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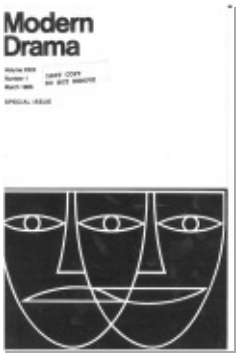


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# Hofmannsthal's *Electra* and Its Dramatic Models

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*Electra* was Hugo von Hofmannsthal's first major success on the public stage. The play was first performed at Max Reinhardt's Little Theatre in Berlin on October 30, 1903. On November 10, Hofmannsthal wrote to his brother-in-law that it had had a great success with three editions out of print, twenty-two adoptions by public stages, and a noisy reception from the press, partly enthusiastic, partly hostile.[1] *Electra* kept its place in the repertoire. Some years later, Hofmannsthal authorized a Japanese club to perform it in Japanese and casually referred to performances of his play on "hundreds of stages" (*Briefe*, II, 385). Today, *Electra* survives chiefly in a cut and slightly altered form as the libretto of Strauss's opera.

*Electra* was not Hofmannsthal's first or only stab at Greek tragedy. A decade earlier, the nineteen-year-old student had tried his hand at Euripides' *Alcestis*. A little more than a translation and a little less than a new version, this play presents a very lyrical and decorous Euripides, with the buffoonery of Heracles toned down, and some poetic *fin-de-siècle* additions about the deep relationships of life and death. *Electra* marked the beginning of several years' preoccupation with Greek myths. It was followed by *Oedipus and the Sphinx* and a translation of *Oedipus Rex*, which Hofmannsthal at one time considered parts of a trilogy to be rounded off by a one-act play on the old Oedipus (*Briefe*, II, 165ff., 218ff.). There are quite systematic sketches for a drama on Pentheus, as well as less elaborate sketches for plays on Leda and the Swan, Jupiter and Semele, and King Kandaules. Hofmannsthal returned to Greek mythology again in two of his opera libretti: *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Die ägyptische Helena* (*Dramen*, II, 501–530).[2]

One should not, however, overestimate the rigor or coherence of Hofmannsthal's interest in Greek tragedy and mythology. He learned Greek at the Gymnasium and was by all accounts a phenomenally gifted and precocious student. References to volumes of Pindar, Herodotus, and Sophocles in his

correspondence show that he continued to read Greek literature in the original after leaving school. But he was not a Greek scholar like Milton or Racine. He was familiar with some of the fashionable scholarship and criticism of his day, notably Nietzsche, Erwin Rohde's *Psyche,* and Bachofen's work on matriarchy, and he associated this reading with the newfangled work of Freud and Breuer on repression, hysteria, and the unconscious. But the eighteen-year-old admitted in a charming letter to Marie Herzfeld: "meine Bildung ist ein bißchen dilettantenhaft unausgeglichen" [my education is rather dilettantish and uneven] (*Briefe,* I, 62). Ten years later, this statement was probably even more accurate, at least as regards Hofmannsthal's classical learning. And his reliance on standard translations is evident in his plays.[3]

While Hofmannsthal was pursuing things Greek, he was also dabbling in several other traditions. Wolfgang Nehring has recently shown that in the early years of the twentieth century, Hofmannsthal tried to find his way as a dramatist by imitating whatever struck his fancy. There were the Greek subjects, but there were also Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book,* Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd,* the medieval *Everyman,* and Calderón's *Life Is a Dream.* And *Oedipus and the Sphinx,* far from being an unmediated return to ancient myth, was inspired by a play on the same topic by Joséphin Peladan, a contemporary French writer.

The provenance of models suggests an eclectic and indeed haphazard procedure. On the other hand, all of Hofmannsthal's plays from that period are dominated by an obsessive concern with the question of identity and its relationship to sexuality and action. In a letter to Hermann Bahr (May 1904, *Briefe,* II, 155), he describes his current work on Calderón's *Life Is a Dream* in a phrase that characterizes his entire work during that time: he is concerned "in die tiefsten Tiefen des zweifelhaften Höhlenkönigreiches 'Ich' hinabzusteigen und dort das Nicht-mehr-ich oder die Welt zu finden" [to descend into the lowest depths of the dubious cave kingdom 'I' and to find there the no-longer-I or the world].

The combination of narrow thematic range with a very eclectic choice of models raises some doubts about the usefulness of exploring the relationship of text and subtext in Hofmannsthal's case. But a close examination reveals that Hofmannsthal was a very good reader and that he chose his models with a keen eye for resemblances between their thematic range and his interests.

The title page of Hofmannsthal's *Electra* identifies the play as: "Tragödie in einem Aufzug frei nach Sophokles." In a letter to Rudolf Alexander Schröder, Hofmannsthal called it "eine freie, sehr freie Bearbeitung der 'Elektra' des Sophokles" [a free, very free adaptation of Sophocles' 'Electra'] (*Briefe,* II, 127). The play, however, is more accurately seen as a version of three very different plays. Its immediate theatre history relates it closely to Oscar Wilde's *Salome.* At the thematic level, the play is a polemical attack on Goethe's *Iphigenie.* The relationship with Sophocles exists superficially at the level of

action; the thematic relationship is mediated through both *Salome* and *Iphigenie*.

