

https://dspace.org/

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

Thompson, Allan Campbell

2011-03-28
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/9241

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

information ages have overlaid the universal logic of primitive thought with the artificial logic needed to survive in modern artificial environments. The mythology of any society is a framework for its analysis, but Western translations of ancient cultures have tended to divorce the theories from the *original cultural and religious settings*. Lévi-Strauss, however, maintains that despite this, the essential structural characteristics will be retained and that this in itself will reveal universal and non-rational logic. Here he is following the Freudian theory that a collective dream is capable of revealing a universal meaning through the interpretation of a hidden 'code', or 'message'. It is this very *interpretation which provides* the key to the meaning of myth. In *Structural Anthropology* Lévi-Strauss writes that "all the paradoxes conceived by the native mind are ... assimilated into a less obvious yet so real paradox which [the situation] fails to resolve. But the failure is admitted in our myths, and there precisely lies their function." (Leach 1970: 132.)

An important aspect of Lévi-Strauss's theories on myth is that of the contradictory nature of its development. The concept of the structural properties of myth follows Hegel's speculations about the nature of reality and the logical technique by which it may be grasped. This technique can be summarised by the formula " thesis - antithesis - synthesis", which results in the following structural analysis of myth:

1 Any myth can be broken up into segments or incidents, agreeable to those who know the myth itself. These segments refer to relations between various characters, or to the status of an individual. **[Thesis]**

2 These relationships are then placed into pairs of *contraries*. **[Antithesis]**

3 These contraries are then resolved through mediation, which returns the cycle to its beginning. **[Synthesis] [Thesis]**

4 These are again broken down into various contraries, which are in turn mediated. The cycle continues until only one contradiction remains.

Such an analysis assumes that each element is only important in relation to *all the others, and* is therefore meaningless in isolation, just as a musical note is meaningless without reference to a score. Meaning is further intensified by the way in which the elements are combined. By applying the above structure to a myth, or group of myths, Lévi-Strauss arrives at a form of social dialectic: the salient social contradictions are stated, and then restated in a more and more *modified form* until, in the final statement, a basic contradiction is stated and then resolved. Thus " the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a [real] contradiction" (139). The contraries (also known as frames of reference) may include characters (men and animals, heroes and gods, birds and humans, etc.), tastes and smells, landscapes (sea and mountains,

valleys and cliffs, etc.), animals and plants, sound and silence, or any combination of these and other contraries. The conclusion reached by Lévi-Strauss is not that all myths say the same thing, but rather that collectively the sum of what all the myths say is not expressly said by any one of them, and that what they collectively say is a necessary poetic truth stated through a perhaps unwelcome social contradiction. However, *that contradiction is in itself identified and diminished by the myth. A summary* of Lévi-Strauss' theories of *myth can* be displayed as follows:

1. Structure, in which are entailed:
   a) Primacy of the collective.
   b) Extrication from cultural and religious contexts.
   c) A frame of reference which has objective value, if it can be shown that the processes of thought follow a universal logic.
2. The structure of thought.
3. The use of myth to demonstrate the above.
4. The elucidation of myth in terms of content and communicative meaning.

(Summarised from Leach 1967: 97ff.)

The above *theories have met with* some resistance and even occasionally overt *hostility due to the tendency* of Lévi-Strauss to broadly generalise and assert that culture and myth should be regarded as separate entities. K. Burridge (in Leach: 91ff) has pointed out that Lévi-Strauss has committed himself to treating the structural units of myth as if they were unambiguous. Yet, from a

literary point of view, all words are ambiguous and, to a poet or myth maker, the more ambiguous the better. It is somewhat of an irony that Lévi-Strauss, in the discussion of poetry, has given full value to the ambiguity of language while in myth he suggests the ultimate meaning is clear-cut and well defined. However it is obvious that various myths do contain a variety of meanings to different communities, societies and even individuals. This is particularly well summed up by the French literary theorist Roland Barthes in his work *Mythologies* where the assertion is made that "*anything may be a myth.*" (1957: 3.) Despite these criticisms, the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss remain pinnacles of the study of myth, and are often used as a frame of reference in individual studies, as they are in this dissertation. There does however remain one further area of mythography which has a direct relevance to this study, and that is the ever-increasing importance of the relationship between myth and literary criticism.

