ßten selbst die virtuellen Kräfte der Erkenntnis" ("So too in psychoanalytical observation, a poetic surplus of the unconscious itself unfolds the virtual force of recognition") ("Vergnügen" 204). In fact, through his subtle manipulation of rhetoric, Hofmannsthal offers several possible relationships of analyst/analysand in his Elektra.

⁹In 1912 Freud founded a journal of applied psychoanalysis that he called Imago; it was his intent that this be an interdisciplinary collective including pieces on religion, aesthetics, mythology, philology, law, etc. Yet Freud placed himself above the artist by saying that a work of art could only describe or illustrate and not explain ("Freud," Hutcheon 313).
Elektra and Anna O.: The Making of a Hysteria

As noted earlier, it is by no means an original statement on my part that Elektra, Tragödie in einem Aufzug frei nach Sophocles is a dramatic rendering of the famous case study "Anna O.": Martens, Urban and Worbs are among the others who make this connection. It is plain to see that the hysteric described by Breuer in Studien über Hysterie bears a striking resemblance to Agamemnon's mourning daughter. It is commonly accepted that Hofmannsthal was not only familiar with Freud's theories of psychoanalysis, but that he was highly influenced by the notion of the unconscious and incorporated these ideas into his literary works. In fact, two of the central considerations of Hofmannsthal's

10 Although Studien über Hysterie was published in May of 1895, it was not well received among German medical circles ("Translator's Introduction," Standard Edition xv). It was not until after the publication of Die Traumdeutung (1900) that Freud's theories became more widely disseminated, and there is evidence that Hofmannsthal, together with Arthur Schnitzler and Hermann Bahr, read this work in 1903 directly before Elektra was written (Worbs 140). Hofmannsthal revealingly wrote to Bahr asking to borrow the book on hysteria: "Können Sie mir eventuell nur für einige Tage das Buch von Freud und Breuer über Heilung der Hysterie durch Freimachen einer unterdrückten Erinnerung leihen (schenken?)" ("Can you perhaps lend me (send me?) Freud and Breuer's book on the healing of hysteria through the revealing of a repressed memory for a few days?") (Briefe II: 142). Michael Hamburger also assures us that this book, along with Die Traumdeutung and later important works by Freud, were in Hofmannsthal's library. He owned numerous volumes of Pierre Janet's psychological theories ("Hofmannsthals Bibliothek" 26), and was also familiar with the work of French psychologists Dumas, Raymond and Le Bon (Urban 8).

11 Opinion is, in fact, divided on the subject of Hofmannsthal's reception of Freud. In Hofmannsthal, Freud und die Psychoanalyse, Bernd Urban quotes Adorno's observation that Hofmannsthal used psychoanalysis without ever letting it invade his literary works. On the other hand, Walter Jens maintains that it cannot be proven that this 1903 Elektra was modelled after Anna O. because "gewisse psychologische Kategorien...'gleichsam in der Luft lagen'" ("certain psychological categories...'were simply in the air'") (7). And Heinz Politzer claims that Hofmannsthal did not need Freud to explain to him psychological phenomena and that he invented his characters solely on the basis of his own observations (7).
Elektra are the repression of memory as well as the desire to narrate such suffering in language, precisely the terms Freud uses to describe the central concerns in the treatment of hysteria.

There are of course correspondences of a more concrete nature between this new Elektra and her model Anna O.: they are both left on their own to mourn the death of their respective fathers, both grieve in the twilight hours, each is passionate and emotional; inner psychological disturbances are somatically manifested, and the two

12Anna O.'s illness began after her father "of whom she was passionately fond" (SE II: 22) fell ill. He died after the treatment of her disorder had already begun and the hysteria was considerably advanced. Upon learning of his death, Anna's condition worsened and she could no longer recognise people around her, even close family members: "All the people she saw seemed like wax figures without any connection with her" (SE II: 26). Similarly, in her first monologue, Elektra finds herself strangely alienated and isolated from the world without her father: "Allein! Weh, ganz allein, Der Vater fort, hinabgescheucht in die kalten Klüfte" ("Alone! Oh! all alone. Father is gone, driven down into the cold pit") (14).

13At the opening of Hofmannsthal's drama, the maids await Elektra's agonizing mourning: "Ist doch ihre Stunde/die Stunde wo sie um den Vater heult/daß alle Wände schallen..... Immer, wenn die Sonne tief steht/ liegt sie und stönt." ("It is indeed her hour, the hour when she cries for her father, when the walls resound.... Always when the sun lies low, she lies and groans") (9). This reference to the evening hours echoes the indication in Breuer's notes of Anna O.'s sharp change of temperament according to the time of day: "The regular order of things was: the somnolent state in the afternoon, followed after sunset by the deep hypnosis.... After the deep sleep had lasted about an hour she grew restless, tossed to and fro and kept repeating 'tormenting, tormenting'" (SE II: 27-28). It seems the shadows of the evening hours allow for the expression of the pain, whereas the daytime with its bright light is too much associated with the probing analytic gaze of the doctor. This is very much evident in Hofmannsthal's stage directions for Elektra, which specify dark and ominous lighting in shades of red.

14Breuer's initial description of Anna is very positive, emphasising her powers of intellect: "She was markedly intelligent, with an astonishingly quick grasp of things and penetrating intuition. She possessed a powerful intellect which would have been capable of digesting solid mental pabulum and which stood in need of it." However, his description of her during her illness shows a considerable deterioration in these talents and a general progression whereby emotions dominate over all thought processes: "Her states of feeling
women are also virgins.\textsuperscript{16} And yet Elektra is portrayed in a highly sexualized manner, always tended to a slight exaggeration, alike of cheerfulness and gloom; hence she was sometimes subject to moods" (SE II: 21). Similarly, Hofmannsthals Elektra is given to emotional extremes, and yet she has qualities of strength and intelligence, as Klytämnestra observes: "Wenn du nur wolltest,/ du könntest etwas sagen, das mir nützt.... du bist klug./ In deinem Kopf is alles stark" ("If only you wanted to, you could say something to help me.... you are clever. In your head, all is strong") (30). However, the maids who mock Elektra at the beginning of her drama present her in negative terms, calling her alternately a cat and a demon, and suggesting she be kept under lock and key. It becomes apparent that both Anna and Elektra are under-stimulated, causing them to resort to other means of amusing themselves. Anna invents what Breuer calls her "Privattheater" ("private theatre") and Elektra uses her untapped intellect to plot her mother's murder, inventing tricks and riddles to trap her. In desperation, Klytämnestra begs her daughter: "Gib mir nicht Rätsel auf." ("Don't give me riddles") (34).

\textsuperscript{15}Throughout her treatment Anna develops more and more physical symptoms of her mental condition. The doctor is originally summoned because of a cough, which he immediately diagnoses as a "hysterical cough," a \textit{tussis nervosa}. Her symptoms include headache, squint, disturbances of vision, and paralysis of the right upper arm which migrates to the lower extremity, eventually encompassing the entire left side of her body. The patient also suffers from hallucinations and aphasia. There are physical repercussions from Elektra's ordeal as well. She complains to Orestes that she has been robbed of her beauty and reduced to a mere shadow of her former self: "Ich bin nur mehr der Leichnam deiner Schwester,/ mein armes Kind. Ich weiß, es schaudert dich/ vor mir. Und war doch eines Königs Tochter!/ Ich glaube, ich war schön: wenn ich die Lampe/ ausblies vor meinem Spiegel, fühlte ich mit keuschem Schauder, wie mein nackter Leib/ vor Unberührtheit durch die schwüle Nacht/ wie etwas Göttliches hineuchte" ("I am only the corpse of your sister, my poor child. I know I make you shudder. And yet I was a king's daughter! I think I was beautiful: when I blew out the lamp in front of my mirror, I felt with chaste wonder how my naked body shone godly and immaculate through the sultry night") (62).

\textsuperscript{16}Breuer makes this explicit when he comments: "The element of sexuality was astonishingly undeveloped in her" (SE II: 21). It is curious that this statement is inserted for no apparent reason. The doctor fails to mention that Anna O. staged a false pregnancy, the incident that caused him to break off his treatment. Perhaps it was in Breuer's interest to emphasize Anna's asexuality, thus deflecting any suspicion about his intentions toward his patient. Similarly, Hofmannsthals Elektra is a virgin. This is a significant detail, for her status as virgin makes it possible for her to participate in the matricide. If she had been married, her movements would have been severely restricted. Though Elektra is a virgin, Hofmannsthal sexualizes her character by using animal imagery (see Mullen 649). The erotic overtones imply that Elektra may have figuratively lost her virginity, for she has been robbed of her chastity by Agamemnon's ghost. Elektra tells Orest that her father
mirrored in the stage directions, which indicate she is dressed in scant rags: "Elektra trägt ein verächtliches elendes Gewand, das zu kurz für sie ist. Ihre Beine sind nackt, ebenso ihre Arme." ("Elektra wears a despicable awful garb, which is too short for her. Her legs are naked, as are her arms") (Hofmannsthal, "Szenische" 70). Her character has been compared to both Lulu and Salomé, two highly-sexualized roles epitomizing the archetypes of "femme fatale" and "whore" so prevalent in the artistic productions of the fin de siècle.¹⁷

The introductory notes to Studien über Hysterie do not mention sexuality, but concentrate rather on the element of repressed memories and their subsequent articulation in language via the associative method. And yet as early as 1896, one year after the publication of the first case studies, Freud delivered his lecture on "The Aetiology of Hysteria," in which he amended his earlier theory, adding a significant corollary on sexuality. He claimed: "I have been able to discover this connection [between hysteria and

¹⁷The image of the prostitute is ubiquitous at the turn of the century. Young women are seen to be in constant danger of falling into prostitution through promiscuity or sexual expression of almost any kind. Sander Gilman, in Difference and Pathology, points out the explosion in child prostitution and a general fascination with female sexuality in all its polymorphous forms (54). Otto Weininger states, in Geschlecht und Charakter (1903), that "je länger ich über sie nachdenke, desto mehr die Prostitution eine Möglichkeit für alle Frauen zu sein scheint" ("the longer I think about it, the more prostitution appears to be a possibility for all women") (313; his emphasis). While Elektra is by no means a prostitute, Weininger's theory reflects the cultural climate of the time, whereby all women were liable to give in to their base erotic instincts.
sexuality] in every single symptom, and, where the circumstances allowed, to confirm it by therapeutic success" (SE III: 199). Thus, although these underlying sexual forces are nowhere mentioned in Anna O.'s case study, Freud included it retroactively. This proclamation also provided the basis for his "seduction theory" made famous in the case of Dora, where Freud interpreted her claim of unwanted sexual attention as a sign of her repressed desires. His thesis was that "at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience" (SE III: 203; his emphasis). We might consider the consequences of this statement for Anna O.: would Freud have speculated that Anna was traumatized by an early sexual experience? Such a view would obviously contradict Breuer's claim that Anna's sexuality was "astonishingly underdeveloped" (SE II: 21). Hofmannsthal's erotic depiction of his hysterical Elektra takes on new meaning in the light of Freud's later findings on hysteria, anticipating the psychoanalyst's path in his representation of the hysterical in sexual terms.

Freud subsequently added yet another dimension to his thought on hysteria, obviously following from his treatment of Oedipal conflict in "Three Essays on Sexuality." He concluded that hysterical symptoms were the somatic representation of a repressed bisexual conflict, an unconscious refusal to accept a single and defined subject position in the Oedipal structuration of desire and identity. Resolution of sexual phantasy was impossible because there are "two sexual phantasies, of which one has a masculine and the other a feminine character," from which Freud concludes that "one of these phantasies springs from a homosexual impulse" ("Hysterical Phantasies and Their Relation to Bisexuality," SE IX: 164). "Bisexuality" here refers to an instance of ambiguity with
respect to the hysteric’s sexual identification, portrayed for example in Elektra’s masculine-gendered traits. She was an anomaly in her time in that she was solely responsible for her actions, with no man around her to restrict her movements—her father dead, her brother exiled, and no husband.

In the end, Elektra’s rejection of stereotypical femininity allies her with her mother. Klytämnestra’s murder of Agamemnon provided a model for her daughter, and Elektra follows her lead, displaying a capacity for violence that does not fall within the acceptable range of emotions and conduct for a woman in her position. Cixous argues that, if Electra, like her mother, is capable of wielding a weapon, this affirms the continuation of the maternal force: “And suppose Electra was going to kill? What if woman took over from man, made off with the sceptre, the dagger…. That would mean that there are manly possibilities in woman. That the reign of mothers is therefore not dead, that power could come again from the direction of the maternal hearth?” (110). Paradoxically, her role in killing her own mother links her to the maternal creative force. That which can give life, can destroy it too.

Repressing Freud: Debunking his Myth

There are many reasons why the case study of Anna O. was crucial for Freud and

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18 We might consider Elektra’s overtly sexualised behaviour towards her sister as an instance of such bisexual ambivalence and her inability to resolve it one of the causes of her hysteria. Rather than viewing what Freud calls hysterical symptoms that result from a person’s inability to accept a particular subject position, another way to view Elektra’s polymorphous sexuality is as a rebellion against fixed Oedipal structures. Her unbridled sexual energy seems to fuel her struggle for revenge.
Breuer. First of all, the dates of the original therapy, beginning with Anna's father's illness in July 1880 and ending with Breuer's abrupt departure in April 1881, are contemporaneous with key discoveries documented by Jean Charcot and Pierre Janet, two of the foremost French psychologists. Freud and Breuer wanted to claim to be the leaders in this new field, and their description of Anna O.'s therapy provided them with that opportunity. In their introduction to Studien über Hysterie, they state that this case was the first instance where a truly psychoanalytic method was used to treat the patient, although it is plain that Anna herself was to some extent instrumental in guiding her physician. After all, it was she who labelled their discussions the "talking cure" (SE II: 30), creating a lasting nickname for Freud's cathartic or associative method.19

One of the most radical reevaluations of this striking case is Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's Remembering Anna O.: A Century of Mystification. This is both a scholarly work and a cross between a paperchase and a murder mystery, in which the author unveils

19Breuer reports that Anna also gives this process another term, namely "chimney-sweeping," a word that may be read as an ironic statement on her part, drawing attention to the aspect of the therapy that involves being invaded. It all depends on who is doing the sweeping of course, but it could be that Anna is making fun of Breuer's method of probing and prodding her for the kind of information (memories) that will best serve his project. Fritz Schweighofer puts it another way, arguing that Anna O. had her own carefully constructed package of lies that she was selling to Breuer for the price of his attentions. He hypothesizes that Bertha Pappenheim, a very intelligent yet bored young woman turns herself into Anna O. of her own volition so as to escape the confines of the house and her restrictive role as her father's nurse: "Das heißt in der gegebenen Situation: Bertha betrügt Breuer, dieser betrügt Freud, und Freud betrügt das Publikum" ("This means that in the given situation: Bertha tricks Breuer, he tricks Freud, and Freud tricks the public") (7-8). Each has valid reasons for constructing a web of lies, but no one of them is single-handedly responsible for the resulting betrayal. What is important in Schweighofer's version is the shift in perspective from viewing Anna O. as the victim to the possibility of seeing her in an active and manipulative role. It seems that Elektra too plays such tricks.
the real story behind a tale of fabrication and deceit. He questions their methods of analysis and many subsequent assumptions made on the basis of this one case study, demonstrating that it was a complete failure: "It may be true that the cure of Anna O. consisted—partly—in her relating 'memories' to Breuer, but it is just plain untrue that this treatment ever got rid of her symptoms" (9; his emphasis). Borch-Jacobsen tells us that when Breuer abandoned the treatment Bertha Pappenheim (the patient's real name) was sent to a sanatorium. In a letter to his then fiancée, Martha Bernays, Freud mentioned Breuer's distress at the situation: "Breuer is constantly talking about her, says he wishes she were dead so that the poor woman could be free of her suffering. He says she will never be well again, that she is completely shattered" (qtd. in Borch-Jacobsen 25). This death wish raises the question of how the story should end. The doctor appears to be distressed that there has been no neat closure to the analysis such as her death would have

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20 For example, Borch-Jacobsen reveals that the cathartic method was first in use as of 1889 (26) and maintains that Freud and Breuer could not have known of this method at the time of Anna O.'s treatment: "Clearly, then, the theme of pathogenic memory was introduced into the Bertha Pappenheim case only later on, to make it fit the theory of traumatic hysteria put forward by Charcot and the Salpêtrière school" (55). Jeffrey Masson also confirms that Freud concealed a number of important details about what he learned while in Paris from men such as Antonin Delcasse, Paul Brouardel and Ambroise Tardieu. He returned to Vienna with books by them dealing with the subject that would become his obsession for the next decade, but nowhere does he cite them as sources for his theories (51-54).

21 Breuer states optimistically in the case study that, after the treatment had come to a close "her condition was bearable, both physically and mentally" (SE II: 32). In short, the case study makes the therapy out to have been a success not only for the patient, but indeed a breakthrough in methods of treatment. Borch-Jacobsen demonstrates through letters from the doctors who treated Bertha Pappenheim subsequently that this is simply not the case and that it was not until much later that she began to improve and carry on with her life. What had been a dismal failure was nonetheless described in glowing terms: "a successful cure" (Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, SE VI: 257).
provided. Unlike Antigone, the heroine of this case study does not die at the end, but continues to live as a reminder of a failed project. In having his Elektra die, Hofmannsthal finishes off his fiction in the way that Breuer might have wished his case study to terminate.

Underlying Borch-Jacobsen's obsession with unearthing the layers of lies surrounding Anna O. is an issue that has been of prime importance in the American media. The author shows how both Breuer and Freud manipulated the details of the case study to have it look as though the hysterics who "suffers mainly from reminiscences" can be cured in the reconstruction of those very traumatic memories. Borch-Jacobsen does not make an explicit link between the obvious fictionalization of Anna O.'s memories and the debates surrounding "false memory syndrome," and yet it becomes clear that for him the first clinical case of hysteria using the psychoanalytic method is also the first case of false memory. Although the polemic regarding the veracity of the events related in the study was naturally unavailable to Hofmannsthal at the time when he wrote his Elektra, there are interesting parallels between Anna O. and her mythological double. In much the same way as Breuer and Freud have a great deal at stake in their fictionalized character, so too Hofmannsthal is not entirely without his motives in taking on Elektra, as we shall see.

Elektra as the Analyst

Perhaps more interesting than the similarities between Elektra and Anna O. are the markers that divide the mythological from the empirical hysterics. For instance, each has discrepancies in her memory, one of the key elements in Freud and Breuer's initial
discussion of hysteria. The physicians claim that, once the repressed memory of an original trauma has been articulated, the patient ceases to suffer from the afflicting symptoms (SE II: viii-xix). This may be true in Breuer's account of Anna O.'s progress (if not in reality), but Hofmannsthal's Elektra does not suffer because she is unable to remember the cause of her discomfort. On the contrary, the root of her disturbance is precisely her inability to forget Agamemnon's murder. Memory haunts her, not repression.

In the second scene of the play, Elektra attempts to enlist her sister's help in carrying out the matricide, but Chrysothemis will have none of it, claiming it is not suitable for women to concern themselves with such matters and that she is not prepared to sacrifice her life for the cause: "Nein, ich bin/ ein Weib und will ein Weiberschicksal" ("No, I am a woman and want a woman's fate") (19). She urges her sister to forget about their father's awful death, provoking Elektra's outraged response: "Vergessen? Was! Bin ich ein Tier? vergessen?...ich bin kein Vieh, ich kann nicht vergessen!" ("Forget? What! Am I an animal? forget?...I'm no animal, I cannot forget!") (20-21; his emphasis). Elektra has become the embodiment of memory itself, and this suggestion disgusts her. She may not be a civilized woman in her present state (reduced to a mere slave-girl), but she knows that her honour and position of her family depend on her memory of Agamemnon's murder.

If Elektra suffers from memory, her mother is plagued by her efforts to repress the memory of her role in her husband's murder. Klytämnestra can find no peace, constantly forced to relive her own fear and dread through terrifying dreams. Exasperated by these nightmares, she pleads with her daughter: "Weiß du/ kein Mittel gegen Träume?" ("Have
you no remedy for dreams"), to which Elektra responds with false innocence, careful not to betray her pleasure at her mother's distress: "Träumst du, Mutter?" ("Do you dream, Mother?") (29). In the long conversation following this exchange, Elektra takes on the role of the analyst to the troubled Klytämnestra, who has no choice but to play the helpless patient. She describes her discomfort:

[It is nothing, not even a nightmare, and yet it is so terrible that my soul wishes to be hanged and every limb]

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22This idea was first put forward by E.M. Butler in her 1938 article (169), although it is also suggested in the text itself when Klytämnestra says that her daughter speaks like a doctor. A more recent discussion of this scenario can be found in Martens' article on repressed memory (45).
yearns for death, and yet I live
and am not even sick: you can see for yourself:
do I look sick? Is it then possible
to perish, alive, like a rotting carcass?
can one waste away and not be sick?
waste away, with waking senses like a dress
devoured by moths? And then I sleep
and dream, and dream! (31)

Klytämnestra's complaints bear an uncanny resemblance to the classic symptoms of hystera and to a case study in Freud's work closest in date to Hofmannsthal's play—Die Traumdeutung (1900), one of the most controversial books in all of Vienna at the time when Hofmannsthal was writing his Elektra. In this passionate exchange, Elektra and her mother both suffer from the poison of memory in ways that are complementary to one another and yet equally destructive. As observed by Lorna Martens: "each woman represents a part of the other's psyche" (43).23 Their codependency can be described as

23Martens even suggests that this is the cause of Elektra's mysterious death. She envisions their lives as "interlocking circles" (42) and concludes that the two women are so linked to one another that, when Klytämnestra dies, her daughter does not have the means to go on living. I see Elektra's death more as a monument to Klytämnestra than as a result of deficiency after her death. Cixous interprets Electra as a strong magnetic force pulling those around her into her orbit: "The ancients knew the properties of yellow amber: when the electron is rubbed it attracts light bodies. The Choir, Clytemnestra, Chrysothemis—light bodies, attracted by magnetic Electra: an intense system of exchange, attraction, particle loss fed by Electra. As soon as she is in the presence of an unstable body whose electrons are easily grabbed, she attracts them—she even releases her own negative particles constantly, stimulating, going over and over the sensitive periphery of her being this painful skin whose nerves she bares" (Newly Born Woman 106). Cixous sees Electra's strength as coming from her intense relationships with others and with
symbiotic or even mutually parasitic: the analyst requires the disturbed patient, and the patient requires the therapist to explain the mystery of the disorder. Elektra cleverly adopts the role of the doctor, as Klytämnestra herself observes: "Sie redet wie ein Arzt" ("She speaks like a physician") (26). The analytic session takes place in the middle of the one-act play and constitutes the tragic anagnorisis. The rising tension is finally broken when Klytämnestra's maidservants inform her that Orestes is dead, putting an end to the unbearable uncertainty. As it turns out, this is merely another in a long line of tricks to which the murderous mother falls victim.

Underlying the intense atmosphere of loathing and jealousy, fear and deceit is another narrative thread in the problem of language. The self-reflexive dialogue is littered with references to speech, words and silence. Klytämnestra confesses her growing frustration with the ambiguities surrounding her: "Was die Wahrheit ist,/ das bringt kein Mensch heraus. Niemand auf Erden/ weiß über ein verborgnes Ding/ die Wahrheit." ("What the truth is no one will know. No one on earth knows the truth about hidden things") (28). While she ostensibly refers to the whereabouts of her son, her scepticism could symbolically be read as referring to the psychoanalytic method, casting doubt on the ability of the therapist to shed light upon the hidden recesses of the mind. Nevertheless, she puts faith in her daughter's ability and urges her to use the power of words as a healing agent: "Wie man ein Wort und einen Satz ausspricht,/ darauf kommt vieles an." ("How a word or a sentence is pronounced,/ much depends on this") (29). She demands that Elektra use her talent for language: "Aber du hast Worte./ Du könntest vieles sagen,
was mir nützt. Wenn auch ein Wort nichts weiter ist!" ("But you have words. You could say much to help me. Even though a word is nothing more than that!") (30-31).

Klytämnestra contradicts herself, first claiming that language can make all the difference and then negating the material power of the word altogether. Finally, in her anger and frustration, she threatens her daughter with her own words: "aus dir/ bring ich so oder so das rechte Wort/ schon an den Tag" ("one way or another, I will get the right word out of you into the daylight") (38). The half-crazed mother seems sure that there is a "right word," absolute and ideal in its expressive capabilities. Ironically, the more faith Klytämnestra puts in the authority and healing power of words, the deeper she falls into the trap. Playing upon her mother's desperation and vulnerability, Elektra fabricates a riddle, telling her patient that, when the right blood flows, her nightmares will subside and she will once again sleep peacefully. Elektra carefully doles out one clue after another: a woman must die and a strange man must do the killing. And yet, incapable of comprehending any but the most literal use of language, Klytämnestra is deaf to Elektra's subtle ironies. Coincidentally, this interpretation of clues resembles the method Freud and Breuer claim to have discovered through their analysis of Anna O. However, it would appear that the associative method does not work for everyone; even Klytämnestra knows that things are not always as they seem, asking, "Geht denn nicht alles/ vor unserm Augen über und verwandelt/ sich wie ein Nebel?" ("For do not all things turn before our eyes and transform itself like fog?") (35). Ultimately, words and deeds amount to one and the same thing:

und unser Taten! Taten! Wir und Taten!
Was das für Worte sind. Bin ich denn noch,  
die es getan? Und wenn! getan, getan!  
Getan! was wirfst du mir da für ein Wort  
in meine Zähne!  
(and our deeds! Deeds! We and deeds!  
What strange words these are! For am I still  
the one who did this? And what if! done, done!  
Done! what a word you throw  
in my teeth!) (35)  
Klytämnestra now sees she will have to eat her words—and her deeds for that matter.  
Indeed, as is only fitting for the doctor, Elektra has the last word when she helps to  
silence her mother for good, usurping what little voice she has left. She spits out the  
answer to the riddle, crying that Klytämnestra is the one who must bleed for amends to be  
made. Elektra is done playing and now uses the whole signifying force of language,  
sparing her mother no horrors as she describes her future death:  

Du möchtest schreien, doch die Luft erwürgt  
den ungeborenen Schrei und läßt ihn lautlos  
zu Boden fallen... Die Galle träufelt  
dir bitter auf das Herz, verendend willst du  
dich auf ein Wort besinnen, irgend eines  
och von dir geben, nur ein Wort, anstatt  
der blutgen Träne, die dem Tier sogar
im Sterben nicht versagt ist: da steh ich
von dir, und nun liest du mit starrem Aug
das ungeheure Wort, das mir in mein
Gesicht geschrieben ist: denn mein Gesicht
ist aus des Vaters und aus deinen Zügen
gemischt, und da habe ich mit meinen stummen
Dastehn dein letztes Wort zunicht gemacht,
erhängt ist dir die Seele in der selbst--
(You want to scream, but the air stifles
the unborn cry and lets it drop silently
to the ground.... Your venom dribbles
bitterly into your heart, perishing you want
to remember one word, to utter just
any one word once more, just one word, instead of
the bloody tears not even denied the animal
in death: I stand here
before you, and now with a frozen gaze you read
the terrible word that is written
on my face: for my face
is made up of a mix of my father's features
and yours, and so by standing here in silence
I have destroyed your last word;
your soul is hanged inside yourself—) (39-41)

With this violent speech, Elektra performs a kind of linguistic hypnosis upon her mother, diagnosing a very different form of speech impediment. Like Anna O., Klytämnestra has developed an acute aphasis disorder. Not only has her voice been destroyed, but Elektra predicts her mother's end. When justice comes in the form of an axe, words have no bearing.24 At the moment of truth, Klytämnestra will finally see language for what it is—a shifting set of signs that her daughter uses to fabricate a mother's most dreaded nightmare.

This important scene revises the Oedipal story, where it is no longer the son who usurps the authority of the father, but rather the daughter who appropriates her mother's position. In another parallel to the Oedipal scene, Elektra does not simply negate the powerful maternal force, but re-inscribes it and projects it in another form.

Abjection: Maternal rejection or maternal repression?

The importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the Electra myth has often been ignored. Unlike its Sophoclean Urtext where the recognition scene steals the show, Hofmannsthal's play pivots on this maternal conflict. There has been a considerable reevaluation of the role of mothering by feminist psychoanalysts from Nancy Chodorov to Julia Kristeva. Melanie Klein was the first to interpret the role of the mother in relation to a child's primitive emotions of sadism, paranoia and depression. She argued that the maternal bond becomes problematic when the boundary between child and mother

24It is true that Elektra earlier forgets to give Orest the fatal weapon, but in this dialogue, she gives her mother a hint of the cruelty that will come in the form of the murderous axe.
becomes dangerously blurred. In phantasy, the child divides the mother into "good" partial objects, which it integrates, and "bad" partial objects, which it rejects, thus defending itself from disintegration ("Oedipus Conflict" 186-91). The child seeks to possess and destroy the mother precisely because she is the source of all good things. From a Kleinian perspective, then, Elektra's rebellion against her mother is a normal and necessary stage in her development into a mature individual; this interpretation relativizes the vilification of Klytämnestra and stages the conflict as the negotiation and transfer of maternal power.