*Electra* was especially written for Gertrud Eysoldt, who had starred in over 200 performances of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in the same theatre and, according to the contemporary critic Paul Goldmann, "specialized in perverted women."[4] Hofmannsthal had seen Eysoldt in Gorky's *Lower Depths,* and it was at her urging and Max Reinhardt's that he sat down to carry out plans for the Electra drama that had been on his mind for some time.[5]

The plan to write an Electra play dates to 1901:

Mein Ausgangspunkt war der Elektra-Charakter, das erinnere ich mich ganz genau. Ich las die sophokleische einmal im Garten und im Wald, im Herbst 1901. Die Zeile aus der "Iphigenie" fiel mir ein, wo es heißt: "Elektra mit ihrer Feuerzunge" und im Spazierengehen phantasierte ich über die Figur Elektra, nicht ohne eine gewisse Lust am Gegensatze zu der "verteufelt humanen" Atmosphäre der Iphigenie. Auch die Verwandtschaft mit Hamlet und der Gegensatz zu diesem ging mir durch den Kopf. (*Briefe,* II, 383).

My point of departure was the character of Electra, as I well remember. I read the Sophoclean play in the garden and in the forest, in the fall of 1901. The line from "Iphigenia" came to mind where it says: "Electra with her fiery tongue," and as I walked I fantasized about the figure of Electra, not without some pleasure in the contrast to the "devilishly humane" atmosphere of Iphigenia. The similarity and contrast with Hamlet also went through my mind.[6]

In a diary entry of 17 July 1904, Hofmannsthal gave a very similar account:

Der erste Einfall kam mir anfangs September 1901. Ich las damals, um für die "Pompilia" gewisses zu lernen, den "Richard III" und die "Elektra" von Sophokles. Sogleich verwandelte sich die Gestalt dieser Elektra in eine andere. Auch das Ende stand sogleich da: daß sie nicht mehr weiterleben kann, daß, wenn der Streich gefallen ist, ihr Leben und ihr Eingeweide ihr entstürzen muß, wie der Drohne, wenn sie die Königin befruchtet hat, mit dem befruchtenden Stachel zugleich Eingeweide und Leben entstürzen. Die Verwandtschaft und der Gegensatz zu Hamlet waren mir auffallend. Als Stil schwebte mir vor, etwas Gegensätzliches zur "Iphigenie" zu machen, etwas worauf das Wort nicht passe: "dieses gräcisierende Produkt erschien mir beim erneuten Lesen verteufelt human." (*Aufzeichnungen,* 131)

The first idea came in early September 1901. I was reading "Richard III" and Sophocles' "Electra" in order to learn some things for "Pompilia." Immediately the figure of Electra was transformed. The ending was also there at once: that she cannot go on living, that, once the blow has fallen, her life and entrails must rush from her, just as life and entrails together with the fertilizing sting rush from the drone once it has impregnated the queen. The resemblance and contrast to Hamlet were striking. As for style, I thought of doing

something opposite from "Iphigenia," something that would not fit the description: "this hellenizing product appeared to me on rereading devilishly humane."

Letters written in 1901 and 1902 continue to refer to plans for this drama, but it was not until the encounter with Eysoldt and Reinhardt that Hoffmansthal sat down to write the play.[7]

## *ELECTRA* AND *SALOME*

*Salome* and *Electra* are now associated in our minds as Strauss operas. But Hofmannsthal was skittish about the relationship of his play to Wilde's. Strauss apparently became interested in Hofmannsthal's play after seeing a production of it at the Little Theatre in Berlin. When Strauss worried that the two plays might be too similar, Hofmannsthal in a letter disputed his argument: "Es sind zwei Einakter, jeder hat einen Frauennamen, beide spielen im Altertum und beide wurden in Berlin von der Eysoldt kreiert: ich glaube, darauf läuft die ganze Ähnlichkeit hinaus" [They are both one-act plays, each is named after a woman, both are set in antiquity, and both were premièred in Berlin by Eysoldt; I think that is all there is to the resemblances.].[8] This statement clearly understates the similarities and the influence of Wilde's play. Hofmannsthal wrote his play for the Little Theatre in full knowledge that Electra would be played by Gertrud Eysoldt, who was famous for her Salome, and he saw Eysoldt in Gorky's *Lower Depths* while working on his play. The German theatrical history of *Salome* stands squarely behind Hofmannsthal's play.

Wilde's play changes the biblical narrative in three important ways. First, Salome is motivated by her own passion for John and acts out of the love/hatred of a rejected woman. Second, Salome is killed at the end. Finally, Wilde elaborates the biblical motif of Salome's dance and gives it an explicitly bloody setting:

> HEROD Ah, thou art to dance with naked feet! 'Tis well! 'Tis well! Thy little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees. ... No, no, she is going to dance on blood! There is blood spilt on the ground. She must not dance on blood. It were an evil omen.
>
> HERODIAS What is it to thee if she dance on blood? Thou hast waded deep enough in it. ...
>
> HEROD What is it to me? Ah! look at the moon! she has become red. She has become red as blood. Ah! the prophet prophesied truly. He prophesied that the moon would become as blood. Did he not prophesy it? All of ye heard him prophesying it. And now the moon has become as blood. Do ye not see it?[9]

Thus, Wilde's play places a heroine within a complex of themes and motifs that involves sexual frustration, blood, dance, and death. The crazed heroine's fatal

dance of death at the moment of triumph has no precedent in Sophocles' play, but it is quite obvious that she conflates central motifs of Wilde's play.