2.2 MYTH AND LITERATURE

"Instead of the narrative method, we may now use the *mythical method. It is, I* seriously believe, a step toward *making the modern world possible for art,* toward ... order and *form*." (*Righter* 1975: 60.) Thus did T.S. Eliot commend *James Joyce's treatment* of the Odyssey as a search for external order and source of meaning that could bring some measure of value and form to the chaos of modern life. Throughout the history of literature, authors, poets and

literary critics have been drawn to myth as an agent for their creative powers, as a source of inspiration, and as a tool in the art of interpretation. Myth can be associated with all fields of art, but it is in poetry and drama that it has made the most impact. It is obvious that a talented poet or author is better able to put across the message of a myth than a mythical specialist, although cultural context becomes a crucial factor. A Scandinavian saga, for example, is more 'mythological' than Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* because the former is still rooted in a pre-historical background, whilst the latter has been adapted for contemporary audiences. It is no less 'mythic' than the saga, but its social context forces a redefining of its 'mythological' status in terms of the attitudes and theories of both its author and its listeners. A mythical story can then remain unchanged (even while adapting to cultural and contextual changes), yet the underlying attitude of its audiences may differ vastly.

One of the most influential thinkers on myth and literature has been Friedrich Schlegel (1772 - 1829), a German philosopher and critic who was also one of the founders of the Romantic movement in Germany. He proposed that the poets of any particular age should be able to conceive of themselves as mythmakers engaged in a communal theory based on the assumption that the modern Western world has no mythology of its own. As a result, it is necessary to 're-create' mythology out of the creative impulse. According to Schlegel, this 'new' mythology has to encompass all fields of arts until art and myth have become totally integrated. This point of view was, however, contradicted by

the French author and poet Victor Hugo (1802 - 1885) who claimed that Western mythology was never actually lost, but needed to be further exploited for literary ends. Where Hugo and Schlegel do agree is that mythology is no longer a simple matter of content, but rather a way of thinking and, more importantly, a means of creation. In such a way it can be seen as the central creative point of all art and literature. This concept was furthered in the writings of William Blake (1757 - 1827), the English poet, painter, engraver, and mystic. He asserted that myth is the inner structure of all human history, *and* history itself can be explained by the mythical imagination of the artist. More than any other poet or author, Blake's output was an attempt to re-create mythology in such a way that the past, present and future could be gathered into a collective whole capable of being interpreted and analysed through its very mythic nature and development.

The question that remains after all the theory has been outlined is whether or *not* a myth can have any bearing on the literary process. For example, *The Tempest* by Shakespeare can be said to lend itself to a mythical interpretation as it contains numerous mythical *archetypes and imagery involving fertility* cults, death by water and ritual reconciliation. Yet this drama has no direct relationship to any established myth, and the fact that mythical theories only evolved in the eighteenth century precludes the author from having conceived the historicised notions of a mythical explanation of the play. Geoffrey Chaucer's epic poem *Troilus and Criseyde* reveals a similar dilemma. No

classical accounts of the tale exist despite its setting in Ancient Troy, and it is necessary to ask whether Chaucer was more influenced by the myth or the story, as well as to ask whether the final outcome is mythical, narrative, or both. These questions are beyond the scope of the present study, but are equally relevant to a discussion of *Elektra*. Sophocles' *Electra* was based on the mythologies of Ancient Greece, and von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* was in turn influenced by and based on Sophocles' drama. Does the fact that the final version is borrowed indirectly from mythological sources mean that the myth is fundamentally the same, or is it the same story without any mythical overtones? It must be stressed again that the 'myth' is the same, but the cultural context of the *fin-de-siècle* as opposed to Ancient Greece shifts the emphasis of the drama's structure. However the ambiguity of theory about myth often obscures the issue. Audience response to a particular play, poem, composition, or other work of art cannot be analysed as a result of the mythical or non-mythical nature of a story. Myth is often integrated into a plot or story as a means of enriching or deepening the literature concerned. When a traditional myth is incorporated into a work, the collective powers of the poet or author are of more importance to the effect of the myth than the cultural implications of that myth, and as a result the myth itself becomes a measurement of the writers' own talent. The result is, therefore, not a national myth in the style of Homer, but rather a stage in the development of the writer. In addition to this, if a familiar myth is being used, it can serve as a framework of understanding for the reader or audience. From a contrary point of view, an unfamiliar myth

is, through its very distance, imaginatively useful and allows a claim of the exotic and esoteric to colour the appeal of an artist who is more concerned with tone and contrast than plot development. An example of mythical theory in literary practice can be found in the extensive writings (both theoretical and fictional) of Thomas Mann (1875 - 1955). Mann's attitudes to the role of myth and modern literature were shaped by the psychological and philosophical revolutions of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud and Jung. His conclusion is that, known or unknown, all myths lie within the individual, and as such are the foundation of life and the unconscious - all mythical knowledge resides not in the art, but in the artist himself: "When a writer has acquired the habit of regarding life as mythical and typical there comes a heightening of his artistic temper, a new refreshment to his perceiving and shaping powers, which otherwise occurs much later in life ... the myth is the legitimisation of life; only through it does life find self-awareness, sanction, consecration." (Ellman 1965: 675.) Mann has gone even further than this by comparing mythology and mythmaking to a drama, a farce, or a folk-mime, and the artistic eye has as a result a mythical slant on life which makes it look like a scenic reproduction reproduced as in jest. At the same time, a narrational meeting of myth and psychology is "equivalent to a celebration of the meeting between poetry and analysis, between art and order" (67).

Because of the problems involved in defining myth, the overlapping of words such as 'myth', 'mythology', 'legend', 'folklore', 'tale' and 'story' tends to present

unique problems. Gerald Kirk in *The Nature of Greek Myths* has attempted to distinguish between myth and legend on the basis that legends are supposedly based on actual events, while myths include gods and other supernatural beings. However, heroes appear in myths as well as legends, and thus create an overlap between the two categories. A folktale on the other hand may be identified by its more frivolous nature. Any change in context, though, results in a parallel shift in definition. This leads back to the concept of myth as an energising or controlling principle in literature, which appeals to the imagination in varying degrees, depending on the context which the work of art provides. The element of myth is not so much a creative method as an intellectual device used to gain some perspective on the author, and on the world in which he works. Eliot has written of myth as "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." (Righter: 34.) Eliot credits W. B. Yeats with being the first literary figure to be aware of a 'mythical method'. However, that there is some order intrinsic to the mythical material itself seems highly unlikely: not only will the artist manipulate the elements of myth as he chooses, but he will also assign to them a meaning of his own choosing.

Another figure who has been influential in twentieth century studies concerning the relationship between myth and literature has been Northrop Frye. Frye's work is similar in certain respects to that of Kirk, but with one important difference. Whereas Kirk is of the opinion that myth, legend and fairy-tale can

be defined as different genres, Frye believes that "the typical forms of myth become the conventions and genres of literature: Myths of gods merge into legends of heroes; legends of heroes into plots of tragedies and comedies; plots of tragedies and comedies merge into plots of more or less realistic fiction." (1957: 51.) This quotation, from Frye's best known work, *Anatomy of Criticism*, is taken from a section used exclusively to propound the similarities and influences between the two disciplines of myth and literature. Calling his theory "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths", Frye sets about proving it through the application of mythical imagery to the genres of comedy, romance, tragedy, irony and satire. These genres or categories are in contrast to one another; Tragedy and comedy are at opposite poles, as are romance and irony. However, comedy can at certain levels blend into either satire or romance, while romance can be either comic or tragic. The tragic, on the other hand, is often highly romantic and, as often, ironically realistic. The influence of Frye on other studies has been notable, and his theories and concepts form the basis of some of the hypotheses used in this particular study, particularly in chapters five to eight (p60ff).

2.3 RICHARD WAGNER

As the subject of this discussion is that of myth and music, it is necessary to turn once again to the theories of Richard Wagner, whose development of the musical myth resulted in a redefining of the function of musical theatre as a

whole. A summary of Wagner's central theory of 'mythos' can be outlined as follows:

- Myth is the basic material of Greek tragedy. This has to be so, because no single individual can fully understand the nature of creation. The community (or in Wagnerian terms, the 'Volk') created its gods in an image which it could comprehend, that of man and, in doing so, took the first step towards interpreting the world and its inhabitants. The 'Volk', using myth, thus became the creators of art. As the resultant myths are essentially attempts to achieve a perceivable portrait of the world as experienced by man, they must necessarily achieve artistic form and value. The Greek tragedians had the task of compressing and distilling such myths into the form that appealed to the imagination of every audience, and so of bringing them to the realm of reality. "Tragedy is nothing more than the artistic completion of the myth itself; while the myth is the poem of a life-view in common." (Goldman 1977: 156.) Myths are therefore the raw material whose images the poet can employ as the vehicle for his own exploration of the world around him. The incomparable thing about the myths is that they are true for all time, and their content, however close its compression, is inexhaustible through the ages.

'Mythos' was to become the central concept in the Wagnerian 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (complete artwork), in which as much theoretical thought is given to the music as to the art, decor or libretto. At the time he was reading the *Oresteia*, Wagner was considering writing a music-drama based on the

legendary hero Siegfried, employing ancient Nordic and Scandinavian myths. In an essay entitled *The Nibelungs: World History out of Saga* he employs myth as a political allegory, while at the same time acknowledging its collective functions: "The gods and heroes of religion and saga are the concrete personalities in which the spirit of the community portrays its essence to itself ... their content is of the most universal, all-embracing type." (Ashton-Ellis 1977: 266.) Wagner's chief inspirations had been drawn from Norse and German mythology, and in particular the legend of Siegfried, ever since he read Jacob Grimm's exhaustive compilation *Teutonic Mythology* in 1843. Once again he turned to Greek tragedy: "I was pointed at the last to myth [where] social relations were drawn in lines as simple, plastic and distinct as those through which I had earlier recognised in it the human shape itself." (Ewan 1982: 33.) This ideal formed the basis for the use of myth in music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and must have appealed to the young Richard Strauss, whose own passionate interest in Greek antiquity led to the composition of six major mythological works for the musical stage.

The study of myth is therefore an ambitious undertaking, and any one study is forced to make use of the theory or theories that are the most applicable to its particular field in order to avoid generalisation and/or ambiguity. Even then, the conclusions reached are often contradictory to the conclusions reached by studies which chose an opposing theory as their point of reference. The functions of myth and mythology remain impossibly varied, and one of the only

descriptions of these functions which manages to contain all the disparate elements can be found in volume four of *The Masks of God*, an epic exploration of myth and meaning by the mythologist Joseph Campbell: "The first function of a mythology is to reconcile waking consciousness the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe as it is: the second being to render an interpretative total image of the same, as known to contemporary consciousness. Shakespeare's definition of the function of his art, "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature", is thus equally a definition of mythology. It is the revelation to waking consciousness of the powers of its own sustaining course." (Campbell 1968: 4.) It is the purpose of this study then to show how the nature of the *fin-de-siècle* fashioned and defined the re-creation of the myth of Electra.

CHAPTER 3

ELEKTRA: FROM MYTH TO LIBRETTO

3.1 THE MYTH

Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, made war against Tantalus, King of Pisa, and after killing him and his new-born son, forcibly married his widow, Clytaemnestra. She bore him one son, Orestes, and three daughters, Electra, Iphigenia and Chrysothemis. However, Aegisthus (son of the pretender to the throne of Mycenae, Theystes) became the lover of Clytaemnestra whilst Agamemnon was away at the Trojan wars, and together they plotted to murder the king upon his return. Aegisthus' desire was to take over the royal position, while Clytaemnestra desired to avenge the deaths of her husband Tantalus and her son by him, and that of Iphigenia whom Agamemnon had sacrificed to the gods before setting out for the Trojan conflict. When Agamemnon returned, Clytaemnestra greeted him with pleasure, and led him to the bathhouse where a hot bath had been prepared by slave-girls. As he finished, and put one foot out of the bath, Clytaemnestra threw over his head a garment of net woven by herself. Aegisthus then murdered the helpless king by delivering two strokes of a double-edged sword, and Clytaemnestra decapitated him with an axe, the Cretan symbol of sovereignty. Electra, fearing for her brother's safety, sent the

infant Orestes away with their father's ancient tutor, and after hiding for a while with shepherds of the Tanus river, they went into exile at the court of Strophius. Here Orestes became a firm companion of the son of Strophius, Pylades, and the two boys grew up as brothers. It was here he learned of his father's death and, after consulting the Delphic Oracle, learned also of Apollo's demand of vengeance, on the pain of becoming a diseased outcast. Thus Orestes and Pylades returned secretly to Mycenae via Athens. In the meantime, Electra lived in unimaginable poverty in the courtyard of the palace. Aegisthus, who acted as sovereign but was actually little more than a slave to Clytaemnestra, was petrified of vengeance and had offered a large reward for the assassination of Orestes. He also forbade suitors for Electra's hand, as a son born to her could conceivably be a vehicle for vengeance. He would have destroyed her altogether, but Clytaemnestra did not want to offend the gods further, and so Electra was threatened with imprisonment and banishment if she did not accept the situation as her sister Chrysothemis had done. Instead she was married to a poor peasant who, because of his chaste nature and fear of Orestes, never consummated their unequal union. However, she secretly sent constant reminders to Orestes that it was his task to wreak vengeance on their mother and her paramour.

When Orestes arrived in Mycenae, Clytaemnestra had a vivid nightmare where she gave birth to, and suckled, a viper. When Orestes heard of this, he knew that he was that viper who must destroy his mother. Electra and Orestes finally

met again at the grave of their father, and Orestes and Pylades entered the palace disguised as messengers from Strophius, bearing the news of the death of Orestes in a fall from his horse. They wished to know what should be done with his ashes. Clytaemnestra, not recognising her son, was overjoyed and sent for Aegisthus who was at a nearby temple. The maid who was sent had recognised Orestes, and therefore told Aegisthus to come unarmed, as his enemy was dead. As Aegisthus arrived, Orestes drew his sword, and cut him down. Clytaemnestra recognised him as her son, and bared her breast in an effort to win mercy from him. However, Orestes beheaded her with a single stroke of the same sword, and she fell beside the corpse of Aegisthus. After this, Orestes was punished for his matricide by the Furies (Erinnyes) - serpent-haired, dog-headed and bat-winged creatures who set about flaying him. He made his way to Delphi, where he submitted to trial with Apollo as his defending counsel, and was honourably acquitted. Electra, freed from her bondage, married Orestes' companion Pylades.

(Condensed from Graves 1961: 420ff.)

3.2 THE TRAGEDIES

The myth of Electra and Orestes is one small part of a huge myth concerning the house of Pelops in which the theme is one of a cycle of revenge. The myth has survived in such a stylised form that its origins are virtually obliterated: It is referred to in passing in Homer, and then became a popular myth for

dramatisation, "proving that the classical dramatists were not bound by tradition ... theirs was a new version of an ancient myth" (Graves: 426). The first Greek dramatist to make use of the plot in a significant way was Aeschylus (525 - 456 B.C.), who in his great trilogy *The Oresteia* makes use of the full cycle of sin and revenge. The central character of the drama is Electra, who appears in *The Libation Bearers*, the second drama of the three. Aeschylus' concern is with the omnipotence of divine powers who control destiny, and the powerlessness of the characters to question or resist these powers. This theme of a "puppet of the gods" was rejected by Euripides (484 - 406 B.C.) and Sophocles (496 - 406 B.C.), who both dramatised the story of Electra and presented it in a more plausible manner. Euripides took the return and vengeance of Orestes as the plot of his *Electra* and chose to present it on a human level. He also took the opportunity to pronounce judgement on Orestes' deed: it was both sinful and inevitable, and as such involved no benign power. Sophocles' *Electra* is the most poignant of the three versions: it neither approves nor condemns, nor pronounces any judgements. The plot is concerned with mortal beings whose situations are not due to divine will, but rather to mortal doings. The play, unlike the other two, is complete in itself - it does not require or intimate a sequel to the events presented. Although Sophocles was unmoved by the complex symbolism of Aeschylus and the poetic subtlety of Euripides, he nevertheless created a tragedy which did not diminish the controversial elements of the ancient myth. He was content to display the story without any moral discourse. Whereas Sophocles was not the inventor of the dramatic form,

he was nevertheless the one to perfect it into a structure akin to today's theatre, and further developed the art of dramatic technique by increasing the number of main characters to three. Sophoclean drama can be defined as "the drama of living persons choosing their own paths to happiness or disillusion, to success, failure or extinction" (Watling, E. Introduction to Sophocles' *Electra* 1953: 15.) Sophocles was to become one of the most influential dramatists of all time and is often referred to as the father of the theatre. A future artist who was to become strongly influenced by the Attic tragedian was the German playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose play *Elektra* is a re-adaptation of Sophocles' own tragedy.

3.3 VON HOFMANNSTHAL AND THE DRAMA *ELEKTRA*

Hugo von Hofmannsthal (*1874 - 1929*) began his literary career whilst still at school and became well known for his poems and essays which he composed under the pseudonym 'Loris'. In his student days he exerted a not inconsiderable influence on the literature of his native Austria, and helped to lay the foundation of an original post-Romantic literary movement. The continued success of his literary career saw the young man decide to forego his planned academic future for that of playwright. Von Hofmannsthal's peculiar talent in the field of dramatic art was to rework the works of other periods, and present them in a setting suitable to the mood of contemporary Europe. As a result, by the end of the century he had become Austria's greatest playwright, as well as a highly

regarded intellectual and philosopher. Among the concepts that intrigued him was that of the 'Mythos', and this strongly affected his work throughout his life. 'Mythos' to von Hofmannsthal was all-embracing, the true centre of creative thought: "*Mythos is everything fictitious in which you participate as a human* being." (Broch 1984: 141.) In 1902, von Hofmannsthal had produced the 'Chandos' letter. In this work, the fictitious Lord Chandos, a young landed nobleman of the Elizabethan period, writes to his close paternal friend Lord Chancellor Bacon, and describes, among other things, his growing disgust with the inability of language to cope with man's emotional needs, and his frustration at being unable to live in a present reality. Von Hofmannsthal felt that it was only through the experience of myth that a character could become purified, and that myth was the perfect vehicle for conveying dramatic or poetic intent. In particular, the myths of classical Greece caught von Hofmannsthal's attention, as well as their re-adaptation by Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles.

The Greek tradition had long been *part of German culture, with Goethe in* particular producing work based on the serene and pastoral elements of antiquity. Von Hofmannsthal, however, faced with the dilemmas of the unreality of life, did everything in his power to deflect the concepts of "noble simplicity and quiet greatness" (Uekermann 1986: 15), and, in the writing of *Elektra*, turned to Greece as expounded by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*: dark, brooding and savage, with a conscious desire for ugliness and destruction, "a *will* to tragedy, *profound pessimism*" *(1956: 8). In order to*

achieve this, von Hofmannsthal made use of contemporary psychoanalytic science as well as ancient myth, and as a result *Elektra* is a play influenced as much by the discoveries of Freud as it is by the tragedies of Sophocles. Kenneth Segar, in his essay on the influences on the writing of *Elektra* (John 1988: 55ff), writes that von Hofmannsthal was forced to "create aesthetic harmonies out of the fusion of his own intensely experienced present and the heritage of an age-old world" (p55). Although von Hofmannsthal used the subtitle 'a drama freely based on Sophocles', *Elektra* is also indebted to Aeschylus and Euripides, as the playwright would frequently choose details from all three Greek sources whenever he felt it would benefit the drama. In such a manner the dramatic tension of the recognition scene is heightened by combining the Sophoclean account of Orestes being accompanied by his tutor (who had gone with him into exile when Orestes was still an infant), with Aeschylus' account of Orestes' return being a matter of hopeful conjecture rather than an eventual certainty. Other elements are emphasised or even exaggerated by von Hofmannsthal, as in the friction between Elektra and Chrysothemis - which is no more than bickering in Sophocles. He also eliminated the chorus entirely, thus allowing for a free expression of his aesthetic of the individual facing his or her present reality. However, the most significant alteration is that of the final scene. In the Sophocles tragedy, the work ends with the death of Aegisthus and the marriage of Electra. Von Hofmannsthal's version sees Elektra launch into a manic dance of triumph, leading to her collapse and death, in an unprecedented and ambiguous finale.

Also unprecedented in dramatic myth is his portrayal of the character of Klytemnestra: "There is nothing in the whole text of Greek literature to prepare one for Hofmannsthal's recreation of Klytemnestra. She is the most ghastly character, worse in decadence than Elektra, who is at least strong in her hatred and bitterness." (Del Mar 1961: 308.) In addition to this, he also excludes any reference to Klytemnestra's reasons for murdering her husband, reasons that are fully explained in the earlier tragedies. Von Hofmannsthal had been impressed by the way in which Sophocles had emphasised individual psychological problems that were a result of, and related to, larger public concerns, and yet still managed to create an external conflict and drama. Consequently, he attempted to internalise the public concerns even further, and this has led to criticism that no genuine conflict remains. A justification for this might be seen in the suppression of Klytemnestra's reasons for the killing, as well as in the character of the solitary Elektra. Any conflict remains internalised between the characters themselves and any social relevance is ignored. The huge public importance assigned to the task of Orestes by the Greeks becomes in *Elektra* little more than a means to the end of Elektra's revenge. Maximilian Harden, a Berlin critic who attended the 1902 premier of the drama, commented that it would have had greater coherence if the retributive deed of Orest had been left out altogether. In 1911, von Hofmannsthal admitted that he had transformed the Sophocles tragedy into little more than a vehicle for emotion, created by the various emotional predicaments and intensely-felt situations that constitute the bulk of the drama.

Elektra was one of the most successful works ever written by von Hofmannsthal, and despite reservations by critics such as Harden, became the principal reason for the fame he enjoyed. However, he was not yet satisfied with the final outcome of the work. Von Hofmannsthal had long thought that the true expression of drama, particularly in the creation of mood, atmosphere and intensity, was music: "a material more immediate, more fluid, glowing more intensely than words." (Broch: 141.) Thus, as soon as he heard of Richard Strauss' interest in *Elektra* he made plans to arrange a collaboration in the creation of an opera. Despite initial reservations (due mainly to the similarity in content between *Elektra* and *Salome*), it was inevitable that Strauss would be attracted to the idea of a collaboration. This was principally a result of the nature of the drama: "Whether the subject is hysteria or a mystic union with the Ground of Being, the work is less a drama than a tone-poem" (John 1988: 59).

3.4 THE LIBRETTO

The text of *Elektra* is divided into seven scenes within a single act, and with minor differences has the same structure as the libretto. These scenes are:

i *Prologue*: The maidservants.

ii Elektra alone.

iii Elektra and Chrysothemis.

iv Elektra and Klytemnestra.

v Elektra and Chrysothemis.

vi Elektra and Orest.

vii *Finale*: The murders, followed by Elektra's dance and death.

One of von Hofmansthal's 'improvements' on Sophocles was to exclude the chorus, and in its place he substituted five maidservants and an overseer (scene i). This treatment was retained by Strauss. However, an important aspect of the drama which Strauss chose to reverse concerns the name of Agamemnon. In the play any reference to his name was deliberately avoided, as if it were forbidden to utter it. This is so even in the great soliloquy of scene ii. It is only Orest who is able to break this taboo, after which Elektra is free to invoke the royal name. Strauss, however, insisted on introducing it at every possible opportunity, and provided motivic material to emphasise it even when not spoken on stage. For example, the opening as well as the closing bars of the opera are deliberate derivations of Agamemnon's musical theme. Another important difference occurs in the ordering of events: In the third scene, von Hofmannsthal has Elektra describe a nightmare in which Klytemnestra is hounded to her death by her children. Strauss transfers this dream to the end of the fourth scene, where it is used to increase the dramatic tension. Unfortunately, modern conductors and directors often choose to cut this section in performance, resulting in a more logical musical progression at the expense of the dramatic effect. Strauss often requested changes to the text, although these requests were minor in nature, and usually involved a reduction in lines and/or characters. Scene v in the opera, for example, includes an exchange between two manservants which in the original had a third character,

a cook, engaged in a longer conversation. By reducing the scene, "an impression of prevailing confusion was whittled down to a brief and peremptory exchange between the aggressive young man and his bewildered elderly colleague." (Del Mar 1962: 317.) In only one scene did the composer actually ask von Hofmannsthal for more lines, and that was in the recognition scene, the potential of which Strauss had recognised from the beginning. Accordingly Strauss requested "a long point of repose after Elektra's first cry of 'Orest!'... Couldn't you fit in a few beautiful verses here until, at the point Orest tries to embrace her tenderly, I can pass into a more sombre mood." (Correspondence 1980: 16.) These extra lines, which were written with some difficulty, allowed Strauss to create the only moment of rapt tenderness and sustained lyricism in the entire work. However, as a result of the extension of the recognition scene, Strauss severely curtailed the impact of the tutor's entrance at the end of the scene, thus blurring the transition into the finale. The finale itself created some disagreement between librettist and composer, with much discussion ensuing between the two men regarding the final scene. Von Hofmannsthal proposed concluding with Klytemnestra's death and Elektra's dance, thus omitting Aegisth's arrival and murder. Strauss was strongly opposed to this, and Aegisth was eventually retained. In addition the declaration "love kills, but none passes through life without knowing love!" was added to Elektra's song of victory in order to contrast Elektra's thoughts with those of Chrysothemis. The action of the libretto ends much in the same way as that of the play, with the collapse and death of Elektra, and the ominous absence of Orest from the scene.

Von Hofmannsthal was in general pleased to have had the opportunity to rework the text. By 1906 he had recovered from the crises articulated in the 'Chandos' letter, and he welcomed any chance to emphasise the positive aspects of his heroine, as well as to redefine his relationship to drama. By using music in conjunction with stage technique, he was finally able to intensify and perfect his dramatic aesthetic. *Elektra* stands today as one of the most perfect collaborations between poet and composer, and the names of von Hofmannsthal and Strauss are as synonymous as Da Ponte and Mozart. Together they created a musical myth, in which the music is as important to the whole as the libretto. By examining the two aspects simultaneously, it is possible to advance the theory that *Elektra* is more than a myth with orchestral accompaniment, but rather a stage tone-poem which is in its entirety a myth in the true sense of the word. The mistake that is often made is to ascribe *Elektra* almost wholly to Strauss, yet any meaningful study of the opera must recognise the importance of von Hofmannsthal's contributions, both dramatically and theoretically. As a result, this study of the mythical nature of *Elektra* involves the concepts and theories of both its creators, with both the score and its libretto being given equal prominence.

CHAPTER 4

THE OPERA *ELEKTRA*: A BACKGROUND

4.1 RICHARD STRAUSS AND HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL

Elektra was the first of eleven successful collaborations between Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and had its world première at the Königliches Opernhaus in Dresden on the 25 January 1909. The performance marked the appearance of the most important mythological opera since the music-dramas of Richard Wagner, and probably the greatest Hellenistic opera ever composed. Of all the factors that were to influence the creative ideals of Richard Strauss, the most important was that of Hellenism. The vivid impressions left on the young composer after his journey to Greece in 1892, and particularly his visit to the ancient ruins of Olympia, prompted him to write to Wagner's widow, Cosima Wagner, that "everything I experienced in Greece ... These are impressions that will shape my whole life." (Schuh 1976: 303.) Later, this comment was affirmed when the composer was able to state that "real opera subjects can only be found in Greek Antiquity." (Krause 1964: 356.)

Opera subjects based on Hellenism had long since vanished from the stage as the fervour of nationalism forced the ideals of the Renaissance to give way to the rediscovery of ancient European epics. Strauss himself composed two operas in the nationalistic mode, but neither *Guntram* (1894) nor *Feuersnot* (1901) compare favourably with his five efforts in the field of antiquity: *Elektra* of 1908, *Ariadne auf Naxos* of 1916, *Die Ägyptische Helena* of 1928, *Daphne* of 1938, and the posthumously performed opera *Der Liebe der Danäe* (1952). Yet of these five mythological operas, one did not reflect the true spirit of Greek thought. This was *Elektra*, a vocal tone-poem so extreme in its Expressionism, both musically and dramatically, that it prompted one writer to condemn it as "a grim excursion through mythological abysses" (Krause 1964: 355). Strauss' morbid fascination with the dark and bloody myths of the Atrides seems to contradict the very spirit of Hellenism, but actually is fully in keeping with the trend first noticed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1878) in which he comments on the attraction to "pessimism, tragic myths, and the concept of everything evil, mysterious, destructive and ominous" (1956: 8). Strauss' return at age fifty to a more serene form of Hellenism resulted in *Ariadne Auf Naxos*, but neither it nor anything else he composed ever matched the brilliance of his dark masterpiece *Elektra*.

Strauss never had the same sense of the mythological as did Wagner, whose theoretical treatises on music and myth formed the basis for his creative aesthetic, but the theoretical foundation of *Elektra* as a myth is akin to that of

Tristan und Isolde, or the *Ring* cycle. This is thanks primarily to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who, like Wagner before him, was strongly influenced by the concept of the 'mythos' and its implications in the artistic nature of a human being. 'Mythos' was von Hofmannsthal's response to the despair of his 'Chandos' letter, and became the only way in which to deal with the 'present reality'. From this time on, the poet/playwright worked almost exclusively within the concepts of 'mythos', producing dramas such as *Elektra* and *Achilles Auf Skyros* and novels including the unfinished *Andreas*. Having solved the problem of a present reality, von Hofmannsthal was still preoccupied with the limits of human language in society, and the idea of music as a vehicle for his mythological theories became viable after the interest shown by Strauss in the drama of *Elektra*. In an early letter to the composer, von Hofmannsthal wrote: "The rapid rising sequence of events relating to Orest and his deed which leads up to victory and purification [is] I can imagine much more powerful in music than in the written word." (Correspondence: 4.) By the time of their final collaboration, that of the mythological opera *Die Ägyptische Helena*, von Hofmannsthal was convinced of the necessity that music should act as a vehicle for the expression of myth: "How else can we capture our own present, engulfed as it is in thousands of years of culture? ... no middle-class, everyday dialogue can capture this! Let us write mythological operas, the truest of all art-forms!" (John 1988: 62.) Music had become the ritual enactment of society, and opera was the ultimate expression of this ideal. Language was no longer considered sufficient to adequately convey the meaning of the 'mythos': "If the

fundamental theme of myth is to be convincing, it requires a second means of enchantment, namely music." (Quoted in Broch 1984: 33.) The validity of this statement was first tested in the dark passages of *Elektra*, and fortified in every subsequent collaboration between composer and playwright.

4.2 CRITICAL REACTIONS

The 1909 première of *Elektra* was not the success that had been hoped for, and many were offended by the dissonant score and grim plot. Satirical references were made in the press to future librettos with the names 'Incest', 'Lynch Justice', and 'The Bloodthirsty Gorilla', and cartoons such as 'The Elektric Chair' sought to ridicule the composer. Critic Thomas San-Galli wrote that Elektra was an opera that "one has to have heard, however unpleasant the experience may be. Then it will sink into oblivion quickly and forever" (Puffet 1989: 2.) Others were less hostile, with Alexander Dillmann praising the work as "purer and more authentic than much of what is written according to the rule-book ... of this there can be no doubt: *Elektra* represents a decisive milestone in music history." (Puffet: 3.) Modern commentators of the opera are generally guarded in their reactions to *Elektra*, with some such as Ernst Krause displaying a certain vehemence in their distaste for it. Charles Osborne is more enthusiastic in praising the opera as one of the most remarkable of this century. Although Strauss himself was forced to admit to the opening season's limited appeal, the opera has found acceptance internationally, and is today one of the

pillars of the standard repertoire. Norman Del Mar, author of the three-volume *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on his Life and Works* (1962), comments in volume one that Strauss was able to "live to see the day when it was to be regarded as arguably his most technically advanced and interesting composition" (293). It is notable that Del Mar feels compelled to use the word 'arguable' in praising the opera: this is because *Elektra*, despite its popularity, has certain structural and dramatic weaknesses. Although these do not overwhelm the overall impact, they are important enough to remark upon.

A recurring argument against the credibility of both the drama and the opera concerns the final scene. This scene sees the accomplishment of the murders of Klytemnestra and Aegisth, followed by Elektra's triumphant joy and subsequent death. It is this death that is the most unsatisfactory part of the entire plot, despite its being accompanied by the most intense and shattering musical climax of the work. Up to this point, Elektra has spent most of her time on stage plotting ways to avenge her slain father, yet when the moment finally arrives, she has no part in it. The fact that Orest is solely responsible for the death of his mother and Aegisth makes Elektra's triumph and collapse all the more pointless: it is "the ultimate in hollow triumphs ... a less elevated 'Liebestod' than Elektra's is difficult to imagine. " (Puffet: 56 - 57.) Although admittedly she does remain true to her destiny, her victory is Pyrrhic in the extreme, resulting in an all too convenient demise and equivocal ending to the opera. The drama and the opera have, textually at least, the same ending, but whereas the end of the former