employs an ominous silence which hints at von Hofmannsthal's unrealised sequel, *Orestes Auf Delphi*, the latter makes use of a *fortissimo* dance of triumph and joy which is abruptly cut short by the collapse of the protagonist. The subsequent ambiguity of her death and the abandonment of Chrysothemis by Orest results in an impression of dramatic incompleteness which seems strangely out of place in a composition that professes to be rooted in a present reality: *Elektra* is after all a music-drama, despite its kinship to the genre of tone-painting. One critic, Ritchie Robertson, finds the composer guilty of "a sentimental attempt to supply an upbeat ending which is incompatible with the sombre and violent events which have preceded it." (John 1988: 61.) Another aspect of the work that has been strongly criticised is Strauss' overuse of huge musical climaxes in the work, often using V - I perfect cadences so strongly that the music struggles to continue. An example of this is Elektra's attempt to seduce Chrysothemis to her cause (figure 88aff.) The cadence at the end of this section is so final that "the music almost grinds to a halt" (Puffet: 38). On the other hand, *Elektra* contains a great deal of Strauss' best work, with the 'recognition' scene in particular being of remarkable beauty and lyricism. This scene had been one of the weaker sections of the drama, with Orest's appearance detracting from the internalised figure of his sister. Strauss was able to reverse this by creating a generous, albeit slightly calculated, profusion of expansive melodic beauty: "the finest lyrical music Strauss had yet produced in his compositions for the stage." (Del Mar 1962: 322.) The musical structure of the drama will be more fully discussed in chapter ten, but it should be noted

from the outset that it is both a work of theatre, and a tone-poem. This latter title is possible because of its continuous build-up and release of tension, and more importantly because of the use of the orchestra in a highly individual way. Strauss had always been a master orchestrator, but *Elektra* represents his peak. It employs one of the largest orchestras of any opera, and it is unsurpassed in its programmatic tone-painting with the use of tonal and timbral effects. Although the entire forces are employed at moments of great tension, the orchestra is skilfully divided into chamber-like ensembles that can be as ominous or as tender as the libretto demands. The recognition scene is the most obvious example, but others include the scurrying strings as Elektra hunts for the axe (figure 116a) and the ominous and nervous utterances of the flutes and harps at Klytemnestra's descent prior to her confrontation with Elektra (figure 177). *Elektra* is Strauss' ultimate achievement as an orchestrator, and he was never again to use such massive forces in an opera. His experience in the field of the tone-poem had given him the means by which to treat the orchestra as one instrument without drowning his principal instrument, the human voice.

As the popularity of *Elektra* grew, so too did the number of commentators and, as a result, numerous interpretations of the opera are extant. These have varied in concentration from a Jungian analysis of the 'Elektra-complex" (Wintle, C in John, 1988: 63ff), to comparisons with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (as in Bennet, B. 1988: 113 ff). The two most important aspects of the opera, though, are those of mythology and psychoanalysis, and before proceeding to a detailed

examination of the former, it is first necessary to investigate the importance of *Elektra*'s Freudian roots.

## 4.3 THE INFLUENCE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

The full title of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's drama is *Elektra: a Drama based freely on Sophocles*, and as such is slightly misleading. Although Sophocles did provide the inspiration for the writing of *Elektra*, it is far removed from the spirit of the Greek playwright. Instead it is a dark and brooding work of theatre, in which von Hofmannsthal deliberately avoided any possible cliché of neo-Hellenistic drama that pervaded the nineteenth-century literary world, a good example being *Iphigenie auf Tauris* by Goethe. Yet by excluding the ancient spirit, von Hofmannsthal was forced to look elsewhere for an element of dramatic impact, and he thus made use of the new science currently sweeping Europe, that of psychoanalysis. The endeavours of Sigmund Freud had become as important in the field of art and literature as they were in medical studies, and *Elektra* is perhaps the supreme example of this interaction. In G. Uekermann's essay *Myth and Psychoanalysis in Hofmannsthal's 'Elektra'*, it is suggested that the character of Elektra is largely based upon a case study that had first appeared in Freud's *Studies in Hysteria* of 1895. In the study, a young woman named Anna O. (real name Bertha Pappenheim), a product of a wealthy family, was found to have a split personality. In addition, she also suffered from mental and physical ailments that intensified after the death of her

much-loved father. Elektra bears a strong resemblance to Anna O., although she is by no means a mirror image. The most important of their similarities are the merging of two time levels in the consciousness, a self-induced hypnosis, and recurring hallucinations of their respective fathers. This latter point also contributes in both women to a growing alienation from their mothers, and severe emotional and sexual deficiencies which lead Elektra to exclaim: "Do you not think that when I rejoiced in my body, that his sighs and groans did not penetrate to my bedside? .... [Agamemnon] sent me hate, hollow-eyed hate as a bridegroom". Although these striking similarities do indicate the strong influence of Freud's work on von Hofmannsthal, the playwright did not turn Elektra into a neurotic hysteric in the sense that Anna O. was. Elektra's states of self-hypnosis are firmly rooted in a present reality, and any experience of different time zones does not cause her to lose control of the moment. The opera score also adds a new dimension to the phenomenon of her hallucinations as the towering presence of Agamemnon is felt throughout the work in his powerful and insistent leitmotivs. This results in his increasing similarity to the presence of the ghost in *Hamlet.* Another indication of Elektra's grasp of reality is her unshakeable sense of moral duty. Freud's character is mentally unable to cope with morality, but not so Elektra: Her lines "Forget? What? Am I an animal? I am not a beast, I cannot forget!" are an indication not only of her refusal to conform to the dictates of Aegisth and Klytemnestra, but also of her commitment to opposing the evil they represent.

*Elektra* revolves around a psychologically disturbed character, but it is not just the protagonist who is a result of psychological influences. In fact, all three leading female characters are unstable in three equally intense and opposing ways: Elektra is obsessed with revenge, and unsettled through grief; Klytemnestra is obsessed with fear of revenge and death; and Chrysothemis is sexually and emotionally deprived. Klytemnestra, one of von Hofmannsthal's most repulsive creations, also seems to have been conceived with the theories of Freud in mind. In the central scene of the opera, Klytemnestra explains her nightmares to Elektra, and how she has tried to suppress the cause of them, the murder of Agamemnon: "First it was to come then it was past ... in between I did nothing". The dreaming of events suppressed by the conscious mind was the subject of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), which appeared during von Hofmannsthal's writing of *Elektra*, and it forms the basis of Klytemnestra's psychological character. It was also used effectively to create the character of Chrysothemis, who is obsessed with achieving a means to deny the grim reality of the past in order to create an imaginary and Utopian future.

Dramatic criticism of the finale has already been noted in section 4.2, and in psychological terms the scene is ambiguous: it either portrays Elektra as a neurotic failure, or it is the supreme moment, a triumphant return to her true self. Whichever the case, it remains the ultimate intensification of her psychological condition. Although some, even von Hofmannsthal, accused Strauss of turning the drama into little more than an emotional vehicle, the

composer was the only musician who could realistically re-create, in musical terms, the atmosphere of hysteria in an effective manner. This does not only apply to the finale, but to every scene where a psychological factor is emphasised or supplemented by the score. The overall impact is subsequently subtly altered, as Elektra is a more positive character in the opera as opposed to the drama, but the psychoanalytic aspects of both versions are more or less the same. As *Elektra* is primarily a mythological work, the psychological angle is revealing in any study of the myth. In the drama, myth and analysis combine into a powerful, internalised and ultimately disturbing piece of theatre. Although the psychological factor is still important in the opera, the mythical aspect takes precedence, revealing the work as rooted in the structures of myth itself, within the contemporary concerns of *fin-de-siècle* Europe.

## 4.4 THE QUESTION OF MYTH

Whenever a musical composition, particularly an opera, is said to have a mythological content, the most important question to be asked is whether or not the 'mythical' aspect of the work is merely a story drawn from mythological sources, one that the composer and/or librettist feels is suitable for adaptation to the operatic stage. Also, if the plot is mythological in a genuine sense, the question is raised whether or not the music of the opera constitutes more than a mere accompaniment, with no inherent mythological features of its own. It is obvious that in many so-called 'mythological' works composed prior to the late

Romantic era, myth was little more than a story, and the music accompanying it but a vehicle for that plot. The theoretical treatises by Richard Wagner, combined with his own monumental music-drama, eliminated the superficial 'myth-opera', and instilled in the post-Romantic consciousness an undeniable awareness of the importance of the 'mythos' in creative thought. Richard Strauss was the inheritor of that consciousness, and although his writings show little interest in the theory of myth, his music is a monument to the integration of myth and music. This is also perhaps largely due to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose writings do show a strong theoretical leaning towards the importance of myth. As a result, *Elektra* can be seen as a true myth, in its musical as well as in its dramatic structure.

In earlier chapters the concept of myth was discussed, and the conclusion reached was that not only is it difficult to define, but that various theories exist that often contradict one another. Each theory was developed in conjunction with the study of certain types of mythology (anthropological, religious, etc.) and many are not applicable to the study of *Elektra*, which is a myth rooted in Ancient Greece and refined with nineteenth-century ideals. It is, therefore, necessary to isolate the theories that are applicable to the opera, and concentrate on those theories when arguing the case for *Elektra*'s status as a musical myth. The most obvious of these is the relationship between myth and literature. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism* has identified this relationship as a progression of forms that eventually leads to contemporary

fiction: myth becomes legend; legend becomes tragedy; tragedy becomes drama; drama becomes plot; plot becomes fiction. *Elektra* falls into three of these categories - myth, tragedy and drama (as well as music-drama). Frye, Tarasti and Cassirer have all investigated the structures of mythical literature, and the most important theory to emerge is that of the archetype. Each myth has elements in it that firstly identify it as a myth, and secondly relate it to all other myths of its type (tragic, comic, ironic, etc.) *Elektra* is primarily a tragic myth, and other elements that are inherent in it include the hero-mythical, the nature-mythical, and the archetypes of apocalyptic and demonic imagery. In the following study of the opera, these archetypes will be examined in both the dramatic and the musical fabric of the whole, and often these two aspects are inseparable. A study is also included of the overall structure of the work. As a result, *Elektra* can be shown to be a characteristic mythical work that is functional in both its text and its score, and a work reshaped by *fin-de-siècle* concerns combined with a Hellenistic background.

# *CHAPTER 5*

## A TRAGIC MYTH

*Elektra* is without doubt a mythological opera, but when discussing it as such it is first necessary to determine exactly what type of myth it is. Four mythic 'types' or 'forms' exist, although they are all very generalised and the borders between them often ill-defined. These are romance, comedy, irony and tragedy. Of these, the last has always been the most powerful as well as the most popular form. A plot which involves a tragic hero opposed to forces beyond his or her control (gods, destiny, human and/or social upheaval) is a marked feature of myths and legends covering the entire spectrum of human society and experience, from the ancient Egyptian god Osiris to the figure of Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* of contemporary science fiction. In literature, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, as well as all of Shakespeare's tragic plays, follow the general archetypal nature of tragedy. *Elektra* can also be labelled a 'tragic' myth, although its peculiar nineteenth-century *fin-de-siècle* blend of legend and psychology, of antiquity and Romanticism, have redefined its mythological function to a certain degree, resulting in a certain confusion regarding traditional methods of identifying true tragedy. Despite this, the opera is particularly powerful as a tragic myth, eliciting an almost overpowering

emotional (and aural) response from its audiences. Its rejection of certain archetypal situations and characters is balanced by its exaggeration of others, the most obvious being its undeniably tragic nature.

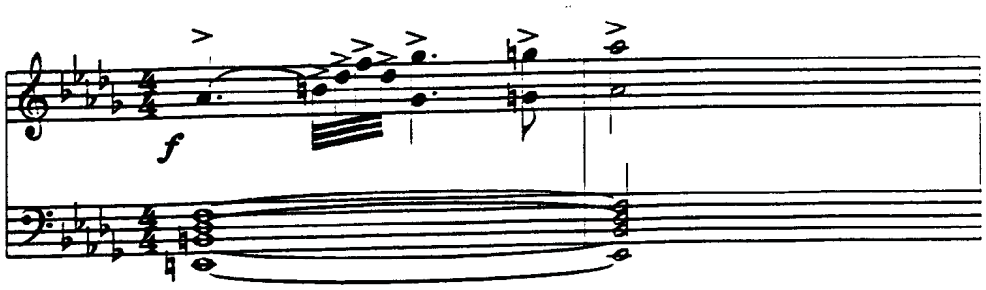
One of the most marked features of a tragic myth is the construction of its conclusion. In most cases the work ends with either a feeling of deep serenity, or in a general joyous thanksgiving. The final scene of *Elektra* seems to conform to the latter. The music is tonal, in a major key, and rhythmically robust. Elektra herself is wild with joyous triumph: "I carry the load of fortune, and I dance before you here. With happiness like ours, just one thing seems right: silence and dancing ..." These are the last words she sings in the opera, as immediately afterwards she drops lifeless to the ground. As a result, the nature of the finale becomes ambivalent: the atmosphere of joy is replaced by one of gloom and death, with an ominous rather than a serene ending. Therefore the 'thanksgiving' feature of the tragedy becomes a mere prelude to Elektra's collapse. If the music of her dance is examined more closely, then it is seen that the dance-theme


is actually a parody of a Viennese waltz tempo and rhythm, and it reflects not so much 'joy' in its usual sense, but rather an immense relief from pain and despair. The score reflects a mediation of the mythological problems posed to

Elektra, and her sudden death is made all the more tragic for that. An obvious parallel with *Hamlet* can be drawn: In both plays the finale is made into the most tragic scene of all, heightening the drama and leaving the central character dead in the last moments.

Other comparisons with *Hamlet* are numerous and not within the scope of this study. However, one important aspect that Strauss' music-drama shares with Shakespeare's tragedy is the recurrent theme of vengeance. On its own it is a simple concept, yet it is intricately woven into some of the most complex tragedies. The natural order of being and the basic tenets of law are suspended in anticipation of the return of the avenger. As the act of revenge is in response to another earlier act, tragedy can be said to be in a binary form. Agamemnon was murdered, so in order for the plot to contain a satisfactory conclusion his murderers must themselves be murdered. This fact is the central concern of the *Oresteia* as well as other accounts of the Electra myth. But *Elektra* itself is isolated to the point of exclusion from the myths preceding and following the original story. Originally, Agamemnon is murdered by Clytaemnestra in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Orestes' matricide is met with divine vengeance in the form of the Furies, who only relent after the intervention of the god Apollo. In the opera, however, the past and the future are discarded in favour of the present. Elektra's thirst for vengeance is the sole source of revenge, and as such it assumes heroic proportions, increasing the tragic vein that characterises the opera. The music links Elektra's hatred for her

mother to the element of vengeanc, and as such is a feature of the score as a whole. The 'hatred' motif pervades the music throughout, and its jagged demi-semiquavers and D-flat triad above a polytonal chord constantly remind the listener of Elektra's emotions:

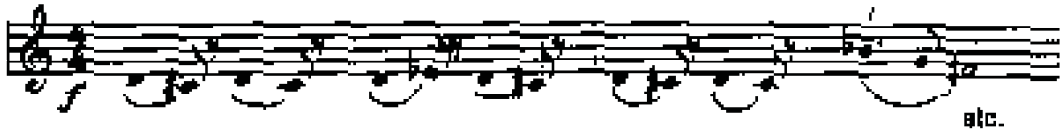



Elektra's exultation after the death of Klytemnestra and Aegisth (beginning with her triumphant response to Aegisth's cries for assistance - "Agamemnon hears you!") represent the fulfilment of vengeance, and thus the completion of a tragi-mythical function in the opera. The binary nature of tragedy is completed only with the relieving of Elektra's obsession.

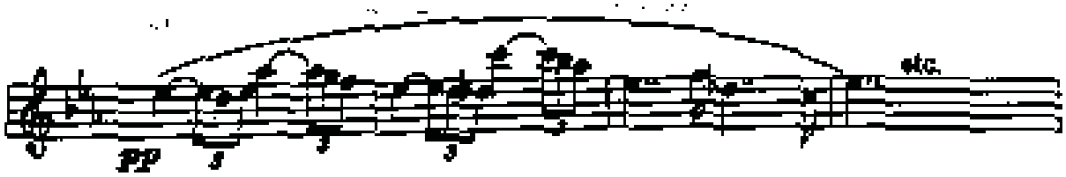
An important link with the concept of vengeance is the concept of guilt. Guilt is a feature of the opera in a variety of ways - Elektra's guilt at not being able to save her father, and even more so at not being able to assist Orest by giving him the axe to murder Klytemnestra. This guilt soon disappears though, but only after vengeance has been exacted. Klytemnestra also harbours guilt, although her response is to reject it, and attempt to diminish it by eliminating its source - the figure of Orest. For Orest is not only a threat to her position and indeed her

life, but he, more so than Elektra, is a reminder of the deed his mother has committed. Because of this, Elektra accuses Klytemnestra of "sending off gold whereby [Orest] might be strangled." The guilt in Klytemnestra's subconscious results in her dreaming of her own death, and the nightmare scene, punctuated by some of the most extreme chromaticism in Romantic opera, portrays her physical and moral decay as a result of her guilt. Thus she is not a tragic figure as such, but rather a key to the binary fulfilment of the tragic progression. This element of guilt has been recognised by H. Broch as one of the key features of the tragedy, one that reflects archetypal concerns: "In *Elektra*, tragic guilt is a function of the ancient inexorable fate that has made man into a super- and subhuman double essence, sinful in one half, atoning in the other, yet never reaching a unity that will master fate as in the Christian Everyman." (Broch 1984: 176.) Due to the concerns and concepts of the opera, its mood is predominantly sombre, marked by intense episodes of hatred, frustration and ultimately, hysterical joy. A prominent aspect of any tragic myth is its serious mood, which often becomes one of melancholy. Here, however, mood is defined in a significantly different manner. In traditional tragedy, the mood is not a means of intensifying effect - this is achieved through dramatic development and plot structures. *Elektra*, on the contrary, often relies on mood for effect, and the orchestra plays an important role in the musical development of atmosphere. Sometimes this is done through 'tone-painting', where the score re-creates actual events or actions. The yelping of dogs, neighing of horses and rushing of blood are all identifiable in Elektra's monologue. In other

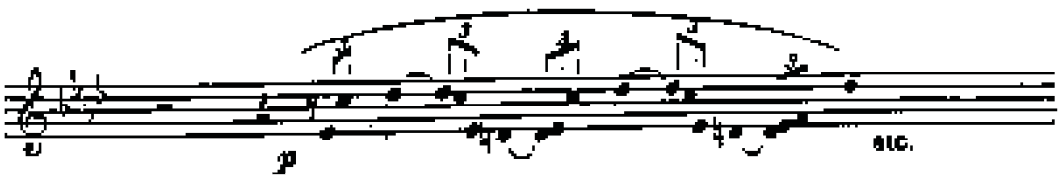
circumstances the mood is created harmonically: The 'hatred' motif's superimposed pair of minor triads immediately sets the tone of the monologue, which ends with the appearance of Chrysothemis, and a block chord of the same motif's notes. After the Chrysothemis scene, a sense of expectation and foreboding is experienced through the use of a rhythmical, driving theme to accompany the approach of Klytemnestra:




The entire scene following this, the confrontation between Elektra and Klytemnestra, is one of the most sombre and malevolent scenes in all Strauss, and this is increased substantially by the use of shifting harmonies and polytonality, usually associated with Klytemnestra. (A more comprehensive study of the Queen's motivic material will appear in chapter seven, p89ff.) However the mood, although predominantly serious, also has occasional moments of tenderness and joy, which become all the more effective through their very scarcity. The most prominent of these is the passage played by horns and strings when Elektra summons her father to "come before your child",




*and the second during* the recognition 'aria' which is thematically as well as *emotionally* linked to the previous example:




As can be seen, any musical expression of tenderness is usually characterised by undulating triplet figures alternating with tied crochets. Other instances of the expressive use of triplets are in the theme of Elektra's royal bearing, as well as in the compound rhythms of her dance for joy where the triplet figure is fragmented to emphasise the higher degree of excitement. Yet music is not the sole creator of mood. Von Hofmannsthal was particularly concerned with the atmosphere of his work (both as drama and as opera) and his stage directions serve to intensify the claustrophobia of the setting. The ruined and decaying courtyard, the use of torches together with blood-red lighting and costumes, and the gestural elements of Elektra frantically digging for the axe, as well as in her dance are all part of the general effect. However, despite a tendency towards the world of shock and horror, von Hofmannsthal's darkly psychological libretto does stay within the boundaries of tragedy. Strauss and von Hofmannsthal were products of late Romanticism, and consequently were able to make use of the Romantic traditions in order to create an expressionist artwork. Yet the mood is tragic, the structure tragic, and the plight of the characters tragic. All the characters in the opera are at the mercy of fate, the wheel of destiny. Thus Klytemnestra is helpless against the nightmares that plague her, and turns in desperation to the daughter who hates her: "As one gets old, one dreams. But then they can be dispensed with. There are rituals .... If

you but wished it you could impart some knowledge that would help." Similarly, when Elektra comprehends her inability to even assist Orest in his task, she too realises that she is helpless against the workings of fate: "I did not give him the axe! There are no gods in heaven."

The supremacy of fate over the limitations of human effort is one of the most important formulas in tragic myth, and it is particularly notable in *Elektra*. This can also be linked to the binary nature of the opera - Agamemnon was murdered, accordingly fate decrees the killing of his killers in fulfilment of the tragic ideal. Another important formula is that of moral law, or rather the violation of, or indifference to, its basic tenets. *Elektra*, seen against a moral background, must be one of the most tragic operas of all - morality seems non-existent: Klytemnestra, a queen, murders her husband Agamemnon, whose death in return demands the crime of matricide. She then lives in adultery with Aegisth, her accomplice in the murder, and both plot the death of Orest, her son, and the imprisonment of her daughters. Elektra, in order to escape this (as well as to take revenge), attempts to break the taboo of incest. All the above is emphasised in the score as well as in the plot, and many productions which have concentrated on the immorality of the opera have become little more than parodies. A more subtle approach is needed to create a tragic story without reducing it to a catalogue of horror.

Often in tragedy the circumstances do not favour the leading character. The tragic representation of an event that turns out disastrously for the protagonist is true of Elektra's death in the last scene, but this can also be explained by the Aristotelian concept of the catharsis, in which either the audience is left feeling exalted and relieved, or the protagonist is purged from guilt, or both. Elektra's demise is ironic after all that she has been forced to live through, but it does act as a purification of her character which allows the audience to experience the pleasure of pity and fear, another criterion of tragedy by Aristotle. Thus the catharsis is necessary to "distinguish the tragic from comic or other forms, and ... to produce this effect in the maximal degree as the principle which determines both the choice of tragic protagonist and the organisation of the tragic plot." (Abrams 1981: 202.) Elektra's triumph and subsequent death are then not merely ironic, but also the fulfilment of a tragic ideal. The same can be said of Agamemnon's murder. Although not an actual part of the opera's action, it is fundamental to the outcome of the plot and allows the dead king to achieve tragic status despite his absence from the stage. Agamemnon's role as an individual will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter (p74ff), but it is necessary to mention him here as an element (or function) of tragedy . Everything that occurs, occurs as a result of his death. Just as the theme of vengeance is related to his murder, so too is the catharsis of the final scene a purging of all the misery inflicted on him, as well as by him.

Therefore the opera can be considered consistently tragic in nature, mood and execution, and this is true both in relation to *fin-de-siècle* expectations of the time, as well as to the timeless definition of tragedy given by Aristotle: "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself" (Abrams: 202). However, tragedy is but one element of myth and does not prove a work is mythological by itself. It is necessary to search deeper into the fabric of the plot and the score to ascertain whether or not *Elektra* is a myth. This entails the study of archetypes such as the hero-mythical and the magic-mythical, as well as the character of the myth - is it apocalyptic or demonic? Other minor elements also point to its mythical status. The principal archetype of a myth is its central heroic figure, and in *Elektra* the identification of this figure poses certain unique problems. Therefore, before the opera can properly be labelled 'mythic', it is essential to solve these problems by discovering which character is in fact the tragic-hero.

# *CHAPTER 6*

## THE PROBLEM OF THE HERO

The concept of the hero-myth is closely allied to that of the tragic, and in most instances both may characterise the same myth. The Greek hero-myths were a development of ancient Mycenean legends, and are extremely complex entities whose central characters were created out of a variety of narrative, historical, social and religious sources. Hero-myths constitute the most prominent and varied elements of Greek mythology as a whole, and include many of the most popular and enduring tales, such as Orpheus in the Underworld; the Twelve Tasks of Hercules; Jason and the Golden Fleece; and the voyages of Ulysses. The idea of a heroic figure is a common one, and can best be defined as "a person who by his courage, wisdom, power, or some other quality differs from other people, and who because of this quality is able to resolve a mythical problem." (Tarasti 1979: 91.) This definition must be qualified by the fact that although the hero is 'great' when compared to the ordinary human being, he or she is negligible when compared to a higher force, be it fate, fortune, gods, necessity, accident, circumstance, or any combination of these. As a result, the hero is our mediator with this greater force. To quote the mythologist Joseph Campbell: "By overcoming dark passions, the hero symbolises our ability to control the irrational savage within us" (1988: xiii). On the other hand, it must

be remembered that although the hero is on top of the mythological wheel of fortune, halfway between mankind and a greater force, he or she is as often a victim as an instrument of that force.

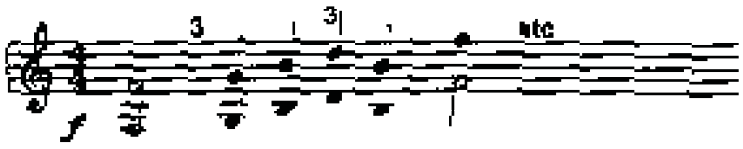
## 6.1 THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE HERO-FIGURE

In the majority of myths and legends it is clear which character is the hero-figure, and his deeds, qualities and characteristics are obvious and unambiguous. Yet in *Elektra* this is not the case, and the heroic emphasis periodically shifts from one character to another, or is present in more than one character at the same time. In addition, all the characters in the opera, including those with heroic qualities, are flawed in such a way that would preclude them from attaining genuine heroic status. In Sophocles' tragedy, Orestes is clearly the hero, whilst both Electra and Clytaemnestra are presented as tragic figures. On the other hand, von Hofmannsthal chose to minimise Orest's contribution to an almost negligible role, while at the same time increasing Elektra's participation in the action and reducing Klytemnestra to a near caricature of decaying evil. Therefore, any study of the heroic element in *Elektra* must begin with its central character.

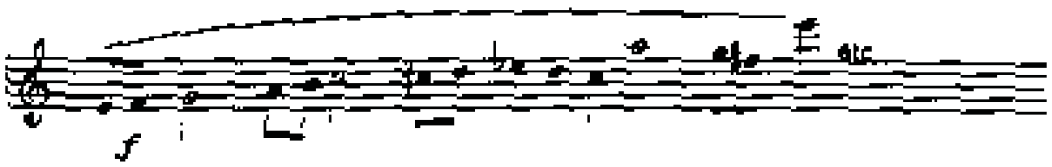
Elektra is without doubt the most important dramatic figure throughout the opera. She is on stage more than eighty per cent of the time, and other characters, particularly Klytemnestra and Chrysothemis, tend to be defined in

relation to her qualities rather than in their own terms. (Klytemnestra's decadence as opposed to Elektra's integrity; Chrysothemis' weakness in relation to the inner strength of her sister.) Thus, in a heroic sense, Elektra is without doubt superior to the people who surround her, and differs from them in a variety of ways. She is also faced with the "dark passions" that the hero must overcome, and her intense dance of triumph at the opera's conclusion must be seen as her expulsion of these passions. The third sense in which she can be identified as the hero is the fact that she is a true victim of fate and circumstance, although she does not succumb to, but rather defies them in her quest for vengeance. Yet in spite of the above, there are other aspects to her character that contradict any claims to her being the central heroic figure. Her defiance of fate and circumstance is intense and undeniable, but it must be remembered that it is ultimately passive: she does not contribute anything but rhetoric to the situation. Her desire for revenge is dependent on Orest's return, and even her desperate decision to commit the deed herself is thwarted by her brother's eventual arrival. So complete is her inability to act that she does not even remember to give Orest the murder weapon that she has been hoarding for so long: "I could not give him the axe to do it. There are no gods in heaven!" This denial of any divine assistance is also inconsistent with a typical Greek hero, who is usually either opposed to, or fighting for, one or more gods, if not actually semi-divine himself.

Elektra's regality and pride are never in question, but lapses in her character *detract from her heroic nature*. This is true not only dramatically, but musically as well. Her royal bearing is well documented in themes such as that of the opening monologue in which a tonal ascending figure rises majestically through the chaos of the musical fabric




as well as her triumphant motif in the finale which accompanies her ultimate fulfillment:

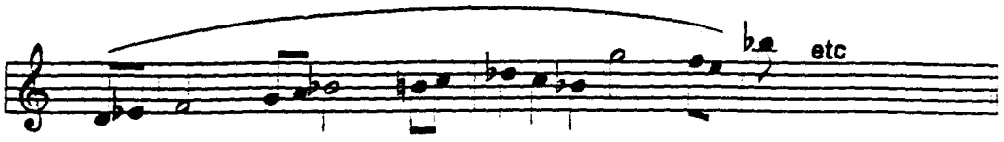



However, themes like these and others which emphasise the positive in Elektra are often contrasted *with*, or even derived from, negative themes. A central theme of the entire opera is hatred, and it is expressed in a motif which belongs solely *to* Elektra. This theme, quoted in the previous chapter (p63), is so greatly assimilated into the character of *Elektra that it even appears* in her dance of triumph, and it also appears as a bitonal chord (D-flat major and E major) referring to the *principal* object of her hatred, her mother Klytemnestra. Therefore it is impossible for Elektra to be considered the hero-figure of *Elektra due to* the contradictions within her character. If Tarasti's definition of "courage, wisdom, power, or some other *quality*" is applied to Elektra, these

contradictions are made all the more obvious: she has courage, but not the courage to act alone; she has wisdom, but this is clouded by her hatred; and in the final analysis, she is powerless. Her other qualities - regality, conviction and a moral sense of rightness - are likewise diminished by her squalor and bitterness. As Elektra is therefore not the hero, it is necessary to examine the figure of Orest, diminished as his role is, in order to see whether or not he can be considered the central heroic figure.

In mythical terms, Orest is the character who is successful in his quest, the character who resolves all contradictions in the structure of the tragedy. He returns determined to avenge his father, and does so without hesitation. The mythical result was his punishment by the Furies, but this is excluded from the action of the opera. His figure is often considered heroic because of his role in the epics and tragedies of Homer, Euripides, Aeschylus and, of course, Sophocles. However, the audience of *Elektra* is faced with an Orest who is a shadow of earlier chronicles. His character is implied rather than developed, and thus his heroic qualities and deeds are omitted. Any emotions are limited to his brief reconciliation with his sister, and even then it is Elektra who is the more overcome. It is true that he does solve the mythical problem - the killing of Klytemnestra and Aegisth as revenge for the murder of Agamemnon - but in *Elektra* this problem is portrayed as belonging solely to Elektra: Orest is not directly involved with the agonising deliberations and planning of his sister. Orest's first theme is heroic, played as a fanfare on the trumpet, but is used in

relation to Klytemnestra's nightmare rather than to Orest's character. His nature is also little more than an extension of his sister's, shown musically by the fact that his 'determination' theme is identical to Elektra's triumphal theme (quoted on p73) in every way except its key.




Although Orest does not have 'unheroic' qualities that detract from his nature, it has to be admitted that his character in the opera is never significantly nor sufficiently involved in the action to make him the central heroic figure. The problem that *Elektra* poses is therefore the identification of a heroic figure - the other characters in the drama are either too weak (Chrysothemis) or too abhorrent (Klytemnestra and Aegisth) to qualify. Chrysothemis does however occupy a role in the opera which is archetypally mythical: the suppliant. The suppliant is usually a female character who is the epitome of helplessness and excluded from society. A central theme in Greek tragedy pertains to the awful consequences of rejecting a suppliant, but in *Elektra* this is reversed as Chrysothemis is constantly mocked, rejected and even cursed, and with no direct effect on any of her tormentors. Chrysothemis can be seen as the opposite of Elektra, almost an alter-ego of the same person, in a symbolisation of the dichotomy between the independent female character, and the woman who wishes for domesticity. As such, Chrysothemis cannot be considered heroic in any sense (although she is a tragic character) and as both Elektra and

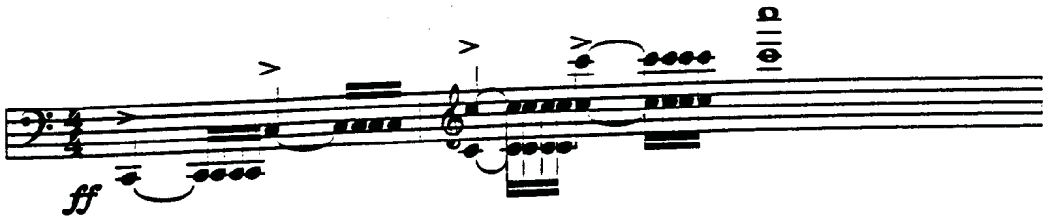
Orestes cannot qualify as central hero-figures, the options seem closed. Yet to be a tragic myth in the true sense, a hero must exist. It is at this stage that music supersedes text in the presentation of myth in the most perfect realisation of a mythical function since Wagner's music-dramas. Strauss had long been drawn to the idea of portraying the hero in musical terms: The tone-poem *Ein Heldenleben* exalts the glories of the artist as hero; *Also Sprach Zarathustra* uses the Nietzschean concept of the superman as its musical basis; and the early opera *Guntram* echoes the Wagnerian ideals of a nationalistic hero. In the same vein, the hero of *Elektra* is not a dramatic one, but one represented in the very fabric of the score. His presence-through-music governs the actions, thoughts and emotions of the entire opera: the figure of Agamemnon.

In establishing Agamemnon as the central heroic figure, Strauss and von Hofmannsthal took the archetypal character of the nemesis, and transformed it through music from a minor to a major role in the story. "The nemesis may be an invisible force known only by its effects, and of often an event previous to the action of which the tragic myth itself is the consequence." (Frye 1957: 216.) Therefore the nemesis in *Elektra* is both the murder of Agamemnon, and Agamemnon himself. His presence has all the characteristics of a heroic figure: His bearing and regality is without question and sets him apart from the other characters of the drama; his power is all-encompassing as it compels Elektra and Orest to seek vengeance for him, as well as rendering Klytemnestra virtually insane with fear; and it is Agamemnon who, through other characters,

resolves the mythical problem posed by his own death. Agamemnon's claims on the role of central hero-figure are expressed (presented) purely in musical terms, but these terms are linked to virtually every scene of the score. His principal motif


opens the entire opera, and closes it. This motif, similar in its fanfare-like quality to Orest's motif, differs in that it is directly related to the character it represents. In addition to this it is also a source for other motifs rather than a derivation itself. Thus it also governs Orest's courage as well as Elektra's mourning and unkempt state resulting from her ceaseless thirst for vengeance. It is also worth noting that the first notes Elektra sings in her great opening monologue contain the notes of this theme, indicating that her love of Agamemnon is as much part of her musical constitution as is her hatred of her mother. His motif appears at virtually every important moment in the opera: Elektra's monologue, Orest's appearance and recognition of his sister, the confrontation between Elektra and Klytemnestra, and throughout the final scene. Most important of all, the motif is used particularly effectively during the murders of both Klytemnestra and Aegisth. As the latter is confronted by Orest, he cries out: "They're murdering me - don't you hear me", to which the orchestra replies with the Agamemnon theme in a particularly violent and powerful manner, punctuated by Elektra's triumphant reply: "Agamemnon hears

you!" For the theme to appear at this point in the drama reinforces Agamemnon's role as hero. The entire opera has been a build-up to the solving of the mythical problem, namely the avenging of Agamemnon's murder, and the murdered king himself has been a prominent part of the action. For Agamemnon to be part of the mythical solution is a clear indication of his central importance. This is further emphasised by his motif being an important element in Elektra's dance of triumph, actually dominating the musical progression after her death. Such is Agamemnon's importance in the opera that Strauss provided him with a second motif, one that emphasises his presence as a guardian/avenger of the house of Mycenae, as well as his royal stature. This motif is usually thundered out by the brass section of the orchestra in a relentlessly rising sequence that has the same majestic effect as Elektra's royal motif, but on a far larger scale:



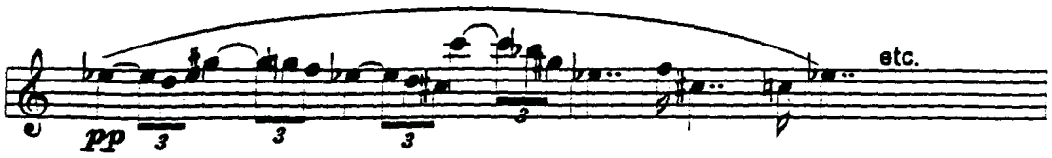

This theme, unlike the first, does not permeate the score in a variety of derivatives, but appears in its original form, unyielding and powerful, in order to emphasise the ultimate power of Agamemnon and his inevitable victory.

In identifying Agamemnon as the hero of *Elektra*, it must be remembered that this is so only in the opera: von Hofmannsthal's drama omits the great name for as long as possible, so that when it does occur it is as a great release of

unconscious tension. It was Richard Strauss who insisted on the name being sung, or its motif played in the orchestra, at every viable occasion. In this sense the opera *Elektra* is more of a mythical vehicle than is the drama, as the latter does not attempt to present a hero in the archetypal sense, preferring instead to actually diminish the role of the hero, whereas the opera does the opposite through the use of its music. Although this type of 'musical heroism' had occurred in Wagnerian music-dramas, this was the first time a purely mythical element had been presented solely through its music, rather than allowing the music to merely echo the traits of a character who actually exists on stage. This fact is crucial to any conception of *Elektra* as myth through music.

A possibility alluded to earlier was that of a 'collective' hero, where the qualities of the characters, while not individually able to create an archetypal hero, might be combined so that two or more characters could together be labelled heroic. Although Agamemnon has already been identified as the hero, it has also been mentioned that his presence works through the other characters, shown by the derivatives of his motifs in their actions and feelings. There are, however, moments when two or more characters 'become one', both spiritually and musically, which often creates a mythic-heroic moment. This occurs twice with Elektra and Orest. The first case involves the juxtaposition of their triumphal themes with the only difference being found in their key-signatures. The second, the recognition scene, unites brother and sister in the quest for vengeance, as if being apart had been an impediment to any action. Yet the

most important 'shared' motif is that between Agamemnon, Orest and Elektra (and to a lesser extent, Chrysothemis) and is, after Agamemnon's principal motif, the most important theme in the opera, appearing whenever the three characters are in any way linked, be it spiritually, physically, or through shared memories.




This motif, quoted earlier on page 65 as an example of one of the more poignant moments in the opera, is also noticeably one of the quieter and gentler themes, and is first heard during Elektra's monologue. At this stage, after the playing of the theme by violins and horn, Agamemnon does 'appear' before Elektra in the form of his second motif. (In the acclaimed film by Götz Friedrich, Agamemnon physically appears at this stage, although Elektra is too preoccupied to notice.) The argument for the 'collective' hero theory therefore combines the dramatic\heroic qualities of Elektra and Orest with the musical ones of Agamemnon in order to solve the mythical contradiction. Yet it remains only Agamemnon who can be called an individual hero-figure due to the other characters' inability to conform to the archetypal requirements of a hero.

## 6.2 THE PHASES OF HEROIC DEVELOPMENT

Northrop Frye in the *Anatomy of Criticism* identifies six phases that a hero may go through in his development. (1957: 211ff) These are as follows:

1. The dignity of the hero.
2. The hero loses his or her innocence.
3. The hero triumphs.
4. The fall of the hero.
5. An increase in the ironic.
6. The world of the demonic.

As *Elektra* has a unique hero in Agamemnon, the emphasis of these phases often varies from one to the other. As a result, the character of the hero sometimes differs, lending more credence to the theory of the collective hero. The first phase is the one in which the central character is given the greatest possible dignity in contrast to the other characters. This is certainly true of *Elektra*, where the musical motifs associated with Agamemnon not only emphasise his regality, but also the decadent nature of most of the other characters. It is true that both Elektra and Orest are portrayed as having extreme dignity in relation to the other characters (the maid's scene preceding Elektra's monologue emphasising this), but Orest's presence is limited while Elektra's positive motifs are diminished by the associations of the 'hate' themes. The second phase is the tragedy of the loss of innocence. In contrast to the first phase, this one emphasises Elektra rather than Agamemnon. Although the opera