### *ELECTRA* AND *IPHIGENIE AUF TAURIS*

For the German bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century, the exiled Iphigenia, "seeking the land of the Greeks with her soul," was the great paradigm of neoclassical hellenism, and as such mediated the understanding of Greece as a vision of beauty and serenity. Goethe himself had his doubts about the play. In a letter to Schiller, he spoke of his "hellenizing drama" as "devilishly humane." In his later autobiography, he drew attention to the "dark and terrifying elements" in the background of his play. Goethe's younger contemporary Heinrich von Kleist had responded to these elements in a play modeled on the *Bacchae,* in which he opposed to Iphigenia's Apollonian triumph the Dionysiac and destructive frenzy of Penthesilea.[10]

A very similar protest motivates Hofmannsthal's *Electra*. The deliberate and provocative contrast with Iphigenia was part of the original conception of his protagonist. The point is so obvious that critics have ignored it and have not traced the precise and detailed manner in which the contrast is developed. One might begin with Hofmannsthal's memory of Goethe's phrase about Electra with her fiery tongue, which occurs in Orestes' narrative of the matricide:

> Elektren gibt Orest sich zu erkennen;
> Sie bläst der Rache Feuer in ihm auf,
> Das vor der Mutter heilger Gegenwart
> In sich zurückgebrannt war. Stille führt
> Sie ihn zum Orte, wo sein Vater fiel,
> Wo eine alte, leichte Spur des frech
> Vergoßnen Blutes oftgewaschnen Boden
> Mit blassen, ahnungsvollen Streifen färbte.
> Mit ihrer Feuerzunge schilderte
> Sie jeden Umstand der verruchten Tat,
> .....
> Hier drang sie jenen alten Dolch ihm auf,
> Der schon in Tantals Haus grimmig wütete,
> Und Klytämnestra fiel durch Sohnes Hand.
>
> Orestes made himself known to Electra;
> She fanned the fire of revenge in him
> Which in his mother's sacred presence had
> Died down to embers. Silently she led
> Him to the place at which his father died
> And where an old, faint trace of wantonly
> Spilled blood still stained the frequently washed floor

With ominous and palely faded streaks.
She there described for him with tongue of fire
Each circumstance of that outrageous deed,
.....
She forced upon him there that ancient dagger
Which had in Tantalus's house raged grimly,
And Clytemnestra died by her son's hand.[11]

The passage contains several motifs that Hofmannsthal develops in detail. None of the ancient versions specifies Orestes' weapon. Goethe resorts to the Gothic motif of a cursed weapon that links the generational sequence of crimes. "[T]hat ancient dagger/ Which had in Tantalus's house raged grimly" becomes in Hofmannsthal's drama Clytaemnestra's ax, which Electra guards for her brother's use. More interesting is the phrase:

And where an old, faint trace of wantonly
Spilled blood still stained the frequently washed floor
With ominous and palely faded streaks.

The faint trace of blood may be seen as an image of the distance between Goethe's play and the violence of his sources. Hofmannsthal's play, on the other hand, swims in blood. The deliberate contrast with Goethe is apparent in the opening scene, where a group of maidservants viciously gossip about Electra. They indignantly repeat her accusations, including this one:

daß wir
mit Wasser und mit immer frischem Wasser
das ewige Blut des Mordes von der Diele
abspülen.

to wash
with water and with more and more fresh-drawn
water the everlasting blood of murder
off the floors – [12]

That is a memory, via *Macbeth*, of the Goethean passage. It may also be seen as a return to the theme of blood in the *Oresteia*, especially to the carpet scene of the *Agamemnon*, in which the stage is metaphorically transformed into an ocean of blood. The distinctive aspect of blood in *Electra*, however, is its compulsive association with sexuality, and as we shall see, this association is part of Hofmannsthal's provocative challenge to Goethe.

The opening scene of *Electra* shows us a group of women on a darkly lit stage. When Electra enters, the stage direction specifies: "*sie ist allein mit den Flecken roten Lichtes, die aus den Zweigen des Feigenbaumes schräg über den*

*Boden und auf die Mauern fallen, wie Blutflecke*" [*she is alone with the patches of red light which fall like bloodstains from the branches of the fig tree obliquely across the ground and upon the walls*] (pp. 14, 11). We see the courtyard of an oriental palace, but it is also a red-light district.[13] Sex and violence come together in the image of the maidservants conceiving children on the blood-drenched steps of the palace (pp. 13, 10), in the ambiguous groaning behind closed doors (pp. 17, 15), and in Electra's laconic description of the world around her: "sie kreißen oder sie morden" [they give birth or kill] (pp. 22, 19). That such lurid color is part of fin-de-siècle decadence in the manner of *Salome* requires no further comment. But it is also the answer to Goethe's explicitly asexual construction of classical Greece.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dramatists who wrote plays on subjects of Greek tragedy were usually dissatisfied with the limited and unsentimental treatment of love in their sources, and for this reason they would add erotic subplots. Opposition to the indiscriminate use of such subplots led to the demand for a "tragédie sans l'amour." Racine, who in his *Phèdre* had given the great portrayal of a woman destroyed by passion, wrote such a play in his *Athalie*, a scriptural drama written for performance by girls in a convent school. The play was very famous in the eighteenth century because it employed ancient dramaturgy with a strict avoidance of any erotic motif. Goethe in his *Iphigenie auf Tauris* took the ideal of the "tragedy without love" one step farther and made it the subject of the play itself. In several eighteenth-century versions of the subject, Iphigenia fends off the advances of unwelcome suitors.[14] Goethe follows this motif when in the first act of his play Iphigenia turns down a marriage proposal from King Thoas. But in Goethe's play alone, this denial is a rejection of marriage as such. To the great tragic heroines destroyed by passion in ancient tragedy, whether Phaedra, Medea, or Dido, Goethe opposed Iphigenia, the saint and sister who rescues Orestes from his madness. The madness of Orestes, however, had been reinterpreted by Racine in sexual terms: the Oreste of *Andromaque* is mad because Hermione does not return his passion. Thus, the psychological reintegration of Goethe's Orestes through the healing power of his sister is itself a psychosexual drama, albeit of a peculiar kind. The saintly humanity of its moral vision rests on a vow of chastity.

The ancient playwrights derived the name "Electra" from "a-lektron," "without bed." The daughters of the "overbedded" Clytaemnestra are both unbedded, and in a peculiar fashion *Electra*, no less than *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, is a "tragédie sans l'amour." But to the voluntary renunciation of Iphigenia, Hofmannsthal opposes the enforced frustration of Electra. The risqué elements of the play, including Electra's lesbian attack on her sister and the memories of incestuous rape by the ghost of the father, directly parallel the relationship of Goethe's Iphigenia with her father and brother. Iphigenia dwells on the memory of her happy childhood, at the center of which stands the identification

of her father as a thoroughly good man. Electra is haunted by the overbearing presence and demand for revenge of a ghoulish father, who visits her at night and "der mich zwang alles zu wissen, wie es zwischen Mann und Weib zugeht" [forced me to know all that goes on between man and woman] (pp. 63, 64) – an anti-Goethean move by an inhabitant of turn-of-the-century Vienna. The same is true of the relationship between Electra and Chrysothemis. The sister's selfless and chaste love becomes the paradigm for the relationship of man and woman in Goethe's play. Electra's sisterly love is of a different kind, and surely we are meant to hear Goethe when Electra woos Chrysothemis with the words:

> Von jetzt an will ich deine Schwester sein,
> so wie ich niemals deine Schwester war! (p. 51)
>
> From now on
> I will be your sister as I have never
> been your sister before!

The intensely and self-consciously claustrophobic atmosphere of *Electra* is also part of the attack on the neoclassical subtext. In his "Scenic Instructions," Hofmannsthal gave "Enge, Unentfliehbarkeit, Abgeschlossenheit" [narrowness, lack of escapes, enclosedness] as the characteristic features of the setting[15]; and in a letter written shortly after the première, he complained of the play's "compulsive claustrophobia and terrible lack of light" (*Briefe*, II, 132).

Hofmannsthal's claustrophobic spaces are generally metaphors of the womb. The cave is the favored image. In *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, the oracle warning Laius against a son takes this form:

> Der König hüte sich
> und stehe an dem Bette seiner Frau,
> gewappnet und mit einem nackten Schwert,
> wie vor der Höhle, draus sein schlimmster Feind
> hervorzubrechen lauert.
>
> Let the king be on his guard
> and stand at his wife's bed
> armed and with a naked sword
> as if at the cave from which his worst enemy
> is lurking to burst forth.

Images of this kind are obsessive during Hofmannsthal's works of this period, and sometimes they are involuntarily funny, as in his sketches to a Pentheus drama:

Ein symbolisches Motiv: daß Pentheus seinen eigenen Palast nicht kennt: nicht die

Grotte, nicht die unterirdischen Teiche, nicht den Schacht, der in den Berg führt durch eine Falltür, (an dieser steht er dann und schreit hinab: Mutter, Mutter!) – Cadmus verhöhnt ihn drob. (*Dramen*, II, 526)

A symbolic motif: that Pentheus does not know his own palace; not the vault, not the grotto, not the subterranean ponds, not the shaft that leads into the mountain through a hatch door, (he stands over it and calls down: Mother, Mother!) – Cadmus scorns him for it.

In *Electra*, the cave image appears prominently in a passage in which Electra reacts with disgust to her sister's desire for a normal life as wife and mother:

> Pfui,
> die's denkt, pfui, die's mit Namen nennt! Die Höhle
> zu sein, drin nach dem Mord dem Mörder wohl ist;
> das Tier zu spielen, das dem schlimmern Tier
> Ergetzung bietet. (p. 20)
>
> Fie,
> the woman who thinks of it, who calls it by name!
> To be the cave the murderer enjoys
> after the murder; to play the beast giving
> pleasure to the fouler beast. (p. 17)

The setting of *Electra* in fact consists of a regress of claustrophobic spaces: the palace, the rooms within the palace, Clytaemnestra's womb are arranged like a set of Chinese boxes. Movement within this space is never free of terror: the one servant who admires Electra is pushed through the door into the palace and whipped (pp. 12, 9), and the sound of whips accompanies the procession that surrounds Clytaemnestra's arrival (pp. 24, 22). Flight and chase are also prominent motifs. Twice in the play, Electra envisages the circumstances of Clytaemnestra's death, and on both occasions her death involves a chase. The first time, she thinks of Orestes chasing Clytaemnestra through the basement of the palace to the deepest pit where the ghost of Agamemnon resides (pp. 23, 21). In the second vision, Electra tells Clytaemnestra how Orestes will chase her and how (in circumstances not unlike Pyrrhus's hesitation) she will be suspended in nameless terror until Orestes drops his ax (pp. 40, 38).

Although the association in Hofmannsthal's *Electra* of claustrophobic fear with sexuality is well motivated in terms of his other works from that period, the systematic opposition to the spatial imagination of *Iphigenie auf Tauris* is highly significant. Goethe's asexual drama occurs in a setting that stresses openness and release. The play's opening lines establish the dominant sense of space:

Heraus in eure Schatten, rege Wipfel
Des alten, heilgen, dichtbelaubten Haines, ...

Enclosure here is benign: moving out of the temple, Iphigenia enters not the open and sunny plain, but the shadowy space of a grove. The play is familiar with terrifying enclosure, the "iron band" that a god forged around the brows of the family of Atreus (331), the "klanglos-dumpfe Höhlenreich der Nacht" [the soundless dull cave kingdom of night] (1005), where Orestes stores the memories of his horrible deed, the prison of his madness. But when at the end of the third act he is cured by his sister, the world lies before him as an open and sunny plain after a thunderstorm, and claustrophobic spaces are evoked only to be banished:

Die Eumeniden ziehn, ich höre sie,
Zum Tartarus und schlagen hinter sich
Die ehrnen Tore fernabdonnernd zu. (1359–1361)

To Tartarus pass the Eumenides,
I hear their going, and they close behind them
The doors of bronze with far-receding thunder.

Iphigenia returns once more to the claustrophobic vision of bondage at the end of the fourth act, when in the *Parzenlied* she conjures up the world of past violence and dwells on the image of Tantalus as the "exiled ancestor in nocturnal caves" (1762–1763).[16] But the play moves away from this vision to end in release and liberation.

The sense of space that governs Goethe's play appears in the stage directions of nineteenth-century versions of Greek tragedy with which Hofmannsthal was familiar. In his "Scenic Instructions," Hofmannsthal expressly forbids "jene Säulen, jene breiten Treppenstufen, all jene antikisierenden Banalitäten, welche mehr geeignet sind, zu ernüchtern als suggestiv zu wirken" [those columns, those broad steps, all those hellenizing banalities more suited to sobering up the spectator than to having a suggestive effect] (*Prosa*, II, 81). The space of *Electra* is far from such visions of openness. Just as Hofmannsthal resexualized Goethe's asexual drama, so he foregrounded the claustrophobic terror lurking in its background.

## HOFMANNSTHAL AND THE SOPHOCLEAN *ELECTRA*

The Sophoclean *Electra* departs in significant ways from the versions of Aeschylus and Euripides, and as we shall see, it is precisely these departures that Hofmannsthal engages in his version. Although different in all other respects, Aeschylus and Euripides each place the matricide at the dramaturgical

and moral center of the play. In both plays, Orestes pretends to be the messenger of his own death and gains entrance into the palace with this disguise. In both plays, the recognition between brother and sister occurs before Orestes carries out his plan. Recognition and disguise are subsidiary features in a plot that moves toward the realization of the horror of matricide as its central event.

At first sight, the Sophoclean play shows an almost perverse lack of interest in the problematical nature of matricide, as the playwright pursues the question: what would happen if Electra heard the false news of her brother's death before learning the truth about him? The instrumental motifs of disguise and recognition catch the dramatist's attention, and matricide is relegated to the status of a traditional and uncomplicated donnée.

This switch of priorities gives its distinctive shape to the Sophoclean drama, which unfolds as the fluctuating sequence of Electra's hope and despair. When her sister, Chrysothemis, tells her about the mother's ominous dreams, Electra is elated and gathers confidence for the ensuing confrontation with Clytaemnestra in which she savagely demolishes her mother's claim to have killed Agamemnon out of just revenge. She triumphs, and a humiliated Clytaemnestra performs her rites and prayers culminating in an unspoken wish. As if in response to that silent prayer, the messenger arrives with the news of Orestes' death. Through his psychologically intricate management of the triangular dialogue situation, Sophocles reinforces the effect of Electra's disillusionment. The messenger addresses Clytaemnestra, but the dramatist wants the audience to attend to Electra's response. Three times Electra seeks to establish herself as the proper audience; three times Clytaemnestra tells the messenger to ignore her. His elaborate account of Orestes' death – much the longest messenger report in Greek tragedy – has, from the poet's perspective, its proper listener in the forgotten Electra, the neglected mourner among an official audience who take little trouble to conceal their satisfaction.

With an almost sadistic pleasure in his dramaturgical skill, Sophocles adds three twists to the isolation of Electra. First, Chrysothemis returns from the father's grave with news of the signs of Orestes' return that she found there. She is right but Electra now "knows better," and the signs only deepen her despair. Second, Electra fails to persuade her sister to become an accomplice in carrying out Orestes' task: when Chrysothemis leaves, Electra has lost her sister as well as her brother. Third, in the play's most famous scene – an occasion for virtuoso display by Hellenistic actors – the disguised Orestes carries the urn with his own ashes to the palace, evidence of the truth of his story. He encounters Electra, and once agains she becomes the recipient of a message not intended for her. Slowly Orestes recognizes the identity of this half-crazed woman, and the grief he has unwittingly inflicted on his sister begins to dawn on him. She asks to hold the urn, but when he sees the passionate devotion with which she clings to him in this residual form, he cannot continue in his course of

deception. He takes the urn away from her in a moment that is for her the ultimate and most gratuitous form of deprivation. Out of this moment the recognition arises, and the play moves swiftly toward its conclusion.

From this description of the play, it may appear as if the drama of recognition had emancipated itself from the drama of matricide. But a moment late in the play reestablishes the connection. Electra, standing guard at the door to the palace, hears her mother's death scream and exclaims: "Strike again if you have the strength." The line is famous and problematical. Seventeenth-century critics found it difficult to reconcile this unrestrained outburst of fierce hatred with their notions of appropriate behavior for a princess. Corneille in his second *Discours* blamed Electra for "l'inhumanité dont elle encourage son frère à ce parricide" and considered it incompatible with her character as a "vertueuse opprimée"[17]; and Racine wrote in the margins of his copy of Sophocles: "Ce vers est un peu cruel pour une fille; mais c'est une fille depuis longtemps enragée contre sa mère."[18] Adapters of the play devised ingenious solutions, such as transferring the sentence to Clytaemnestra, in whose mouth it expresses the defiance of the hardened criminal even at the point of death.

The scandalized neoclassical critic is usually a good guide to interpretative cruxes, even though his own solutions may fail to persuade. The discrepancy between Electra's unquestioned nobility and the ferocity of her "[s]trike again" is a cardinal fact about the Sophoclean play. Its plot makes visible the psychological cost of the protagonist's dedication. Through the drama of recognition, the warped ruins of Electra's noble self become starkly apparent. At the same time, it becomes evident that Sophocles' drama has been all along the tragedy of a protagonist shaped and distorted by the burden of revenge on the mother.

Aeschylus's Electra is forgotten after the recognition; the Euripidean character becomes an accessory to the matricide. The Sophoclean Electra is posted outside the palace and becomes a vicarious participant by witnessing the event in her imagination. In the context of available dramaturgical options, this Sophoclean decision is significant: the deed that Electra need not do because of Orestes' timely arrival is also a deed that she cannot do. It is part of her fate to be incapacitated for action.

A look at Sophocles' earlier *Antigone* illustrates the point. *Antigone* is, like *Electra,* a play in which the heroine fulfills her destiny in unswerving devotion to a kinsman. In both plays, the heroine's inflexible resolve is underscored through contrast with her sister's pragmatic accommodation. But here the resemblances stop. Antigone does her deed and dies for it, but she suffers no diminution or distortion in her being. Within the narrow limits Greek tragedy establishes as the appropriate sphere of action for a woman, we are meant to think of her as going beyond a woman's courage; but her act, far from unwomanly, is the very paradigm of sisterly devotion. And her suffering and isolation, however intense, are short in duration: she becomes Antigone and

fulfills her fate in the short space between her brother's death and her own suicide. Hence, the peculiar bloom or freshness of her tragedy to which Hegel responded so strongly. By contrast a savage deficiency marks Electra at the moment of her "[s]trike again." She does not do the deed that she had long anticipated, but time has corroded and stunted her.

Although Hofmannsthal follows the skeletal action of the Sophoclean play, he has very little interest in the drama of recognition, which he manages in a much simpler fashion by introducing motifs from *The Odyssey* and the Euripidean version.[19] But he is keenly interested in the theme of the protagonist's incapacitation for action to which the drama of recognition leads in the Sophoclean version. His heroine utters the obligatory "[s]trike again," but that moment is upstaged by an innovation in which the theme of her radical inability to act finds much more explicit expression. When after the recognition scene Orestes declares his intention to act speedily, she celebrates action as the "bed of rest for the soul" and contrasts the impotent and corrosive emotions of love and hatred with the fulfillment of those who act:

> nur der ist selig,
> der seine Tat zu tuen kommt! und selig,
> wer ihn anrühren darf, und wer das Beil
> ihm aus der Erde gräbt, und wer die Fackel
> ihm hält, und wer die Tür ihm auftut, selig,
> wer an der Türe horchen darf. (pp. 67–68)

> only he is blessed
> who is coming to do his deed! And blessed
> who may touch him and who digs up the ax
> for him out of the earth and who holds the torch
> for him and who opens the door for him, blessed
> is he who may listen at the door. (p. 69)

But when Orestes is summoned by his mentor to enter the palace, she forgets to give him the ax that she had preserved for him during her waiting, and she is overwhelmed by despair at the fact:

ELEKTRA *allein, in entsetzlicher Spannung. Sie läuft auf einem Strich vor der Tür hin und her, mit gesenktem Kopf, wie das gefangene Tier im Käfig. Plötzlich steht sie still und sagt*

> Ich habe ihm das Beil nicht geben können!
> Sie sind gegangen, und ich habe ihm
> das Beil nicht geben können. Es sind keine
> Götter im Himmel! (p. 68)

ELECTRA *alone, in terrible suspense. She runs to and fro in a single straight line in front*

*of the door, with lowered head, like a captive animal in its cage. Suddenly she stands still and says*

I could not give him the ax!
They have gone, and I could not
give him the ax. There are no gods
in heaven! (p. 70)

This emphatic moment of failure climaxes the play's pervasive concern with distorted relationships between self and action. In one of his diary entries, Hofmannsthal lists action, work, and the child as instruments of social integration; speaks of "transformation" and "self-abandonment" in action and then alludes to his "ironic" treatment of the relationship of self and action in *Electra* (*Aufzeichnungen,* 217). The three women in the play are differently crippled in their capacities for action as the result of Agamemnon's murder. In the case of Chrysothemis, the maternal sense of time as growth and fulfillment has given way to barren waste, and she watches with fascinated horror the useless passage of her own life:

Es ist ja nicht ein Wasser, das vorbeirinnt,
es ist ja nicht ein Garn, das von der Spule
herunterfliegt, ich bins ja, ich! (p. 20)

For it is not water which is rushing by,
and it is not yarn which is rolling off,
rolling off the spool; it is I, I! (pp. 17–18)

For Clytaemnestra, the finality of the crime has destroyed any relationship between self and action:

Und wir selber, *wir*!
und unsre Taten! Taten! Wir und Taten!
Was das für Worte sind! Bin ich denn noch,
die es getan? Und wenn! getan! getan! (p. 35)

And *we*, we ourselves! And our deeds!
Deeds! We and deeds! What odd words!
For am I still the same who has done the deed?
And if so! Done! Done! Done! (p. 33)

She is not hypocritical when she remembers nothing about the deed itself:

Erst wars vorher,
dann wars vorbei – dazwischen hab ich nichts
getan. (p. 35)

Now it was
before, and then it was past – in between
I did nothing. (p. 34)

But she is terrified by the consequences of what she can no longer remember:

Kann man denn
vergehen, lebend, wie ein faules Aas?
kann man zerfallen, wenn man gar nicht krank ist?
zerfallen, wachen Sinnes, wie ein Kleid,
zerfressen von den Motten? (p. 31)

Is it then possible
to perish, alive, like a rotting carcass?
Can one waste away and not be sick?
Go to wrack, with waking senses, like a robe
eaten up by moths? (p. 29)

In some respects, an even more powerful account of her dissolving self appears in the stage direction that describes the arrival of Clytaemnestra and her train:

*An den grell erleuchteten Fenstern klirrt und schlürft ein hastiger Zug vorüber: es ist ein Zerren, ein Schleppen von Tieren, ein gedämpftes Keifen, ein schnell ersticktes Aufschreien, das Niedersausen einer Peitsche, ein Aufraffen, ein Weitertaumln.* (p. 24).

*A hurried procession passes the glaringly lit-up windows, clanking and shuffling by: it is a tugging and dragging of animals, a muted scolding, a quickly stifled scream, the whistling sound of a whip, a recovering and staggering onward.* (p. 22)

In her despair, she tries to establish herself through rituals: there is a right way of doing everything, and if everything is done rightly, the chaos at the center is overcome:

Es gibt Bräuche.
Es muß für alles richtige Bräuche geben.
Wie man ein Wort und einen Satz ausspricht,
darauf kommt vieles an. Auch auf die Stunde.
Und ob man satt ist, oder nüchtern. (p. 29)

There are
rites. There must be proper rites for everything.
How one pronounces a word, and a sentence,
much depends on that. Also on the hour.
And whether one is full, or fasting. (p. 27)

Compulsive repetition also governs the life of Electra. The worship of her father has become a ritual for her: in the very opening lines of the play, the time is given as "her hour, her time of day when she howls for her father." She is fiercely absorbed by the memory of the past and her imaginary anticipation of revenge, thoughts which occupy a much greater proportion of the play than they do in the Sophoclean version. But if Hofmannsthal designs for Electra a special participation in the deed, the guardianship of the ax, he introduces the motif only to mark her failure: in the end she does not give her brother the ax that he does not, in any event, need.

Hofmannsthal's disabled Electra is an interpretation of the Sophoclean character in light of Hamlet and Iphigenia. The Hamletesque dimensions of Electra's failure to give Orestes her ax are obvious. But there is also a systematic opposition to Iphigenia. In her decisive soliloquy, Goethe's heroine asks: "Hat denn zur unerhörten Tat der Mann allein das Recht?" [Do men alone, then, have the right to do unheard-of feats?]; and through her decision to tell the truth, she commits an act that defines her and integrates the society around her. Iphigenia acts and, no less than Antigone, does so in a manner peculiarly appropriate to her sense of self as a woman. Electra's compulsive and futile activity of digging up the ax marks the distance from the achieved act celebrated at the crisis of Goethe's play.

The heroine's death is certainly in keeping with Hofmannsthal's portrayal of Electra's incapacitated self. What appears as a major departure from the traditional plot also renders explicit the problematical state of the heroine that is implicit in the Sophoclean version. One may well argue that Electra's death is the most "Sophoclean" feature of Hofmannsthal's version, and that it radicalized tendencies in the ancient version that its author was prevented from pursuing by the conventions of his craft. It was beyond the freedom of the ancient playwright to change outcomes dictated by tradition, and in the tradition Electra survived. But playwrights sometimes elaborated their plots in such a manner as to render the traditional outcome questionable or meaningless. The *deus ex machina* was the favorite device for turning a modernized plot to its preestablished ending. In a number of Euripidean plays, the discrepancy between plot and outcome becomes a source of ironic effect. What the *deus ex machina* establishes is so obviously not a solution that the audience are invited to envisage conclusions that follow more logically from the course of events.

A *deus ex machina* of this kind appears in *Philoctetes,* a play that has many affinities with the Sophoclean *Electra.* In both plays, time and hatred have violently twisted the noble but inflexible constitutions of the protagonists so violently that one may ask whether these figures are no longer or all too much themselves? Can one imagine a return to normal life for either of them? In the *Philoctetes,* the obstinate and self-absorbed protagonist refuses to travel the path that will bring victory to the Greeks and glory to himself because he cannot do so without benefiting his enemies. The satisfaction of his hatred has come to

dominate everything else, and only the appearance of Heracles, once the hero's mentor and now a paradigm of suffering and transfiguration, frees the hero from both physical and mental anguish. It takes a leap of faith to follow this ending. The *Electra* simply ends without saying anything whatever about the future of the heroine. To kill the heroine, as Hofmannsthal does, is to take the plot of the Sophoclean play to its radical conclusion and develop it in the other direction from that of the *Philoctetes*. Twentieth-century German scholars have promptly and with some justice read Hofmannsthal's ending into Sophocles' play. Thus, Schadewaldt calls Electra's "[s]trike again" "virtually her own death cry."[20]

In the Ariadne letter, one of his most important interpretative statements about *Electra,* Hofmannsthal draws out the thematic implications of Electra's death. He dwells on the paradox that one cannot live without changing and forgetting, but that all human dignity is inextricably linked to memory and loyalty. Electra is for him the paradigm of a figure identified, petrified, and destroyed by loyalty; and he compares the opposition of Electra and Chrysothemis with its gentler reenactment in the figures of Ariadne and Zerbinetta (*Prosa,* III, 138–139). The paradoxical nature of loyalty forms an important link between Hofmannsthal's and Sophocles' versions of the Electra myth. Dignity and nobility are defining features of the Sophoclean protagonist, as they are not of the Aeschylean and Euripidean Electra figures. Nobility is not the first thing that comes to mind in Hofmannsthal's lurid portrayal of his heroine, whom he likes to show in the postures of a caged and wild animal. But in an important moment in the play's opening scene, one of the maids defies the malicious gossip of the others and expresses her enthusiastic admiration for Electra:

> Es gibt nichts auf der Welt,
> das königlicher ist als sie. Sie liegt
> in Lumpen auf der Schwelle, aber niemand,
> *Schreiend*
> niemand ist hier im Haus, der ihren Blick
> aushält! (p. 12)

> There is nothing in the world that is nobler
> than she. She lies in rags stretched out
> on the threshold, but there is no one,
> *Shouting*
> there is no one in this house who can endure
> her look! (p. 9)

The Sophoclean Electra sacrifices her life by transforming it into a stylized memorial for her murdered father. In her ignoble environment, such a memorial can only take the external form of humiliation – just as in *Philoctetes,*

true nobility hides in the protagonist's rags and cave rather than in the public world of the Trojan War. But Electra is not Cordelia, and the playwright dwells on the savage and self-enclosed aspect of nobility under such conditions. Hofmannsthal pushes this theme further. The death of his Electra resolves the final state of the protagonist in the opposite direction of the *Philoctetes*. The transfigured Heracles calls Philoctetes back to health, fame, and an active life. Electra's death spells out the consequences of such a protagonist's life in a world without miracles. As Hofmannsthal puts it in a late diary entry, she is destroyed by the content of her life, like a jar by the water that turns to ice inside it: "Electra is no longer Electra, because she dedicated herself to being only and nothing but Electra" (*Aufzeichnungen*, 201).

But ambiguities remain. Does Electra's death confirm or transcend the destructive petrification of her all too loyal self? The text need not give a definitive answer to such a question. In fact, it does not, and Hofmannsthal's own remarks about the play are also ambivalent. In the text of the play – as opposed to the libretto of the opera – Electra remains an outsider at the moment of triumph just as she had been at the moment of retribution. The parallels are precise. Electra fails to give Orestes the ax and is absent from the place of execution. After the death of Aegisthus, the inside of the house turns into a place of orgiastic celebration. Electra, however, remains outside. When Chrysothemis asks her whether she does not hear the music, Electra answers that she hears it because the music and entire festival emanate from inside her. But an ocean weighs on her limbs so that she cannot move. Implored again by Chrysothemis, she remains standing:

> *sieht starr auf sie hin*
> Schweig und tanze. Alle müssen
> herbei! hier schließt euch an! Ich trag die Last
> des Glückes, und ich tanze vor euch her.
> Wer glücklich is wie wir, dem ziemt nur eins:
> schweigen und tanzen!
> *Sie tut noch einige Schritte des angespanntesten Triumphes und stürzt zusammen.* (p. 75)

> *stops, looks at her fixedly*
> Be silent and dance. All must
> approach! Here join behind me! I bear the burden
> of happiness, and I dance before you.
> For him who is happy as we, it behooves him to do
> only this: to be silent and dance!
> *She takes a few more steps of the tensest triumph and collapses.* (p. 77)

Her words speak of happiness and dance, but the stage directions about her gesture and movements confirm self-enclosure and petrification. