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

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-Part 1: **Appearance of Orest.**

- Denial and rejection.

-Part 2: **Recognition scene**

- Self-pity and triumph of Elektra. [Duet]

-Transition: **Departure of Orest and Tutor.**

10.3.3 Scene vii : Finale

Although some commentators (Puffet and Gilliam) have preferred to see the finale beginning only with the entrance of Aegisth, it clearly begins with Elektra's realisation that she had forgotten to give to her brother the axe which she had been hoarding for this moment. This then conforms to the pattern established earlier which always begins in a state of despair. From a mythical point of view, everything has pointed towards this moment: all the previous musical concepts have hinted at it, and dramatically the work acquires its tension through expectation of it. The music accompanying the off-stage death of Klytemnestra remains as ambiguous, fleeting and atonal as the music accompanying her earlier appearances. However, the baiting of Aegisth by Elektra and his eventual murder by Orest is accompanied by a highly ironic use of Agamemnon's tonality of C (major and minor) whilst his key of E-flat major in a waltz tempo (later exploding into the dance of triumph) is hinted at amongst the other textures. The C minor reaches its apex with Aegisth's death and the words "Agamemnon hears you", and thus begins a process that will only be completed at the very end of the opera. In terms of the 'symphonic' structure of the opera, the section after

Aegisth's death forms the coda, the summation of all that has gone before: The mythical problem has been solved, the hero/es have triumphed, and a great apotheosis has begun. It is during Elektra's final dance that all the major musical themes are resolved and transformed both by the mood of exultation as well as by the insistent waltz-type rhythms of Elektra's dance. The first stages see the tonality of E major being interrupted by and alternating with the tonality of C major at figures 226a and 236a; these tonalities remain dominant even though others are also explored. The final clarification of the opera occurs at this stage, namely "the depiction of death as dark, which means that the bright tonalities must disintegrate and finally be replaced." (Puffet 1989: 72.) Thus bars 258a to 259a see an extreme chromatic progression attempting to return to C major, but reaching instead the excessive brightness of a B major dominant. However, rather than actually reverting to E major, the music instead begins with passages in E-flat minor (representing the death of Elektra) and C minor (representing her vengeance). These two tonalities have a common E-flat pitch, but even this is discarded as is Elektra herself in the last page of the score when Agamemnon's C major becomes the dominant chord, suggesting that it is he who is finally triumphant. Some critics interpret this scene as Elektra's triumph, but the final shift in tonality contradicts this.

The finale has its own pattern not directly related structurally to what has gone before. It is a series of climaxes, each bigger than the last, culminating in the huge climax of the dance itself. It does however follow the pattern of the

"interruption" which characterises previous scenes; however this interruption is the most extreme of them all, as it has been anticipated in the earlier stages of the pattern. The structure can therefore be laid out as follows:

-Part 1: Klytemnestra's death.

- Elektra's response establishing an increased intensity.

-Part 2: Aegisth's death.

- Intensity develops into hysteria.

-Apotheosis: Dance of triumph and collapse of Elektra.

- Re-emergence of the themes of Agamemnon.

[The principal tonalities of this scene involve a conflict between the E-flat major and C minor of Elektra, and the C major of Agamemnon, with the latter emerging triumphant.]

10.4 Summary

The entire second half of *Elektra* is both a culmination and a fulfilment of the first, and is itself split into two parts, namely scenes v and vi, and the finale. The fifth and sixth scenes are a reflection of each other as they portray similar emotions and events from two opposing points of view, the former being negative and cynical, the latter genuine and positive. The last scene acts as the coda and apotheosis of the opera as a whole. The pattern that each scene of Part Two follows is slightly different from that of the first part, being compressed into the categories of Despair - Intensity - Frustration. This can be tabulated as follows:

	DESPAIR	**INTENSITY**	**FRUSTRATION**
Scene v	**News of Orest's death.** (D minor)	Seduction scene. (E-flat major with dissolutions; later G major)	Chrysothemis' rejection. Elektra's curse. (B-flat minor/C minor)
Scene vi	**Searching for axe.** (D minor)	Recognition. (A-flat major) Duet (B-flat)	Self-pity of Elektra, and entrance of Tutor. (B-flat minor)
Scene vii	**Failure to retrieve axe for Orest.** (Extreme chromaticism)	Death of: 1) Klytemnestra 2) Aegisth. (C major and E-flat major)	Death of Elektra, and dominance of Agamemnon. (C minor) (E-flat and C majors)

The second part of the opera is therefore a fulfilment of the first, and the overall structure of *Elektra* can be tabulated in the following manner:

-Part One	**Introduction to mythical problem.** **Imaginary triumphs of Elektra and Chrysothemis.** **Ultimate triumph of Klytemnestra.**
-Part Two:	**a) Attempt and failure of Elektra to solve mythical problem.** **Catalytic appearance of Orest.** **b) Solution of mythical problem: Ultimate triumph of Elektra.** **[Frustrated by ultimate triumph of Agamemnon]**

