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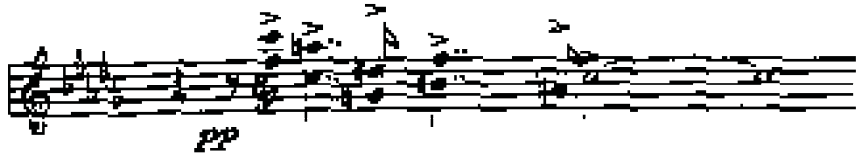
Strauss and Von Hofmansthal's Elektra: the realisation of myth in music

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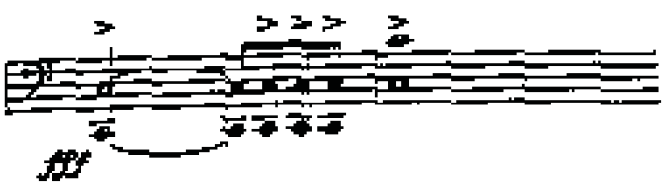
opens with the protagonist in a state of decline and virtual insanity, it is soon clear that this is a result of the murder of her father. When Elektra sings "I think, too, I was fair", she is referring not only to her physical beauty, but also to her state of innocence. This was lost because "the dead are very jealous, and [Agamemnon] sent to me this hate, this hollow-eyed hate, as bridegroom." Although Elektra is clearly the focus of concern of the second phase, the third and fourth are more ambiguous as they are concerned with the respective success and fall of the hero. Here, the perspective of the audience is important in identifying the nature and order of each phase. If Elektra is again the principal character, then her dance of victory followed by her collapse and death follow Frye's pattern. Yet the reverse applies to Agamemnon. His 'fall', represented by his murder, is followed by his eventual triumph over his murderers. This is even emphasised musically: any discussion of his death is accompanied by a descending figure,
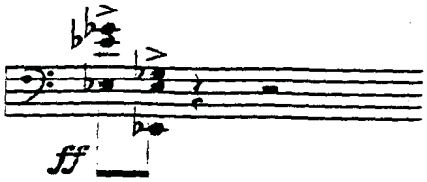


while his triumphant second motif is a strongly ascending figure:



Likewise, Elektra's exultation is portrayed by a leaping theme,



while her death is accompanied by a sharply descending interval:



The fifth phase is also particularly applicable to the finale of the opera in that it deals with the increase of the ironic in a hero's existence. The explicit irony is that of Elektra's death at her moment of triumph. A more implicit irony is the ultimate triumph of Agamemnon, a dead character who, after working through his children in order to take revenge, discards them in favour of his own victory. The irony of a murdered character emerging triumphant at the expense of all the other characters is paralleled in *Hamlet*, but in *Elektra* this irony is also satirical in its pointing out of the dominance of fate over the best efforts of mankind. Thus, regarding the phases of heroic development, the emphases are as follows:

Phase One:	Dignity.....	Agamemnon
Phase Two:	Loss of Innocence.....	Elektra
Phase Three and Four:	Triumph and Fall.....	Elektra
Phase Four and Three:	Fall and Triumph.....	Agamemnon
Phase Five:	Increase in the Ironic.....	Agamemnon

Although Elektra is often part of the development, Agamemnon's dominance of the score ensures that he remains the more important heroic figure.

The final phase of heroic development is a phase that applies to the entire opera of *Elektra* rather than following the pattern of progression implied in the first five phases. It concerns the world of shock and horror, a glimpse of the demonic. (Dramatically, this applies equally to the opening monologue where a bedraggled and filthy protagonist is introduced, leading to the act of matricide, the collapse and death of Elektra, and a general atmosphere of gloom and violence.) Musically, this is taken even further. Themes of incest, murders, nightmares and madness compete with each other in what must be the most extreme score ever composed. As far as this affects Agamemnon as hero, it is sufficient to say that he, as nemesis, architect and overseer of the entire opera, is the true protagonist of the wasteland created by Strauss and von Hofmannsthal.

In conclusion, *Elektra* can be regarded as conforming to the requirements of a mythical work in that it follows the development of a heroic archetype through its different phases, as well as through the structure of its plot. Although there is a certain amount of blurring due to the very nature of the work's hero(es), resulting in the exaggeration of certain phases and the increasing ambiguity of others, this does not diminish it in any way, but rather confirms it as a product of the late nineteenth century, where myth was seen as a vehicle for the uncertain and even the decadent. As *Elektra* has almost an excess of both, it is not surprising to read of adverse contemporary criticism of the opera, and of the drama. Its plot is particularly unpleasant, and as a result of its dark moods

and violent action, Agamemnon becomes not only a hero figure, but also part of another mythical archetype which can be used to describe the opera as a whole. This is the archetype of demonic imagery, the style most clearly and unambiguously employed by Strauss and von Hofmannsthal in *Elektra.*

CHAPTER 7

APOCALYPTIC AND DEMONIC IMAGERY

In previous chapters, the mythical character of *Elektra* was discussed, as well as the mythical personalities of its principal characters. It is now necessary to examine a broader aspect of the opera, namely that of its mood and psychological character, by making use of the archetypes found in 'apocalyptic' and 'demonic' imagery. Most myths contain elements of both, but any listener would agree that *Elektra* is almost wholly demonic, both in its horrifying text as well as in its relentless and dissonant music. However, in presenting Strauss' opera as a demonic myth, it must be born in mind that 'apocalyptic' is no more than the polar opposite of 'demonic', and that the latter is more often than not defined by the qualities of the former. For this reason, an apocalyptic image always has an opposite and negative demonic parody.

Apocalyptic imagery is often used when discussing myth and/or legends of a sacred or Utopian nature: "The apocalyptic world, the heaven of religion, presents, in the first place, the categories of reality in the forms of human desire, as indicated by the forms they assume under the work of human civilisation." (Frye 1957: 141.) Consequently the various spheres, or worlds, of human perception are Utopian in nature in an apocalyptic myth. For example,

the vegetable world consists of tranquil gardens, fertile farms, groves and parks. As in other worlds, man is contained by nature, but has redefined it in his own terms. Thus the animal world is dominated by domestic creatures such as the horse and the dog, and particularly the sheep - which has become one of the most important images of apocalyptic legends within the Christian context. The meeting of the vegetable world and the animal world results in the familiar use of pastoral imagery, whilst legends such as Robin Hood, and literature such as Shakespeare's forest comedies are part of the interaction between vegetable and human worlds. The mineral (or inorganic) world is usually identified with a powerful city, or in many cases just a building - a temple or mansion being the most common. Also included in this world are geometric symbols such as the eternal circle, and architectural ones of towers and ladders.

Elektra is clearly a demonic parody of the above. No situation in literary history could be further from pastoral serenity than the ruined courtyard of the castle of Agamemnon, in which most of the action takes place. Even the use of domesticated animals in Elektra's monologue confirms the horror of what has happened before, and what is yet to occur: "We'll sacrifice the stallions which are stabled here, we'll drive them out to your grave together, and they'll sense death at hand and whinny in death's atmosphere, and die there. And we'll sacrifice the hounds ... they must shed their blood for you, and end their duties thus." This parody of apocalyptic domestic animals is made even more horrifying by the realism of the score: yelping of dogs in pain and the neighing

of terrified horses. In addition to this, the sacred image of the sacrificial sheep, used frequently in relation to messianic figures such as Jesus Christ, is parodied in Klytemnestra's sacrifice of such an animal in order to interpret her evil dreams, accompanied by the frenzied and relentless rhythm in the orchestra which was quoted in the chapter on tragedy (p65). The use of sheep in *Elektra*'s score is far from the pastures and flocks that provide such tranquillity in the tone-poems *Don Quixote* and *Eine Alpensinfonie,* where they are portrayed as representative of a pastoral Utopia.

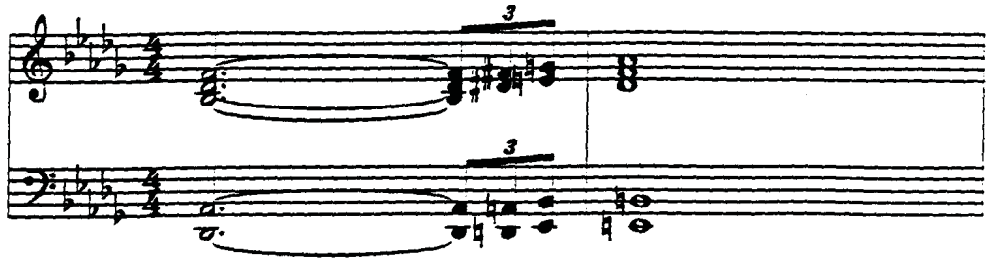
As far as the inorganic world of *Elektra* is concerned, the castle of Mycenae is the most obvious symbol. The apocalyptic image of a temple or house has become instead a dark, brooding and oppressive place of death, a physical representation of the corruption evident in most of the characters. The castle also serves as a literal representation of mood, and is a constant reminder of the fall of the house of Mycenae as a result of the murder of Agamemnon. In the history of demonic literature, the castle has often been a symbolic source of evil - the catacombs of Crete in Greek mythology; the castles of Elsinore (*Hamlet*) and Cawdor (*Macbeth*) in Shakespearean drama; the numerous 'haunted' castles in the Gothic genre. Agamemnon's castle fits into the pattern of death and destruction. He is murdered there himself and as a result his wife and her paramour are murdered in turn, and Elektra does not long survive them. Chrysothemis senses this aspect of the castle - "before dying, I want to live first!" - when appealing to Elektra for freedom, and Elektra accuses

Klytemnestra of ordering the death of Orestes from within the castle walls. ("You sent off gold that he might be strangled!") The castle is a visual representation of the decadence and malevolence of the drama, but does not possess its own musical vocabulary. The musical representation of the demonic nature of the opera is concentrated on specific characters, as well as on broader and more conceptual elements.

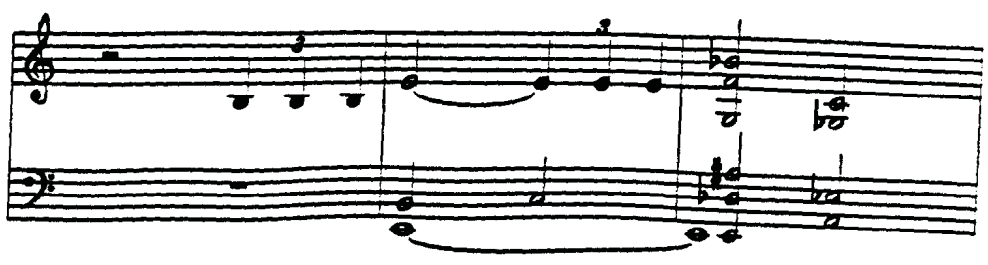
'Demonic' music, like mythical music, has long provided the accompaniment to scenes from hell: Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* are examples of operas containing music that evoke the underworld. But the latter opera became known in the Romantic era as peculiarly demonic, not only due to its subject-matter, but also because of its tonal centre of D minor. Consequently Mozart's concerto for piano K.466 was also labelled 'demonic' because of its D minor key signature. It therefore comes as no surprise to discover that *Elektra* places strong emphasis on this key, particularly when referring to the murder of Agamemnon. (Chapter ten deals in detail with the structural nature of the opera, including key relations.) Weber's *Der Freischütz* extended the possibilities of demonic music in the enchanted forest scene, where a mixture of diminished seventh and augmented triads create a gloomy and oppressive atmosphere. By incorporating chromaticism, Wagner was able to achieve this to an even greater degree in portraying Klingsor's magic castle in *Parsifal.* (This can be compared to the motif of Valhalla in the *Das Ring der Nibelungen*, where the straightforward tonal fanfares of *Das Rheingold* present

an apocalyptic structure.) *Elektra*, always tonally based despite its extreme chromaticism, takes demonic musical images even further by the use of uncertain key-shifts, and a use of bitonality in portraying the most demonic character, Klytemnestra: "Chords which could be used to clarify tonalities are still present, ... but they are either fleeting or overlaid with contradictory elements. Klytemnestra herself slides further into ambiguous, unstable harmonic regions." (Puffet 1989: 66.) Von Hofmannsthal's Klytemnestra is the most evil and belligerent character in the opera. It is she who plans and helps execute the murder of her husband, who plans the death of her son, and who treats her daughters like wild animals. Because of her irredeemable nature, critics such as Norman Del Mar have condemned her characterisation as being one-sided and unrelated to her original personality. "Strauss concentrates on the decaying ruin ... rather than on the tremendous personality she has once been." (Del Mar 1962: 305.) He then continues by openly displaying his disgust at the result: "There is nothing in the whole text of Greek literature to prepare us for [Klytemnestra.] She is easily the most ghastly character in the whole dreadful drama, worse by far in her decadence than Elektra" (308). Even Klytemnestra describes herself as "a putrid carcass", and a "corpse devoured by crawling maggots". The stage directions at her entrance before the pivotal fourth scene call for her to have "a sallow, bloated face ... her eyelids are unnaturally large and it seems to cost her great effort to keep them from falling." With a description such as this, it is little wonder that Strauss used all the musical technique he possessed to make her as musically repulsive as she is
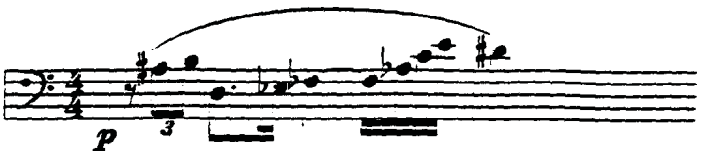
dramatically. By employing bitonality, Strauss was able to create images of unease and deception, together with dissonances that would disturb the listener's perceptions. This can be seen in Elektra's view of her mother - a chromatically sliding line, the use of a warped E scale in the second bar, and of course the use of polychordality:
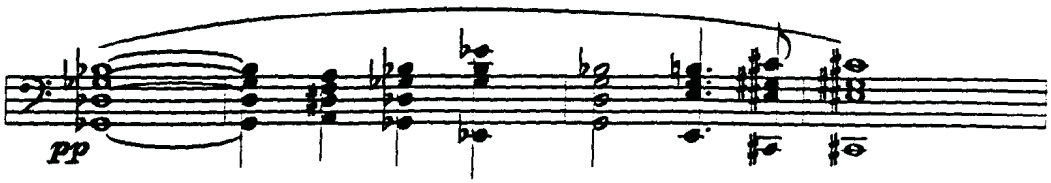


The juxtaposition of E major and D-flat major as in the above example is often used in association with Klytemnestra throughout the opera. It is closely linked with Elektra's 'hatred' motif, and is in fact a block chord of that motif's notes. This has led some commentators to ask whether the evil of Klytemnestra is not just a product of Elektra's imagination. "Listeners know this to be the view Elektra takes of her mother. Obviously unsympathetic, it is not necessarily a fair or accurate depiction of the queen." (Greene 1991: 46.) Greene later accepts the reality of Klytemnestra's evil at the end of scene iv, at the whispered news of Orest's death. However, she becomes a character in her own right at the point at which she begins to describe her decaying body. Her spiritual decay is further described later in the score, in a bitonal sequence that consists of a harmonic structure of two minor chords, a tritone apart:



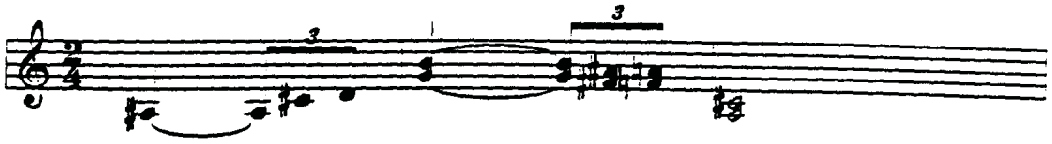
Other motifs relate to her sinister presence:



her evil and dangerous influence:



and her unspeakable appearance:
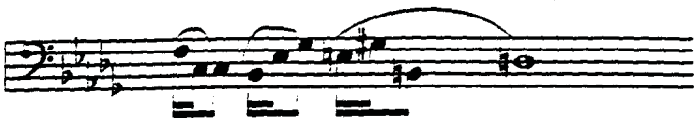


Both musically and dramatically, Klytemnestra is too evil and too perverted to be taken literally, and as a result becomes a virtual caricature of her own personality. In a mythical sense, however, she is the ultimate demonic character and the antipode to the virgins and angels of apocalyptic imagery. Consequently her character, momentously perverted and exaggerated in realistic dramatic terms, becomes musically as well as textually a truly mythological creation, - more so than any other character in the opera save Agamemnon.

In the earlier discussion of Agamemnon as hero of *Elektra*, it was noted that his themes and, as a result, his presence, pervade all the important moments of the

action and that the triumph of the last scene is not so much Elektra's, but rather that of her father. However Agamemnon's influence on the course of the action can also be seen in demonic terms. The last scene is a case in point. Elektra's wild dance and triumphant words are cut short by the return of the themes of Agamemnon, and she is left to her fate. This puts Agamemnon in a new role - that of a manipulative figure seeking revenge for his own purposes. Throughout the score, Elektra's musical language is defined on the one hand by hatred for her mother and, on the other, by the themes of Agamemnon. Just as this led Greene to consider Klytemnestra a product of Elektra's mind, so too could it be argued that Agamemnon is the character dominating Elektra, to the extent that she can be discarded after his goals are met. This aspect of the murdered king casts him in a more malevolent light than his motivic material suggests, yet it also increases his presence as the central figure of the drama. In his very solitariness and manipulative nature, he confirms the Romantic view of a demonic figure, defined by Goethe as "ultimately, everything which is individual and separates one from the others." (Tarasti 1979: 110.) Therefore, the demonic figure in Romantic thought was equivalent to the solitary, questing artist that practically defined the Romantic condition. Strauss, a product of this philosophy, merely presents his hero with shades of demonic imagery that colour his entire opera. This does not contradict Agamemnon's status as hero, nor does it affect his regality as presented in the score. Rather it changes the heroic emphasis of a mythical quest into an individual thirsting for vengeance, using in the process the characters of the opera as the means to achieving this

end. Agamemnon may be a demonic character, although substantially less so than the physical characters on stage, but in Romantic terms, he remains the central hero-figure.

One means of portraying evil in music is to use bitonal, ambiguous harmonies and sliding rhythms, such as those associated with Klytemnestra. In doing so, she is constituted as not only evil, but scheming and dangerous as well. The figure of Aegisth on the other hand is treated in a totally different manner. In contrast to Klytemnestra's bitonality, his theme is strictly tonal; in contrast to her myriad related themes, his never changes. His motif would be almost melodic in invention, if it were not so short, and is often portrayed in a mocking manner by the orchestra:



This superficiality and shallowness is a true reflection of the evil of Aegisth, implying that he was more an accomplice in the murder of Agamemnon rather than an instigator. Accordingly, while Elektra feels intense hatred for her mother (which in itself implies a certain type of reluctant respect), her attitude towards Aegisth is never more than contemptuous:

Klytemnestra - "Who does the rite?"

Elektra - "a man."

Klytemnestra - "Aegisth?"

Elektra - "Did I not say a man?" (laughing)

Aegisth is therefore also a demonic character, but in a different way to Klytemnestra. Her character is a parody of a heroine, a queen, whilst he remains nothing more than an evil fool. This is constantly emphasised on stage as well as in the orchestra. "While the Klytemnestra motif, with its rhythmic and melodic complexities, characterises someone who is complicated as well as sinister and sufficiently noble that her perversion is momentous, the Aegisthus motif makes a stock character of him, not a self whose being a self can be grasped or joined by the audience." (Greene 1991: 48.) In an apocalyptic myth, the individual is a hero, or even a god, and is a purely positive force. If he is to be sacrificed, it is for the good of his people both at that time and in the future. But in a demonic myth, the individual becomes a tyrant, a despot prone to melancholia, and utterly ruthless. Klytemnestra is clearly a product of a demonic myth, as is Aegisth in his own way. Their sacrifice of Agamemnon is purely selfish, and is therefore a demonic act which subsequently transforms Agamemnon from the living hero he was into the demonic hero he becomes. Thus *Elektra* is itself a demonic myth due to the nature of its characters, and its presentation of the individual. In addition to this aspect of the drama, another which defines demonic imagery is the role of various concepts. The most important of these is sexuality.

In the Utopian concept of myth, sexuality is a positive and unifying force. Sex itself is often used as a metaphor for the reconciliation of the sexes into a

perfect 'oneness', and is linked to the attainment of divine union with a god. Marriage too is considered holy and a way of achieving completeness, as seen in the concept of the 'Chymical Wedding' of medieval alchemical thought. It is obvious therefore that any demonic parodies of sexuality would be concerned with perversion, frustration and separation. The female archetypes of angels, goddesses and mothers become instead archetypes of witches, harlots and sirens. The demonic parody of marriage is usually concerned with socially unacceptable unions such as hermaphroditism, homosexuality and incest, the last being traditionally the most common. Consequently, sexuality in *Elektra* is almost exclusively demonic in nature. It must be remembered that the character of Elektra herself is based on a case-study of a sexually repressed patient of Freud. This is most obvious in the recognition scene as she recalls how before the murder she was able to accept her own sexuality, and even take pleasure from it. "I felt then how the slender ray of moonlight bathed on my body's naked whiteness tenderly ... and my hair was such fine hair, it set the men all trembling." Nevertheless, the killing of Agamemnon succeeded not only in destroying the social fabric of Elektra's existence, it also forced her to reject her sexuality altogether. "My pure shame I have submitted, the shame that's sweeter than all things else ... that encircling every woman, keeps away all awful things from her and her spirit." Themes relating to her bedraggled and unkempt appearance are common in the score, and reinforce her indifference and asexuality. Yet despite her rejection of the positive values of sex, Elektra is prepared to make a cynical and calculated use of her sister's sexuality for her

own ends. Chrysothemis, still sexually aware, is denied her desires by her incarceration in the castle. In this sense she is still symbolic of a demonic parody of sexual desire, but in a way opposite to Elektra. Because of this Elektra is able to attempt two of the parodies of marriage - homosexuality and incest - in order to persuade Chrysothemis to assist her in murdering Klytemnestra and Aegisth. This 'seduction' scene contains some of the most lush and ravishing music of the entire score, including the use of the motif that has earlier referred to the bonds between Elektra, Orest and Agamemnon. By including this motif at this point, Strauss implies a form of sexual blackmail of Chrysothemis in an attempt to gain her help. In Christopher Wintle's Jungian analysis of the opera in his essay *Elektra and the Elektra Complex* (John 1989: 63ff), this particular scene is described as "addressing the sexual basis of the ... 'Elektra Complex' [showing] how the powerfully life-enhancing erotic forces are entwined with equally powerful murderous ones" (70). Wintle argues that in order to regain her own sexuality, Elektra has to murder her own mother. Chrysothemis' refusal to comply with her sister's attentions (albeit after initial temptation) therefore destroys Elektra's prospect of "vicarious sexual gratification" (71). However, her sexual cynicism in this scene is without equal. To an equally erotic score, she praises Chrysothemis' virginal strength and offers herself to her sister: "how strong you are! The nights spent in virginal sleep have made you strong ... You could take me, or a man, within your arms and then choke him." But this is all an attempt to use Chrysothemis' sexual frustration as a means to her own end. "All around you I'll wind myself, I'll sink

down my roots into you; I'll implant my strength of will deep in your blood." The true extent of Elektra's cynicism is revealed at the end of the scene as she violently curses her sister, supported by the full complement of the orchestra. Elektra's cynicism regarding the sexual nature of those around her is perhaps based on past experience, and once again incest is used as the principal parody of marriage. In her opening monologue, she sings to her father to "come before your child", and the motif of the family bond is heard in the first tender moment of the score. In the Unitel film of the opera, Elektra picks up the head of a broken statue of Agamemnon, and proceeds to embrace it passionately at this point. Götz Friedrich, the director of this production, here pre-empts the disclosure of incestual relations with Agamemnon. In the text Elektra only reveals the fact during the recognition scene, where she tells Orest: "This sweet sense of wonder I've sacrificed for our father. Know then, each time that I rejoiced in my body, all his sighs forced entry, all of his groanings, to my bedside. For the dead are very jealous..." It is then no great surprise that Elektra is sexually repressed, and indifferent to the needs of her sister. Her conception of sex is also illustrated by the contempt she feels for Aegisth, and she compares him to a woman whose "valiant actions all take place in bed." That this attitude and all the various other attitudes to sexuality in *Elektra* are of a demonic nature is therefore indisputable, and the fact that this story gave rise to the psychological condition of the 'Elektra Complex' only serves to confirm this. To quote Wintle again, "both the text and the music of the opera dwell ... powerfully on both the sexual and sensual nature of things. What is

celebrated here is the mystery of the dark workings of the mind, and their relation to the awesomely destructive and self-destructive energies of nature" (77).

Other less important demonic characteristics are perceivable in the course of the action. Social interaction is replaced by the 'mob-mentality' of the opening maidservant's scene, and any opposition to this (for example, the fifth maid's defence of Elektra) is dealt with swiftly and ruthlessly as no dissent is possible in a demonic setting. Loyalty, in apocalyptic imagery a positive and important factor, is in *Elektra* concerned either with sycophancy (the train-bearer and confidante) or with obsessive and perverted loyalty, such as Elektra's memory of Agamemnon at the expense of all others. Even Orest is only a means to an end, forgotten as soon as Klytemnestra and Aegisth are dead. Loyalty such as this, built on layers of hatred, vengeance and obsession can only be a parody of loyalty built around trust and inspiration.

Fire is another characteristic of myth that can be used either as an apocalyptic or a demonic image. In the former sense, it is purgatorial, an ordeal which is positive and cleansing. In demonic terms it becomes symbolic of damnation and pain. Fire is closely linked to light, and light, or rather the lack of it, is an important device in the opera. Mention has already been made of the dark and gloomy atmosphere of the castle, but the appearance of light is usually a prelude to killing. After the third scene, 'flickering torches' are noticed in the

background, and Chrysothemis describes Klytemnestra as "driving the maids before her, each holding up a torch. They're dragging beasts out, and ritual daggers!" This is ironically mirrored in the final scene as Aegisth returns home to find the castle in darkness. Elektra is the one who grabs the torch and lights the way into the hands of Orest, who is waiting to murder the usurper inside the castle. The triumphant dance-scene which follows is full of light imagery that would be considered apocalyptic if heard in isolation from the rest of the opera. It is Elektra who sings these lines in a frenzied 'Liebestod': "a thousand torches are brightly burning ... but this very moment I am the fire of life and my bright flame is consuming the darkness of the world ... Do you see my face? Look at the light which pours out from me." Apocalyptic words, but ultimately demonic as the 'light' is abruptly extinguished, and the theme of Agamemnon re-stated. As in the sacrifice and murder scenes, light in this scene, even though used metaphorically, is as much a prelude to Elektra's death as it is to the sacrifice of the sheep and the killing of Aegisth. This demonic aspect of light is also used ironically at the end of scene iv when Orest's 'death' is announced to Klytemnestra, and she immediately begins calling for more light, not knowing that it is her own death that is imminent.

When taking into account the nature of the characters and the concepts of *Elektra*, the opera is clearly a demonic parody of an apocalyptic myth. This has led certain critics to condemn it as being distasteful, and even subtly dangerous. Ernst Krause, for one, has warned listeners of "sensitive dispositions" against

listening to either *Elektra* or *Salome*, finding both operas repellent, and in social terms, even bourgeois: "Even if Strauss did no more than depict human degradation from the outside, what is monstrous remains monstrous" (Krause 1959: 295). In dramatic terms, this might be so, but in mythological terms *Elektra* becomes no more than an extreme demonic parody which in its extremes is no more unacceptable than the extremes of a purely apocalyptic myth. As a mirror into the darker side of human nature *Elektra* succeeds without question, both in its dramatic impact as well as its musical experience, which in this opera are inseparable. This is best summed up by Strauss' own response to criticism of his score as too violent and not sufficiently tonal to suit contemporary tastes: "A mother is murdered on stage, and you expect me to write a violin concerto?"

CHAPTER 8

MINOR ARCHETYPES AND MYTHICAL EFFECTS

Mythical archetypes and their characteristics are never absolute, and this is best illustrated by the dual hero-demonic nature of Agamemnon. An archetype may be used in a variety of different contexts, depending on the work of art of which it is a feature, as well as its relationship with other archetypes in the same work. Thus, a comic plot will eliminate any genuine demonic imagery, while a tragic one will not be concerned in any significant way with apocalyptic elements. However, the flexible quality of archetypal imagery has often been overlooked by scholars who tend to favour certain elements over others. Tarasti's *Myth and Music*, for example, deals mainly with aspects of the heroic and the nature-mythical, while Frye and Kirk favour apocalyptic and tragic elements: 'Stylistic traits' of one point of view are often elevated to 'fundamental archetypes' of the other. Yet it is not possible in general matters to adopt such rigidity. The identification of archetypes can only be applied to individual works using basic patterns. Consequently, the principal archetypes of *Elektra* are the hero-mythical, the demonic, and the tragic. Other elements such as the nature-mythical and the fabulous cannot and do not exist within the structures of this opera, as their very essence is in conflict with the nature of

the plot. On the other hand, there are a few minor archetypes and effects which function at a different and less important level, but are nevertheless part of *Elektra* 's overall mythical structure.
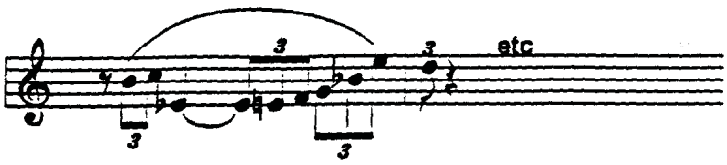
One of the fundamental modes of the manifestation of myth is that of magic, which is more often than not a derivative of a demonic-mythological situation. Here a character will attempt to achieve a variety of goals by sacrifice, fetishes or obscure rituals. Klytemnestra, herself a demonic character, is also presented in the role of a high-priestess, someone whose entire philosophy is based on magical and supernatural intervention. This is most clearly seen in her confrontation with Elektra, where she displays her jewels and amulets: "There are rituals. There must be for all things the proper rituals. That's why I am so festooned with jewels, for there lies in each one, for certain, special power. We need know only how they can each be used." Klytemnestra's nightmares, themselves the product of a supernatural world as they predict her death by her son, can likewise be halted by 'proper rituals': "and if I take each beast that crawls and flies and bleed its veins dry ... I'll stop this awful dreaming." The ambivalent musical material associated with Klytemnestra has already been discussed in the previous chapter, but certain effects used in the score are common in Romantic tone-paintings of magical situations. For example, Klytemnestra's theme, a rising and menacing motif, becomes later in the opera the motif of sacrifice, emphasising her status as priestess and sorceress, and its

chromaticism and constant repetition echo the 'magical' effects of Wagner's *Siegfried* and *Parsifal:*
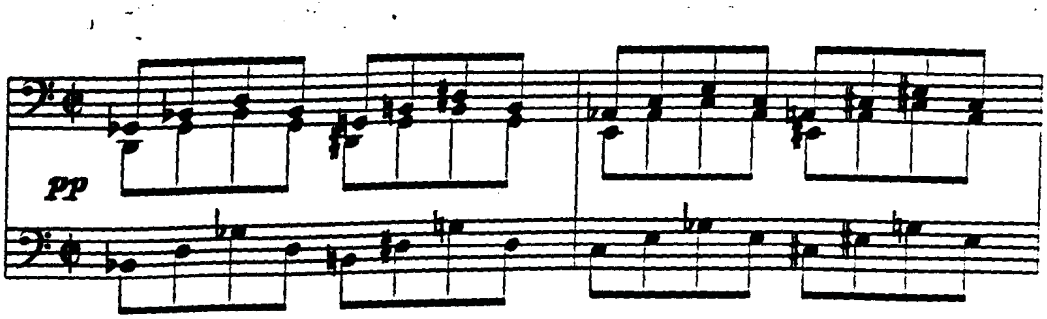
(a) Klytemnestra



(b) 'Sacrifice' theme



Devices common in the portrayal of magic in the Romantic era were not purely melodic, but also included such techniques as driving rhythms, augmented triads and the chromatic alteration of chords. Klytemnestra's appearance in scene iii prior to the sacrifice is one of the rhythmic effects, which can also be described as primitivistic, a style that shall be more fully discussed below. As far as augmented triads and chromaticism are concerned, a prime example can be found in the accompaniment to the words describing sacrifice quoted above. In this example the celli and basses play the following two bars:

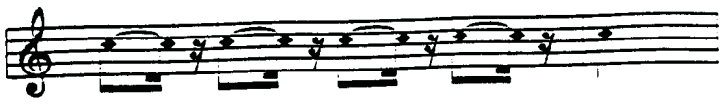


These four beats consist of four augmented triads, each in the first inversion, and each chromatically a semitone apart from the ones preceeding or following it. The effect is menacing and ominous, and almost subliminally so, due to the extremely soft dynamic of the passage. This type of harmonic construction is almost always associated with magical or supernatural scenes in the opera, and is as much a technique of presenting a character as being magical as are the more direct symbols of amulets, rituals and sacrifices.

A peculiar type of stylistic device that became popular in the early decades of the twentieth century was that of primitivism, with Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* being the most famous example. Primitivism is characterised by reconstructing so-called primitive music within the boundaries of Western art music. This includes restricting melody to a limited range, using modal and other scale patterns, and the continuous repetition of a simple motif. Rhythm in particular is the most important single element of primitivism, including polyrhythms and rhythmic repetition. In *Elektra* this technique is used only occasionally, but effectively. The first instance is the approach of Klytemnestra and her entourage, where the driving two-bar rhythm which heralds her arrival
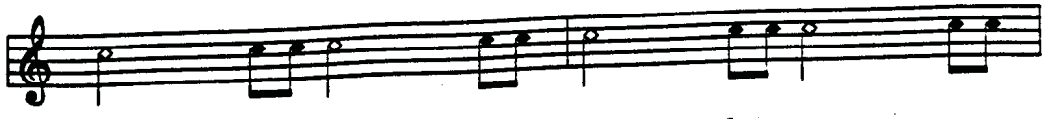


gradually increases in intensity until the appearance of the queen abruptly cuts it off. This tension is achieved firstly by using the first bar in double tempo against the original phrase;



and secondly by employing the bass-line to support the entire rhythmic structure of the section with rapid semi-quavers over a wide range. Another instance of primitivistic technique is in the finale's dance-scene, where two distinctive rhythmic patterns form the basis of the dance. (Rhythm in primitivism is in itself often a referent to ancient dance forms.) The first rhythm, staccato and energetic, is the same as in Elektra's opening monologue:



The second, by contrast, is a smooth and legato melodic line in the rhythm



and is also based on, but not identical to, the melodic inventions of the monologue. It is at this stage that Agamemnon's motif again asserts itself and the final four bars, played *fortissimo* by brass and timpani, are primitivistic in

their own right. Primitivism is one of the most effective musical techniques of mythical composition as it does not depend on dramatic or textual programmes, and despite its limited use in this opera, it does contribute to the macrostructure of the myth in question.

One of the most expressive techniques in the music of late Romantic opera, and particularly mythical opera, is the use of gestural effects in the score. This has often been associated with Wagnerian leitmotif technique, and can be heard in the motifs of the lumbering giants in *Das Rheingold*, and Siegfried's horn-call in *Götterdämmerung*. These are gestural in that they are associated with action on the stage and actually shape the nature of that action. Aspects of the gestural can also refer to stage effects and/or directions that contribute to the drama. In creating *Elektra*, Strauss and von Hofmannsthal emphasised the importance of gestural imagery. Musically, the yelping of dogs and whinnies of horses of the first scene, the frantic bowing of the strings when Elektra looks for the axe, and the crack of whips as Klytemnestra approaches are all gestural effects that create atmosphere and mood. Silence in the score is another gestural effect; the most effective moment being the empty bar before the news of Orest's death penetrates Elektra's consciousness. This brief instant of silence before a huge orchestral outpouring is so important to the structure of the score that Strauss identified it as the end of the 'first half' of the opera, beginning thereafter to renumber bars. (1a, 2a, etc.) Other gestural effects of a non-musical nature include Elektra's rags and Klytemnestra's blood-red dress, the dim and ominous

lighting effects, and the general decay of the decor. Thus the gestural is not an archetype in the same way that demonic imagery or pastoral symbolism are. Rather, it is a device used to create the ambience in which a certain archetype may function. Klytemnestra could not achieve her full affect if it were not for her 'drooping eyelids', scarlet dress and ambiguous musical imagery. The above is also true of a similar device, that of the sublime, which is in many ways the antithesis of the gestural. In this, great exultation is achieved as a result of the elevation to a new mythical level. In the opera its most obvious occurrence is at the finale where Elektra attains mythical status before the intervention of irony. Her words at this point indicate that all her obsessions, hatreds and scheming have pointed towards only this moment. "I've sown the seeds of darkest gloom, and reap a harvest of joy". The strictly tonal, waltz-type accompaniment to her triumph is also sublime in terms of its exultant mood and fiery energy. Elektra has reached for this state before - at the conclusion of her monologue, in the confrontation with her mother - but only achieves it after the disposal of the 'mythical problem' (Klytemnestra). Chrysothemis' 'aria' in the third scene is also sublime as her imagination manages momentarily to eliminate reality. Orest's recognition of his sister and, even more so, Elektra's recognition of Orest are similar examples.

The final important mythological aspect of *Elektra* is that of tragic irony. In many tragedies the hero is forced to disappear in order to make way for irony, and Agamemnon is an extreme example of this. Although he is the central

heroic figure, his demonic nature and physical non-presence create an ironic slant to the entire opera. Agamemnon's re-emergence at the end, after his daughter's death, is ironic as it places the triumph and the credit for the deaths of Klytemnestra and Aegisth in the hands of a purely musical presence - the nemesis as hero, despite the fact of his 'non-existence'. Elektra's dance itself is the supreme irony, as she accepts the victory as hers alone. This, despite the fact that she was unable to persuade Chrysothemis to help her, was unable to do the deed herself, and was ultimately not even able to assist Orest in the murders by giving him the axe she had stored for so long. Even the music of the finale is ironic as it does not refer to Orest at all (except in the 'bond' theme), despite his catalytic role in Elektra's triumph.

One of the principal features of irony is that it portrays or emphasises the natural cycle, or the wheel of fate, and the cyclical nature of the opera is witness to this. Elektra's monologue is almost a miniature version of the finale, including motivic and rhythmical material that will occur much later in a more ironic setting. Each scene presents Elektra in a state of extreme emotion, and she appeals to a universal audience to listen to her in both cases:

Monologue: "These who are far off may only see how my shadows dance. They will all say - 'such a mighty monarch is here' "

Finale: "My bright flame is consuming the darkness of the world."

This metamorphosis from shadow to flame is mirrored by the change in emphasis from Agamemnon to herself. The monologue is essentially a hymn to

the murdered Agamemnon, and a call for vengeance. The final dance on the other hand is a victory cry for Elektra alone, and this makes Agamemnon's theme all the more ironic, as well as demonic. The 'wheel of fortune' aspect of irony is also important in that all the action and emotion of the opera, both dramatically as well as musically, point towards the death of Klytemnestra (and, almost incidentally, Aegisth as well). Elektra's death is ironic in the sense that it is unnecessary to the completion of the plot, and is used merely as a dramatic device to emphasise the emerging dominance of Agamemnon.

Irony works on many levels, and at its most extreme it is dark and disquieting and consequently closely linked to the demonic archetypes. Here the human condition is presented in terms of largely unrelieved bondage, and is concentrated in prisons, lunatic asylums, wastelands and places of execution. "It differs from a pure inferno mainly in the fact that in human experience, suffering has an end in death." (Frye 1959: 238.) This statement has particular relevance to *Elektra:* only death relieves the suffering of Elektra - the death of Klytemnestra and her own collapse. Elektra is in reality a prisoner, both of her own obsessions as well as of her mother's whim. Another characteristic of this phase of irony is madness and despair, and every character save Orest is a reflection of this. As a result, the characters of the opera become parodies of the romantic roles of hero, queen and mystic, and the qualities of parents and their offspring become increasingly sinister. Thus only irony can be experienced when Elektra exults "no-one dies without first making love's acquaintance", as

well as when Klytemnestra, remembering an irrevocable past, says of Elektra's voice: "that sound is well known to me. Like things I might have forgotten long ago. She knows me well." The unrelieved horror of *Elektra* blurs the fine line between irony and satire, and skilled actresses are needed to play the parts of both Elektra and Klytemnestra in a manner that does not change them into caricatures. However, one character does exist only in satirical terms, and that is Aegisth. Aegisth is an example of the satirical archetype of the Omphale, a man bullied or dominated by women. He attempts to keep control of Klytemnestra and the household through fear and superstition, but Elektra recognises the power as belonging to Klytemnestra alone. As a result, his musical vocabulary is as limited and banal as his influence on the outcome of the action. He thus supplies the sole satirical effect in what is otherwise a predominantly ironic tragedy.

In conclusion, the opera *Elektra* can be defined as a tragic myth, characterised by heroic, demonic, magical and ironic archetypes supported by the devices of primitivism and gestural and sublime imagery. This definition is a result both of the nature of the plot as well as the interaction between the myth and the musical fabric. In this case, music is not merely an accompaniment to a sung text, but a vital and necessary part of the audience's response. In von Hofmannsthal's drama, Agamemnon exists only in the imaginations of the characters; as a direct consequence of the use of music and leitmotivic associations in Strauss' opera, he becomes instead an archetypal ironic hero,