For Kristeva too, the mother-daughter clash precedes, even eclipses, the Oedipal conflict. In The Powers of Horror, she provides a model of parental relations based on the early rejection of maternal influences even before the child envisions itself existing in the autonomy of language outside the mother. This process of abjection is a violent, even clumsy breaking away from the authority of the mother, always with the threat of falling again under the sway of her stifling power (13). In the early stages of its life, the child is

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25 The terms "good" and "bad" are somewhat misleading, for the mother is nothing but a fluid construction projected by the child's desires and anxieties. So too with Hofmannsthal's mother and daughter: we never really get a sense of Klytämnestra other than through Elektra's words very early in the drama. However, Elektra does not correspond to Klein's theory with respect to the guilt and depression that follows the child's rejection of the mother. Elektra seems unburdened by the superego that, according to Klein, takes over and begins to function as a means of self-punishment.

26 Klein uses the House of Atreus as an example of her theory, though her analysis is based on Aeschylus's Oresteia and focuses is on Orestes' relationship to Clytemnestra. Klein concludes that Orestes, while identifying with Electra's hatred, is plagued by guilt as soon as the matricide is carried out. As for the source of Electra's hatred, Klein cites her envy and dissatisfaction at not having her sexual desires met by the father. In Hofmannsthal's play, Elektra's hatred originates with Agamemnon's unjust murder, but then takes on a life of its own. Though still obsessed with revenge for his lost honour, she is more than his messenger on earth.
permanently united with the maternal body, which it does not distinguish from its own. When the child begins to question its identity with the mother, it is overcome with a sickening ambivalence giving rise to spasms of horror, violent loathing and repugnance (2). In the context of the Electra myth, the early infantile state corresponds to the time previous to Agamemnon's murder, and perhaps the abjection of the mother begins at the very instant when Elektra realises her father has been unjustly killed. Described as "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it" (4), abjection as a process bears a certain uncanny resemblance to Elektra's own ambivalent behavior towards her mother, as she tricks Klytämnestra into believing she will help her, all the while scheming revenge. According to Kristeva, language is made possible only through this rejection of the maternal, since all symbolism depends upon differentiation. She goes on to say that "[t]he child can serve its mother as token of her own authentication" (13), assuring us that even the death of the mother does not mark the end of maternal power. Elektra's relationship to language is also tortured and unstable, at once using language to her advantage as a dissembling force, but finally relegating herself to silence at the end of the play, embracing action and rejecting words. In her relations with her mother, she relives the original experience of abjection and the linguistic ambivalence that accompanies it. Elektra repeatedly denies the effectiveness of speech, as she tries to persuade Chrysothemis to help her in the murder: "Schweig Still. Zu sprechen ist nichts." ("Be silent. To speak is nothing") (47). And again when speaking to Orest, she questions her linguistic ability: "ich red [sic] und stehe doch nicht Rede" ("I speak and yet do not justify
my speech") (55). This direct contradiction of her own words and of words themselves illustrates Elektra's attitude toward the expressive power of language, an attitude corresponding to Kristeva's description of "border anxiety" in abjection. Filtered through the theory of abjection as maternal ambivalence, Elektra's role in the matricide of Klytämnestra is not a wholesale rejection of the maternal, but a means by which the daughter inherits and regenerates the power of the maternal for her own purposes.

Hofmannsthal as Hysteric: Reversing Roles

As I have already shown, the heroine is not the only hysteric in Hofmannsthal's Elektra. Klytämnestra is at least as mad as her daughter. Yet we should perhaps consider to what extent the author suffers from a nervous disorder of his own. Hofmannsthal seems to have been afflicted with a rare form of linguistic aphasia similar to the speech disorder Anna O. develops during her treatment with Joseph Breuer. The doctor describes her symptoms as follows:

[A]longside of the development of the contractures there appeared a deep-going functional disorganization of her speech. It first became noticeable that she was at a loss to find words, and this difficulty increased. Later she lost her command of grammar and syntax; she no longer conjugated verbs, and eventually she used only infinitives.... In the process of time she became almost completely deprived of words. (SE II: 25)

Breuer observes that the hysteric's symptoms dissipated entirely once he was able to cull from her the inhibitions that lay at the root of her disorder. And yet Anna's own label,
"talking cure," is ironic, since his methods resulted in her loss of speech and not in renewed expressive abilities. Anna finds herself no longer capable of speaking German, and must resort to communicating in English.

Although Hofmannsthal never lost the capacity for speech entirely, his ailment had potentially severe consequences, since the loss of faith in language is devastating to a writer. In response to his disorder, he adopted an alternate narrative persona, allowing him to disguise his true identity and yet express his innermost feelings. This is the famous Lord Chandos, the younger son of the Earl of Bath, whom Hofmannsthal had write a letter to Francis Bacon "wegen des gänzlichen Verzichtes auf literarische Betätigung zu entschuldigen" ("apologizing for his complete abandonment of literary activity") (7). He claims that he is in need of medicine to heal the ailments of his inner self, describing this condition as a "Krankheit meines Geistes" ("disease of the mind") (8). Chandos laments that language has lost its authenticity, that it is contaminated and decayed. He sums up his doubts in a frank manner:

Mein Fall ist, in Kürze, dieser: Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen.... Ich empfand ein unerklärliches Unbehagen, die Worte 'Geiste', 'Seele' oder 'Körper' nur auszusprechen.... [D]ie abstrakten Worte, deren sich doch die Zunge naturgemäß bedienen muß, um irgendwelches Urteil an den Tag zu geben, zerfielen mir im Munde wie modrige Pilze. (In short, my case is this: I have completely lost the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently.... I experienced an inexplicable unease in speaking the words 'mind,'
'soul' or 'body'.... [T]he abstract terms the tongue must naturally use to voice a judgement crumbled in my mouth like mouldy fungus.) (11-12)

"Unbehagen" (unease, disquiet), the word Chandos uses to describe the sensation of pronouncing these abstract concepts, is synonymous with Freud's famous term "unheimlich" (uncanny), which denotes both a feeling of strange familiarity and one of terrifying fright ("The 'Uncanny,'" SE XVII: 220-21). A duplicity or paradox inhabits Chandos's relationship to language: he relies upon words to express his innermost self, but language has also become his enemy, failing him in his desire to articulate abstractions. As with Freud's "uncanny," Hofmannsthall's distress lies in the slippery quality of language, signifying something and nothing at the same time. Abstract terms present the greatest difficulty for Chandos, and he craves a tangible element to save him from the emptiness he endures. He relates his own corporeality to his struggle with words:

[I]ch fühle ein entzückendes, schlechtin unendliches Widerspiel in mir und um mich, und es gibt unter den gegeneinanderspielenden Materien keine, in die ich nicht hinüberzufließen vermochte. Es ist mir dann, als bestünde mein Körper aus lauter Chiffren, die mir alles aufschließen. Oder als könnten wir in ein neues, ahnungsvolles Verhältnis zum ganzen Dasein treten, wenn wir anfingen, mit dem Herzen zu denken. (I experience in and around me a simply delightful endless refraction, and among the materials playing against one another there is not one into which I cannot flow. Then I feel as if my body consists of mere ciphers which unlock everything in me. Or as if we could enter into a new and foreboding relationship with the entire Dasein if only we could begin to think
with the heart.) (17)

The paradox of Chandos's misery is that, while his doubt leaves him in a helpless aphasic crisis, he nevertheless experiences an ecstasy in the confusion of language. It is as if it washes over him so that he is at one with the materiality of language through a kind of corporeal signification. Chandos says of these strange occurrences that he hardly knows whether to ascribe them to "dem Geist oder dem Körper" ("the mind or the body") (17).

Hofmannsthal uses the famous "Chandos Brief" (1901) to expose his greatest fears about the failure of language, and **Elektra** is his first major work published after his literary breakdown. The play has been seen as a turning point in Hofmannsthal's oeuvre, where he leaves the inner world of poetry and rises to new expressive heights through the use of the dramatic genre. He abandons his former lyrical obsession with expressing consciousness as a whole, a state that Lord Chandos mourns as "das ganze Dasein als eine große Einheit" ("the whole of existence as one great unit") (10). It is now reduced to mere fragments: "Es zerfiel mir in Teile, die Teile wieder in Teile" ("For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts") (13). Perhaps Hofmannsthal hoped to replace the emptiness of the written page with the interaction of the real bodies on stage.

I am suggesting that Elektra not only plays analyst to the other members of her family--Klytämnestra, and to a certain extent Chrysothemis and Orestes--but that she also symbolically treats her author as patient, nursing him through his aphasic crisis.

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27Sally McMullen describes this new dramatic expressivity: "In Elektra, for the first time, the substance of the work breaks through the language. Words now emphasize confused emotions. There is no longer a clear-cut, artificial perspective: Hofmannsthal now evokes complex psychological ramifications which evade intellectual analysis" (639).
Hofmannsthal writes on the raw edges of language in *Elektra*, and the sheer dynamism of the heroine along with the horror of the action might be just the therapy required to cure him of his scepticism about language. As many critics have noted, "die Tat" ("the deed") becomes the soul force behind the plot, driving the Atreides to their collective fate (Jens; Nehrun; Rey). As he dons the mask of the courageous princess, perhaps Hofmannsthal is able to trade the decadent and overused nature of language that Lord Chandos laments for her faith in action. In her strength and resolve to avenge her father's lost honour, and in her second role as healing agent, Elektra's reputation as hyster is overturned. Instead of accepting the diagnosis and resigning herself to the role of patient, Elektra invents clever ways of using her madness to subvert the rules of the game and triumph over her circumstances.

**Epilogue: Will the real Anna O. please stand up?**

Just as I have shown that Elektra may not be the real hyster in Hofmannsthal's play, so too should Anna O.'s experiences be reexamined within the larger context of her historic persona Bertha Pappenheim. Breuer and Freud's case study is just the beginning. Perhaps Anna is at least as good an actress as Gertrud Eysoldt (who played the first Elektra), fabricating wonderful stories with which to entertain her analyst, and fooling him into believing that she is a hyster in order to escape her father's house. After all, we are told that she is a very intelligent and highly imaginative girl, though bored and under-stimulated, leading "an extremely monotonous existence in her puritanically-minded
Like Elektra, she learns to exploit the resources at her disposal, using her "Private theater" (SE II: 22) to undo the logic of her opponent.  

Following the abrupt end of her treatment with Breuer, Pappenheim was sent to the Burghölzi clinic in Zürich for her convalescence, where she regained her health, mental and physical. She went on to devote her life to saving young girls from prostitution, crusading against the traffic in women in an attempt to save them from exploitation and abuse, whether sexual, physical or psychological. In general, Pappenheim played an important role in bringing about social reforms for women and was especially active in Jewish women's organizations. Perhaps she felt compelled to transform her hysteria into feminism. I have used the case study of Anna O. to show that there is always a two-way flow of power and that both analyst and analysand can use strategies of manipulation. Just as Anna O. was not necessarily always the victim, or powerless in her relationship with

28Anna O. does not receive the kind of stimulation she deserves and needs. In fact Breuer comments that during the course of her treatment she becomes less imaginative: "It became plain from her evening stories that her imaginative and poetic vein was drying up" (SE II: 31). Maybe he is the one who robbed her of her creative inspiration and has used her powers as a muse toward fabricating his own inventive stories to make a brilliant case study.

29Diane Hunter goes so far as to conclude that "Pappenheim actually treated herself, with Breuer as her student" ("Hysteria" 475). Mitchell provides us with an alternate reading of the Breuer/Pappenheim encounter, suggesting that: "The madness that came via her father's death...enabled Anna O. and Breuer to descend together to the 'Mothers'" (103). Mitchell argues that hysteria is the result of a crisis at the loss of the maternal (hence, the disturbance of language) and that Breuer saw in Bertha his own lost mother.

30Pappenheim translated Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and wrote a play entitled Women's Rights (Hunter, "Hysteria" 478). For more detailed discussion of Bertha Pappenheim's life and work see: Fritz Schweighofer's Das Privattheater der Anna O. and Helga Heubach's Bertha Pappenheim, die Anna O.: Sisyphus: Gegen den Mädchenhandel.
Breuer, so too it is possible to read Elektra as using her hysteria to triumph over her oppression, her author and even over death itself.\footnote{Two very different interpretations of Anna O. have been proposed. The first, put forward by Elaine Showalter in \textit{The Female Malady}, shows the patient as an innocent and unwilling participant: "Evening after evening, like the sultan with Scheherezade, Breuer made Anna tell him stories" (156). Borch-Jacobsen takes the opposite view, which I have been emphasizing, in which Anna appears as the stage-manager of her own treatment. Robert Wilcocks' review of the English translation of Borch-Jacobsen's \textit{Remembering Anna O: A Century of Mystification} portrays the work as an elaborate and intricate investigation of conspiracy and intrigue not unlike a John Le Carré novel. In fact, Borch-Jacobsen's study entered a highly controversial debate surrounding Freud studies, and is interpreted as an attack on the discipline of psychoanalysis. Many influential scholars (among them Kristeva, Sollers, Elisabeth Roudinesco and André Green) have declared this and other works the product of a hysteria of political correctness (Wilcocks 338-39).}

What appears to be a sign of the heroine's madness, her wild demeanor and irrational behaviour in fact symbolizes an allegiance to, even a restoration of the lost or suppressed chthonian maternal. In what appears at first glance to be a classic case of hysteria, Elektra appropriates and perverts the role of the Furies as protective spirits of the dead mother and resurrects Klytämnestra's maternal forces. From Aeschylus to Bachofen, the Electra myth has been interpreted as a shift away from the authority of the mother and a rise in the power of paternity. If the father is ostensibly the victor in this legend, then why is the father absent--and mourning--throughout the action and why does the dynamic force of Elektra and Klytämnestra strike fear into the hearts of all who witness the violence and cruelty of their acts?\footnote{Oddly enough, we find the reverse situation in the case of Anna O. The emphasis is upon the father, his death, and Anna's distress at the loss, while there is no mention of her mother at all. As is the case with Freud's study of Dora, the mother seems to be of no consequence and it is almost as if she has been suppressed for the purposes of analysis, as if her influence in the daughter's life is either of no consequence or simply an unwanted complication. It is in Hofmannsthal's play that we witness Elektra gaining strength} Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the fact that
historically most of the interpreters of the myth have been male, and that wishful thinking has prompted them to read the legend as a triumph of paternity. It is not my aim simply to contradict this tradition of interpretation and to impose a gynocentric view in its place, but rather to create a gap in the argument, to present alternatives and to challenge the standards of the known. The tragedy of Electra should ultimately prepare us to engage in our own negotiations with gender and sexuality and with the power struggles required to redefine these terms for our age.

precisely from the conflict with her mother, an exercise that is denied to Anna O. and other of his female patients.
Chapter Five

Strauss's *Elektra* and the Ironic Waltz: Hysteria Displaced

Cacophony vs. Psychological Polyphony

Richard Strauss's operatic adaptation of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* allows us to consider how the composer treats hysteria from an alternative perspective—or doesn't treat it as the case may be, since not every illness has a cure. There were mixed reactions to early performances of *Elektra*, first presented in Dresden on January 25th, 1909 as part of the Richard Strauss Festwoche. The standing ovation it received and the great jubilation accorded the spectacular performance under the direction of Willi Schuh, made *Elektra* appear a huge success. And yet following the premiere in Prague, a one-word telegram was wired to Strauss: "Failure" (Strauss 156). By this time in his career, the composer had achieved considerable fame for his works, not the least of which was *Salome*, a succès de scandale performed countless times in all the major European opera houses (save Vienna and London, where it was banned for many years). All eyes were on Strauss when it was announced he had a new opera, but his critics were as eager as his supporters. It was not long before nasty cartoons appeared in the press showing patrons clutching their ears in great agony at the cacophony of sounds emanating from the stage and, especially, the orchestra pit, where an unprecedented one hundred and eight instruments screeched and blared intolerably.1 Strauss wrote in his memoirs that it was his aim to challenge the

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1Strauss included such rarities as the recently invented Heckelphone, the potent bass oboe. The composer was at the time by his own admission "enamoured" with the dynamic setting of "ff" (Recollections 156), and acknowledged the works of his youth as full of anguish and tragic flourish. Karl Böhm recalls a touching memory of Strauss's old age when while attending a rehearsal of *Elektra*, he clutched Böhm's wife's hand for the last
listening habits of his audience: "I penetrated to the uttermost limits of harmony, psychological polyphony (Clytemnestra's dream) and of the receptivity of modern ears" (155). This statement indeed aptly sums up the effect of Elektra on many who heard it. Even today it is ranked among the classics of the Viennese avant-garde works of Arnold Schönberg and Alban Berg, who also placed considerable demands upon their audiences.²

Strauss's musical innovations in Elektra have stretched the descriptive vocabularies of his critics, inspiring imaginative wordplay. His orchestration is compared to "a witches' cauldron, from which rise the most pungent and acrid fumes"; its "purpose is to create one spine-chilling effect after another" (Carner 26). It was also called "a huge volcano sputtering forth a vast amount of dirt and muck" (Ernest Newman, qtd. in Simon 15), or even "ein Rodin" with "urzeitlicher, barbarisch strotzenden Prachtfülle...von bisher nie geahnter hypnotischer Seelenkraft im Ausdruck des Unsagbaren, Unsichtbaren, kaum mehr Erfüllbaren" ("a Rodin" with "primitive, barbarically bristling magnificence...of never-before-imagined hypnotic spiritual energy in the expression of the unsayable, the invisible, the hardly even performable") (Specht 167). Given the consensus on the psychological and emotional intensity of the music, it would be a logical extension to say that, whereas

²Schönberg praised Strauss for his daring affronts to standard harmony, and honoured him by including examples of his orchestration in his Harmonielehre (1911) (Wintle 66). But Schönberg later recanted his allegiance to Strauss when he refused to speak at the composer's fiftieth-birthday celebrations, saying that, if he had learned something from Strauss, he must have been mistaken (T. Carpenter 74).
Hofmannsthal inserts hysteria into the characterization of his heroine, for Strauss hysteria functions as an effect of musical narrative. However, does Strauss's opera represent the mad disease through his brash, turbulent and untamed orchestration or via other, subtler means? Can chromaticism or dissonance portray any specific behaviour or emotion, be it dementia, anger, hatred or jealousy? This chapter seeks to unravel the multiple messages communicated through the intersection of musical narration and words in Strauss's Elektra in order to determine the effect of this new medium on the representation of the myth.

Critics have asserted that this opera is more a tone poem painting emotions and events in a mimetic fashion (Potter 17) or, as one critic puts it "Symphonie schüttet wie sauce über den Braten" ("symphony poured like gravy over the roast") (Gerlach 404). Others have labelled Elektra a "heroische Symphonie" ("heroic symphony") (R. Breuer 22) or a composition in "sonata form" (Puffet 36). Strauss not only ignores the conventions of opera such as recitative and aria, but tests the limits of the operatic genre as a whole.3

3In the 1880s, the tone poem and programme music in general were the instrumental genre of choice among composers of the day. Strauss followed the example of Smetana, Dvořák, Liszt and Saint-Saëns, among others, in composing his Macbeth, Don Juan and later Also Sprach Zarathustra, but admitted that these "programmes" were "merely the stimulus to the creation of new forms and nothing more" (qtd. in Kennedy 17). He incorporated this programmatic style into his early operas, though he later confessed that this led to a somewhat problematic relationship between words and music: "My vocal style has the pace of a stage play and frequently comes into conflict with the figuring and polyphony of the orchestra" (Strauss 156). This conflict was clear to the singers who took roles in Elektra, but none was more firm on this point than Ernestine Schumann-Heink, who created the role of Klytämnestra and declared that the part was so desperate it nearly killed her (Lawton 322). The difficulty of singing Elektra became legendary and it was declared the part would bring on "Stimmenmord" ("voice-murder") (Messmer 75). Leonie Rysanek, who for most of her career sang Chrysothemis opposite Birgit Nilsson's Elektra, claimed: "Mein ganzes Leben hat man mich vor ihr gewarnt" ("Throughout my entire life, I was warned about her") (Dusek and Schmidt 266).
However, Strauss was certainly not the first composer to challenge the traditional form of music drama. He followed closely in the footsteps of Richard Wagner, whose work he revered enormously, emulating his style and taking his technique one step further.  

While Strauss may have used dissonant or chromatic orchestration in *Elektra* to express extreme psychological states, or rather "perversity," as an early reviewer puts it (Bekker 294), it can hardly be said that the opera is a chaotic mass of noises devoid of structure. On the contrary, *Elektra* is a highly ordered composition divided with almost mathematical precision into two symmetrical sections almost identical in length (part one goes up to rehearsal number §275 and part two concludes at §262a [the rehearsal numbers of the second half are distinguished by the addition of "a" after the arabic number]). The first part consists of four scenes: the prologue by the maids, Elektra's opening monologue, her discussion with Chrysothemis, and her confrontation with Klytämnestra. The second section also depicts four scenes: Elektra's attempted "seduction" of Chrysothemis, Elektra and Orest's recognition scene, the murders, and the finale including Elektra's dance. Strauss planned a systematic climax in intensity right to the end with the mother-daughter conflict at the apex of the first section, and the recognition scene as a second dramatic peak. Because the play ends with Elektra's dance of death there is no denouement such as

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4Although Strauss grew up listening to the classical trio of Mozart, Beethoven and Haydn (his father, a respected musician, hated Wagner and his music with a passion, though he conceded to perform the famous horn solo in *Tristan* [Recollections 127]), he discovered Wagner while a young music student and was inspired by what he heard. Wagner's notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk conceived of opera as a fusion of all the arts, but especially text and music, whereby neither is subordinate but each functions symbiotically with the other. Strauss adopted Wagner's format of using short and recognizable musical themes associated with a particular concept, character or mood--Leitmotifs--and continued to challenge the limits of the operatic genre.
would be found in most Greek tragedy, and Strauss's musical structure demonstrates this continuous augmentation of dramatic tension.

A Bassoon and a Flute: The Composer finds his Librettist

Strauss wrote that, when he saw Hofmannsthal's play in 1905 at the Deutsche Theater with Gertrud Eysoldt in the title role, "I immediately recognized, of course, what a magnificent operatic libretto it might be" (Recollections 154), and yet there were considerable changes to be made to the text before it would suit Strauss's requirements. The most significant alteration is in the length of the play text itself, which is considerably reduced in parts, most notably in the long exchange between Elektra and her mother, but also in the recognition scene, which shrank from 86 to 23 lines. At the same time, Strauss asked Hofmannsthal to add new text after Elektra's cry of "Orest!" when she first recognizes her brother, so that he could create a fluid transition from the heroine's expression of despair to the sudden joy she feels. Strauss proposed to Hofmannsthal: "Ich werde ein zärtlich bebendes Orchesterzwischenspiel einfügen, während Elektra den ihr wiedergeschenkten Orest betrachtet" ("I will insert a tender trembling orchestral interlude while Elektra observes Orest, once again restored to her") (Briefwechsel 36). Here and at

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5 It should be said that Strauss had already engaged with the Electra myth in his youth. At the age of seventeen, he composed a setting for a chorus from Sophocles' Electra, which was performed at the Ludwigsgymnasium that same year. Another factor which may have had an effect on Strauss's decision to deal with a classical theme is his enthusiasm for all things Greek. After a particularly bad case of pneumonia, the composer sailed for Greece in 1892, and while convalescing there, he fell in love with the culture and its mythology, recalling in his memoirs: "I have always been a German Greek" (Recollections 89). This interest persisted, and Strauss, together with Hofmannsthal, wrote four more operas on classical subjects.
various points in the action, Strauss halts the words to provide a musical interlude, almost like a cinematic freeze-frame where the music narrates the complex emotional turmoil that resists symbolization in language. Hofmannsthal, for whom, as we have seen, language was an inadequate medium, found the collaboration with Strauss extremely satisfying, since opera was just the form to supplement the limited expressive potential of words. The feeling was mutual, and Strauss paid Hofmannsthal the high compliment of writing to him that he was "der geborene Librettist" ("the born librettist") (41). The dynamics between Strauss and Hofmannsthal have been compared to that of a "cello and a harp or a bassoon and a flute," as opposed to the natural pairing of two solo violins (Simon 16).

The two men saw each other infrequently throughout their more than twenty years of collaboration, although together they produced a total of six major operas and several minor works. Strauss may have lacked the polished finesse of the precocious, refined

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6Hofmannsthal had already attempted to interest Strauss in a collaborative work in 1900, when he sent the composer a draft of a ballet called "Der Triumph der Zeit." Strauss declined the offer, saying that the work was of profound poetic beauty, but that he had plans for his own ballet (Briefwechsel 16). Perhaps it was too beautiful for Strauss's early tastes for topics dealing with violence, horror and the grotesque. Even prior to his poetic breakdown (the crisis of signification that gave rise to "Ein Brief" in 1902), Hofmannsthal was interested in the expressive quality of extra-linguistic media such as ballet, pantomime and music.

7Although Strauss's junior by a good ten years, the dandy Hofmannsthal made no bones about the composer's lack of refinement, saying to him once: "The great danger of your life... is a neglect of all the higher standards of intellectual existence" (qtd. in Kennedy 67). Although Hofmannsthal may have made some disparaging remarks, Strauss, who had a reasonable knowledge of the literary and visual arts, was not the uncultured buffoon that he was made out to be. However, the poet's words to Strauss on his sixtieth birthday reflect the true nature of his respect: "The only person who always recognized whatever there was, who received it with real joy, received it productively and translated it into higher reality, was you" (qtd. in Kennedy 84).
poet, but when it came to drama, he had a keen and savvy sense of how to steer the
dramatic energy.

Moritz Heimann wrote to his friend Hofmannsthal after the play's 1903 premiere:

[Gerade auf den schönsten Seiten ist der Vers nicht eigentlich dramatisch. Er bleibt in der Fläche. Er ist voll Feuer, lebendig tönend, von wachster Phantasie genährt. Aber er bezeichnet nicht die Geburt des Gedankens, nicht die Regung des Gefühls, sondern Gedanke und Gefühl sind fertig, und der Vers kommt hinzu und beschreibt sie, schmückt sie, beleuchtet. (Precisely on the most beautiful pages, the line is not really dramatic. It remains flat. It is full of fire, lively sounding, nourished by the most lively fantasy. But it does not indicate the birth of thought, not the stirring of feeling, but the thought and feeling are complete, and the line comes and describes them, decorates them, lights up.)

(Hofmannsthal, Briefe II 76)

Heimann's complaint is just what Hofmannsthal feared the most in his own writing, and it was this problem that music could help him solve. But exactly how this marriage of words and music functions is a topic of fierce debate.

Musical Voices: Mimesis or Diegesis

Musicologists are divided on the subject of the relationship of music to words, and Strauss's Elektra presents its own challenges to this dilemma. The opera has been called an "ultra-expressionist stream of consciousness" (Whittall 56), which would indicate that it
mirrors the content of the drama unreflexively. Another critic praises Strauss for translating Hofmannsthal's psychologically complex narrative into "einfachen musikalischen Zeichen" ("simple musical signs") (Jäger 145), suggesting that music is a form of short-hand code for language. But, as Theodor Adorno argued of the relation between music and language: "Musik zielt auf eine intentionslose Sprache.... Sprache interpretieren heißt: Sprache verstehen; Musik interpretieren: Musik machen" ("Music's goal is an intentionless language.... To interpret language is to understand language; to interpret music is to make music") ("Fragment" 252-53), an idea which would imply that music cannot be interpreted as such because it carries no specific meaning. All of these statements, to one degree or another, indicate that music cannot communicate as language does, but that mood and emotion in music is connotative rather than denotative.

In fact, we know that the Greek word for music meant both music and language until Plato first made the distinction in the fifth century BCE, declaring that rhythm and melody were subordinate to words. For Plato, language has a representational quality which music does not, and is therefore superior to non-signifying music (Neubauer 22). The Romantic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer agreed with Plato that music has an

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6The term "expressionist" has been used by more than one critic to describe Strauss's Elektra and its place within a given artistic paradigm or school. (This is somewhat misleading, given the fact that musical expressionism usually includes the works of Schönberg, Berg, Webern or even Bartók.) It should be taken into account that six years had passed between when the play was first written and its premiere in operatic form. It is perhaps fair to question whether or not the fin-de-siècle was still really the prevailing aesthetic, and for whom. Since Hofmannsthal's decadent Elektra was so closely tied to Viennese cultural consciousness at the time and to the recent explosion of interest in Freud's work on dreams, perhaps Strauss's German audience required a different interpretation more in tune with the pulse of Munich or Berlin, Strauss's musical milieu.
essential, unmediated quality, but this very nature was his justification for choosing to
elevate music above all other art forms. For Schopenhauer, music was the pure expression
of true will, a view which influenced Wagner in particular but also many other nineteenth-
century composers. Music thus never represents pleasure, pain, sorrow or horror, but
expresses the essential and transcendental nature of these emotions.\(^9\) In *The World as Will
and Representation*, Schopenhauer wrote of the relation between language and music:

> Because music does not, like all the other arts, exhibit the *Ideas* or grades of
> the will's objectification, but directly the *will itself*, we can also explain that it
> acts directly on the will.... Far from being a mere aid to poetry, music is
certainly an independent art; in fact, it is most powerful of all the arts, and
therefore attains its ends entirely from its own resources. Just as certainly it
does not require the words of a song or the action of an opera. (448; his
emphasis)

In *The Emancipation of Music from Language*, John Neubauer proposes that social
circumstances paved the way for Schopenhauer's theory of music as a means of achieving
divine transcendence. With the waning of absolute church authority and religious beliefs,
instrumental music expanded its role from frivolous entertainment to a serious medium
capable of filling the spiritual vacuum. Schopenhauer's thought allowed secular music to
attain an almost sacred status as a vehicle for transcendence.

And yet by the end of the Romantic era, the concept of music as "absolute"—a

\(^9\)Similarly, Eduard Hanslick declares that music cannot signify emotion or ideas *per
se*, saying: "Love and anger occur only within our hearts" (9).
non-signifying totality—was being challenged. Programme music began to test the narrational and mimetic limits of musical forms, and Strauss was among the many prominent composers who wrote in this genre. The growing interest in Freud's psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious was also an important influence on the changing perception of music, and on the doubt about its nature as an unmediated art form. If consciousness itself is divided and mediated, then perhaps music functions similarly as both message and medium. In this case, then, music could both perform the narrative or mimetic function as well as signify through its structure and diegetic devices.

A Polyphony of Voices: Composing the Story

Carolyn Abbate calls this capacity of music to express on multiple levels a "polyphony of voices." By voice, she means "not literally performance, but rather a sense of certain isolated and rare gestures in music, whether vocal or nonvocal, that may be perceived as modes of subjects' enunciations" (Unsung ix). Abbate distances herself from Edward Cone's notion of "the composer's voice" as the sole narrator of the musical piece, instead proposing that in any given piece of music there exist a plurality of voices, each with its own intentional autonomy. These voices do not make up a linear narrative, a progressive sequence driving the plot forward, but interact separately and even express contrasting messages. These incongruences of voice are a source of pleasure, says Abbate, because of the tension that builds between them. She suggests that a voice may present multiple interpretive possibilities within itself, through a process of defamiliarization or self-reflexivity such as in Elektra's famous claim that the music comes from inside her:
"sie kommt doch aus mir heraus" ("it is coming from inside me") (74). It is left ambiguous whether Elektra refers to the music that we as the audience are listening to, thus shattering the greatest operatic convention of all—that the characters are not aware that they are singing—or if she refers to another, more figurative understanding of music as the explosive joy that exceeds the expressive capacities of language and overflows into music and the final dance that will be her end.10

If we consider Strauss's Elektra in terms of Abbate's notion of the "polyphony of voices," what are the interpretive consequences for the representation of operatic hysteria? First of all, this theory rules out the possibility that Strauss's orchestration functions like an unconscious of the text, revealing the hidden psychological processes at work in Elektra's mind. If the music is made up of multiple voices, we can no longer assume that there is a direct relationship between the message being communicated in the text and that of the music (although Strauss himself, a Wagnerian, may have thought roughly in these terms).

But first we should perhaps consider just how hysteria might be represented in music, regardless of which voice is speaking. It has been taken for granted that the wild chromaticism and daring harmonies in Elektra are signs of lunacy or psychological turmoil, yet these divergences from polyphonic harmony are associated with a great many

10It is this kind of self-conscious music-making that Wagner sought to avoid when he covered up the orchestra pit at Bayreuth, argues Abbate. Wagner, a resolute Schopenhauerian, could not avow that actual bodies (likely perspiring from the physical effort of playing an instrument) engaged in this supposedly noumenal medium (Unsung 13). And yet there are moments in Wagner's own music when the music slips out of the absolute mode, and veers in the direction of multiple voices, such as the famous English horn melody in the third act of Tristan und Isolde.
other subjects, from the expression of evil, pain, sorrow, fear and doom to political resistance. It is doubtful that anyone would argue that Strauss's motive for the chromaticism in Elektra is political. My point is that, making blanket statements about the deviant orchestration in Strauss's opera necessarily representing the heroine's dementia is neither informative nor useful as an interpretive tool.

Susan McClary investigates the musical representation of madwomen from a feminist perspective, arguing that composers have been attracted to narratives involving female hysteria because the subject matter offers tremendous opportunity to show off their compositional skills by ensuring there will be moments of wild dramatic energy. She tells us these heroines' dementia is "delineated through repetitive, ornamental, or chromatic excess" but goes on to say that this excessive ornamentation depicting the madwoman's

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11Theodor Adorno is well-known for his views on Schönberg's atonal compositions and the capacity of music to resist the reifications of the "culture industry." He argues that because Schönberg's works propose a challenge to the listener and are not easily assimilated, functioning as a kind of musical Verfremdungseffekt, they provoke audiences to resist aesthetic totalitarianism.

12In fact, there is nothing inherently meaningful about chromaticism and its association with extreme emotions of all kinds. One might argue that, like the linguistic signifier, the musical signifier (or tonal progression) is arbitrary and autonomous, and that it only carries meaning when it is assigned a certain value with the consensus of a given interpretive community. This would indicate that the expression of hysteria in music is a convention rooted in historical and cultural contexts and not based on any pre-given factors. It is relatively easy to verify this arbitrariness if we consider that chromaticism is only dissonant when compared to Western notions of harmony (which we associate with balance and well-being, morally and physically) within our current system of musical notation. In fact one could easily say that in Strauss's Ariadne auf Naxos Zerbinetta comes far closer to conventional coloratura representations of dementia in earlier opera than Elektra does.

13McClary claims that the enormous popularity of these insane heroines is a source of embarrassment to musicologists, who ignore or make excuses for these characters' dementia (80).
deviance has long been a privileged component in Western music (81, 82). McClary postulates that such musical representation of hysteria finds itself wedged into a larger conflict—that of the compulsion for discipline and control in musical forms, pitted against the equally strong desire to violate and exceed these very power structures (82). It is precisely this dichotomy between the strictness and rigidity of traditional forms and everything that falls outside of these narrow bounds, stretching the audience's ears as well as its social conscience, that is worth investigating in Strauss's opera. It is through this frame that Elektra, the apparently hysterical heroine, and her place in the middle of this struggle can be most fruitfully examined.

The Viennese Waltz: Ballroom Distortions

Chapter Four already questioned Elektra's role as the hysterical patient in Hofmannsthal's drama, suggesting that she might switch places and don the doctor's white coat, playing analyst to her mother, but also simultaneously to her author. This chapter asks again: who is the real lunatic? Carolyn Heilbrun and Catherine Clément both assume as a matter of course that Elektra is the poor soul condemned to madness by male composers and librettists anxious to pander to their audiences' fetishes. Clément confesses her mixed feelings of guilt and pleasure in listening to the beautiful music of distressed female heroines, slaves to madness, death, and the male phantasy of women desiring to be seduced. She condemns composers for figuratively putting women on the psychoanalytic couch, never believing their complaints of rape and abuse, concluding: "Either all the fathers were rapists or all the daughters were damned liars.... [B]ecause [Freud] sided with
the fathers, he decided the sin lay with the daughters. Now we have lying hysterics" (35). Clément goes on to say that Elektra must die because she is guilty of the pleasure of revenge, and in a patriarchal world that won't do. Elektra becomes an "instrument of men's vengeance against their peers" and must be killed (her hysteria silenced) to repress the power of female expression (76). Heilbrun, on the other hand, sees Elektra's hysteria as the only sane response in a mad world in which circumstances demand submission and devotion to a father and a brother: "She goes mad not only because patriarchal rules require that sacrifice, but because, having aided the son in the allegiance of the father, she has no further purpose in life" (45).

Clément and Heilbrun offer valid interpretations of Elektra's madness, but the music allows for an alternative reading. It is, surprisingly, not Elektra's opening monologue where we find the most "chromatic excess," despite the fact that this is the heroine's first chance to express the suffering she endures at the loss of her father, a main factor in her hysterical behaviour. (The Electra complex, Carl Jung's term for the daughter's fixation on and sexual obsession with her father, is blamed for her neurosis, after all; the daughter represses her desire for her father and in so doing causes erratic and irrational behaviour to arise in place of her sexual expression.) Elektra's monologue is decidedly tame compared with the musical voices depicting Klytämnestra's dream, which Strauss himself agreed represents the high-water point of his avant-garde experimentations (Recollections 155). Between rehearsal numbers §127 and §133 the strings and lower woodwinds take turns raging in violent ascending chromatic scales alternating with ominous syncopated dissonant oscillations.
Elektra's monologue begins not with the imposing Agamemnon motif, but with a plaintive lament: "Allein" ("Alone") is accompanied by an inquisitive ascending major third, followed by the phrase "Der Vater fort, hinabgescheucht in seine kalten Klüfte" ("Father [is] gone, driven away into his cold abyss") (§35), accompanied by a mournful descending sequence. Interestingly, Elektra does not sing the leitmotif that has been associated with her character (see example 1); rather, after her first word, the English horn and Heckelphone together insert the plaintive triad trailing off with two ascending semitones.

![Example 1](image)

The fact that Elektra's musical signifier appears in the orchestration and not her own voice is just one indication that there is more going on in the subtext than first meets the eye or ear. It is not until after this introduction that Elektra cries out her father's name in the famous leitmotif of an inverted triad in B-flat minor, recalling the opera's opening chord (see example 2).

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14 The libretto diverges from the play here in that Strauss has Elektra calling upon her father using his proper name not once but five times throughout her monologue, whereas the play uses the neutral shifter "Vater" ("father"). This use of the proper name solidifies the musical and linguistic signifiers associated with Agamemnon, but it also places an added emphasis on Elektra's obsession with her father. Because the motifs associated with Agamemnon appear again and again throughout the opera, we are reminded through aural reinforcement that his spirit roams at large in Argos. There are those (Overhoff, Jäger)
In this first segment, Elektra is hardly a whirling maenad, but presents herself as a dignified if despairing princess, narrating the events that have led to her present situation and outlining a rational plan of action for revenge.

There are moments of poignant lyricism, such as when Elektra nostalgically recalls the innocence of her childhood and pleads with Agamemnon to give her a sign: "Nur so wie gestern, wie ein Schatten, dort im Mauerwinckel zeig dich deinem Kind" ("If only like yesterday, like a shadow, there in the corner of the wall, show yourself to your child") (§45; see example 3):

The passage ends with a resolution in A-flat major, which leads into the soaring tuneful melody known as the "Sehnsuchtsmotif" ("yearning motif") (von Nau 422; see example who suggest that Agamemnon, and not Elektra, is the principal figure in the opera (although Nau would see Elektra as the lead). As the action progresses, this musical signifier refers not so much to Agamemnon's ghostly presence, as to Elektra's hatred and grim determination to enact revenge. She appropriates this imposing tonal progression to the extent that, when we hear it for a final time at the end of the opera, it has become a new Elektra-motif, now lamenting her death and not Agamemnon's.
There are also obvious examples of tone painting, such as the dramatic descending interval on the word "Stürzen" ("plunge") (§50; see example 5), reflecting Strauss's earlier interest in programme music.

But more interesting yet is what follows directly after this mimetic dive. With the word "Rosse" ("Steeds") (§51), during Elektra's description of the sacrificial slaughter of Agamemnon's horses and dogs prior to the celebrations for the vengeful murders, there is a sudden change of mood marked by a new time signature and the unexpected arrival of the major key. The lilting melody is in 6/4 time, and Elektra's joyful melody is accompanied by undulating triplets in the upper strings. This dance rhythm continues right to the end of Elektra's monologue (§64) (with the exception of one bar in 9/4 time at §56 to allow for a slight hesitation on the words "rings um dein Grab" ("circling around your
grave"). If one did not refer to the score, it would be possible to mistake this time
signature for the distinctive 3/4 rhythm of the waltz. However, this is not waltz time but a
distorted version thereof; therefore it is not suggestive of an elegant ballroom and flowing
gowns. It is the stuff of gruesome tragedy.

The distorted reference to this most Viennese of dances opens up points of
incongruity, perhaps the most striking of which is the discrepancy between the dramatic
intensity of Elektra's speech, filled with sorrow and vengeful rage, and the images,
conjured up by Strauss's rhythmic reference to the waltz, of happy couples swirling round
and round to the brisk and regular tempo of the dance. This very chasm between subject
matter and music also foreshadows the ecstatic joy of the opera's final scene. And yet, we
must not lose sight of the fact that the waltz fragment we hear in Strauss's orchestration
here is not the music of frivolous entertainment, but offers instead a contorted, even
deviant, version of the familiar dance form. The ambiguity presented by this disfigured
terpsichorean theme plants in the ears and minds of the audience a seed that will grow
into the "Reigen" that ends Elektra's life, a dance which, like this first waltz, is both
ecstatic and morose, divine and morbid.

**Strauss and the Viennese: A Parody of Nerves**

Apart from the interpretive consequences of the waltz within the opera itself,
Strauss's particular milieu is relevant to his use of this music. The introduction of this
musical idea seems to have been entirely the musician's own decision, since he had
already informed Hofmannsthal that he was not to concern himself in the slightest degree
with the music: "Denken Sie bei der Komposition des Textes gar nicht an die Musik, das besorge ich allein" ("Don't think about the music at all when composing the text, I'll take care of that myself") (Briefwechsel 32). Hofmannsthal was intimately connected to Vienna's cultural institutions, and it is impossible to ignore the importance of the decadent age that spawned Elektra in its dramatic form; but of his own accord Strauss cleverly chose to exploit Vienna's most potent musical convention for its evocations of both innocence and naivety. In Fin-de-siècle Vienna, Carl Schorske writes of Schnitzler's understanding of the far-reaching associations of the waltz in ways that are suggestive for Strauss too:

[Schnitzler] understood not merely the traditions of the world of the waltz but also the psychology of its individuals in their increasingly eccentric relation to the dissolving whole. He has described as no other has done the social matrix in which so much of twentieth-century subjectivism took form: the disintegrating moral-aesthetic culture of fin-de-siècle Vienna. (15)

With Strauss, it is perhaps not a question of illustrating the breakdown of Viennese moral-aesthetic culture, since when he composed his Elektra there was a comfortable distance between him and that decaying metropolis, both temporally and geographically. With the

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15 Hofmannsthal seems to have been enamoured with Strauss's use of the waltz in Elektra, since he asked the composer expressly to include the dance form in their next collaborative work, Der Rosenkavalier (which Strauss had already begun composing in May 1909, a mere five months after the premiere of Elektra): "Lassen Sie für den letzten Akt einen altmodischen, teils süßen, teils frechen Wiener Walzer einfallen, der den ganzen Akt durchweben muß" ("Think of an old-fashioned, partly sweet, partly cheeky Viennese waltz for the last act, which should weave itself throughout the entire act") (Briefwechsel 58).
turn of the century well behind him, Strauss is able to comment musically with the wisdom of hindsight on the social upheaval of those times. In his memoirs, the composer acknowledges the debt he owes his namesake, Johann Strauss, whose genius for musically capturing a historical moment he both admired and emulated:

   Of all the god-gifted dispensers of joy, Johann Strauss is to me the most endearing. That first, comprehensive statement can serve as a text for everything I feel about this wonderful phenomenon.... At a time when the whole world around him was tending towards increased complexity, increased reflectiveness, his natural genius enabled him to create from the whole.

   (Recollections 77; his emphasis)

This last statement might apply equally to Strauss himself, who possessed a gift for ordering complexity: while multiple voices deliver conflicting messages in his use of the waltz metaphor, the composer keeps a tight control over the whole of his composition. One might even go so far as to say that Strauss distorts the Viennese dance as a kind of parodic representation of the psychological turmoil that befell the neurotic city.

   The composer had a somewhat tormented relationship to the Austrian cultural capital, but he never missed an opportunity to poke fun, and it is possible that Strauss saw Vienna's sacred institutions as fair game.\textsuperscript{16} He once described this aspect of his character: "I am the only composer nowadays with some real humour, a sense of fun and a marked

\textsuperscript{16} Strauss was appointed artistic director of the Vienna Opera in 1919, but a dispute with Franz Schalk led to his resignation in 1924. Prior to Strauss's appointment, Hofmannsthal had voiced his reservations, knowing that his colleague, an entrepreneur and an advocate of the nouveau riche, would shake up the old-world conservatism of Viennese opera patrons (Kennedy 67).
gift for parody" (qtd. in Kennedy 1), a talent he was already beginning to hone when he wrote the Elektra. I suspect that, despite the opera's serious subject matter, Strauss could not resist having a little fun playing with Vienna's pressure points. Unlike Hofmannsthal, he seems never to have suffered from psychological instability, and had little time for the fragile nerves of his Austrian neighbours. If this is the case, then the insertion of the waltz in the orchestration surrounding Elektra's monologue may also be parodying the epidemic of hysteria into which Hofmannsthal's heroine was born. In contrast to this collective "crise de nerfs," Strauss's Elektra comes across as relatively sane.

Strauss does not stop after one reference to the waltz—he brings it back for an encore during Elektra's confrontation with Klytämnestra. The tell-tale distorted 6/4 waltz time signature returns at §205 and continues until §216, just in time to accompany Elektra's riddle, the clever word-play she uses to lead Klytämnestra right into her own trap:

Klytämnestra: Rede doch!

Elektra: Kannst du mich nicht erraten?


Den Namen sag des Opfertiers!

E: Ein Weib.

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17 Strauss was not the first composer to disfigure the waltz; Schumann's Papillon and Liszt's Mephisto Waltz are obvious precursors (Reiman, "Trotz allem Scheine" 21).

18 Strauss was a good-natured man, who seemed to have had a happy childhood despite his father's notorious bad temper. He appears to have recognized the tremendous opportunities that helped shape his career, but he also embraced all aspects of his life and work with extraordinary energy and enthusiasm, always rising to the occasion.
K: Von meinen Dienerinnen eine, sag!

ein Kind, ein jungfräuliches Weib? Ein Weib,
das schon erkannt von Manne?

E.: Ja erkannt! das ist's.

K.: Und wie das Opfer? Und welche Stunde? Und wo?

E.: An jedem Ort zu jeder Stunde des Tags und der Nacht....

(Klytämnestra: Speak then!

Elektra: Can't you guess?

K.: No, that's why I ask.

Say the name of the sacrifice!

E: A woman.

K: One of my servant women, tell me!

a child, a virgin? A woman

who is known by man?

E.: Yes one who is known, that's it.

K.: And sacrificed how? At what hour? And where?

E.: At every place at every time of the day or night....)

The teasing scene becomes increasingly absurd, as Klytämnestra digs herself ever deeper into the grave Elektra sets out for her. As I have already mentioned in my discussion of this scene in the play, the Socratic irony here effectively invites the audience to take Elektra's side, figuratively bidding them to join in the shameless taunting and ridiculing of her mother. Though Strauss's rhythm is indicative of the waltz, Klytämnestra sings faster
and faster until she reaches a staccato frenzy, so great is her need for the knowledge her
dughter withholds. This is hardly the graceful pace that Viennese Gemütlichkeit demands,
yet the melodic and harmonic peace that descends in both the vocal register and the
orchestration is sickly sweet as Klytämnestra sings: "Ich freue mich, daß ich dich heut'
einmal nicht störisch finde" ("I'm glad for once today that I don't find you obstinate")
(§215). The waltz in Elektra's opening monologue foretells the joy that will reign when
the murders are complete, but here there is none of that celebratory mood. The
nonchalance of the lilting beat signals Klytämnestra's naivety and mimics the saccharine-
laced irony of Elektra's tongue. And yet Strauss may also be commenting (consciously or
not) on historical events, the false innocence of the waltz as the symbol of the wealth and
grandeur of the Hapsburg Empire. In hindsight, this ballroom tune was no charming two-

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10 This is not the only instance in which Strauss uses musical forms to signal the cruel
games Elektra plays on her mother. At §148, she empathizes with Klytämnestra's plight:
"Du bist nicht mehr du selber" ("You are no longer yourself"); but for those who are not
as quick to register the irony in Elektra's voice, Strauss illustrates her false sympathy by
having her sing these words to the "Freude-motiv," again in 6/4 time:

![Example 6]

This poignant melody recurs in the sisters' duet in the final scene, but here it is more
seductive than joyful. Günther von Nau suggests that Strauss's use of leitmotifs is actually
much more complex than Wagner's, that these musical snippets do not remain constant,
but are subject to a slippage of meaning. (While von Nau has a good point, I think it is
safe to say that Wagner's leitmotifs are also musical shifters and not merely static
symbols.) Strauss layers them and combines them, leaving a dense trail of musical
meaning, the most striking example of which is just after Elektra's cry: "Orest!" (422).
The conglomeration of musical motifs signifies her confusion and the sheer enormity of
emotion that wells up in her in this scene.
The same rhythmic structure reappears at the very end of the scene (just before §261) with a slight variation in the tempo—a jig-like 6/8—only this time the musical joke is on Elektra, since this is precisely the moment when Klytämnestra, by this time tormented to her wit’s end, is approached by a servant who whispers the delightful news of Orest's death into her ear. The orchestra tears into wild jubilation accompanying Klytämnestra's solo number as she doubles over in an attack of insane cackles. Now it is Elektra's turn to be victimized by the sweet waltz, now sinister to her ears and those of the audience.

The last and most magnificent return of the waltz is after Elektra has sung the final note of her duet with Chrysothemis (§247a). The "Verzückungs-Motif" ("Ecstatic-motif") returns in the strings (see example 7) followed closely by the "Tanz-Motif" ("Dance-motif") at §250a (see example 8).  

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20The lilting "Verzückungs-Motif" in 6/4 time actually begins at §230a after Elektra answers Chrysothemis's question about whether she hears the music with "Sie kommt doch aus mir" ("It comes from inside me"). But this is just a prelude to the real celebration which will begin in a few bars. I should mention that the waltz also heralds Elektra's seduction of Chrysothemis as well as sounding a warning prior to the murder of Ägisth. What these episodes have in common is that in each of them Elektra is in a position of power, in the first scene using her eroticism to influence her sister and in the second instance using her double-edged tongue to trick Ägisth as she did her mother.
And almost immediately thereafter in this jam-packed orchestral interlude, we hear the dotted rhythm and pungent chromaticism (after §251a) of what I am calling Elektra's revenge-dance motif (example 9).21

It is telling that all references to the waltz come to an abrupt end when Elektra takes the first steps of what will turn out to be her death dance (§259a).

At the exact moment when it would finally be appropriate to insert a dance motif, Strauss pulls back on the heavy orchestration. Most of the instrumental lines have fixed chords while the strings play the lonely triadic Elektra-motif followed by a snippet of an altered version of the "Seligkeits-Motif." The fun and games are over--Strauss doesn't dare play around in this most serious of moments. Of his many gifts, the composer's acute sense of dramatic energy is one of his most valuable. The two events in the opera that

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21I have been unable to locate this motif in the criticism on Elektra, although it seems to me to be an important one, since it is also appears briefly during Elektra's opening monologue and ties together her desire for revenge with the joy after the act.
might be considered what Edward Cone calls "occasions for song"22 are Elektra's opening lament and her final dance, and yet in the latter case, the performer remains mute and Strauss figuratively echoes this silence by extinguishing the waltz just before the dancer's own demise.23 In this last rendition of the distorted waltz and the metaphoric silence that follows it, there is no irony. Could it be that by muffling the lilting melody of the two-step when Elektra breathes her last Strauss signals the abrupt end to the grace and charm of an era that haunted Europe just as Agamemnon haunted Argos?24 Perhaps Strauss wants

This is a self-reflexive moment in opera (sometimes called "phenomenal music") when a character might have real reason to sing aside from the convention of the genre. These moments need not always be vocal, like the tavern scenes commonly used as "occasions for song," but can also be instrumental, as in the famous horn solo at the beginning of Act III in Wagner's Tristan. While Elektra's dance is not an "occasion for song" as such, it is a self-conscious performance within the text.

It is also interesting to note that the waltz is a purely instrumental form and not the accompaniment for text, thus symbolizing the autonomy of music as its own expressive medium, but also emphasizing the silence of the voice. If Strauss had known his Freud as Hofmannsthal did, he would have realized that silence is one of the symptoms of hysteria. Perhaps he had heard of the famous Anna O., of her aphasia and of the subsequent "talking cure" she underwent with Dr. Breuer. Whether or not the composer was aware of these clinical details, the instrumental quality of the dance melody demonstrates the expressive capacities of non-verbal art forms, a device he used to great effect in his earlier opera Salome.

The Viennese waltz is not the only musical-historical intertext at work in Elektra. Critics have discussed at length the tonal and melodic, but also thematic references to Wagner's Tristan und Isolde (see Carpenter 91-93 and Abbate, Unsung Voices 133-34). This too has considerable consequences for the interpretation of the heroine's demise, since the immediate aural connection is to Elektra's counterpart Isolde and her role in the Liebestod. If we accept that Isolde's death is now transposed onto the mythological heroine's final exit, there can be no doubt that Elektra's death, if it is a death, is a liberation from the suffering of life, that it is an experience of unspeakable ecstasy as the Wagnerian heroine's final lines indicate: "ertrinken,/ versinken--/ unbewußt/--höchste Lust" ("drowning,/ sinking--/ unconscious--/ highest pleasure") (137). Elektra's experience of death as the most extreme bliss is not only emphasized by this musical reference to Isolde drowning in happiness and transfiguring splendour, but also through changes that Hofmannsthal made in the libretto. At Strauss's request, the poet added a duet in the final
to imply that, in the end, the delicate and breezy waltz that recalls a now-vanished age of imperial splendour dies along with Elektra, just as we can hope that the curse of Atreus too is gone forever with the heroine's sacrifice.  

Both Elektra and Strauss have a somewhat ambiguous relationship to paternal imagery. While the avenging daughter remembers her father with nostalgia and respect, these same memories are clouded by the legacy of hatred and suffering that permeates her family tree. So too the composer is conflicted about his history. He grew up forbidden to listen to anything but classical composers, so strong was his father's hatred for anything modern (including all of the Romantics save Brahms), and yet when he discovered Wagner, Strauss knew there was much to be learned from the great innovator. He not only

scene between the two sisters; together they rejoice at the justice enacted by the murders, and directly before her dance Elektra declares: "Aah! Liebe tötet! aber keiner fährt dahin und hat die Liebe nicht gekannt!" ("Ah! love kills! but no one goes there and has not known love") (§246a). (Critics John and Suzanne Potter trace this line to an essay Hofmannsthal wrote on Oscar Wilde [1905]: "He who knows the power of the dance fears not death, for he knows that love kills," but also to Erwin Rhode's permutation of a quote from a Sufi dervish [36]). It is not certain whether Hofmannsthal deliberately refers to the Liebestod in this line, but in the context of the opera, the clear message is that Elektra, giving herself completely over to the power of the dance, fears not death, and exits life in an exuberant state of ecstatic love. While Hofmannsthal's drama does not contradict this message in the sense that in the original text Elektra is obviously overwhelmed with happiness, in the opera the stress is on the power of love to envelop and dissolve the ego in an almost utopian end.

The opera, along with the drama, ends with Chrysothemis calling out her brother's name, "Orest! Orest!," leaving the audience in anticipation of what will come next. Hofmannsthal apparently had in mind to write a sequel entitled "Orest in Delphi" (Briefe 1900-1909 132), although it would obviously not follow the same plot line as Eurypides' Orestes since this version has Electra playing a major role in consoling her mad brother. Nevertheless, the fact that Hofmannsthal had in mind a subsequent work means that the curse might not have died with Elektra and it also opens up new possibilities for the interpretation of the heroine's end.

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took from Wagner, but continually expanded upon the musical forms of his predecessor to the point that he was branded as an avant-garde composer. There were those, among them Hans von Bülow, who sensed that despite the scandals surrounding the young Strauss (for instance, the controversy over *Aus Italien*), he would in the end become the bastion of tradition despite his seeming hunger for all things new (Kennedy 15).

My point about Strauss's appropriation of the dance form associated with his musical father Johann Strauss, is that while Elektra is the supposed hysteric, the composer has his own father complex. If Agamemnon is the most obvious musical representation of a father in the opera, the Strauss waltz is no less pervasive as a paternal presence (although perhaps subtler than the bombastic Atrean chord). We have in this text not one father but two or even three: Agamemnon, Johann Strauss and Franz Strauss. While I am not suggesting that Strauss suffers from madness or any clinical neurosis as such, I do mean to point out that Elektra is not alone in her conflicted relationship to her male parent. And if Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* is a "dramatic cure" for its librettist's "aphasic crisis," we might call the opera "musical therapy" for Strauss's unconscious conflicts with his musical father, his biological father, and his cultural and historical fathers. If the

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26Strauss felt uneasy about this term, and in an essay entitled "Is There an Avant-garde in Music?" (1906) he commented with a good deal of cynicism: "Now I am usually credited with a good nose for sensational matters and, as certain clever contemporaries have long since found out, I spend my day speculating like a kind of musical tailor how best to satisfy next year's fashions" (*Recollections* 12). The composer maintained that terminology such as "avant-garde" is for the most part useless and that it should be left up to the public to decide what they like and that they should not be swayed by the critics' polemic debates (14). He concluded that he was at heart a reactionary, if this definition includes someone who prefers "to see the 'Freischutz' twelve times in succession, rather than some worthless modern opera" (16).
composer is indeed playing with Vienna's collective cultural "crise de nerfs," it is equally plausible that he is working out the uncertainties of his paternal allegiances to Johann Strauss and Richard Wagner, as part of a larger struggle between his respect for musical tradition and a yearning to exploit new, chromatic and dissonant tonal structures.  

Dance and Music: The Primacy of Rhythm

Music and dance together open up new semiotic potential, as Strauss has aptly demonstrated. The very fact that the waltz crops up over and over again throughout the opera means that dance, although not always visually portrayed, is continually present as an implied medium of expression. Music and dance are related art forms in the sense that dance, in most cases, has a musical accompaniment, but what unifies the two is not movement, melody or mood, but rhythm. While for Schopenhauer and Wagner music was superior to dance because of its inherent transcendental quality, for Kant dance could

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[27] Edward Cone proposes that all characters in opera stand in inconsistent, ambiguous relationships to their "song," at times identifying with it in a self-conscious manner and at other times appearing not to be aware that they are even singing (138). We might use this same analogy for Strauss: while he does not perform it, the waltz is just as much his dance as it is Elektra's, and the message it communicates changes according to the context of enunciation. As the opera progresses and we hear the distinctive rhythm return again and again, it becomes loaded with associations, so that in the end it stands for Elektra's nostalgic memories of her father, for her crazed desire for revenge, for her ironic words, for Klytämnestra's shrieks of laughter, for the naivety of now-forgotten imperial grandeur or for all of the above. Because the waltz tune becomes familiar to the audience, it is no longer so jarring, and despite the horrors that we witness at the finale, we take some comfort in the romantic associations of ballroom swirls. If the waltz has multiple meanings for Elektra and her composer, it is equally plurivocal for the audience.

[28] Words, music and dance were equal components in baroque opera, and it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the obligatory ballet lost its privileged place within the genre. Even then dance remained central to French grand opéra.
never be subordinated because it was subject to the dimension of space and therefore an objective form. Francis Sparshott sums up the relationship by saying that "music is dance internalized" and "dance is music externalized" (222). While Cone views music and words as "two aspects of a single organism," he posits dance as a kind of supporting aid to music: "dance can sometimes clarify the rhythmic relationships by creating visual analogies for them" (20). And since, as Clément points out, "the words in opera are seldom understood; either they are in another language, or they are made inaudible by the singing technique" (9), it is rhythm that pierces into its listeners' unconscious. Clément may be right, and yet many of the subtleties of Elektra depend on the dialogue between words and music; Hofmannsthal's poetry is sustained and challenged by the rhythm of Strauss's plurivocal melodies.

This discussion of music and rhythm has consequences for Elektra's representation if we consider that rhythm is the most distinctive feature of the waltz, which gives itself away with its beat. It is rhythm that opens up a gap between what is being narrated in the text and the message of the music in Elektra. As Owen Lee puts it: "an ancient Greek choriambic rhythm wrestles with a distorted Viennese waltz" (208). My reason for focusing on the common element of rhythm as it relates to dance, music and voice, is to explore its signifying potential. Hofmannsthal and Strauss both struggle in their own ways with the limits of expression and end up gravitating toward the rhythm of the dance, Hofmannsthal in his inclusion of Elektra's death dance in the plot and Strauss through his use of waltz music.

In Revolution in Poetic Language, Julia Kristeva offers some insight into the
semiotic power of rhythm, identifying it with pre-Oedipal drives which she describes as "discrete quantities of energy [which] move through the body" and are "always already involved in semiotic processes." These drives articulate the chora: "a nonexpressive totality...that is as full of movement as it is regulated" and "is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm" (25-26). According to Kristeva's semiotic system, this vocal (song) or kinetic (dance) rhythm precedes the socialized body, the symbolic order and the establishment of the sign. This signifying process applies equally to language and to music and dance, but the unifying principle is the rhythmic quality not subject to the exigencies of symbolic representation.

If we apply Kristeva's theory to the case of Anna O., we might conclude that the linguistic confusion she suffers is in fact a retreat to the pre-Oedipal semiotic, a symptom of the greater struggle at the level of subjectivity. We might also consider the dance that Hofmannsthal adds for Elektra, or Strauss's waltz for that matter, as an enunciation of the semiotic chora with its rhythmic drives articulated through the body. Through music, dance, voice and the ambiguities of language, Elektra succeeds in destabilizing the symbolic order, maximizing its signifying potential through rhythmic undulations. There are a number of different ways to interpret the textual representation of hysteria. When we consider these various means of communication and begin to unravel the complexities of the semiotic processes at work in Elektra, it becomes apparent that what is perceived as madness on the part of the heroine may in fact be indications of a revolution in signification.
Chapter Six

The Big Job: Cleaning up the Dirty Dead

in Pound's Translation of Sophocles' Elektra

The Anti-hysteric: Courage and Sanity

"A translator is someone trying to get in between a body and its shadow" (5).

These words, which Anne Carson uses to discuss her translation of Sophocles' Electra, apply equally to Ezra Pound's Janus-faced contortions as he wedges himself into the spaces of this same Greek drama.¹ We might also consider the task of the translator as the job of writing Elektra's shadow as she dances to the rhythm of a tragedy Pound knew all too well. The poet found himself in difficult circumstances when he undertook his translation of Sophocles' play in 1949. He had been imprisoned for his actions during the war, and was considered by many to be mentally incompetent. Pound's Elektra, as stubborn and defiant as the poet himself, fights the battles that he could not. Through his subtle manipulation of Sophocles' language, the translator creates a heroine who is neither a hysteric nor a grief-stricken victim; instead she embodies Pound's own values of strength and determination. He shows Elektra executing the "big job" of revenge, "cleaning up" all the dirt left by the murderers, and setting an example of civic duty by refusing to give in to the pain of losing her father and her dignity. She does not weep and wail, but gets on

¹Pound refuses to translate the Greek kappa into a banal English "c" in Sophokles and Elektra, almost as if it would take away the sweet aftertaste of the original the translator sought to retain.
with the business of restoring order. And like the defiant Elektra of Müller's Hamletmaschine, this young woman transforms her sorrow and suffering into a violent rage. These Elektras break gender stereotypes and refuse the role of demure princess. Pound achieves all of this through a fine balance of fidelity and freedom in translation. He demonstrates that justice amounts to finding the right words. Though Pound's Elektra is a translation and not a free adaptation such as O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra or Eliot's The Family Reunion, it establishes no mere equivalency in English. On the contrary, his idiosyncratic translation poetics, which rests on the principle of mimicking the foreignness of the Greek in a new language, makes for a strikingly new play. Despite his earlier reservations about the stage as a satisfactory medium for his creative endeavours, Pound embraced this drama with all his intellect and spirit, making it new and making it his.

Like Hofmannsthal and Strauss's Elektra, this Atrean princess casts doubt on the view that this century's Electras are mad. The translator shows that she has all her wits about her.

Pound even went so far as to have stationery printed up with the line from Elektra that for

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²The emphasis on the "job," on civic duty, and a stubborn refusal to admit defeat is not unique to Pound's translation of Elektra. These are obsessions that run like leitmotifs throughout his work. Perhaps the particularly frustrating situation he found himself in when he undertook the translation made the poet all the more determined to express his message.

³Pound was quite sceptical about the value of drama, claiming that poetry was by far the superior art: "My whole habit of thinking of the stage is: that it is a gross, coarse form of art" (qtd. in Syros 27). Theatre went against all his instincts as a poet: his love of subtlety, allusion and hermeticism, all of which kept his audience at arm's length. Pound had no desire to communicate with his reader, much less a live audience with expectation of entertainment. He believed in the cultivation of obscurity and in this respect followed the Alexandrians, refuting the critics of the Cantos by stating: "There is no intentional obscurity. It is impossible to make the deep as quickly comprehensible as the shallow" (qtd. in A. George 70).
him captured the essence of his heroine's bravery: "Shall we to all our ills add cowardice?" (Pound/Cummings 228).5

Pound worked on his translation during his time at St. Elizabeths Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Washington, D.C., where he was confined from 1946 until his release twelve years later. He was discharged when his doctors could not diagnose any clinical mental disorder and felt that he would not benefit from psychiatric or medical treatment (Carpenter 729; Flory 184). Pound was imprisoned for his actions during the war, namely a series of extremely controversial radio speeches which revealed him as both a fascist and an anti-Semite. Although he was accused of treason, his lawyer's plea of insanity led to his incarceration at St. Elizabeths, and there was no trial. During these "mad years," the poet began working on the Elektra with Rudd Fleming, a professor of English at the University of Maryland.6 When I first encountered the text, it struck me as a curious coincidence that Pound would have chosen one of the most quintessential hysterics in all of Greek literature for his heroine, and after my initial reading I was intrigued with the

4Since the line numbers in Pound's translation are different from the Greek of Sophocles, I will refer to the translation with P and use an S to mark the lines of the original. All comparisons will refer to Jebb's translation, since it was Pound's principal study aid for his Elektra. It is telling that the poet used this 1894 edition, despite his negative review of it as a translation. Even today, after more than a century, Jebb's commentary remains a key tool for classicists, with its meticulous attention to detail, copious explanatory notes, and readable yet literal text.

5Pound corresponded regularly with a great many of his contemporaries, and always used his stationery as a political placard, branding it with such messages as: "res publica, the public convenience," "A tax is not a share[,] A nation need not and should not pay rent for its credit," or "Liberty is not a right but a duty" (Pound/Zukofsky xxiv).

6The published Elektra has both Pound and Fleming as collaborative authors, and yet there is little indication that the latter did much more than provide a few helpful hints, most of which it seems Pound eventually ignored in the final manuscript.
way in which Elektra's "insanity" might be represented in the form of a poetics. And yet, a closer examination of the text revealed that Pound's idiosyncratic and unconventional language hovers like a thin veil over what might be described as a foolproof defense of sanity that would stand up in any court of law. Pound had a very clear agenda in his translation, but the question is once again: is Elektra sane or mad? Does Pound merely disguise her hysteria with his own wishful thinking? These questions will be addressed through a close analysis of the text. To this end, however, it is necessary to understand the context of the translation and the characteristics of Pound's poetics.

Publication and the Private Pound

Most likely due to its relatively late publication, there is little scholarship on this text. It was not until 1989, after the play was performed in New York City by the Classic Stage Company, that this Elektra was released in an edition by Richard Reid. It is not known why Pound did not publish the translation during his lifetime, but it has been suggested that the author feared this slim volume would provide evidence of his sanity, and that he might have to be tried after all (Uhlmeyer 144; Reid xiii). And yet this argument does not hold up, given the fact that Pound's Women of Trachis translation was published in 1954, also during the St. Elizabeths years. This logic also does not agree with Pound's own vehement desire to stand trial and argue his own case. Another possible reason for the manuscript's long wait on a dusty shelf is that the poet was unsatisfied with the results; much earlier, Pound had attempted a translation of Aeschylus's Agamemnon, of which he confessed: "I twisted, turned, tried every ellipsis and elimination.... But the
translation was unreadable" (Guide to Kulchur 92-93). He had also at times doubted his own expertise, saying he was "too god damn iggurunt of Greek" (Selected Letters 274; his emphasis). Or maybe he wanted to wait until the all-important musical score that would accompany many of the lyrical passages was complete. After all, Pound always felt that music was not granted enough importance and stated in his usual hyperbolic style: "Poets who are not interested in music are, or become, bad poets.... Poets who will not study music are defective" (Literary Essays 437).

These are all plausible justifications for the delay of publication, but perhaps it was for no practical reason and merely a personal decision, a private affair. Was this work too personal, too private for public consumption? Does it reveal aspects of Pound's inner struggles that he would not have felt comfortable sharing with the masses he had worked so hard to educate through his wide-reaching literary and editorial interventions? In May of 1971, not long before his death, Pound was asked in an interview if he had attempted other translations of Greek drama apart from the Women of Trachis. At this point he brought up the failed Agamemnon project. Olga Rudge then interrupted with "And Electra?" Humphrey Carpenter describes the scene in his biography, A Serious Character:

Pound made reference to the music in the First Typed Manuscript and signalled the sung parts in the stage directions, at one point even suggesting a kettle drum accompaniment. It is obvious that the play is meant to be performed as a piece of music, whether sung or spoken, and the author imports the appropriate vocabulary into his translation, using terms such as "sotto-voce," "pianissimo" or "adagio" as markers of character and mood. Pound had written an opera, Le Testament du Villon, after he moved to Paris in 1921, of which R. Murray Schafer says that "had it been better known, it would have been one of the most controversial pieces of music of its epoch" (xii). He fancied himself a composer, although Stephen Adams, a specialist in Pound's musical compositions, says there is no evidence that he even began writing musical accompaniment for the Elektra.
"Pound looked up but did not speak. Instead, he returned to his hands.... An earnest but impassive expression began to mould the contours of his face" (905). The biographer implies that the poet's lacuna had been intentional and that he had made a conscious decision not to comment any further on this particular project.

Whatever his reasons for not mentioning the Elektra translation, this translation can arguably be closely linked to Pound's larger poetic project. He felt it was his "job" to resuscitate the classics, to "clean up" American culture and get rid of the "dirt," educating through examples from the classics, singlehandedly if need be.8 He seemed to feel that, once this first step had been achieved, all the rest would fall into place: economics, politics, social mores and civic justice. Pound made a personal cult out of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, the latter of whom he saw as following on the heels of Aristotle, as one man who truly understood what a constitution was about. The poet made it no secret that he had the solution to civic problems in his economic theories and did not take his responsibility as a citizen lightly: "My job, as I see it, is to save what's left of America and to help keep up some sort of civilization somewhere or other" (qtd. in Syros 94), a sentiment expressed in Elektra's assertion of her duties to the chorus: "It's my job./ I have never asked to neglect it/ let me go on alone" (P169-171).9

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8Pound deplored the fact that the classics were no longer the pillar of a solid education: "The classics have more and more become a baton exclusively for the cudgelling of schoolboys" (Make it New 125). He felt that when the classics were taught they were badly taught, and that education in Latin and Greek was a punitive or disciplinary project rather than one meant to pass on an important cultural inheritance.

9For these lines, Jebb proposes: "but I cannot leave this task undone, or cease from mourning for my hapless sire. Ah, friends whose love responds to mine in every mood, leave me to rave thus,—oh leave me, I entreat you!" (S132-136). We can see that Pound
The Elektra translation finds its place within this mandate. One might ask why Pound chose to work on Sophocles when he had always held up Aeschylus as the master among the Attic tragedians. To be sure, the Agamemnon had resonance for the poet's situation at the time he undertook the Elektra project. But while he was drawn by Aeschylus's straight talk in the Oresteia, there is a finality to the Eumenides that did not suit the poet's purpose. The refreshing openendedness of Sophocles' Electra reflects Pound's belief in the power of "ideas going into action" (Guide to Kulchur 44), where the stress is on the doing of the "job" and not on resolution per se. It is clear from his translation that the author felt drawn to the chorus's cry of "freedom" and to the tragedy as a master code of civic conduct and moral responsibility. The emphasis in Pound's reworking of the drama is not on Elektra's pain, but on the bravery she demonstrates when she speaks her version of the truth regardless of the consequences. The poet expressed similar sentiments in the Cantos:

and the dark shade of courage

'Ηλεκτρα

bowed still with the wrongs of Aegisthos

greatly condenses Sophocles' expression, perhaps symbolizing the need for concise action, getting the job done quickly and swiftly with a minimum of words.

Pound knew, even if Agamemnon did not, that coming home could be a risky business. Despite his position as one of the great modernist poets, Pound felt misunderstood by the American people and was hardly given a hero's welcome.

One of the reasons why Pound may have chosen not to pursue the Agamemnon translation is that Aeschylus's Greek is considerably more difficult than either Sophocles' or Euripides', and it is quite possible that the poet was not up to the task.
Trees die & the dream remains (90/609).  

These sentiments may have been Pound's personal litmus test of poetic and political integrity from much earlier in his literary career, but they are rendered all the more powerful when he transposes this notion into his translation, creating an uncompromising heroine, who says: "Need we add cowardice to all the rest of this filth?" (P401). If Elektra is an exemplary model of fearlessness, her sister speaks for the vast majority who may have an acute sense of what is right but feel burdened by the task of actively seeking justice. Such people choose a path of lesser resistance, excusing their behaviour with a motto like Chrysothemis's: "EVEN JUSTICE CAN BE A PEST" (P1172). Unlike most adaptations of Sophocles' Electra, the play does not have as its major conflict that between Clytemnestra and her daughter, or between Orestes and his sister. Rather, its greatest dramatic intensity comes in the scenes between Elektra and Chrysothemis, where the tragic anagnorisis rests on the clash in their values.

Pound uses these scenes as a platform to express a passionate belief in individual civic responsibility and the search for justice. Carey Perloff, who directed the 1987 production of Elektra, asks of the dramatic context:

Are we in the House of Atreus or in St. Elizabeths mental hospital? Is our

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12Pound alludes in the Elektra to the same metaphor of the bowing tree when Chrysothemis tells her sister: "I'm only telling you to bend not break/ when you come up against power," to which Elektra responds with a cheeky: "Slobber over 'em. Not my way" (P453-55). The meek sister repeats the metaphor later, still trying to dissuade Elektra: "You try to break a man [Aegisthus] like that?/ who cd/ get away with it/ & not break" (P1120-22). Pound uses both of the confrontations between the sisters as the most obvious platform for his thoughts on the subject of courage and cowardice, pushing these scenes to the limit.
Chorus Mycenean women or tough American townsp folk? Is this Elektra a Greek princess or a persona of Ezra Pound, himself convicted of insanity and imprisoned in a hateful house, waiting to be rescued and vindicated? (qtd. in Syros 18)

I would say that Pound's agenda consisted not only in using this translation as a forum to display his own situation as analogous to the humiliation suffered by his heroine. He also wanted to show that, like Elektra, he could not be silenced or censored by incarceration. He also meant to illustrate the ambiguity of justice as it is spoken through the mouths of time-tested characters. By painting Elektra as stalwart and resolute, Pound eradicated the image of the helpless, hysterical and grief-stricken servant-girl who can do nothing but await her brother's arrival. If this Elektra suffers at all, it is out of pity for those who fail to comprehend the pure logic of justice as she sees it. Like the mythological princess, Pound appeared to feel no remorse for his actions and exhibited a stubborn refusal to indulge in sorrow of any kind. It was the decline of civilization at large that he regretted, and more importantly the American people's ignorance. He seemed to lament the fact that they did not even bother to reach out and grab the fragments of culture which he and the other moderns had dedicated their literary careers to resurrecting.

While it would appear on the surface, then, that Pound used Elektra as a mouthpiece for his sentiments, the situation is more complex. The translator's voice cleverly poses as a shifting signifier, so that all the characters in this drama offer an alternative vision of justice. I do not believe that Pound meant to impose his voice literally onto the words of the Atreides but that it was his aim to use their utterances as
catalysts to catapult the American people into action, to incite them to ask just what it is
to accept civic responsibility and fight for justice against all odds. Ultimately, Pound's
translation of Elektra leaves the audience with the question of where justice is to be found
amid conflicting arguments and value systems. In many ways, translation is a metaphor
for this struggle; just as the "mot juste" is forever elusive, so too justice always hangs in
the balance (Reid xv). Pound teaches us that there is no such thing as a transparent
translation, one that is not value-laden, and it is his hope that audiences will perform their
own act of translation in answering Elektra's question as it appears in the context of their
own lives.

Translation: Scarring the text

Lawrence Venuti's The Translator's Invisibility begins with the words of Norman
Shapiro: "A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when
there are little imperfections--scratches, bubbles" (1). It is precisely such blemishes, battle-
scars as it were, that Pound sought to cultivate. The great modernist poet is without a
doubt one of the most influential figures in the history of translation theory, almost single-
handedly toppling a paradigm that had existed since the seventeenth century. In his
attempts to gain an historical perspective on the translation of the classics, Pound began
his search at the British Museum and noted, with regard to Aeschylus: "no English
translation before 1777, a couple in the 1820's, more in the middle of the century, since
1880 past counting, and no promising names on the list. Sophocles falls to Jebb and does
not appear satisfactory" (Make it New 149). Pound's findings were so dismal chiefly
because classicists created translations only as study aids. It was felt that the texts of antiquity could not truly be rendered into such a vulgar language as English, and to do so would be to devalue them. Classicists also had a stake in remaining a select elite who could read the building blocks of Western literary culture, and the dearth of good translations protected their bastion of power. It is hardly surprising that Pound complained in a letter (1916): "I don't know that one can read any trans. of the Odyssey... Certainly the so-called 'poetic' translations of Greek drama are wholly impossible" (Selected Letters 87). Pound wanted to go head to head with this antiquated tradition, but he had no means of developing a new method other than through sheer experimentation. The intoxicating sounds of Greek haunted Pound--Homer's language presents the most challenges but offers the most rewards--and he described it as "a storehouse of wonderful rhythms, possibly impracticable rhythms" (Selected Letters 87). Many years later, Pound was able to articulate something of a personal theory of translation, one based on the principles of poetic language which he had outlined during his imagist phase.13 Reflecting on his earlier attempts at poetry and translation, Pound remarked that he had had to learn his own

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13Pound's theories of translation cannot be divorced from his poetic principles. As much as his poetry influenced his translation practices, so the latter influenced his creative works. Like the Greeks, he believed in a clear sense of rhythm and melody and, whether or not he was translating the classics, Pound always strove to convey these rhythms in his own language. Three important terms of his early poetics are: 1. melopoeia, a musical element which goes beyond the meaning of the words, allowing one to understand some meaning from a poem even if the language is unfamiliar; 2. phanopoeia, the capacity of language to build visual images in the imagination, of which Pound says it is "practically impossible for the translator to destroy"; 3. logopoeia, the extra capacity of language to play on its meaning ironically, in puns or with respect to usage and context. This part of language cannot be translated, but must be achieved by means of an equivalent (Literary Essays 25).
language, just as Rossetti had, and that is wasn't until he knew this language that he was able to satisfy his own literary criteria: "I hadn't in 1910 made a language, I don't mean a language to use, but even a language to think in" (Literary Essays 194). By then he knew it was impossible to translate "into" a form that already existed in English, but that he had to approach the exercise as if it were a completely new poetic creation. He had to capture the imagination of the original author, tap into this creative genius and recreate the miracle, not by translating the words but by conveying the meaning, ambiance and emotions of the original. He would have to make the younger audience aware of the "mental content" of the work of the older generation (Translations 17).

For Pound, translation is always a form of criticism or interpretation, one view of the original rather than a literal rendering in a new language. On this point, his thought concurs with Benjamin's theory in "The Task of the Translator," where he discusses translation as a "mode," a form of commentary and not communication as such. For Benjamin, every text has an afterlife, which means that it changes as it lives on through new times and contexts, no longer in its original form. The original is not retrievable after this maturing process, which is itself a form of translation, a birthing and a continual "becoming-present" of the text. As a result of this living transformation, there is a part of

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14Pound was constantly creating his own encrypted language to use not just in his poetry and translations, but in his correspondence. He seemed to have a particular code for many of the close friends he wrote to frequently. Each would attempt to out-do the other with outlandish orthography and personal patois, among the most radical of which were those of T.S. Eliot, W.C. Williams and e.e. cummings. Perhaps Pound considered this exercise part of his "preparation for writing."

15Pound gives examples of various categories of criticism: criticism by discussion, by translation, as an exercise in style, via music, and through new composition (Make it New 3).
the original, its "Kern" or core that resists translation. Benjamin concludes that the real

task of the translator is to create a resonance of the original in the new text, and this

everberation of the source text's foreignness can only be conveyed through a liberation

from the literal translation of words or syntax. Pound's technique in the Elektra rests on

producing an equivalent strangeness in English to suggest the quality of the Greek. He

never sacrificed his own poetic voice to the difference of the Greek but transposed that

language's rhythms and melodies into his own "Poundspeak," as it were. In his translation

of Elektra, Pound used devices such as passages of transliterated Greek, dialect (cockney,

Irish, African American), archaic or elevated language, ellipsis,¹⁶ alliteration and

assonance, and melopoeia.¹⁷ The translator keeps his audience on its toes by constantly

shifting mood and tone through the speech habits of his characters, for example having

¹⁶Ellipsis is one of the most crucial of Pound's rhetorical devices. Acknowledging

the collaboration of H.D. and Richard Aldington, the poet outlined several poetic

principles during the imagist phase, one of which clearly states: "use absolutely no word

that does not contribute to the presentation" (Literary Essays 3). He later applied this code

to translation, saying: "every translation must be more concise than the original" (qtd. in

Uhlmeyer 142). While Pound's Elektra has 1802 lines compared to Sophocles' 1510, this

is mainly due to the fact that the translator composed very short lines in keeping with the

rhythm of the speaker, and includes numerous passages of transliterated Greek which in

many places double the English.

¹⁷Examples of Pound's careful attention to the reproduction of sounds abound in his

Elektra, such as the heroine's self-designation as a "ninny" (P187), mirroring the Greek

νήπιος (NEPIOS), meaning childish. While Pound's English translation is not an exact

synonym of the Greek, the translator manages to replicate the sound by choosing "ninny"

where Jebb opts for "foolish" (S145). Another example of Pound's melopoeic genius is in

Elektra's description to the chorus of how she is treated by "the people who murdered my

father": "WHACK, take it, WHACK, leave it" (P319, 321), reproducing visually as well

as aurally the Greek "κάκις... κάκις" (KAK...KAK) (S264). Again, the connection is sonic

rather than semantic, but the effect is nevertheless that of mirroring the Greek in an

English equivalent.
Elektra switch from vulgar colloquialisms to a sudden use of "thy" and "thou" even for ironic effect where need be.\textsuperscript{18} Pound's translation poetics is not so much interested in appropriating and assimilating the foreignness of the original as they are in signalling its continued and renewed relevance for his audience.

Pound does not translate literally from the Greek, but he does not ignore the particularities of its sound, rhythm and melody. Part of his genius is his capacity to mimic the Greek, all the while communicating a clear message through choice of vocabulary and emphasis.\textsuperscript{19} One such example occurs during Orestes' first speech at the grave, recalling

\begin{quote}
Within the same speech (P493-P527), Pound has Elektra lurch from full cockney: "Killed him like a damn foreigner,/ and wiped 'er bloody 'ands on his 'air" to a different style: "I think mebbe he's troubling her dreams." The translation contains a great many inconsistencies in tone and especially orthography. It is possible that Pound became so familiar with his own linguistic eccentricities that he included them in the translation out of sheer habit (although they do not appear in the published version of Women of Trachis). Particularly in the First Typed Manuscript the same word or name is often spelled in many imaginative ways. It seems that some of the erratic spellings were omitted in the second manuscript, perhaps on the advice of Rudd Fleming.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Although my own linguistic deficiencies do not permit me to verify the translation of Elektra, Pound's relative concurrence with Jebb and Loeb (he also relied on the Liddell & Scott Greek Lexicon and Ellendt's Lexicon Sophocleum) indicate that he made few real errors. It is not clear exactly how well Pound knew Greek, but judging from his notes in the margin of the First Typed Manuscript he was quite skilled. He often wrote a Greek word in English transliteration and gave two or more equivalents with question marks, presumably so that Fleming could make suggestions. He left himself notes to "check big Liddel" or remarked "Loeb and [Latin] crib diametric opposite meaning." One critic remarks that "[Pound] made no attempt to adhere religiously to the Greek text because he felt that an extremely important element of poetic economy is the conscious avoidance of unnecessary words" (Ullmeyer 142). This is somewhat misleading, since Pound was intensely serious about conveying the meaning (logopoeia) and, while he makes frequent use of ellipsis, he never sacrifices the message for the medium. However, I did find one major incongruence in Pound's version at P1143-1146 (S1021-1023) where he gives Chrysothemis's lines to the Chorus. Neither Jebb nor Loeb indicate that these could be interpreted as the Chorus's lines, and it could be that Pound merely mistook XP (the first two letters of Chrysothemis) for XO (Chorus). The sense might have been slightly
\end{quote}
Apollo's oracle:

Dont start a war,

take a chance, do it yourself:

Kinky course, clean in the kill. (P37-39)\textsuperscript{20} 

This passage illustrates the multi-dimensionality of Pound's translation poetics. First of all, his short phrases and simple syntax imply the swiftness of retribution, and the repetition of the hard "k" simulates the sharp edge of the murder weapon and the violence of the act.\textsuperscript{21} We note a fidelity to the dominant sound of the Greek: κλέψω (S37), meaning "thievery, stealth, furtive actions, or of beguiling mind," is relatedaurally (and perhaps even semantically) to "kinky" ("strange, eccentric, abnormal, twisted") (Liddell). But this is not all. Many of Pound's characters share his obsession with a necessity to "clean," stirring up images of justice in the form of spring-cleaning, only this time it is the Atrean house that needs to be sanitized. Again and again, we find references to this purging of dirt and the dirty, filth and the filthy. For example, Elektra admits to Klytemnestra that she saved Orestes so that he could "come back and clean up the dirt" (P691), later in the changed if Chrysothemis had said these lines: "Ooooh, Lord/ I wish you'd taken the chance the day he died!/ anything was possible then," telling Elektra what she should have done to prevent Agamemnon's death. It makes no sense for the chorus to issue such complaints since they are almost without exception resolutely on Elektra's side. Pound might have had Chrysothemis say the line something like this: "Well, you should've thought of something while dad was still alive!" The fact that he missed such an obvious mistake may suggest that Fleming was not particularly careful in checking Pound's translation.

\textsuperscript{20}Compare to Jebb's version of the same lines: "—that alone, and by stealth, without aid of arms or numbers, I should snatch the righteous vengeance of my hand." (S36-37).

\textsuperscript{21}In fact, the explosive consonant kappa crops up in a number of words important for Pound's Elektra: clean, kinky, keening, courage, cowardice, chaos and Confucianism.
same speech suggesting that she is a "dirty scold" in her mother's eyes (P693), and concluding that "dirty workers teach dirty work" (P707). Orestes uses the metaphor one last time when he proudly informs his sister:

All right

The house is cleaned \(\text{καγώς}\) up

if that oracle was on the square \(\text{καγως}\). (P1679-81)

Compared to Jebb's: "All is well within the house, if Apollo's oracle spake well." (S1425-26),

Pound's version comes across as a flippant simplification of a double murder including matricide, as if Orestes is wiping his hands on a work-apron after completing a mundane chore. This tactic of reductio, used throughout the Elektra, trivializes the tragic intensity, but it can also augment the horror of the audience, shocking them with Elektra and Orestes' matter-of-fact attitude. Moreover, the quotidian tone may in fact contribute to the audience's ability to see the problem of justice in its own backyard, inciting the public to wake up to its civic responsibility, as Pound would have put it.

Again, during the first heated confrontation between Elektra and her sister, we witness the obsession with cleansing and purging the Atrean House of its dirty curse, when Chrysothemis declares: "Mother told me to go water the grave" (P471). Pound's choice of words belittles but also crucially defamiliarizes the ceremonial cleansing of the dead through libations. Later in her exchange with Chrysothemis, Elektra continues in

\[\text{22While Pound's translation of \(\text{καγώς}\) (KAGOOS) as "clean" and "square" is not as literal as Jebb's "well," he demonstrates a sonic fidelity again here to the sharp crisp \(\text{kappa}\).}\]

\[\text{23Just before Chrysothemis's reference to "water," Elektra uses the epithet "all roasted" to refer to the burnt offerings for the grave, as if the subject were a picnic and}\]
the same vein, warning her sister: "It's not clean before man or gods that you/ plant gifts or carry lustrations/ from that hating woman, to dirty his grave" (P495-97). In addition to placing emphasis on "cleaning up the dirty dead," Pound consciously maintains aural fidelity to the Greek (in S434) through the English words "clean" and "lustrations," reflected in his manuscript notes: κτερίσματι: "KTERISMA: funeral gifts," and λουτρά: "LOUTRA: washing bath, expiatory." Unlike Chrysothemis, the heroine uses refined vocabulary fitting for a princess. It is as though Pound is attempting to restore a bright lustre to certain of the Atreides, perhaps so shiny that he might even see his own face reflected in their gleaming surfaces.

Getting the job done

The characters in this play are always going on about some "job" or other that needs doing, a "big job," a "good job," a "dirty job" and so on. But in addition to the obvious double murder implied, there is the "job" done on Agamemnon prior to the action of this tragedy as well as a host of other important tasks. Richard Reid comments that this

not a rite of mourning. Pound takes great pleasure in dashing the pomp and ceremony with his straight talk. Fleming seems to be sceptical about the poet's somewhat brash use of reductio, encouraging him to reign in the radical fluctuation in tone. However, this is one of the chief mechanisms Pound uses to drive home the problem of perspective, justice as a question of positionality. His own incarceration, which can be seen as a necessary punishment for trespassing against the political integrity of the American people through his radio speeches, can also be viewed as a means of self-justification on the part of the authorities vis-a-vis the measures taken during the war. Either Fleming doesn't see this tactical device or he chooses not to understand what Pound is doing here, hence his censoring remarks. We do know that Fleming broke off all contact with Pound prior to the publication of Women of Trachis (Beye 83), and it may be that a serious difference of opinion led to the end of their collaboration.
word has a significance for Pound that goes beyond Sophocles' own emphasis upon ergon (ἐργόν) at the outset of the drama (xviii), a phenomenon we might compare to Hofmannsthal's almost pathological obsession with "die Tat" ("the deed") in his Elektra. This "job" takes on different connotations depending on who is speaking it. Elektra is the first to claim ownership of the task, declaring "It's my job" (P169; my emphasis here and in all subsequent citations) as she defends herself against the chorus's attempts to calm her anger. She's not the only one who has proprietary interests; during the recognition scene, Orestes mentions what has almost become a code-word by now, offering a clue to his identity: "You're fit for anything, but it isn't your job" (P1425).

And yet when Klytemnestra uses the epithet "good job," she refers to a different deed and proudly details her exploits:

Your father, eh? always that, never different

that's your excuse

I killed him,

yes, me, and a good job, dont I know it,

've I ever denied it? (P603-07)24

24These lines are reminiscent of Klytemnestra's words in Aeschylus's Agamemnon, a passage Pound quotes in "Translators of the Greek." He cites Robert Browning's version:

--this man is Agamemnon

My husband, dead, the work of this right hand here,

Aye, of a just artificer: so things are.

and then his own:

This is Agamemnon,

My husband,

Dead by this hand,

And a good job. These, gentlemen, are the facts. (Make it New 150)

Judging from this earlier attempt at translating the same myth, albeit from different Attic
Hardly has she delivered these lines when her quick-tongued daughter reappropriates the word, accusing her mother of wedding her "bed-boy Aegisthus" (P102): "a dirty job to marry an enemy" (P681). Elektra drives home the underhanded nature of Klytemnestra's behaviour by changing the meaning of "job" again, saying: "and a rotten life I have with you and your fellow-feeder/ put all the low jobs onto me" (P685-85).

Pound's choice of words is telling. The Liddell & Scott Lexicon offers a range of possibilities for ἕργων, including "work, deed, task, thing, matter, point etc.," but nowhere in this list do we find the word "job." The OED supplies this entry: "job 1. a piece of work, for hire or profit. 2. a paid position of employment. 3. colloq. anything one has to do. 4. colloq. a difficult task (had a job to find them) ... 7. slang a crime...as opposed to deed: a brave, skilful, or conspicuous act." "Job" is employed in ordinary traditions, it is safe to say that Pound's concern with the "job" is not a new one.

Other examples of this type include Elektra using Klytemnestra's own admission against her: "Now you're talkin'/ you did the job, not me,/ and things done get names" (P710-12). Elektra later uses it, as if she were quoting a maxim, as ammunition against Chrysothemis's feeble excuses: "You can't do a good job without work" (P1044). If we compare this to Jebb's "Remember, nothing succeeds without toil" (S945), we see that, where Jebb uses the negative "nothing," Pound translates in the positive, reminding us again of the deed. This "good job" is the exact phrase used by Klytemnestra to refer to her own murder. The lexical doubling poses the question: if both are good jobs, which one is a true expression of justice? Orestes picks up the thread after the recognition scene, employing the word almost for comic relief as he tries unsuccessfully to get his sister to be quiet so they won't be discovered. Elektra has been rejoicing in an exaggerated poetic display, which her brother interrupts with: "Yes, yes, but lay off the talk,/...got to get on with the job," even working in a nasty pun to break the mood: "Keep yr/ face mum" (P1510, 1515, 1522). In this same vein, the chorus chimes in like a cheering section once the first murder is complete: "Good job so far. Now the next one" (P1689). This last reference to a "good job" may be Pound cajoling his audience into humorous objectivity from the tragic events. Such distancing mechanisms might alert them to their own necessary jobs.
language to refer to an unpleasant task, hard work or even an offense against the law. It does not imply the lofty intentions of a righteous deed. Pound deliberately chose this kind of expression to drive home the message that "EVEN JUSTICE IS A PEST," and that regardless of how arduous it may be, someone has to do the job. The use of ordinary speech (colloquial, dialect, slang) also puts it in the lived experience of average Americans, each of whom has a responsibility to do the job of a citizen.

λυπέιν: Of Weeping and Wailing

In her study of Sophocles' Elektra, Anne Carson remarks that the word λυπέιν (LUPEIN), used to mean "to grieve, vex, cause pain, do harm, harass, distress, damage, violate" and passively as "to be vexed, violated, harassed, grieve or feel pain," occurs an astonishing number of times in this play (8). The same cannot be said of Pound's translation, which provides very little space for Elektra's grief. She is allowed to voice her sorrow after her first entrance, but is soon scolded by the chorus for her excessive mourning:

But you wont get him [Orestes] back out of black hell

by praying and groaning,

you wear yourself out with too much of it,

no harm to let up for a little. (P172-75)

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26I am not the first to point out the extent to which Pound avoids the expression of sorrow and anguish in the play. Fleming questions the translation of Orestes' line: "I don't suppose the lie [his feigned death] will ruin our luck" (P61), saying: "Orestes is afraid to play dead; I think a more direct expression of his fear would help" (Second Typed Manuscript).
To be sure, Pound is following Sophocles' lead, and yet the derogatory tone of "groaning" leaves no doubt that this moaning is not a very noble act. Jebb's version manages to preserve Elektra's dignity: "But never by laments or prayers shalt thou recall thy sire from that lake of Hades to which all must pass. Nay, thine is a fatal course of grief, passing ever from due bounds into cureless sorrow" (S137-40). The Poundian Elektra's mourning appears base and falsely exaggerated in comparison. Again we hear the narrator's interventions when the chorus adds: "Not only you, dear, everyman alive's got his load" (P207-08). Where Jebb uses "sorrow," Pound chooses "load," once again a word associated with heavy work, here transforming self-pitying "pain" into something resembling a "job."

Finally, Elektra gives in to despair as she describes herself to the chorus in disparaging terms:

childless, wretched,

unwed, in a dither of fear

muddily with tears (P224-26)

This is one of the more lyrical passages in this scene with the chorus, where Elektra is even allowed a rhyme or two. Pound manages to work in an aural reference to the Greek μυδαλέα (MUDALEA) (S167), to be literally wet or dripping, a visual image which strongly evokes the weeping expressed in the phrase, "muddily with tears." It is in this first dialogue between Elektra and the chorus that we find the most concentrated passages of transliterated Greek. Perhaps Pound is adhering to his principle of "melopoeia," whereby the semantics are not necessary for the meaning to be conveyed—even those who
understand no Greek will perceive the anguish in these lines.

For the chorus entry that follows the above lines Pound includes only the Greek, eliciting an incredulous response from Fleming: "(all Greek no English?)" (Second Typed Manuscript). It could be that Pound wanted to perpetuate the atmosphere created by Elektra's moving speech, or perhaps he felt that the chorus was merely repeating its earlier advice for the princess to tone down her misery. He employs the same tactic with the chorus's third and final antistrophe, but allows Elektra to have her say. She complains that she is "kenneled and fed on trash/ in a shapeless sack" (P250-51), only to repeat herself: "in a shapeless sack./ to stand around the empty tables/ and to be fed on their trash" (P260-62). The use of colloquial language changes the mood from one of pure lament to a common or even cheapened expression of grief, thereby lessening its impact.27

Elektra makes it abundantly clear that her lament does not focus primarily on her own piteous state, but rather on the "shame of this house" (P300), where "house" refers to the Atrean family as well as to the general state of affairs among mortals and gods. She insists that there isn't anything "pretty about neglecting the dead," and if this were to happen, "shame wd go to wrack./ all duty wd end & be nothing" (P295, P304-05; my emphasis). There can be no mistake that "duty" refers to all and not just Elektra's particular job.

In the place of sorrow and grief, Pound has his Elektra uphold her pride, even going so far as to leave a lacuna where LUPEIN should be. Carson points out the

27Pound also manages a clever melopoeic link between the Greek τραπεζαίς (TRAPEZAIS) (S192), "meal, eating table, board," and his "trash" (P262).
difficulty in translating this vexing verb in Elektra's first long speech to Chrysothemis (8), but Pound seems to ignore its presence altogether. His heroine comes across as tough and obdurate, as a result of his omission. Compare Pound's "If I don't eat, I don't make myself spew with disgust. Keep my self-respect anyhow" (P418-19) to Jebb's "For me be it food enough that I do not/ wound mine own conscience" (S363-64). In Pound's version, Elektra must stifle all signs of weakness and reflect instead a sound clarity of mind, whereas Jebb's more literal rendering indicates an almost self-destructive urge. Throughout the action, the modern heroine stubbornly refuses to take a personal attitude toward suffering, instead universalizing it as a form of pity for mankind's failure and as a call to action. At the end of her long dirge for the dead Orestes, which Pound titles "Elektra's KEENING" (a traditional Irish funeral song accompanied by wailing), the forlorn sister refrains from wishing her own death, as she does in Jebb: "and now I fain would die, that I may not be parted from thee in the grave" (S1169-70). Instead, she depersonalizes the bane of her mortal existence with the lines:

naught into naught, zero to zero

to enter beside thee

our fortune equal

death endeth pain. (P1365-69)

This last line is devoid of emotional intensity, a detached and objective maxim, and yet the speech is not without its poignant moments. In fact, Pound diverges greatly from the Greek, paraphrasing in concordance with his notes in the margin of the First Typed Manuscript: "language of feeling, not lang/ of action." He also quotes Stendhal's phrase to
himself: "dans ce genre on n'émeut que par la clarté" ("in this genre, one can only create an effect through clarity"), as if to jog his memory about his own poetic principles. Spoken passages oscillate with sung parts and here Pound writes: "possible ameliorations WHEN the music is actually written" (First Typed Manuscript). The poet seems to forget his own anger at his imprisonment, at being misunderstood by the American people, and allows Elektra to mourn her brother in one of her most beautiful speeches.

Pound leaves the expression of Elektra's actual pain to other means, such as his liberal use of non-semantic utterances that mimic her cries of pain, such as "Ajnn. ahh... ahi, ahi,...Oimoi Oimoi" (P805 ff.). Elektra also disguises her grief after the tutor's description of Orestes' death: "OO TALAIN' EGO... AI AI...AIH...Ahh...AHI" (P884 ff.), ending her tirade with the lines:

known, dont I know, over known,
day after day, moon over moon,
overfull, pain over pain
horrors of hate abate not
ever. (P934-38)

The long "o" sounds echo the dominant vowel omega (also incorporating the "u" and "ei")

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Elektra is not the only one to speak her mourning in gibberish--Chrysothemis and the chorus also express their anguish similarly, but the heroine has by far the greater number of both Greek lines and non-referential cries. Carson makes a list of the Sophoclean Electra's "screams" as she calls them and comes up with fourteen different combinations, ranging from "IO," "TALAINA" and "PHEU" to "EE AIAI" and "OTOTOTOI TO TOI" (6). Pound makes use of this last evocative sequence to reveal Elektra's highly charged emotion upon recognizing her brother: "OTOTOTOI/ clear again, not to be ended,/ not to be forgotten" (P1465-67).
in the original Greek, one of the sounds Pound uses to invoke grief. Elektra's speech
would sound as follows:

KAGÔ TOUD' ISTÔR, UPERISTÔR,
PANSURTÔ PAMMENÔ DELNÔN
STUGN ÔN T'AKEÔN AIÔNI (S850-52; my transliteration)

Pound's translation is very free, and reserves its fidelity to a few key ideas and the
melopoeic representation of sorrow. Hugh Kenner writes that the translator was interested
neither in lexicography nor versification "but in how the bard's throat was shaped" (qtd. in
Apter 78).29 If we compare the above lines to Jebb's version--"Well know I that, too well,-
-I, whose life is a torrent of woes dread and dark, a torrent that surges through all the
months" (S850-52)--we can see that the modernist poet follows his own advice to avoid
heavy syntax. It is also interesting to note that Pound employs "horrors" where Jebb
chooses the more neutral "torrent," insisting that Elektra's sadness turn to spite. And yet, it
is at the moments of Elektra's greatest agitation, be it inconsolable sorrow or ecstatic bliss,
that Pound's syntax fades almost to extinction. Could it be that this is a means of
simulating both hysteria and grief, the two states that Pound seems to have avoided
evoking in his translation? Whatever the motives, his refusal to dwell on either of these
extremes provides a portrait of Elektra as both sane and strong in the face of intolerable

29I do not agree entirely with Kenner's remarks on lexicography, since I think it is
fairly clear that Pound was concerned with both semantics and rhythm almost to the point
of pedantry. When he did deviate, it was in calculated errors, what Daniel Hooley calls
"ironic distortion" (28). But Pound was indeed keen on reproducing the actual sounds. We
know that he and Rudd Fleming read the Greek aloud to each other in order to get a feel
for its musical qualities, and it is likely this process of immersion that enabled his
meticulous adherence to the sounds of the Greek.
Courage and Confucianism

Our heroine is neither mournful nor mad, it appears, but rather brimming with courageous defiance. Over and over, Elektra funnels her anguish into anger, as Pound advocated in the stage directions halfway through her "KEENING":

(anger now stronger than grief; for a moment: SPOKEN)

And that bitch of a mother is laughing

and they haven't sent back even the shape of him [Orestes],

but a ghost that can't do its job. (P1339-42)

It is perhaps significant that the author has Elektra speak the lines in which she expresses wrath, whereas the moments of lament are sung, since it is more difficult to understand words set to music. Is this a ploy to keep the audience focused on the heroine's rage?

Elektra's anger is not without purpose. It is directed toward the eventual accomplishment of the deed, if only to keep her own dignity and self-respect. As Elektra reminds Chrysothemis: "the free born ought not to sink into slavery" (P1102-03). Pound's insistence on getting the job done is not unique to this play but runs like a leitmotif throughout his literary works and life. He was intensely committed to putting "ideas into action" (Guide to Kulchur 44), something he translated into his own Taoist "path of duty,”

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30Pound does refer to hysteria in the Cantos, though not in relation to Elektra. Instead, he points the finger elsewhere: "hysteric presiding over it all' '39/ House, Foreign Relations./ Bellum cano parenne..." (86/568). Pound finishes the thought in the next poem: "...between the usurer and any man who/ wants to do a good job" (87/569).
a way he would follow regardless of the consequences. Pound's commitment to this journey could not be stopped by a mere war, as he wrote to his friend Odon Por in December, 1941: "this war is a war between two principles, between two orders/ I must continue my work..." (qtd. in Syros 185). Nor could he be silenced by a mere incarceration, as Orestes' final question to Aegisthus indicates:31

Haven't you ever learned That the DEAD don't DIE? (P1750-56)

I am not suggesting that Pound, the man, speaks directly through the mouths of his characters, but that the translator provides a strong narrative voice which carefully channels the messages delivered by each of the Atreides. We hear this narrative voice in the tutor's first speech as he urges Orestes to action: "And now, Orestes, it's up to you/...Get goin' quickly" (P19,21), and again in Apollo's oracle: "take a chance, do it yourself" (P38). The chorus becomes the narrator's mouthpiece when warning Elektra to cease her "groaning," and even Klytemnestra is allowed to speak along the lines of duty when she freely admits "I killed him/...with Justice on my side...put the blame where it

31After all, if Pound could write the entire Pisan Cantos (which won him the Bollingen Prize) under the horrendous conditions in Pisa, then probably nothing would stop him from working.
belongs" (P605, 608, 634).

However, we hear another voice speak through Chrysothemis and Aegisthus, one recognizing that the "path of duty" might require a compromise to ensure at least a qualified freedom. Perhaps Pound created another narrative persona in Chrysothemis, the woman who sees that by negotiating she can remain free, like the translator, whose lawyers convince him to plead insanity to avoid being tried for treason. Her lines spoken to Elektra in their first dialogue can be read many ways:

I dont like the mess any better than you do,

If I could get hold of the power

I'd show 'em what I think,...

What I say to 'em isn't so, and what you think is,

but I've got to obey in order to keep my freedom of action. (P382-89)

Like Chrysothemis, Pound knows what's what, but he also knows that he has to retain whatever freedom he can. As for Aegisthus, when he realizes what awaits him and that there's no way out, he cries: "Who th' HELL. Damn, damn/ I'm trapped" (P1748-49). This utterance, when coupled with Pound's refrain in the Cantos--"All, that has been, is as it should have been" (86/564)--has a decidedly sinister ring, given the poet's circumstances.

By posing as all of his characters in the guise of the translator's multiple voices, Pound succeeded in showing the radical ambiguity of "JUSTICE," inviting his audience to choose either freedom with some conditions attached or the kind of freedom you risk dying for. This is a point Chrysothemis makes:

...fine talk's no use if we're dirty dead
Death's not the worst that can happen
but not being able to die when you want to. (P1129-31)

Throughout all of this serious talk of life and death, freedom and justice, duty and courage, the narrative voice maintains an undercurrent of wry humour, undoing each character's rhetoric as fast as it is spoken. Through sudden and surprising shifts in tone and style, every attempt to establish a predictable pattern of characterization or narrative voice is eschewed. And yet, we can almost hear the translator's chuckle as he thinks to himself that, in spite of this seeming chaos he has created, "WHAT SPLENDOUR/ IT ALL COHERES" (Women of Trachis). The translator has the last laugh.

I began my research for this chapter by considering whether and how hysteria might fit into Pound's translation of Sophocles' Electra, only to find that I would have to abandon all of my preconceptions about the poet's characterization of his heroine as well as my own prejudices about the author's mental state. This Elektra, like Hofmannsthal's and Strauss's, challenges the model of hysteria put forward by Freud and Breuer in their case study of "Anna O." Pound creates an astoundingly sane and daring princess who courageously wipes away her tears of suffering, intent on getting on with the job of cleaning up the dirty dead. Just as the poet admits that "all translation is a thankless and desolate undertaking" (Make it New 148), in itself something of a dirty job, so too following one's own "path of duty" is a difficult task. Nevertheless, through his Elektra,

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Pound's struggles with coherence permeate his oeuvre, dominating the last pages of the Cantos: "I cannot make it cohere./.../ i.e. it coheres all right/ even if my notes do not cohere" (116/796-97). This uncertainty suggests that the job of the poet-translator is never really done.
Pound shows us that searching for justice is as important a job as finding the "mot juste," even though it's like taking out the trash.
Mourning and Poetic Survival
Chapter Seven

The Mature Electra: Resurrecting Voice in H.D.'s "A Dead Priestess Speaks"

On (Not) Knowing Greek: Decadent Aesthetics and H.D.'s New Hellenism¹

The American poet H.D.'s particular brand of Hellenism requires us to rethink the question of mythopoiesis introduced in Chapter One. So too do the specificities of the poetic genre and the difference of perspective introduced by a gendered reading of myth. For example, Virginia Woolf addresses the problem of access as an impediment to women's myth-making. In her essay: "On Not Knowing Greek," she draws upon Electra's suffering as a parallel to that of women and girls denied the right to study ancient languages: "[Sophocles'] Electra stands before us like a figure so tightly bound that she can only move an inch this way, an inch that... [s]he will be nothing but a dummy, tightly bound" (95).² Woolf equates Electra's silence with women's ignorance of the classics and urges women to follow the example of this defiant and courageous mythological heroine: "Electra bids him utterly destroy—'Strike again'" (96). She counsels her readers to turn to the Greeks to make sense of the "vast catastrophe of European war," a subject that otherwise risks falling into clumsy, sentimental poetry. Woolf concludes that "it is to the

¹When I use the word "Hellenism," with respect to H.D.'s writing, I am not using it in the strictest sense of the word to refer to Alexandrian classicism, but in the more general sense that it has been used to refer to H.D.'s particular characterization of Greek culture.

²While Alice Ostriker advocates a feminist revisionist mythmaking, she cautions that it is important to keep in mind that myth belongs to "high culture" and that it has been filtered by religious, educational and literary authority (317). Rachel Blau Duplessis (15) and Susan Friedman (Psyche Reborn 234) both point out that one of H.D.'s primary motives is to confront the process of masculine mythmaking and find a new place for women in a male-dominated tradition.

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Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age" (106).

This sentiment aptly sums up H.D.'s own attitude toward the disillusionment and the shattering of personal and public values resulting from the Great War. H.D. responds to this traumatic experience with a quest for a new aestheticism based on the intoxicating beauty of a Greek statue. The words the poet chose for her gravestone epitomize her reading of antiquity, "Greek flower, Greek ecstasy," a vision that she explains in "I Said" (1919):

you may not seem a Greek to yourself,
you may not seem a Greek to another,
but anyone who stands alone.
...anyone to-day who can die for beauty,
(even though it be mere romance
or a youthful geste)

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3Woolf's argument is somewhat complicated by the fact that she is against translation as a means of making the classics available to a wider audience, although her opinion might have been different if there had been any attractive and accessible translations in her time. While she encourages the teaching of classics to girls and women, inevitably access to such training is restricted to the educated elite, regardless of their sex. Woolf reveals her own complicity with the regime of secrecy in that she provides no English translation of her own Greek citations, an ironic gesture considering her own attack on exclusivity.

4Susan Stanford Friedman describes the sense of urgency to experiment with new literary forms in an effort to encompass such trauma: "The hysteria of patriotism and the omnipresence of death in a trench war for inches or feet of blasted territory created the necessity for a different kind of art, one that could record the fragmentation of culture and begin the quest for new meanings" (Psyche 3).
is and must be my brother. (Collected Poems [CP] 323)

H.D. had lost her brother to the war and her father to the unbearable grief at the death of his son: "My father died, literally, from the shock" (Tribute 31). Once heralded by Ezra Pound as the perfect emblem of his times, and christened "H.D. imagiste," the poet also felt abandoned by her literary father. The paternal modernist rejected what he perceived as the emptiness of formalism and along with it the voice that best epitomized such crystalline purity. There is a certain bitterness in H.D.'s manifesto-like declaration of the need for a new Hellenism:

The mind, in its effort to disregard the truth, has built up through the centuries, a mass of polyglot literature explanatory of Grecian myth and culture.

But the time has come for men and women of intelligence to build up a new standard, a new approach to Hellenic literature and art. (CP 328)

When H.D. appropriates mythological figures in her attempt to witness the atrocities of war and the horrors of manmade modernity, she provides us not only with a revision of her characters' stories but with a revision of mythopoesis itself. Gone are the crisp edges of imagism--H.D. learned to sand down the hard surfaces of her poetry with the tools of semantic overdetermination, lexical slippages, allusion, and ellipsis. In short, she creates a new kind of hermeticism. As discussed by Blau Duplessis, Friedman and Cassandra Laity, among others, H.D.'s new Hellenism was a direct attack on the male-dominated modernist mythopoetics of Pound, Eliot and Yeats. She challenged the vision of Greek heroics that

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5Pound, whose early influences included Swinburne, Rossetti and Morris, vehemently rejected Aestheticism, calling it "a masturbatory phantasmagoria" (qtd. in Laity 48). Ironically, H.D., who began as an imagist and followed Pound's doctrine of the "direct
makes a cult of war and adventure. In its place, she fostered a hermetic world with a
code-language of flowers, stone-cold hands and sleek statues symbolic of sensuous beauty,
sexual liberation and illicit love. In Paint-it-today, the protagonist exemplifies her
abhorrence of the typical quest structures of male mythmaking: "Large epic pictures bored
her, though she struggled through them" (qtd. in Blau Duplessis 20). Here, epic might be
equated with the genre of Pound's Cantos or Eliot's Wasteland. H.D. did exploit the epic
genre in Trilogy, and yet she did so as a deliberate and conscious departure from the

treatment of the thing," turned to the very writers her mentor had rejected as part of his
youthful infatuation. Pound felt that he had matured beyond his Romantic-influenced early
work and it could be that he was threatened by H.D.'s recuperation of the very poets he
rejected. Considering Pound's somewhat tortured relationships with those close to him, the
major rift with H.D. is not all that surprising. Laity suggests that the modernist
mythopoetics of Pound, Eliot and Yeats "suppressed linguistic indeterminacy and textual
deferrals of desire...for what I will call a poetics of 'consummation,' a linear, male
heterosexual/textual narrative that, among other things, deliberately sealed off the free play
of desire in open-ended narratives of Romantic quest" (47). While she is right in
suggesting that these modernists attempted to squelch any remaining fin-de-siècle
influences in their work, this statement is somewhat heavy-handed. My own reading of
Pound's Elektra shows that there are frequent instances of "linguistic indeterminacy and
textual deferrals."

"Eliot prescribes a new "mythical method," praising Joyce's "parallel to the Odyssey,
and the use of appropriate styles and symbols" ("Ulysses" 175) as a prototype for a
modern recuperation of mythological forms: "In using the myth, in manipulating a
continuous parallel between contemporeity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method
which others must pursue after him....It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of
giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which
is contemporary history.... Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical
method" (177-178). Where H.D.'s endeavours diverge from Eliot's suggestion is precisely
in her reception of the classics, which does not involve the imposition of method, a
"controlling" or "ordering," but rather entails a widening of the lens angle to include
alternative versions of reality, blurring rather than focusing mythmaking in a narrative
poetics. Eliot's phrasing here is curiously like the imperialist rhetoric of postwar Britain,
revealing a nostalgia for a world where history can be conceived of as a continuum, a
view rendered null and void by H.D.'s myth-making in deliberately fragmented forms.
grandiose works created by her male counterparts (Friedman, Penelope 352).

While Friedman places H.D. "squarely in the center of this modernist mythmaking tradition," even if her poetics emphasize a more religious, esoteric, syncretist and personal reading (Psyche 209), Laity offers a different perspective. She contends that H.D.'s mythopoetics are not so much a rebellion against the male modernists as a backward gaze and wilful appropriation of a Decadent-Romantic Hellenist aesthetics practiced by fin-de-siècle writers. Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater and even Algernon Charles Swinburne, with his morbid scenes of statuesque "cold immortal hands" and love "as deep as a grave" (492, 494), glorified a version of spiritual and rejuvenating friendship as well as same-sex love. These same images fascinated H.D. and acted as her early muse. While the male modernists strove to eradicate the connection between antiquity and the effeminate and fragile aesthete, for H.D. the Platonic doctrine of these late-Romantic images provided a defense against the terror of war she associated with the heroic legends of violence and conquest. Wilde's encoded homoerotics can be read as misogynist or at least unsympathetic to a version of femininity that focuses on women, and yet H.D. had a different reception. She embraced the icon of the nude male body of Greek statuary, often summoned as a Victorian Hellenist object of the male gaze. The poet appropriated this homoerotic image toward a vision of the androgynous or hermaphroditic youthful body which signifies transgressive female desire and a lesbian erotics in the writing of Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall and Colette. H.D.'s Romantic-Victorian model of antiquity is very

7Here, we might even think of Mallarmé's portrait of antiquity in "Hérodiade" or Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du mal and the general influence of symbolism on this decadent fin-de-siècle aesthetic.
much centred around an ideal of morbid beauty as a symbol of gender ambivalence. It serves as a frame for her poetic politics, rejecting the violence of war and the unnecessary suffering it imposes on those who are left behind.

Poet-Prophet-Priestess: Resurrecting a Voice

H.D.'s work was explicitly concerned with the recuperation of the classics and the role of "Greekness" in defining a modern sensibility. There is a significant shift in her approach to mythmaking issuing from the trauma of the war and its aftermath, though more specifically attributable to the therapy the poet sought out to remedy her lost voice." H.D. underwent an initial analysis with Freud in the spring of 1933, an experience that would have a profound effect on the ongoing dialogue with myth as intertext. As Friedman puts it: "Freud's equation of cultural myths with personal dream involved her in a self-conscious attempt to define the links between tradition and individual vision" (212). Her encounter with psychoanalysis, it may be argued, led H.D. to modify her incorporation of the classics as an intricate web of hermetic allusions: the poet began actively creating new myths, paralleling the resurrection of her own poetic voice.9 This

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9In her letters to Bryher, H.D. openly discusses her writer's block in 1933 and 1934 (Friedman, Psyche 30), although she later characterizes this silence as an "incubation period" for the emergence of a new H.D. (9).

9A good example of this practice of altering myths to form new models of female empowerment is H.D.'s poem "Eurydice." Here, the speaking "I" takes the subject position of the wife who remains so silent in the classical versions of the myth. Eurydice blames Orpheus (whose name goes tellingly unmentioned) for his "arrogance" and berates him for forcing her back to life:

if you had let me rest with the dead,
I had forgot you
rebirth is most apparent in her poem cycle "A Dead Priestess Speaks," where, among other motifs, H.D. turns to the Electra myth to demonstrate her new theories.\(^{10}\)

But it was the "professor," as the poet refers to her mentor in \textit{Tribute to Freud}, who urged her to use her writing to discover and develop this new voice. It was in response to haunting visions such as the one she labelled her "jelly-fish experience of double ego" (\textit{Tribute} 116) that H.D. sought out Freud's treatment.\(^{11}\) She felt stifled and desperately "wanted to be let out":

\begin{quote}
I wanted to free myself of repetitive thoughts and experiences—my own and
\end{quote}

and the past. (\textit{CP} 51)
She blames him for summoning her out of her peaceful death only to be forced once again to face the black depths of "this colourless light." Eurydice berates her "ruthless" husband for intruding on the solitude of the dead that she had come to cherish, a little place for her spirit to grow, finally glorifying her newfound comfort:

\begin{quote}
before I am lost,  
    hell must open like a red rose  
for the dead to pass. (\textit{CP} 55)
\end{quote}

Ironically this poem enacts the very opposite scenario from that expressed in "A Dead Priestess Speaks"; while Eurydice found solace in the silence of Hades and admonished Orpheus for imposing his will, the speaking subject in "Priestess" expresses pleasure at being freed from the enclosure of the underworld and rejoices like Persephone in her newfound voice. In the poem "The Master," the old man to whom the speaker refers is likely Freud, a welcome Orpheus figure envisioned here as bestowing "wisdom" and "measureless truth," thus aiding her in the process of resurrection (\textit{CP} 451ff.).

\(^{10}\)H.D. later writes that these "nine poem-sequences or choruses belong in technique and emotional content, exactly to this transitional period.... They are hardly a bridge, they are threads in a tapestry" (qtd. in Burnett 156).

\(^{11}\)H.D. describes the experience: "bell-jar or half-globe as of transparent glass spread over my head like a diving-bell and another manifested from my feet, so enclosed I was for a short space in St. Mary's, Scilly Isles, July 1918, immunized or insulated from the war disaster" (116). This effect of a doubled vision distorting the world around her recurs as an image throughout the poet's writing, and can be viewed as one metaphor for the way in which mythology weaves its way through her poetry, as a lens through which to see the world.
those of many of my contemporaries. I did not specifically realize just what it was I wanted, but I knew that I, like most of the people I knew, in England, America, and on the Continent of Europe, were drifting. We were drifting."

(Tribute 13)

Freud considered the poet more of a "student" than an analysand, and indeed the sessions can be seen as a catalyst for the ensuing dialogue with and translation of psychoanalysis as an intertextual project. While she was very enthusiastic about this new world of dreams and symbols, H.D. was far from an uncritical consumer of psychoanalysis. She took on the role of critic and interpreter, documenting her treatment in Tribute to Freud as a "case-study,"12 a hieroglyphic testimony riddled with allusions to myth.13 Indeed, H.D. was not content to be either analysand or student, and definitely not the victim of female hysteria such as Anna O. Instead she figuratively dons the robes of prophetess, priestess or even goddess.14 The poet describes the professor sitting in his office, "a curator in a museum,

12In many ways, the very act of writing an account of her own analysis deconstructs the power structures inherent in psychoanalysis. H.D. in effect usurps the interpreting role of the physician, a reversal of the treatment received by Anna O. and others like her.

13Examples of mythological characters who figure in Tribute are Hermes, "the Messenger of the Gods and the Leader of the Dead" (8), or Janus, "the roman guardian of gates and doors," the god of beginnings and ending, symbolizing H.D.'s quest for a new voice. Both of these gods, who in some sense mediate the threshold between life and death, signify the role the poet designates for Freud as "midwife to the soul" (116), master of H.D.'s resurrection.

14H.D. has been criticized for her Freud-friendly reading of psychoanalysis, ignoring his problematic view of female sexuality (Fields xxxviii). It is true that she dedicated her memoir to Freud, whom she called the "blameless physician," and yet the poet's reception of his work must be viewed in the context of her own experience of analysis. It is also important to keep in mind that if H.D. felt that Freud helped her regain her voice and overcome her personal crisis, her gratitude should not be understood as a blanket acceptance of his theories. She does relate incidents of disagreement between herself and
surrounded by his priceless collection of Greek, Egyptian, and Chinese treasures" (116); he is also the figure of an archeologist, digging up, collecting and preserving the past in an attempt to make sense of the human psyche through the timelessness of myth. While H.D. took from Freud the relationship of dreams to the world of myth and what she called the "associative method," working with the semantic slippages of language, her use of myth differs from that of the father of psychoanalysis. The poet recalls in Tribute that "[t]he Professor said that we two met in our love of antiquity. He said his little statues and images helped stabilize the evanescent idea" (175). And yet Freud and H.D. diverged in their reception of this antiquity. Unlike Freud, for whom the myths of Oedipus and Electra are convenient structures imposed as a model for human psychosexual development, H.D. did not consider myths as any absolute archetype. Rather, each legend is made up of fragmented images and allusions, which she employs to construct a plurality of subject positions. No one myth dominates her writing, but myths are freely evoked in quick succession, combining Greek, Roman and Egyptian traditions, maintaining a fidelity to

Freud: "I was rather annoyed with the Professor in one of his volumes. He said (as I remember) that women did not creatively amount to anything or amount to much, unless they had a male counterpart or a male companion from whom they drew their inspiration" (Tribute 149). And yet the overriding message that Freud seems to have conveyed is that H.D. needed to work through her war-trauma in her writing. Ironically, it is through writing that the poet unravels the trauma of this male-gendered muse--she casts Freud at first as Apollo to her Pythia, then castrating the sun-god through the image of "blindness."

H.D.'s style has been criticized for being excessively associative, often using lexical similarities to link ideas and images (Fields xxxix), and yet this is clearly an intentional practice on the part of the poet. She emphasizes the importance of cryptic hieroglyphics: "SIGNET--as from sign, a mark, token, proof; signet--the privy seal, a seal; signet-ring--a ring with a signet or private seal; sign-manual--the royal signature, usually only the initials of the sovereign" (Tribute 66). H.D. uses her own encoded initials to mould her own identity. In many ways, the author constructs her own subjectivity as a myth.
traditional legends while constructing new stories.

"A Dead Priestess Speaks": Constructing a Mythical Speaker

In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. writes "I let death in at the window" (117), referring to her attempt at "unravelling the tangled skeins of the unconscious mind and the healing implicit in that process" (16). The otherness of the unconscious is revealed through the poet's analysis by Freud, which she characterizes as a liminal or threshold experience, illustrated by her observation of the picture entitled "Buried Alive" in Freud's waiting room at Berggasse 19 in Vienna (131). H.D. actively seeks out the surprise of her own writing as a near-death experience, prophesying: "Perhaps I will learn the secret, be priestess with power over life and death" (117).

And yet this power to mediate between life and death, literally to negotiate her own symbolic resurrection, must be realized through her poetic voice, spoken through the Dead Priestess-cum-Electra. H.D. transforms her underwordly priestess figure into a new vision of Electra in the course of her poem cycle "A Dead Priestess Speaks." This complex intermingling of mythological characters and images acts as a mediating journey for Electra, one punctuated by an important encounter with Clytemnestra. The daughter comes to understand her mother in a dialogue of love and respect that has been denied both women in all of antiquity. Moreover, it is through this renewed maternal bond that Electra realizes her true poetic potential and emerges into the celestial light of day as a confident and mature voice.

The secret of writing functions like a dream-world to cloak the "I," as evidenced
by the speaker in the title poem of this collection: "They may read/ the pattern/ though you may not,/ I, being dead" (CP 371). This statement plays in complicated ways with the subject perspective: the "you" refers to both reader and speaker, neither of whom has access to the secret code. The speaker must be the author of this unreadable "pattern," but is denied the right to decipher it because, as she has told us, she is dead. The "you," designating the reader, is also denied the special knowledge of her words. Only the furthest removed "they" are privileged to encode the wondrous pattern. And yet, by announcing that she is dead, the "I" constructs her own identity as "other" to herself. This conundrum is typical of H.D.'s poetry in this cycle, and indeed in much of her later work. The hermeticism functions as a rhetorical trope, expressing the sensation of being "buried alive," hesitating between this world and the next.\(^{16}\) H.D.'s dense semiotic clusters contain the power of the priestess's oracles, and the speaker in this poem claims to possess such a mighty force:

I wore white,

as fitting the high-priestess;

ah, at night--

I had my secret thought, my secret way,

I had my secret song (CP 372-373)

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\(^{16}\)In her discussion of melancholia, Kristeva observes that people experience this trauma as a falsity of language, which attempts to compensate for the lost object "buried alive": "The dead language they speak...conceals a Thing buried alive....It shall remain walled up within the crypt of the inexpressible affect" (Black Sun 53; her emphasis). This claustrophobic image recurs in H.D.'s "Dead Priestess," and yet it is precisely through a renewed language, replacing the dead one, that the poetic voice manages to exit from the enclosure of the metaphoric underworld.
She tells us of the surprise that only the Priestess (as the dead other) can write, and yet this does not mean that she is immune to suffering. Finally she tells the story of the pain and anguish caused by war, be it the Trojan war or the Great War. We learn that this travesty was the cause of her own death, that help came "too late":

how my heart cried,

O, I was never pure nor wise nor good,

I never made a song that told of war (CP 376)\(^{17}\)

Part of the secret of this poem is the identity of the speaker, behind the mask of "Delia," a Roman version of Artemis. The choice of this moniker also solidifies a connection to the writer's own life, since this is the pseudonym used for her autobiographical text: "H.D. by Delia Alton." Part of the fascination with H.D.'s clever self-referentiality is that she is consistently both subject and object of her own discourse. The addition of various mythological characters into this equation makes for an entangled and perpetually shifting subject position.\(^{18}\) H.D.'s story shows up as a palimpsest beneath

\(^{17}\) War is not the only cause of her suffering; she laments that she is caught in the arms of an "angry lover" (CP 376), perhaps a reference to the poet's failed marriage to Richard Aldington, or even a reference to Pound, to whom H.D. had once been engaged but who was more significant as her literary lover. While these biographical details are not central to the interpretation of the poem cycle, the poet does mention both men in her discussion of her analysis. It is all the more relevant to consider possible allusions to her biography, since H.D. constantly plays with her own life, writing in the genre of roman-à-clef in Paint-it-Today, as well as her memoirs, Notes on Thoughts and Vision, not to mention the obvious punning of her initials in Hermetic Definition, Hermione, furthering the autobiographical metaphor in Helen in Egypt.

\(^{18}\) Friedman observes that, just as Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes taught us the linguistic construction of identity, the self as a product of naming, so too H.D.'s "Delia" confirms that the Other is always writing the self (Penelope 75).
the tale of Artemis, goddess of the hunt, protector of wild creatures and defender of
virginity. Here, the speaker-writer laments that she was "too late" to end the war and
prevent needless suffering. We must recall that Artemis enters the Atean myth when she
stops the fleet headed for Troy, refusing to grant the necessary winds until Agamemnon
sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia. Though Iphigenia is a virgin, deserving for her burial a
"simple white/ pure slab of untouched marble" (CP 376), the goddess feels tainted for
failing to put an end to war, and imagines being taunted for her sins: "Delia of Miletus is
a whore" (CP 374). Delia is modelled on the women who were helpless to prevent their
sons, brothers and lovers from leaving for battle following promises of "the glory of the
war" (CP 372). For those left behind and numbed by the horror of mass death, the only

19 Artemis feels wronged by Agamemnon because he slew her most beloved stag when
hunting, and so decides to avenge herself by taking from Agamemnon something that is
equally precious to him: Iphigenia. The goddess is doubly rewarded when Agamemnon
dies for sacrificing his daughter. The water that brings him home turns from the wondrous
symbol of glory, "dark and purple," to "his wine-dark sea" (CP 372; her emphasis).

20 It is also significant that, in some versions of the myth, Artemis is said to be the
twin sister of Apollo. Her bid to stop the Trojan war by arresting Agamemnon's fleet
creates a clear opposition to Apollo's oracle urging Orestes to commit matricide. The
contrast between Artemis's pacifism and Apollo's brutal decree is intensified in light of
their filial relations. H.D. is fascinated by doubles of all kinds, such as the coupling of the
sisters Helen and Clytemnestra in Helen in Egypt, "twin-sisters of twin-brothers" (74)) or
that of Osiris and Isis, Demeter and Persephone, Orpheus and Eurydice, or Electra and
Orestes for that matter. She writes: "There were two's and two's and two's in my life.
There were the two actual brothers (the three of us were born within four years). There
were the two half-brothers; there were the two tiny graves of the two sisters..." (Tribute
31). A further instance of twinning is that of H.D.'s initials inverted in D.H. Lawrence's
name, alluded to in Tribute (141), and echoed in the opposition of "A Dead Priestess
Speaks" to Lawrence's The Man Who Died. Gary Burnett argues that this work deals with
"Christ's late attempt to come into touch with the flesh' and sexuality with the priestess of
Isis" (159), whereas H.D.'s priestess rejects the "angry lover" declaring that it is "too late"
(see Burnett 155-73 for a full discussion).
remaining task was to write "an epitaph/ to a dead soldier" (CP 371).

However, the speaker plays more than one role, for she is also the "high-priestess," invoking the Pythia at the shrine of Delphi. While this female speaker has knowledge of the most powerful words, she is nevertheless responsible for delivering Apollo's oracle demanding that Orestes commit matricide. The speaker implies that the priestess is innocent, and yet she is blamed for the perpetuation of the cycle of violence and cruelty that incites Clytemnestra's murder. The allusion to Artemis and Pythia constructs the female voice as victim, forced to carry out the male-dominated strategies of destruction, as suggested by the Priestess's lines:

I was not pure,

nor brought

purity to cope

with the world's lost hope (CP 369)

The speaker, as mediator and messenger of death, also bears resemblances to Persephone, the archetypal figure of death and resurrection. If the speaker as Artemis/Pythia is destined

\[21\] Apollo's priestess, Pythia, was named after Python, a huge female serpent said to have protected the original oracle, which was in the hands of Gaia. Apollo killed the serpent and took over the shrine, but retained Pythia as his priestess. The power of his oracles is forever indebted to the earth-goddess Gaia (Grant 290; Walker 832). It is unlikely that H.D. was oblivious to this aspect of the legend, since her treatment of myth thrives on such connections to female power. Through Pythia, Python and Gaia, H.D. is able to connect the roles of priestess, prophetess and goddess within the speaker of the poem, creating a forceful and persuasive female figure. We might also consider the link between the Pythia's delivery of oracles and the writer's creative genius, and yet, as the poet makes clear in her discussion of dream with Freud, an oracle is always plurivocal: "the Priestess or Pythoness of Delphi sat on the tripod while she pronounced her verse couplets, the famous Delphic utterances which it was said could be read two ways" (Tribute 51).
only to suffer for what she could not prevent, the triumph of Persephone and Demeter over Zeus's omnipotence offers hope for a future of liberation and rejoicing. The goddess of the underworld overcomes her fear of Hades, of being "Buried Alive," instead promising great fertility and creative spirit. Through Persephone, the cycle of war and hatred is replaced with one of resurrection and renewal. There is nothing arbitrary in H.D.'s careful shaping of the speaker's voice, "the line I drew with weaving,/ the fine thread" (CP 377), a secret pattern to be read only by a select few. In this respect, the narrative subjectivity is both mythical and mythological, consenting to none other than a "hermetic definition."

Electra and Orestes: Twin-Statues and The S/word

Electra emerges from a series of mythological figures, all symbolizing resurrection: Psyche, Persephone, Eurydice, Osiris, and even Lazarus. While Electra's story is not about reincarnation per se, the myth is inserted into the poem cycle in such a way as to imply her ascension from the underworld in a parallel to the liberation of the poet's voice. Inspired by Euripides' Electra, H.D. constructs the myth anew through a dramatic dialogue between Electra and Orestes, in which the siblings negotiate the aftermath of violence. It is "too late"—the murders have been committed and the two are left to wrestle with their

22H.D.'s hermeticism is as frustrating as it is provocative. There are times when it seems unnecessarily elliptical, as if the poet sends her reader on a treasurehunt with only the most faint of clues. It may seem like a form of arrogance akin to Pound's statement that he was writing at times for an audience of three or four people, and yet we can also see the obscurity of the poet's writing as an invitation to imagine new myths and stories. Because we are provided with incomplete versions, the reader must finish the telling and invent the treasure herself.
gilt, as expressed by the wholly un-Sophoclean chorus: "woe for the children's fate" (CP 388; her emphasis). Their world has been transformed into purgatory in the wake of the cruel massacre manifested by the curse of Atreus and, like the Dead Priestess, Electra and Orestes find themselves condemned to the land of the living dead.

Quite unlike many of the Electras so far examined, H.D.'s heroine begins with a lament for Clytemnestra that reads more like a love-song. She likens her mother's story to an undiscovered flower, camouflaged by the ashes of war.23

and I thought of rhododendron
fold upon fold,
the rose and purple and dark-rose
of her garments. (CP 378)

In the eyes of Electra, the murderous Queen is the victim of her own violence. Strangely, however, when H.D. sets up a reflexive relationship between subject and object—"To love, one must slay/...to love, one must be slain"—the perspectives of mother and daughter meld into one lump of pain. In fact, there is no explicit mention of the mother, and the indeterminate "she" remains nameless for the first few pages of the poem, like the secret of the unopened flower: "no one knows/ what I myself did not./ how the soul grows" (CP 378). This same epithet is repeated with the variant "that the soul grows in the dark," referring again to the dark of the tight rosebud, or to the obscurity experienced by the

23H.D. continues her attempt to redeem Clytemnestra's name in Helen in Egypt, where Helen rewrites her twin-sister's story: "By identifying Clytemnestra with Iphigeneia, 'as one before the altar,' it seems as if Helen were trying to re-instate her" (77; her emphasis).
Dead Priestess.\textsuperscript{24}

The enigma of the mother is not revealed until Electra's second speech, when "the whole earth in flame" announces "rose/rose/rose,/ O rhododendron-name, mother." Here, her daughter sees clearly for the very first time. Electra mourns the fact that Clytemnestra had to die for the world to see her true colours:

no one knows the colour of a flower
till it is broken,
no one knows the inner-petal of a rose
till the purple
is torn open;
no one knew

Clytemnestra (CP 381)

The poem is constructed through a series of couplings, allowing H.D. to play with the ambiguities of subject-position. The dialogue oscillates between Electra and the Choros, Electra and Orestes, Electra and Clytemnestra, Electra and Pythia. These exchanges are carried on simultaneously, enriching the positionality of the Atrean Princess. Electra's first two speeches are interspersed with statements from the Choros,

\textsuperscript{24}H.D. appropriates the floral vocabulary from her Decadent-Symbolist influences from Mallarmé and Wilde, and yet she rewrites the semantic horizon of flowers such as the rhododendron or the rose. For Wilde and Pater, certain flowers were highly encoded with images of homoerotic love and sexual liberation, but for H.D. this opening flower stands for the figure of the mature woman who emerges out of the tight rosebud of pre-pubescent youth or androgynous sexuality. The rhododendron is a recurring image throughout this poem cycle, and each time it is evoked, it strengthens the metaphor of mature female sexuality and the self-assured creative fertility of the poetic voice.
who relates the story of Apollo's oracle and Agamemnon's death. It warns the dangers of the curse—"tread not here/ where wine is spilled/ red/ red on marble" (CP 380; her emphasis)—in contrast with the "white/ pure slab of untouched marble" (CP 376) meant for the Dead Priestess's grave in the previous poem. And yet the Choros confirms the after-life of the murdered: "Never let it be said/ they are dead." They prophesy that "Clytemnestra, Electra and Death/ are burnt like star-names in the sky" (CP 383). H.D. seems also to be invoking here the first Electra, one of the seven Pleiades, daughters of the Titan Atlas. They are said to have been so distressed at the death of their sister, Hyades, that they all killed themselves and were subsequently placed in the sky as a cluster of stars used as tools of navigation (Grant 275). Hence H.D.'s association of Electra with her mother and death.25

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25Electra's Persephone-like descent to the underworld and return as (an affirmation of) Clytemnestra(-Demeter) is implied through H.D.'s allusion to the earlier Electra, but it is also present through the unity of the poem cycle, that is to say, through the affinity between the speaker of the previous poem, the "dead priestess." This connection is not only apparent in the speakers of these two first poems, but functions as a "subject rhyme" that continues throughout the collection, where the theme of death and resurrection signalling a new feminine creativity recurs in many guises, including that of a female Christ figure, Calypso, Dodona, Hyades, Aphrodite. And yet H.D. is doing more than resurrecting her own creative voice through the figure of the dead priestess. Indeed, she is altering the iconography of her poetic muse. Her early poetry is defined partly in terms of the symbolist movement, which made an aesthetic out of morbidity and constructed a decadent worldview from images of faded beauty. While H.D. embraced these images and incorporated the neo-Romantic fin-de-siècle discourse into her version of Hellenism as a contrast to the sterile vision put forward by her male modernist counterparts, in "Dead Priestess" H.D. seems to be re-coding her symbolic vocabulary surrounding death. In this poem cycle, the encoded aesthetics of death is no longer that of decadent morbidity as muse, but rather of "productive decay," in the sense that Benjamin uses the word "allegory" (see Chapter Two), a death symbolic of female fertility and creativity in the image of Persephone.
Androgynous Greek Youth vs. Passionate Maternal Sexuality

An alternate reading of the daughter's figurative death emerges within the scope of H.D.'s quest for a mature voice. Electra and Orestes are figured as "statues/ by a temple-gate," encoded as the Decadent and neo-Romantic image of the androgynous or hermaphroditic Greek youth, making up the two halves of the Platonic third sex, as witnessed by the Choros' lines: "They are fair/ they are tall/ they stand twin-statues/ by a city-wall" (CP 385; her emphasis). While this poetic persona dominates the early work of H.D., following the traumatic experiences of the war, her ensuing analysis with Freud and the painfully mute "incubation period," the new voice emerges as that of a mature, self-assured and maternally-identified woman, most evident in Helen in Egypt. Laity makes this important point, saying: "H.D. never abandoned the Romantic philosophy of twinship, however in her later work she would drop the mask of the crystalline youth for the more passionate, abject body associated with the cult of the femme fatale" (64). While I don't perceive Clytemnestra in this Electra-Orestes poem as a "femme fatale" figure, I do read Electra's compassion for her mother as a transition of subject perspective to a mature and maternally-identified femininity. What we witness in the intersection of "Electra, Clytemnestra and Death" (CP 383) is part of this transition period that leads to the

26In H.D.'s early work, twins seem to symbolize a prelapsarian androgyny, whereby brother and sister form a complete sex. Twins of the same sex also hold up same-sex love as an exalted form of "friendship." In her later work, the twinning of Helen and Clytemnestra seems no longer to be inspired by the ideals of androgyny, hermaphroditism, or homosexuality, but rather represents the perfection of gynocentric love, a sisterly kindness and mutual understanding, a secret shared only by women. This imagery is introduced in the long-overdue reconciliation of Electra and Clytemnestra, where the daughter first recognizes her mother's beauty as an opening rhododendron rose.
acceptance of a powerful and passionate female sexuality, which H.D. had previously rejected in favour of a male-gendered androgyne. We might also read this as a metaphorical incorporation of the lost mother on the part of her daughter: it is as if the newfound wisdom of maturity enables Electra to understand, indeed to embody her mother's version of the story. It is through the mutual experience of death uniting mother and daughter, where Electra is cast in the role of her suicidal Pleiadic predecessors, that the Atrean princess emerges like Persephone resurrected in the form of the maternal Demeter. Just as Electra and Orestes are constructed as "twin-statues," symbolizing the perfect pairing of gender in a utopian hermaphrodisism, Electra and Clytemnestra also embody an ideal image of femininity as a coupling of prepubescent girl and sexually mature womanhood. But this partnership is about more than myths of mothers and daughters. It is about H.D.'s coming to terms with her literary fathers, be they Pound and Lawrence, or Wilde, Pater and Swinburne, as allegorized in Electra's rejection of the selfish and arrogant Apollo. Electra's incorporation of and resurrection as Clytemnestra symbolizes H.D.'s realization that she does not need the Victorian symbolist figure of the Greek statue in order to make a powerful poetic statement, but that she can rely on the formidable strength of the Priestess/ Prophetess/ Goddess model of femininity.

Orestes crumbles in the wake of the murder, blaming his actions on Apollo's words: "He said 'strike' and he struck me; when I struck Clytemnestra, I struck myself. I

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27Incorporation is a term used by Freud, but also by Klein and Kristeva to discuss the mourning subject's desire to absorb the lost object into the ego. In psychoanalytic terms, this is the subject's attempts to heal the gaping wound left by the irrecoverable loss of the mother. Of course, language is another vehicle for suturing over that loss.
cut right through myself, and I am nothing but the cold metal, I am cold, the sword, I
don't feel anything at all" (CP 384). He looks to Electra to be his Pythia, "a sort of
sister," and begs her to hold him up: "Stand up, stand up, O Electra, don't fall." However,
she makes clear where her loyalties lie: "Why should I stand while Clytemnestra lies?"
(CP 385). Orestes feels abandoned by his sister, calling her: "--you devil," but she returns
his words, calmly and courageously accepting herself for what she is: "Only Electra"
(CP 386). She repeats her argument that "no one knew/ Clytemnestra" (CP 387),
reiterating the image of the flower bud that opens to reveal "the inner petal of a rose," and
yet her efforts fall on deaf ears. The siblings argue issues of justice and action, but it all
comes down to a problem of semantics:

Orestes: It was you who said, slay.

Electra: Long ago--yesterday.

Orestes: But now--the shadows have not moved.

Electra: There are no shadows when the whole is black.

Orestes: Would you take back the deed, take back the sword?

Electra: Only the--word.

Orestes: The word was God.

Electra: Who is to say whether the word was daemon, God or devil? (CP 387;
my emphasis)

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28 Orestes' admission that he is "nothing but the cold metal" (CP 385) can arguably be
read as a reference on H.D.'s part to her earlier Decadent-influenced poetic voice. At one
time, she had viewed the metaphor of cold immortality as one of purity and classical
beauty. But used in this context, it has clearly lost its appeal, now signalling nothing but
the dispassionate numbness of murder.
H.D. plays cleverly with the complexity of justice in ways not unlike Pound's subtle use of language to show the ambiguities of reason and action. Electra juggles images and words, first establishing that there is no distinction between right and wrong, light and dark, when "the whole is black," then signalling Apollo's vanity, whose "word" so easily becomes a "s/word." Electra's self-designation as Pythia--"I was the sister, I was the priestess, I was alone" (CP 385)--does not make her a neutral messenger or mask for the sun-god's words, but her own woman. She is aware that the power of the word cannot be left to a god or to her literary fathers, nor, for that matter, to the Apollo-like establishment that spoke the word which started the war. Indeed, the last lines of the poem stage a formal rejection of the once-prized Greek statue of the androgynous youth: "Un-sexed;/ inhuman,/ doomed" (CP 388). H.D.'s now-mature Electra equates Apollo, the voice of a male god masquerading as a female priestess, with the unspeakable horrors of violence, be it matricide or war. Apollo doesn't even have the courage to deliver his oracles himself, instead setting up Pythia to take all the blame. Electra realizes that justice is never a black and white issue but is clouded by the ambiguity of language, the word made sword. While she accepts her complicity in the matricide, this new Electra recognizes the need for an independent, sexualized and assured voice to speak against cruelty and destruction of any kind. The Choros, as in Sophocles, mirrors Electra's sentiments, and yet, like the Euripidean chorus, it does not condone the actions of the children. Instead it affirms the triumph of the mother's authority, also symbolizing H.D.'s sexually mature and maternal poetic voice:

Out on the sea
the ships toil grievously,
soon they will come,
finding that they have lost
Clytemnestra
and home. (CP 388; her emphasis)

Hope in the Song: Coda

After a hiatus of nearly a hundred pages, Electra and Orestes return to recapitulate their themesong. Sandwiched between the Atrean dialogues are several poems, all of which in some way enact the theme of resurrection. The poet-speaker is created and recreated in the vision of a post-Apollonian priestess, the Pythia sans sun-god. When brother and sister return, Orestes has changed his tune, decrying Apollo's intervention and even denying him the status of deity:

not God,
not God

Among these poems is "The Master," where H.D. most explicitly treats her analysis with Freud. The aging father of psychoanalysis is cast partly in the role of an obstinate Apollo ("I was angry at the old man, I wanted an answer") and yet it is precisely the frustration that leads the poet/speaker to let go of her need for this "very beautiful" old man and follow his advice to find her own voice: "you are a poet" (CP 454-55). If at the outset, H.D.'s speaker sees herself as Freud's Pythia, her perspective has changed by the end of the poem: "men will see how long they have been blind,...shall see woman/perfect" (CP 460). This meditation on her analysis seems a deliberate attempt on the part of the poet to make sense of her contradictory relationship to Freud. She genuinely liked the man she had come to know and felt indebted to him for the success of her therapy, but she could not reconcile this view of Freud with the man capable of writing such misogynistic theories of female sexual and psychological development.
to betray with a nod
youth into battle...
why did I follow
a song? (CP 466-67)

At first Electra expresses nothing but anger and hatred at the destruction caused by "not God," saying: "men, men, my brother,/ will slay us,/ men will lift stones/ obeying the writ of their altar" (CP 467). Then she suddenly bursts forth in praise of the powers of her own creative voice:

Orestes, fly first,
there is shelter
there is hope
in the song. (CP 467)

Even so, Orestes is beside himself, distraught by his guilt, claiming responsibility not only for the matricide, but also for sister-murder: "How can I go,/ O my sister,/ and leave you to death?/ mine was the sword" (CP 467). In quiet dignity, as the "priestess with the power over life and death" (Tribute 117), Electra responds: "I am older,/ a woman/... God, God,/ he is gone" (CP 468). In one easy sentence, the confident sister shows herself to be worthy of the title of Atrean princess, carried by the strength of her mother and her own figurative death experience. The "song" no longer belongs to any "God," but has been transposed into her own language, the word of the priestess, not the Apollonian sword. These lines offer conviction and faith, the promise of a renewed, independent and powerful female voice. While the Choros in the first Electra-Orestes poem predicted doom
and scorned the children's actions—"woe, woe for those who spent/ life-blood/ in hate"
(CP 388; her emphasis)—this brief dialogue confirms the resurrection and rejoices that "the dead priestess speaks."

The Death of Hysteria

H.D.'s poetic enactment of Electra initiates a radical departure from the myth as told in the Attic tragedies, as she has the heroine renegotiate her familial relationships in tandem with the poet's own quest for a new voice. Still, there are elements that betray the influence of previous Electras. Specifically, the heroine's implied death experience as a descent into the underworld and her subsequent resurrection bear the mark of Hofmannsthal's innovation, the "dance of death." Although his fin-de-siècle heroine does not have a chance to rise from the dead, her triumphant end is configured as a pseudo-redemptive performance in the same kind of transfiguration as H.D.'s Electra experiences through her "song." Here female creativity serves the same function as the ecstatic dance.

Hysteria, however, is conspicuously absent from H.D.'s characterization of the Atrean princess. There is no hint of insanity on Electra's part—only Orestes is haunted by a guilt bordering on madness, as in Euripides' Orestes, where Electra is charged with the

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30 Other feminists have attempted to vindicate Clytemnestra from the accusation of ruthless murderess bestowed upon her from Homer onward (Irigaray, Hirsch, Cixous, Kristeva). Few, however, have managed to include Electra as part of this story. Many feminist writers concentrate on reinterpreting Clytemnestra's story, but do not deal with the problematic element of Electra's involvement in matricide. H.D. handles this difficulty by telling a new version altogether whereby Electra begs forgiveness for her part and finally assumes her mother's role. But in her later work, Helen in Egypt, in which H.D. revisits Clytemnestra's story from Helen's perspective, Electra is conspicuously absent.
task of rescuing her brother from the ravages of lunacy. This reading of H.D.'s Electra poems in the context of the "Dead Priestess" collection is based on a loosely biographical reading whereby the poet writes her testimony of trauma through the enactment of a mythological figure as "other." This Electra is not a hysteric like Anna O. but a powerful priestess and master of her own oracle precisely because this trauma is displaced in language, in the repetition of words and fragmented images.

H.D. rescues her mythological heroine from a disadvantaged position, resurrecting her from the silence of the underworld and deploying her as the muse of a newfound creativity. This Electra not only speaks in the powerful voice of the priestess/prophetess, but she also initiates a reconciliation with Clytemnestra, reinstalling (even reincorporating) the mother as part of her healing process. H.D.'s version of the legend banishes the hatred and violence synonymous with what she views as a male-dominated war machine in favour of a feminine politics of renewal, where beauty, eros and fertility triumph, and culminates in an aesthetics of hope and peace. Like many of her counterparts, this Electra refuses the psychoanalytic couch, choosing to transform her pain into pen marks on a page, focusing on female empowerment and creativity as home remedy.
Chapter Eight

Mourning and Melancholia: Sylvia Plath's Electra Enactment as a Poetics of Survival

Revisionist Myth-making vs. the Mythical Method

In "Electra on Azalea Path," Sylvia Plath writes: "I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy" (Collected Poems [CP] 117), revealing her appropriation of the Electra myth as a balancing act, teetering on the edge of an unstable intertextual matrix. Plath turns to myth in her efforts to make sense of an experience of trauma that resists articulation in ordinary language. The stilts symbolize the effort involved in witnessing such pain, like walking in shaky shoes, and the term "tragedy" refers equally to the classical genre of antiquity as well as to its more quotidian meaning of crisis, disaster or breakdown. Either way, the poet's "borrowing" suggests an imperfect palimpsest, something that doesn't quite fit. There is also a measure of impermanence in this image, like little girls swapping clothes for an afternoon. Shoshana Felman would say that Plath's use of Electra to testify to her personal tragedy will inevitably be off-balance "[b]ecause trauma cannot be simply remembered, it cannot simply be 'confessed':" it must be testified to, in a struggle shared

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1Felman distinguishes between confession and testimony, arguing that true confession "is not available" but "runs the risk of offering still more masks" (158). Testimony, or bearing witness, is allowing ourselves to be surprised by what we do not know, but which is revealed to us through the writing. Other. Ross Chambers theorizes this process of witnessing trauma in language as "generic catachresis," whereby the genre of autobiography is hijacked as a testimony of trauma: the damaged narrative. (Chambers' remarks are from a series of lectures as Northrop Frye Professor entitled "Death at the Door: Witnessing as a Cultural Practice" given at the Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Toronto, winter semester of 1998.) The question of genre is an important one for Plath. Her poetry has been classified as "confessional" by C.B. Cox, A.R. Jones and M.L. Rosenthal (Haberkamp 10), much to the displeasure of other critics including Lynda Bundtzen, Stephen Axelrod and Jacqueline Rose, all of whom contend that her work is more than mere narcissism. My own reading does consider the author's troubled
between a speaker and a listener to recover something the speaking subject is not—and cannot be—in possession of" (*What Does* 16). She argues that testifying to a trauma which cannot be remembered is always a double bind. Or as Adrienne Rich has put it, revision is "an act of survival" (*On Lies* 35), because the writer is not in possession of her own autobiography: "I cannot write my own story...but I can read it in the Other" (*Felman* 17).

Felman explains that we hesitate to testify to such trauma because only the Other has access to that knowledge and must surprise us through the process of writing (133), paralleling Rich's view that "poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know" (40).

It is for this reason that Plath finds herself giving voice to a mythological character. The unspeakable nature of trauma requires "[t]he illusion of a Greek necessity," as the poet puts it in "Edge" (*CP* 272). The poem begins with the lines: "The woman is perfected./ Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment." And yet this peaceful completeness is revealed to be nothing more than a hoax, a *trompe l’oeil*. Adrienne Rich

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biography. Understanding Plath's life through her work is not the aim of this study. Rather, the focus is on how Electra's story functions as a filter for the poet's own mourning process.

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2Felman refers here to the "Other" in the psychoanalytic sense of lost maternal object. In my appropriation of the lowercase "writing other," I will also be using the term more generally to refer to the poetic encounter with a mythological figure as the Other writing the self. Later in my discussion of Kristeva's theory of melancholic depression, I will be using the term in a psychoanalytic context.

3H.D. too remarks on the relation between dreams and writing: "this writing-on-the-wall is merely an extension of the artist's mind, a picture or an illustrated poem, taken out of the actual dream or daydream content and projected from within...an echo of an idea, a reflection of a reflection" (*Tribute* 51; her emphasis). The poet is aware that part of the story is always told by that surprising other part of herself.
laments this impossibility of direct access to

The thing I came for:

the wreck and not the story of the wreck

the thing itself and not the myth. (Diving 23; my emphasis)

Unlike Rich, who finds only myth and not the thing itself, Plath turns to myth to witness the very thingness of her trauma. Ross Chambers tackles this question of authenticity in personal expression from a different angle: "Witnessing is about the truth, but it doesn't define the truth in terms of the facts" ("Death at the Door"). Chambers' maxim helps us circumvent Rich's quandary in the sense that, even if myth does not get at the "thing itself," what appears to be just another fraudulent image can still turn out to be the truth the writing Other prepares.

It was Plath, not her critics, who first revealed her poetic persona as that of Electra, explaining her poem "Daddy" in a BBC radio interview: "Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God" (CP 293). She does not say that she enacts the mythological figure as the poem's speaker, instead invoking the Freudian term "Electra complex" to refer to a psychological model that functions as a rhetorical trope. In fact, Plath herself may well be more of a "myth

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4"Electra complex" is actually Jung's term, introduced in 1913 as a model for female sexual development. Freud used the term briefly, but quickly replaced it with his own invention, the female Oedipus complex (introduced in "The Three Essays on Sexuality"). He mentions the earlier term, however, in his late essay "Female Sexuality" with regard to sexual difference: "we are right in rejecting the term 'Electra complex' which seeks to emphasize the analogy between the attitude of the sexes. It is only in the male child that we find the fateful combination of love for the one parent and simultaneous hatred for the other rival" (SE XXI: 228-29). While Freud does not admit the term Electra complex, he does refer to the girl's obsession with the father as a normal part of female development:
larger-than-life" (Haberkamp 9) than the Electra who figures highly in her *Ariel Poems*, indicated by the title of Judith Kroll's influential *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. In the wake of Plath's suicide in 1963, she became the object of countless elegiac mythologies. One might even conclude that the poet herself was the instigator of  

"The little girl likes to regard herself as what her father loves above all else; but the time comes when she has to endure a harsh punishment from him and she is cast out of her fool's paradise"("The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," *SE* XIX: 173; see also "Three Essays on Sexuality," *SE* VII: 228). Freud seems puzzled by his own theories, at once declaring that sexual development in girls is much simpler because they do not experience castration fear ("Dissolution," *SE* XIX: 178-79), then suggesting in "Anatomical Sex-Distinction" that the female Oedipal stage is more complex because it involves a shift in sexual object, from female (maternal) to male (*SE* XIX: 251). Ultimately, this female complex, whether named after Electra or Oedipus, is a prepubescent sexuality, and does not persist into adulthood, which means, according to Freud's view, that the appearance of the complex in a mature woman signals a regression. It is for this reason that I have chosen not to dwell on the infamous Electra complex. Melanie Klein offers no more insightful view of Electra, insisting (as does Freud) that her hatred of her mother results from "not having had her sexual desires gratified by the father" ("Some Reflections" 284), adding fuel to Freud's seduction theory. In fact, Klein focuses almost exclusively on Orestes and his "inverted Oedipus complex," resulting from the incorporation of the "bad mother." Her omission of Electra from the analysis is conspicuous, and once again it is apparent that Electra does not fit easily into any model, psychoanalytic or otherwise. Electra is complex, even if she cannot be said to have a complex.  

Jahan Ramazani considers Plath's contribution to the genre of the elegy and traces her influence on American poets like Sexton, Rich, Wakoski, Kumin, Kizer, and Olds (1143). Ironically, it is Plath herself who becomes the object of painfully romantic and nostalgic elegies, mythologizing her life as a tragedy with Oresteian proportions. Even though Plath's writing is contemporaneous with H.D.'s later work, and the poets' births are separated only by a few decades, Plath remains frozen at the age of thirty in the collective cultural psyche. It is as if the poet had been cryonized at the time of her death, despite that if she were alive today she would be in her mid-sixties. It is exceedingly difficult to say anything about Plath without either trivializing her pain or romanticizing it as a "tragedy," and it is hard to know whether we unnecessarily pathologize her writing as schizophrenic or psychotic because we know how her life ended. I think it is fair to say that when referring to Plath's biography, it is next to impossible to separate the facts from the fiction. Plath, the woman, is only as accessible as the poet-speaker she constructs. In this study, I will inevitably refer to Plath's life; however I will limit my comments to the elements directly connected to the poems I analyze.
this trend, mythologizing her own death-wish into an aesthetics of morbidity with the oft-quoted phrase: "Dying is an art" (CP 245). However, the very fact that Plath's poetic persona portrays ending her life as an artform goes contrary to Freud's insistence that the death drive is a suspension of the pleasure principle. Indeed, the aestheticization of death as a poetic practice installs the pleasure principle in a new way, albeit one that is coupled with disturbingly raw images of pain. Electra is not so much the subject of this process as subjective positionality, a mediator or a platform for the construction and destruction of paternity in an endless cycle resembling a repetition compulsion. Radically opposing images of the father dominate Plath's poetry from beginning to end, and the heroine of the Oresteian legend provides a means of establishing this relationship as obsession, fascination, even fetish. As Jahan Ramazani puts it: "The Electra-myth may be a smokescreen" (1147); all we are left with is the haunting image of Agamemnon's ghost.

An Aesthetics of Mourning: Plath's Electra and a Poetics of Survival

Except for the daughter and her constant apostrophic invocation of the father, all

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6In Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Freud postulated a destructive instinct in the form of the "death drive." This negative force exists alongside and counteracts the life force, or pleasure principle, which the psychoanalyst had considered to be dominant. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud stated that all dreams were "wish fulfillments," the result of a positive life drive. But his clinical experiences, and specifically the discovery of the "repetition compulsion," led him to reconsider the primary life forces, and he developed a theory of regressive narcissism, whereby the life force (pleasure principle) is overridden by the death drive following experiences of trauma.

7It is often difficult to say when it is Electra and when it is an amorphous poet-speaker who contemplates her death in these poems, or if there is really a distinction between the two voices.
other elements of the Electra myth have been stripped away. Like H.D., Plath does not
take the time to tell the story as it happened, but picks up where the action left off. The
bodies are strewn across the stage, but the spotlight is on Agamemnon's corpse, and his
death exists as a distant, elliptical memory, shrunk into three scant lines in "Electra on
Azalea Path":

The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath

The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth

My mother unrolled at your last homecoming. (CP 117; her emphasis)

Frederike Haberkamp calls Plath's insertion of the myth "clumsy," suggesting that it
appears only to "lend the proper symbolic dimension and resonance" (29), and yet J.M.
Bremer views the Aeschylean intrusion differently, suggesting that the three lines in
italics, while they are not a direct quotation from the Oresteia, are spoken by an Electra
character embedded within the poem ("Approaches" 312). Plath thus allows Electra to
voice her own interpretation of the events. If we agree with Bremer, the mythological
heroine is introduced as a double for Plath's primary poetic persona. The following lines
admit this willful appropriation:

I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.

The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry

A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;

My mother dreamed you face down in the sea. (CP 117)

The first voice returns to set the record straight--"The truth is..."--dismissing the neat
Aeschylean rendering of the myth which explains the father's death from everyone's
perspective save that of Electra. It is indeed telling that Plath chooses the Oresteia as her intertext and not either of the later Electra tragedies of antiquity. This Attic trilogy gives Electra the fewest lines. She is sidelined for most of the action, echoing Plath's own sentiments that she "felt cheated" when she visited her father's grave, the incident which inspired this poem (Journal 298). Not only does the poet at last allow the Atrean princess a say in the matter, but because this Electra is the most elusive of the three versions in antiquity, Plath has a clean slate upon which to draw her vision of the neglected figure.

However sketchy Plath's reference to the Electra myth may appear, the poet's consistent use of metaphors of incorporation nevertheless forges a link to the history of the House of Atreus and its cannibalistic curse. Throughout the Collected Poems, we find repeated and intense images of orality (eating and being eaten, devouring, chewing, mouthing), corresponding to Freud's theory in "Mourning and Melancholy" that incorporation is an important part of the process of grieving: "The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it" (249-50). This desire to bring the lost love object into the self is in fact a regression from a more developed object-choice to an expression of primary narcissism. Klein elaborates on Freud's thesis in "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States," suggesting that oral fixation or a consumption compulsion as a response to trauma marks a return to the very early stages of infancy when the child incorporates "good" and "bad" objects as partial representations of the mother's body (345). The child's initial desire to destroy the "bad" objects leads to sadistic and masochistic behaviour, which, when recuperated in later
periods of mourning, results in guilt and self-destructive tendencies. For Klein, the
metaphoric incorporation mediates the experience of trauma: "The individual is reinstating
his actually lost loved object; but he is also at the same time re-establishing inside himself
his first loved objects" (369).

Kristeva agrees with Klein that incorporation is closely linked to the mourning of a
lost loved one; however, she maintains that this melancholy actually conceals an
aggressiveness toward the dead person, illustrating with a first-person narrative account: "I
love that object, but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I
imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I
am non-existent, I shall kill myself" (Black Sun 11). Plath's poetic personas mirror this
love-hate obsession with the father as a lost object that needs continually to be ingested,
introjected, as if she is trying to create a new image of paternity as a part of the mourning
self. Esther Greenwood, the young intern at Ladies' Day magazine in Plath's novel, The
Bell Jar, confesses her fascination with consumption: "I'm not sure why it is, but I love
food more than just about anything else. No matter how much I eat, I never put on
weight" (25). This passage does not reveal the extent of Esther's anxiety, but we are left
wondering if she could have avoided the breakdown and subsequent suicide attempt
depicted in the novel if only she had been able to realize her dream of being fully
identified with her father, the lost love object, which is represented by her love of food.
And yet, as Kristeva points out, incorporation, if taken to its full extreme, leads to a total
narcissistic identification, "a loss of the essential other" necessary for the existence of the
subject: "Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into
death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in a mirage” (5; her emphasis). Thus, if it is to be an effective tool of mourning, incorporation must remain at the liminal stage, a consumption of the parts but not the whole.8

The connection to the Oresteia is indeed partial, a case of covert intertextuality, invoking the terrible curse that infected the Atrean House as a parallel to Plath’s poetic persona’s situation, plagued by the curse of the family romance: a dead father and a hateful mother. Toward the end of Aeschylus’s Agamemnon we learn more of the history behind the cycle of revenge and hatred. Aegisthus recounts the terrible crime against his father Thyestes, who was fed his own children by Agamemnon’s father, Atreus:

Thyestes was the guest,

and this man’s godless father—

the zeal of the host outstripping a brother’s love,

made my father a feast that seemed a feast for gods,

a love feast of his children’s flesh.

He [Atreus] cuts the extremities, feet and delicate hands

into small pieces, scatters them over the dish

and serves it to Thyestes throned on high.

He picks at the flesh he cannot recognize,

the soul of innocence eating the food of ruin—

8Ewa Ziarek cautions against an overzealous acceptance of Kristeva’s theory of melancholic depression, and suggests that there is always a "violence in the symbolization of the other" (70). Incorporation itself is an act of brutality: it may obliterate the boundaries between inside and out, self and other, but it also negates the other in an effort to suture over the "open wound within the ego" (71).
look,                           (pointing to the bodies at his feet)

that feeds upon the house! (Agamemnon 1620-31)

This scene is in fact a repetition of an earlier calamity: it was Tantalus of Lydia who offended the gods by feasting them on his son's flesh, for which he was condemned to starve in Hades, "tantalized" by food and drink just beyond his reach. Thus, it is plain to see that the atrocities committed in this myth are very much the result of the crimes of the father brought back to haunt the children. And it is this doom that Plath paints in her poetic invocation of the Atrean legend through a subject rhyme with her own accursed family romance.

According to Klein, the infant's fear of being devoured by the parent is a reaction against its own desire to assimilate and possess what is external to the self ("On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt" 30). Essentially, the desire to consume and the fear of being consumed amount to the same thing. Plath's imagery of incorporation is the reverse of the scenario related by Aegisthus in the Agamemnon; instead of the father eating his children, the speaker devours the father, miming a graphic feast perhaps as homage to this history, a performance of cultural memory, but it is also to save herself, to put an end to the curse. What the two scenes of conspicuous consumption have in common, however, is a destabilizing of the boundaries between inside and outside. In From Communion to Cannibalism, Maggie Kilgour questions the absoluteness of this opposition: "The idea of incorporation...depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside; but in the act itself that opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it appears to produce" (4). She goes on to say that the interior always takes precedence, attempting to
control the threatening outside, precisely in the act of bringing it inside.  

This desire to control the lost object through incorporation is demonstrated in one of Plath's earlier poems, "The Thin People," where the speaker expresses the same perpetual state of hunger as Esther Greenwood experienced in The Bell Jar:

They are always with us, the thin people
Meager of dimension as the gray people...
It was during the long hunger-battle
They found their talent to persevere
In thinness, to come, later (CP 64)

Similarly, the poetic persona in "On the Plethora of Dryads" learns to squelch her insatiable desire: "Without meat or drink I sat/ Starving my fantasy down" (CP 67). And in "I want, I want," we encounter an equally grievous image of a forlorn creature: "Open-mouthed, the baby god" who "cried out for the mother's dug," but for whom only "[s]and abraded the milkless lip" (CP 106). There are numerous examples where the poet-speaker expresses a desire for oral satisfaction, or rather shows pity for the helpless and weak who must go hungry and neglected. Both Klein and Kristeva confirm that the drive to incorporate the dead other in the process of mourning recalls the originary loss of the mother, a repetition of what Freud calls the "impossible mourning for the maternal object"

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9 One of the most obvious representations of incorporation is through eating, a necessary function of the body, but this may also account for the strict social and religious practices around food. It would seem that the taboo against cannibalism which Freud postulates in Totem and Taboo is tied in with the fundamental cultural need to regulate the relations of inside and out.
(qtd. in Black Sun 9; her emphasis). As such, the object of mourning—in Plath’s and Electra’s case, the father—becomes confused with the primary grief over the lost mother. The speaker in "Poem for a Birthday" reflects this ambivalent relationship to the mother, beginning with the image of bounty, which soon gives way to the natural wilting that accompanies such a cornucopia:

The month of flowering’s finished. The fruit’s in,
Eaten or rotten. I am all mouth.
October’s the month for storage...
Mother, you are the one mouth
I would be tongue to. Mother of otherness
Eat me. Wastebasket gaper, shadow of doorways. (CP 131-32)

The boundaries between inside and out, subject and object are utterly destroyed in this poem, which functions as an elegy to maternal fertility, as portrayed by the flowers and fruit of late summer. The speaker does not wish to incorporate the mother per se, but offers her body as surrogate or prosthesis, to be spoken by the mother’s tongue. The words "Wastebasket gaper" perform this ritual rhetorically by inverting the common phrase "wastepaper basket" to create a distorted image of the mouth as a crude gaping hole, a receptacle for garbage symbolic of the otherness of the mother.

And yet the desire to invade and be inhabited by the mother’s body is simultaneously a drive to negate and thereby usurp her power, since, as Kristeva puts it,
"Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation" (27-28). But for the depressive or melancholic, this process is interrupted, instead leading in two directions: either the self is obliterated to save the mother from fatal negation---"In order to protect mother I kill myself while knowing...that it comes from her"---or the mother is transformed into the "death-bearing she-Gehenna," so that "I do not kill myself in order to kill her but I attack her, harass her, represent her" (28). Plath's speaker in the poem, "Maenad," concludes: "The mother of mouths didn't love me" (CP 133). And finally in "Stones," the last poem of the sequence, the "I" recognizes that the web of self-hatred and rage against the father and (by proxy) the mother is the result of unrequited love for the lost object: "Love is the uniform of my bald nurse/Love is the bone and sinew of my curse" (CP 137). Such a curse is indeed no different from the one in which Electra and her family are mired; the Atrean princess has inherited the cannibalistic crimes of her forefathers in the same way that Plath's speaker is haunted by paternal loss and the desire for introjection, what Kristeva calls "melancholy cannibalism...this passion for holding within the mouth...[that] manifests the anguish of losing the other through the survival of self" (12). The self is indeed nourished and healed, resuscitated through devouring. While the Electra of Attic tragedy does not use metaphors of incorporation to

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10Ziarek questions the ethics of matricide as the condition of subjectivity, concluding that it merely "confirms the primacy of identity and its violence in Western metaphysics" (75). Ziarek wonders if the violence inherent in the neutralization of the other is necessary, and if the mother and the subject's identity are mutually exclusive. Perhaps it need not come down to a question of the one or the other if language can be trusted to mediate such negotiations.

11The speaker comes to the same conclusion in "Electra on Azalea Path": "It was love that did us both to death" (CP 117). Inevitably death interrupts the love between father and daughter.
cope with her mourning, her actions are nevertheless motivated by her ancestors' cannibalism.

Unlike the mythological heroine whose role she poetically enacts, Plath exhibits a self-consciousness about her own psychological state, immersing herself in Freud's theories and attempting self-diagnosis. She usurps the role of the analyst in much the same way as do H.D., Anna O. and Hofmannsthal's Elektra, in the readings offered in this study. Plath writes in her journal for 27 December, 1958:

Read Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* this morning after Ted left for the library. An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the "vampire" metaphor Freud uses, "draining the ego": that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing. (*Journal* 279)

Plath comes to the conclusion that in order to gain power over her mother, she must either appease that "vampire" with food, "like the old witches for whom one sets out plates of milk and honey," or she must "write" (*Journal* 279).12 Paradoxically, however, she feels that her mother stands in the way of her writing, even though writing is the only way she can control her mother. Plath continues to analyse her relationship to her mother in Freudian terms: "How much of life I have known: love, disillusion, madness, hatred,

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12The vampire motif makes its poetic appearance in the poem "Daddy," where the speaker invokes her addressee as "the black man who/ Bit my pretty red heart in two," the crime that justifies killing him, "The vampire who said he was you/ And drank my blood for a year" (*CP* 223-24). The aggression against the mother is transferred to the father as the ultimate object of hatred in Plath's later poetry. It is perhaps the failure to saturate the father in language, to signify fully the Name-of-the-Father, that results in the violent metaphors of this poem and others.
murderous passions... I will write mad stories. But honest. I know the horror of primal feelings, obsessions. A ten-page diatribe against the Dark Mother. The Mummy. Mother of shadows. An analysis of the Electra complex" *(Journal 316).* Plath is already one step ahead of Freud in her perception that the Electra complex has as much to do with unravelling the lost mother in the mummy as it does with the daughter's desire for her father's love.

It is as if the poet anticipates Kristeva's theory of the semiotic when she suggests writing as an antidote for the (incorporation of the) lost object, in fact equating the two when she suggests in a diary entry that the remedy for suppressed talent is "feeding food and words to all the world's other...Bites and wry words" *(Journal 187)*, a metaphor that appears in "The Thin People," where the menace of the famished victims is not so much insatiable craving but "a thin silence" *(CP 64).* The remedy for the agonizing hunger of silence is "a modification in signifying bonds," says Kristeva, and yet it is the "signifier's failure" that distinguishes inconsolable melancholia from normal mourning *(Black Sun 10;* her emphasis). Thus, language appears to collapse into a fragile and unstable symbolic system unable to compensate for the object loss, and this leads to an attempt at sublimation "through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole 'container' seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing" *(14).* Plath's frustration with her writing reflects this ambivalent and even distrustful relationship with signification; after all, if the melancholic feels betrayed and abandoned by the lost object, how is it possible to put faith in a solid bond between the signifier and the signified? The poet's journals are
littered with references to her yearning for the release of satisfying writing (which functions like nourishment for the thin and hungry), and yet her efforts are continually thwarted by a dishonest muse: "I sat paralyzed, feeling no person in the world to speak to. Cut off totally from humanity in a self-induced vacuum. I felt sicker and sicker. I couldn't happily be anything but a writer and I couldn't be a writer" (Journal 248). This same disappointment with the "signifier's failure" is expressed poetically, for example in "Words," where the speaker berates the lexemes for their infidelity, acting as mere "Echoes traveling/ Off from the center like horses," reflections of a mirror, the ruins of "a white skull." Finally, she dismisses words as fully autonomous of the speaker's intent:

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life. (CP 270)

Language here is nothing but an empty shell devoid of authenticity or feeling, taking its cue from external sources, stars, mirrors, wild animals. Kristeva comments on this phenomenon in Plath's poetry, concluding that she was "another of those women disillusioned with meanings and words, who took refuge in lights, rhythms and sounds" ("About Chinese Women" 157). The very first poem in Plath's Collected Poems questions the capacity of language to mend the speaker's fractured object-relations, here labelled "appalling ruin": "What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?" (CP 21). By the end of the volume any faint hope of repairing the damage has been reduced to resignation of the
poet-speaker's ultimate "Voicelessness. The snow has no voice" (CP 263).

Melancholia and the Disavowal of Negation

Kristeva observes that the origin of the word "melancholy" comes from the Greek _melanos_ and _kole_, meaning "black bile," one of the four humours. According to Aristotle, melancholia is a result of an imbalance in the system, an excess of black bile (Black Sun 6) (which presumably needs to be offset through the consumption of a contrasting element). Plath writes in her journal of the rage she feels at her colleagues at Smith College, where she taught in 1957-58: "How I am exorcising them from my system. Like bile" (185). This personal anecdote mirrors the poet's expulsion of the father-figure in her poetry: after incorporating his image through metaphors of orality, he is expelled as a "Colossus," a gigantic monster bearing no resemblance to the actual father Plath had known as a child.

In Kristeva's theory of melancholia, as already mentioned, the experience of trauma at the loss of a loved one evokes the memory of the primary loss of the mother and results in an attempt to recuperate her image or to suture over the damaged object-relations through language. However, these efforts to fill the void with words are frustrated, since the depressive subject is "[u]nbelieving in language," a result of the fact that the object is "unnameable, supreme good, or something unrepresentable" (Black Sun 13-14). In Plath's poetry, the father takes on hypertrophic proportions precisely because he is the unsignifiable "Thing." If his image cannot be fully saturated with words, then he is nothing more than a hoax, a poor substitute for the "real." As if in
compensation for the unrepresentability of the object, the father becomes distorted beyond recognition. As Esther Greenwood puts it: "the person you thought all your life was your father is a sham" (Bell Jar 34). Kristeva explains this phenomenon in terms of a "denial of negation," whereby, in the manic phase, the depressive elaborates a "false language...ersatz, imitation, or carbon copy," which, "if it isn't an antidepressant, is at least a survival, a resurrection" (Black Sun 50-51). Plath demonstrates this willingness to go to extreme lengths to falsify the image of the father, as if it might provide some relief no matter how tentative and short-lived.

There is no more blatant example of this than the speaker's description of her father's grave in "Electra on Azalea Path," where the paternal image is substituted with kitschy ornamentation in a "cramped necropolis":

Nobody died or withered on that stage.....

The artificial red sage does not stir

In the basket of plastic evergreens they put

At the headstone next to yours, nor does it rot,

Although the rains dissolve a bloody dye:

The ersatz petals drip, and they drip red.....

The stony actors poise and pause for breath. (CP 116-17)

The physical father who succumbed to "gangrene" is here replaced with cheap imitation flowers, fading but stubbornly refusing to rot as their fake colour stains the ground like Agamemnon's blood stained Electra's memory. The imagery of "stage" and "stony actors" evokes the theatricality of death and its performance as a "hypersign around and with the
depressive void" (Black Sun 99; Kristeva's emphasis). Kristeva calls this heightened emphasis upon artifice "allegory, as lavishness of that which no longer is, but which regains for myself a higher meaning because I am able to remake nothingness" (99; her emphasis).

Plath demonstrates this allegorical tension between hypersign and the nothingness it recreates in the wordplay on her mother's name "Aurelia Plath," disguised as "Azalea Path." Not only is the lost maternal body recuperated as the resting place of the father, but the substitution is further emphasized in the unreality of the "ersatz petals" which give away their status as trompe l'oeil. And yet in this phrase, the flower name functions merely as a modifier for "Path," the dirt walkway trampled underfoot by the mourning speaker.13

Everything took place in a durable whiteness...

13 Another possible interpretation is the translation of Plath's name, which shares an etymological connection to the German "platt" (flat). Perhaps the mother is turned into the path to be trampled and flattened, tortured for denying her daughter the love she deserved, and the daughter, who also bears the name "Plath" is as flat and hungry as the "thin people." Or could it be that the poet is playing on the same lexical affinity when the speaker invokes Agamemnon's "flat sea purpled"? The German "platt" also means "boring, dull, uninspired," here evident in the tawdry azaleas, but also in the mundane "stony actors" and the monotone drone of Plath's poetic persona. While this reading may appear to stretch the limits of authorial intent, it retains some of its validity as analogy and possible subconscious subtext (after all, Plath does make constant references in her journal to studying German). Plath's poetry has often been dismissed as "confessional" and "stream-of-consciousness," though Hugh Kenner was one of the first critics to praise her craft and rhetorical skill: "Sylvia Plath was counting her lines and governing her rhetoric. ...These are shaped poems..... The resulting control, sometimes look of control, is a rhetoric, as cunning in its power over our nerves as the stream of repulsions" (qtd. in Haberkamp 12; his emphasis). I agree with Kenner and believe that Plath was carefully negotiating her object-relations in rhetorical terms, skilfully working each line to achieve specific allusions, rhythm and tonal quality. She was very much a perfectionist and was likely more aware of the writing process than she was initially given credit for.
...no flower
Breaks the soil. This is Azalea Path...
It was the gangrene ate you to the bone
My mother said; you died like any man.
How shall I age into that state of mind?
I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,

My own blue razor rusting in my throat. (CP 117)

The lost mother is made present through the cryptic "Azalea Path," and then negated with the phrase "no flower/ Breaks the soil," denying the churchyard its named blossoms. We are reminded of the desert-like "durable whiteness." We can extend the analogy of barrenness further, if we consider the etymology of "azalea" from the Greek azaleos, meaning "dry," corresponding to the arid soil that supports only artificial greenery. As rich as the poem's complex imagery and lexical play may be, Plath seems to install rhetorical authority only to negate it with the rot of "gangrene" and the "rust" of the "blue razor" that threatens to gag the speaker's throat and suspend the poem. Plath vows to silence the voice of this poem for good, declaring in her diary: "Must do justice to my father's grave. Have rejected the Electra poem from the book. Too forced and rhetorical" (Journal 300).

We can compare the repeated negation of the life in "Electra on Azalea Path" and the poem's signifying power to Kristeva's "disavowal of negation." Freud proposes that "negation (Vermeinung) is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed," bringing it into consciousness although not necessarily accepting it" ("Negation" 235). For Kristeva, language itself performs a negation by providing a substitution for the lost mother, even
though depressed persons "disavow the negation: they cancel it, they suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss" (Black 43-44; her emphasis). This double negation or denial of negation is also a manifestation of the death drive in that object relations break down entirely in the failure to recuperate the lost mother in language. Paradoxically however, this "schizoid fragmentation," although an expression of the death drive, is in fact a "defense against death—against somatization or suicide" which is perceived as a final reuniting with the lost paradise of the Thing (19). Thus, we can see (at least in the context of Kristeva's theory) that while Plath's poetic persona demonstrates the death drive through a "disavowal of negation," illustrated in the failure of language to represent the dead father, this rhetorical denial is nevertheless a defence against death. Comparing her poetry to that of Virginia Woolf or Maria Tsvetaeva (both of whom took their own lives), Kristeva writes that Plath's double negation of the signifying bond "already announces, for those who know how to read her, her silent departure from life" ("About Chinese Women" 157).14

The departure of Plath's Electra persona may be anticipated by the failure of language, but its silence is a very noisy one, embedded in the pounding rhythms, repetitions, assonance and rhymes of what may be the poet's most famous poem: "Daddy." Hugh Kenner describes this and other Ariel poems as "sick," and suggests a dangerous-

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14 It should be noted that, like the distinction between mourning and melancholy, Freud's theory of the death drive is not synonymous with the suicidal impulse. As already mentioned, the death drive Freud introduces in Beyond the Pleasure Principle is a regressive tendency. It is the drive to return to primary narcissism often manifested in a repetition compulsion. It is omnipresent as a part of normal human psychosexual development, whereas the suicidal impulse arises when the death drive is distorted and the subject becomes fixated on primitive object cathexis.
substance label such as "bad for anyone's soul" ("Sincerity" 43). And yet the disavowal of negation in the repudiation of language, the retreat into "absurd signs, slackened, scattered, checked sequences" marks a desperate measure on the part of the speaker to save herself through what Kristeva calls a "poetics of survival" (Black Sun 73). The collapse of meaning is indeed an attempt to take refuge in the unreality of this frightening image of paternity, in his "gobbledygoo." The speaker blames her muteness on the effects of bodily torture:

I never could talk to you.

The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.

Ich, ich, ich, ich,

I could hardly speak.

I thought every German was you.

And the language obscene (CP 223)

Not only is the tongue stuck stuttering and stammering to spit out the first-person pronoun, displacing and deferring the speaker's subjective positionality through perpetual repetition, but the German "Ich" further distances the speaker from her language, absenting her from the mother tongue. Just as Anna O.'s German falters and gives way to the strange sounds of English, this Electra's language gives way to that of the ultimate other, the German Nazi, as she tries to recuperate/speak her father. Her expression is colonized, conforming to Kristeva's observation that "the speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue...The
dead language they speak, which foreshadows their suicide, conceals a Thing buried alive" (Black Sun 53). In a bid for radical self-exile, the speaker lays claim to the opposing language of otherness, the speech carrying the memory of genocide: "I began to talk like a Jew/ I think I may well be a Jew" (CP 223) (lines which have elicited severe accusations of cultural appropriation for their invocation of the Holocaust¹⁵). There is a blank space of non-communication between the father's language of order and discipline and the daughter's forbidden speech, a gap that gives rise to the semiotic as an alternative orality.

Plath's speaker explains her speech impediment, but it is the poet who demonstrates the defect rhetorically in the rhythmic pairing of words, bordering on the absurd: " Barely daring to breathe or Achoo/...I used to pray to recover you./ Ach, du." The contrast between the non-semantic onomatopoeia of "Achoo" and the German apostrophic address using the familiar "du" is striking because of the sudden shift in tone from playful imitation of a normal bodily function to the sudden seriousness of the

¹⁵ Plath's comparison of her own suffering to that of Holocaust victims has been repudiated as self-aggrandization and for diminishing the real atrocities endured by Jews under in Nazi Germany. As Haberkamp notes, it has been labelled "monstrous" and "disproportionate," "a pure instance of coercive rhetoric" (Bedient, Howe); however the tactic has been defended as an expression of female rage against a "patriarchal and competitive authority structure" (Bloom) and a model of how "the father-daughter relationship dominates the female psyche in our culture" (Bundtzen) (all qtd. in Steinert 153-55). Rose interprets Plath's invocation of the Holocaust as an illustration that her work invokes a more general historical suffering and is not merely a expression of personal experience (223). Whatever approach we take, the metaphor is and will remain disturbing to many readers. Perhaps if she were alive today, Plath would retract the poem's imagery, but it nevertheless demonstrates her desperation. The Holocaust imagery might be a sign that ordinary language had failed Plath and that she had no choice but to resort to extreme and terrifying obscenities as a refuge from the "disavowal of negation," or as the poem's speaker puts it: "The voices just can't worm through" (CP 224). In a time before political correctness, however, references to Nazi atrocities might also merely indicate that Plath sought strong images.
German, here signified as the aggressor's language. The silliness of this coupling also figuratively exorcises the "you/du." The aural affinity between the two utterances "Achoo" and "Ach, du" suggests that the speaker, on the verge of "recovering" the lost object, can simply sneeze away the dreadful daddy in one violent convulsion. The accumulation of words ending in the long "u" vowel creates a semiotic *mise en abyme*, a puzzle within the poem: "black shoe," "Jew," "gobbledygoo," "boot," "brute," "black man who," "stuck me together with glue," "rack and the screw," and so on. This collage of rhyming words is filled with conflicting images of atrocity, but underlying the visual and semantic network is also an aural cue to the universal expression of disgust or repulsion, the "eeew" of a child who has just eaten a revolting morsel. This gagging "eeew" is also found in the ubiquitous "you" designation for "Daddy." This chorus of nonsense sounds like the chant of taunting schoolyard children, again signalling the dramatic contrast in tone between the appaling images of Nazi cruelty and the innocent playwords of children. The long "oo" sound is repeated an astonishing twenty-two times within this short poem, creating dozens of terrifying father-figures that multiply like the war-crimes for which he is blamed. Moreover, this is also an example of the "repetitive rhythm, monotonous melody" and "recurring, obsessive litanies" which for Kristeva characterize the speech of the depressed (*Black Sun* 33).

The poem's first line, "You do not do, you do not do," negating the father's actions, is answered near the end with the affirmative: "And I said I do, I do." We are reminded of the cliche expression of matrimonial assent, a match already hinted at in the earlier poem
"Colossus," where the speaker declares: "My hours are married to shadow" (CP 130). This implied marriage between the Electra-speaker and the dead Agamemnon is annulled as soon as it is named: "So daddy, I'm finally through." But once is not enough, as the speaker reminds us: "If I've killed one man, I've killed two-" (perhaps Plath refers here to the doubled paternal image of Otto Plath and Ted Hughes). Hence the repetition in the last line of the poem just to make plain: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (CP 224). The sentence can be interpreted to mean that the poem has come to an end—"through with the poem" (and "through with you")—but it might equally refer to the speaker as finished with life, done living, "through with this world." However, as a transitive preposition, "through" implies a liminality, the unfinished journey of a nomad, mirroring the speaker's unsteady relationship to language, as well as her self-confessed make-shift constitution: "they stuck me together with glue."

Conclusions: The Digestif

I began my discussion of Sylvia Plath's poetic enactment of Electra as a means of negotiating trauma by suggesting that the "stilts of an old tragedy" allow the "Other" to write the inaccessible story of the self. Shoshana Felman's theory of witnessing—"I cannot write my own story...but I can read it in the Other" (17)—is a useful tool for discussing the

¹⁶ These images form an intertextual link between Plath's vision of Electra and that of Hofmannsthal, who has his character compare the hatred sent by the dead Agamemnon to a bridegroom: "Eifersüchtig sind die Toten: und er schickte mir den Haß, den hohläugigen Haß als Bräutigam" ("Jealous are the dead: and he sent me hatred, hollow-eyed hatred for my bridegroom") (63). This Elektra accuses her father's ghost of raping her consciousness in the same way that Plath's speaker laments the torture she suffers at the hands of the imaginary "man in black with a Meinkampf look" (CP 224).
way in which the poet makes sense of her own suffering as a parallel to and a rewriting of Electra's story. The generic specificities of poetry create a different backdrop for this revisioning of the mythological heroine. In drama, Electra appears as an autonomous character, speaking her own lines, but in a lyrical composition the character emerges as the poem's narrative voice, the subject of discourse, but also as the embodiment of a perspective or awareness. Even though she may not be explicitly mentioned in much of Plath's work, Electra haunts the speaker's consciousness as a presence within the larger poetic world.

While Plath's Electra is silenced by the death of her author, the character has nevertheless been immortalized and lives on in the "poetics of survival," demonstrated by the lasting presence of her voice. The poet's work continues to have tremendous resonance and relevance for contemporary audiences, and her unconventional even disturbing style has exerted influence over a whole generation of writers (see Ramazani 1143). I have suggested that the Electra myth enters Plath's writing in the form of an archaic cultural memory, an inverse subject rhyme with the theme of cannibalism in the Oresteia and the curse it brought to bear on future generations. Paradoxically, it is through the metaphors of consumption which permeate her poetic oeuvre that Plath's speaker nourishes the void of suffering at the loss of a parent. This figurative incorporation acts as an antidote to the death drive, representing but also deferring the threat of self-annihilating narcissism (Kristeva, Black Sun 16-20; Kilgour 232). While this self-treatment could not prevent Plath's suicide in the end, we need not necessarily presume that the narrative perspective died with her. On the contrary, as Kilgour has pointed out, the drive to devour is coupled
with the fantasy of a sublimation that would turn common matter into spirit and resolve all contradictions (17). While this fantasy of sublimation can also be traced to Hofmannsthal's ecstatic dancer or H.D.'s resurrection of her Electra from Dead Priestess to creative muse, Plath's poem "Edge" reveals it to be a mere "illusion" of apotheosis:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga. (CP 272)

Though the promise of the "perfected" dead woman has all the seductive appeal of melancholic regressive narcissism, tantalizing and even intoxicating, the illusion is shattered even before the poem begins.17 The title, "Edge," signals the precarious nature of this liminal scene (as well as the razor's sharp edge), precluding the realization of such perfection, and the speaker even hints self-reflexively at the subtext embedded in the poem like the "scrolls of her toga."18 The enjambment between "dead" and "Body" illustrates the fragmented or incomplete nature of this woman's death, and her contented

17H.D. shared this vision of woman perfected in her poem "Master," where finally men men will see that "woman is perfect" (CP 455), albeit in an entirely different context. The poet invokes the feminine power in the omnipotent goddess: "you are near beauty the sun, [sic]/ you are that Lord become woman" (CP 461). Here, it is H.D.'s use of irony that breaks the utopian imagery.

18Plath's "edgy" rhetoric reflects Kristeva's observations of the melancholic's experience of speech: "I speak as if at the edge of words, and I have the feeling of being as the edge of my skin" (Black Sun 56). The poetic disjuncture, the undoing of words, negates the speaker's vision of physical "accomplishment."
"smile" suggests that she may simply be "buried alive," as if patiently waiting for a resurrection such as the one granted H.D.'s Dead Priestess.¹⁹

Unlike the Elektra of Hofmannsthal and Strauss, Plath's mythological persona performs no triumphant dance, but walks instead on the borrowed and shaky stilts of the Oresteia, constructing a poetic subjectivity through her encounter with the forces of death manifested in her use of Nazi imagery and the destructive metaphors of incorporation. As Felman has suggested, Plath may not have direct access to the story of her trauma, but she attempts to save her own "I" by reading through Electra as Other. Like Nietzsche's roبد- dancer, who must walk a fine line or risk death, Plath's stilt-walking Electra negotiates each step as if it were her last. Zarathustra also assures us that attempting to walk the tightrope is the only sure way to attain the status of Übermensch. So too, each line of Plath's poetry straddles both danger and survival.

¹⁹Just as Plath's own version of the perfected woman shows signs of rhetorical and semantic fissures, so too I claim no definitive conclusions with regard to her construction of Electra, and nor do I wish to resolve the Plath myth itself, since, as David Smith says of this anxiety-provoking enigma: "She can't be explained away. Maybe we feel if we can't explain her we can't explain ourselves" (270).
Conclusion

The Mystery of Muthos

Electra is many things to many people. She is variously the grieving daughter, the courageous sister plotting a cruel matricide, the hysterical maenad, the clever analyst. But in the end, she is a survivor. The Atrean princess refuses to be silenced and will not have her anger tamed. The character and the myth provide a pertinent allegorical backdrop for many significant concerns of our contemporary world: painful power struggles among nations and within families; the continued cycle of violence and revenge that causes senseless destruction and suffering; the changing role of women, who are now unwilling to be passive bystanders, and assert their sexual and political autonomy, effecting change on their own terms. Often, the Electra myth has been interpreted as denigrating mothers and upholding paternal authority. The father is entirely absent from the action, yet there is a constant subtext of gendered tension.

In many of the works I examine, the personal and the cultural overlap in the haunting presence of the mythological father. Agamemnon takes on mythic proportions and becomes the symbol for a larger struggle with paternal authority. Though he is but a ghost, his influence permeates the tragedy. If Freud postulates in Totem and Taboo that the son must kill the father to usurp his power, the Electra myth presents an equally significant challenge to father-rule. H.D. and Plath's poetic enactments of Electra can be viewed as a movement beyond the personal and confessional, a response to and a revolt against patriarchal authority in our culture and, more specifically, the dominance of the male literary canon (see Friedman; Laity; Axelrod; Rose). H.D. makes explicit reference to
her disillusionment with the modernist trilogy of Pound, Eliot and Yeats, and exerts a conscious effort to forge an alternative Hellenist aesthetic. Plath too attempts to gain autonomy from the overwhelming and often stifling shadow of the male poets who dominated her formation as a writer, notably her husband, Ted Hughes, and her mentor Robert Lowell.\footnote{A bitter controversy surrounds Ted Hughes’ role in Plath’s life. He has been condemned by many critics for his editorial interventions in her work, especially after her death. He is reported to have destroyed whole volumes of her diary because they revealed intimate details of the couple’s private affairs (Rose xiii). The recent publication of Hughes’ Birthday Letters has opened a new chapter in this debate, since these apostrophic odes to his former wife end almost thirty years of silence on Hughes’ part. It remains to be seen whether or not this poetic homage will redeem the vilified husband in Plath studies, but it will at least add a new dimension to the polemic and might even shed some light on what was without doubt the central literary partnership in Plath's life.} This is a valid feminist reading of their respective poetic encounters with Electra and her traumatic negotiations with the dead Agamemnon, though there is also considerable precedent for this scrutiny of the father. A dialogue with tradition and with the haunting authority of a larger cultural father-figure is present throughout twentieth-century versions of the myth. Chapter Two explores this phenomenon in Hofmannsthal’s fin-de-siècle Elektra, and suggests that the author invokes his literary fathers as well as the historical sire—the waning Austro-Hungarian empire. A similar obsession with biological, musical and cultural paternity on the part of Strauss can be seen in his operatic adaptation of the work. Indeed, almost without exception, Electra-texts can be said to illustrate on some level a conflict with authority grounded in a political, social and historical context, be it O'Neill's rejection of a repressive New England social structure, Sartre's thinly veiled attack on the French occupation, Pound's diatribe against American involvement in World War II, or Heiner Müller's critique of both National Socialist and East German oppression.
It seems Electra's role is to mediate this struggle with the figurative father as a love-hate relationship—she is complicit with his authority and mourns his death, though she simultaneously seeks to transcend the oppression of his order, even if it means relinquishing her life. In the twentieth century, Electra sends a clear message of maternal allegiance; her subversive hysteria, with its link to the maternal Furies, and her death, symbolically uniting her with Clytemnestra, leaves no doubt about the power and primacy of women in this legend.

It may not be immediately apparent how Electra's self-willed death fits with my analysis of the heroine's representation as a hysteretic through a largely psychoanalytic lens. And yet, the liminality of this end—Electra's unburied body a visible sign of unfinished business—perpetuates the instability initiated by the incomprehensible babble of the madwoman. Given the relative nature of a hysterical diagnosis, sanity becomes a question of perspective. So too the meaning of Electra's death is a matter of interpretation. Could it be that she ends her life in an ecstatic performance or as a walking corpse in order to disassemble the clear structure of tragedy, to question the logos of myth? The liminal nature of the heroine's exit is illustrated by Benjamin's reading of allegory as polarized between melancholia and hope, transience and eternity, destruction and redemption. This allegorical tension is a mere residue of the material suffering of death and cannot be sublimated into an abstract idea. The corpse is a metaphor for the allegorical ruin, a blip

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2 A covert link between hysteria and death has existed since Greek times, when (as we have seen) women's exaggerated and maniacal displays of grief resembled what Freud called hysteria in this century. This practice of crazed dancing, singing and tearing of hair as part of the proper funeral rites was the responsibility of women, who were associated with the beginnings and endings, birth and death (S. Blundell 73).
in the smooth journey toward apotheosis. Just as Elektra's dance keeps her on the threshold of existence in Hofmannsthal's fin-de-siècle drama, and Elektra/Ophelia's incapacitation, gauze-wrapped and wheelchair-bound, keeps her on the cusp of suicide in Heiner Müller's Hamletmachine, so too H.D.'s Electra, "buried alive," and Plath's image of the sweet stench leaking from the wilting flower in "Edge" ("the garden/ Stiffens and odors bleed/ From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower" [CP 273]), perform an aesthetics of allegory related to that of Trauerspiel, literally a "play on mourning." While these Electras hover in the shadow of death, leading a life which "rollt ja aus dem Tode ab" ("indeed unfolds from death") (Trauerspiel 293), the mythological heroine's story is as much a celebration of joy and hope as it is an expression of melancholic despair.

The excess of Electra's death also negates Athena's carefully constructed juridical system mapped out in Aeschylus's Oresteia. The heroine's end is a joyous occasion like the one George Bataille advocates in "The Practice of Joy before Death," where he warns against succumbing to mind-numbing vertigo in the final moment. For him, death is the culmination of all earthly existence: "'Joy before death' means that life can be glorified from root to summit" in a "happy loss of self" (237; his emphasis). This vision of death as a stripping away "until it is nothing but a pure violence" (238) is echoed in the final act of this century's Electras; the mythological heroine mimes the implosion of Schopenhauer's principium individuationis, Bataille's "pure inner fall into a limitless abyss" (238), simultaneously exploding the limits of subjectivity and dissolving into nothingness. By giving freely of herself in a potlatch-like annihilation, Electra denies the primacy of balance and exchange set up in the mythical world-order of an Aeschylus or
Euripides. Only Sophocles comes close to the understanding of death as practice or spectacle such as Bataille or even Benjamin might propose.

In this sense, Electra's unfinished death might be seen as a logical extension of her so-called hysteria. Instead of "succumbing to vertigo" (against which Bataille warns [235]) and giving in to the diagnosis and the psychoanalytic vocabulary that would strip her of joy, the heroine turns the tables on her analyst and audience alike. She refuses to conform to the straitjacket of a case study, leaving in an act of "pure violence." All in one maenadic sequence, she smashes the logos of muthos. While I have already suggested that in the course of this century Electra's hysteria gives way at times to a testimony of unspeakable trauma, that she also begins to heal her own melancholic depression, it is apparent that her death-wish prevails. Perhaps Electra triumphs over hysteria through a "thanatographie," a writing of her own death. As we near the millennium, the Atrean princess is undaunted by death.

To offer an example, in Barbara Köhler's poem cycle, "Elektra. Spiegelungen," she walks wide-eyed to her end and would rather die than be just another character. Sick and tired of games, she takes on the heavy shame of history: "ICH WILL SCHULD SEIN... noch (und warum) ertrage ich das spiel von held und happy end das drama in dem alle rolle opfer sind/ aber es gibt den tod und/ es gibt eine zeit davor" ("I WANT TO BE GUILTY... I still tolerate (and why) this play of hero and happy end this drama in which all roles are victims/ but there is death/ and there is a time before it" (23). Writing in the former East Germany in 1990, Köhler sets her Elektra in the mythic context of the falling Berlin wall, implying in her final line that the event is staged: "am schminktisch sitzt
lektra legt die maske ab" ("elektra sits at her dressing table takes off her mask") (25). In what the author here subtitles "Hommage à Heiner Müller," the Electra figure, no longer believes in the authenticity of revolution, and chooses death over the sham of the mask.

Köhler is not alone in taking Electra's death as her lead. Alan Marshfield's collection *The Elektra Poems* follows in the footsteps of Plath's desperate Electra, framing the character in a long line of "female suicides in mid-career" (56). It is not clear who this Elektra's jailer is: her own conscience, her analyst or history itself. But, like her predecessors, this girl fights back:

Usage is what she lives by, not a cage.

Who wants to be a prisoner all her life?

Who wants to live in a psychotic calm

upon the arm of a correct, stiff groom

that leads her doctor-like around his grounds? (57)

Like many of her counterparts, Marshfield's modern Elektra is wired with an electric charge that does justice to her name. The author gives away his sources when he tells us his heroine is "among the derivatives of fin de siècle" and describes her heady "aromatic dance" (59). But this Hofmannstalesque death dancer is now but an archetype, a myth in herself, compared here to "Hedda, Blanche, Eurydice" (63), women who know their mind and speak it.

Even Anne Sexton writes of her own Plath-like Electra complex, "the mythopoetic music of the father-daughter dance" (D. George, 411). Like other poets who document Electra's story, Sexton does not shy away from death, but looks it aggressively in the face, daring it to come her way: "when death comes with its hood/ we won't be polite" (Complete
If one thing characterizes this poetic collage of Electra vignettes, it is the daringly naked portrayal of the heroine's violent nature, exemplified in Marilyn Hacker's description of her as a "lustful short-haired virgin bitch" (13). She is not afraid of murder and she is not afraid of death. These poets invoke Electra's story and demonstrate that death is a way of life, that, like her clever manipulation of psychoanalysis, her dying is just another subversion, a refusal to play by the rules. From Hofmannsthal to Pound to Plath, this century's Electras are unapologetically brash and at times unsympathetic figures. Still, this new model of aggressive femininity has not affected her popularity as a literary subject. Perhaps Marguerite Yourcenar was right when she had her Pylades announce to the leading lady: "Tu devrais savoir que tout homme un peu lucide finit un jour ou l'autre par n'aimer qu'Electra." ("You ought to know that every man who is a bit clear-minded will end up one day or another loving only Electra") (113). Men and women alike have found inspiration in Electra's pain and courage. Authors from diverse cultures and contexts have illustrated the struggles of the babbling hysteric and her dancing death, but more than anything, this century has granted the character a voice and a space to speak her difference.

I began my discussion of the Atrean legend by suggesting that Electra's entrance into the story coincides with the fifth-century attempt to end the primacy of muthos, and replace it with the tidy perfection of Platonic logos. I proposed that Electra's increasing importance in Attic tragedy, beginning as a minor character and ending up in the title role, and her transgressive behaviour works to counteract this rationalizing trend. The mythological heroine's choice to seek revenge against all reason in fact reverses the path toward tragic transcendence, with its pursuit of Athenian civic reforms and of father-rule through the assault.
on motherhood. Similarly, in this century Electra has no truck with *logos*. Subverting her diagnosis as a hysteric and using it as a weapon against those who would seek to control her seemingly irrational behaviour, be it her author or her analyst, and ending her life in a liminal death/non-death, the powerful princess continues to refuse determination and definition.

Electra confirms that, if mythopoesis is alive and well in our times, so is the mystery of *muthos*. 
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