It is important to note that the final dramatic and tonal irony of Elektra's death and Agamemnon's dominance occurs after all other contradictions have been resolved: it is not so much a part of what has gone before as a means of shockingly indicating that although everything seems to have ended as it should, ultimately nothing is certain. This is consistent with *fin-de-siècle* mythical theory, which held that myth is not merely plot, but also an indication of the ambivalence of existence. The patterns, plot and structure of *Elektra* all contribute to this philosophy, ensuring that the opera remains one of the most convincing mythical creations of the twentieth century, despite its decadent and oppressive nature.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Elektra* may be defined as a tragic myth governed by heroic and demonic archetypes (supported by archetypes of magic, primitivism, sublimity, gestural effects and, most importantly, irony), and reconstructed in the context of *fin-de-siècle* mythical thought. In addition, its inherent mythical nature is emphasised, developed and enhanced throughout by the realisation of the musical score, itself a mythical work of art. The opera represents the culmination of Richard Strauss' Expressionist output, the further development of which was left to the atonal phase of Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. What was to remain unchanged, however, was his fascination with, and love for, the myths and legends of Antiquity, resulting in a further four operas drawn from this source. Although the operas *Ariadne Auf Naxos*, *Die Ägyptische Helena*, *Daphne* and *Der Liebe Der Danäe* are all characterised by a lyrical neo-classic spirit within the context of Romantic style, *Elektra* remains the most convincing example of Strauss and von Hofmannsthal's mythical oeuvre, despite the extremity of its music and the nihilism of its plot. This is primarily due to the presentation of the social uncertainties and contradictions that are a reflection of modern society. These are particularly discernible in the final scene which, rather than concluding with

the usual mythical function of a "posthistory: the reconciliation of the mythical hero" (Tarasti 1979: 335.), ends with the abrupt and inexplicable death of the protagonist. Although *Elektra* is almost wholly internalised, this final and unresolved contradiction has broader implications in that the denial of a traditional apotheosis leads to feelings of ambivalence and even disquiet in the minds of the opera's audiences. This aspect, combined with those of psychoanalysis, have resulted in the opera being dismissed as "a sort of pre-Freudian interpretation of ancient tragedy" (Tarasti: 329), yet it must be remembered that the character of Elektra is partially based on an actual person studied by Freud, which allows for further contemporary relevance to the staging of an opera set in ancient times. The deliberate and unique juxtaposition of myth and psychoanalysis is one of the principal reasons for the opera's effect as a modern mythical work of art.

Traditional archetypal aspects of mythology also govern the furtherance of *Elektra*'s plot; most notably those of Northrop Frye. Frye's theories have on occasion been the target of adverse criticism due to his rigid "monomythicism" (Doty 1986: 199) which tends to reject other theories, but his work remains a basis for the study of the influences of myth on literature. Frye's theory of Archetypal Imagery, applied to *Elektra*, proves that the opera is far more than a modern version of a classical myth-opera, where music functions as no more than an accompaniment to a mythical plot. In the score and in the text, the principal archetypes of tragic, heroic and demonic imagery (combined with

numerous minor mythical effects) emphasise the work's roots in the myths of Antiquity as well as its standing in modern mythology. However, it is the concept of the hero that, more than any other aspect of the opera, defines *Elektra* as a mythical work of art. The presentation of a character through music is not unusual in opera, but for that character to fulfil the functions of a mythical hero purely through motivic development and derivation, without being a physical or vocal element of the opera, confirms its unique essence. The character of Agamemnon alone is sufficient to identify the opera as myth, although the elements of demonic and tragic imagery also contribute to this. The archetypal nature is supported by a structural and compositional style that ensures that the opera *Elektra* is not only different in mood from the drama *Elektra* which inspired it, but that it is a more mythical work as well. It therefore proves von Hofmannsthal's assertion that although drama may be the traditional vehicle for mythical thought, it is only through the medium of music-drama that this may ultimately be achieved. Wagner's own theories of myth follow a similar argument, and his music-dramas remain the supreme examples of the realisation of myth in music. However, he was the pre-eminent musician of his time, and such thinking had always been a part of his aesthetic. Von Hofmannsthal, one of the most important literary figures of his time, was only later in his career to realise the truth of Wagner's assertions and to employ them together with Strauss in the writing of *Elektra*. The difference between Wagner's mythical works and *Elektra* is that while the former are based on and defined by ancient Teutonic mythology, the latter is an ancient Greek myth

redefined by contemporary concerns. That it has become one of the most important opera's of the twentieth century is an indication of the effect of the realisation of mythology through the medium of music. Consequently, *Elektra* can be considered as a modern myth in its own right, and a full appreciation of the opera is possible only by recognising it as such.

APPENDIX

TABLE OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

PAGE NO.	THEME	SCORE NO.
61	Dance	252a (-2)
63	Hatred	5
65	1. Klytemnestra 2. Summons	127 47 (-12)
66	Recognition	149a
73	1. Royalty 2. Triumph	17, and 37 (-2) 237a
75	Triumph	172a (+8)
77	Agamemnon	Opening
78	Agamemnon 2	44
80	Bond	47 (-12)
82	1. Death 2.Triumph 3. Exaltation 4. Death	38 (-2) 261a (+6) 253a (+1) 261a

90	1. Klytemnestra	39
	2. Spiritual Decay	138 (+4)
91	1. Sinister Presence	39 (+1)
	2. Evil Influence	68 (-4)
	3. Appearance	67 (-1)
93	Aegisth	39 (+4)
103	1. Klytemnestra	39 (+1)
	2. Sacrifice	162 (-3)
	3. Chromaticism	201
104	Rhythm	128
105	1. Rhythm 1	130 (+2)
	2. Rhythm 2	252a (-2)
	3. Rhythm 3	247a
113	1. Agamemnon	Opening
	2. Mourning	6
114	1. Recognition	135a (+5)
	2. Rhythm	16 (-3)
	3. Presence	138a (+3)
115	Family	146 (-6)

116	1. Interlude 2. Seduction 3. Pitiful State	273 23a (+1) 25a
117	1. Dance 2. Hatred	257a 35 (-3)
118	1. Chord 2. Victory	35 (-3) 250a (+1)
119	Triumph	195a (+3)
120	1. Dream 2. Chrysothemis	120 (-2) 66
121	Domesticity	106

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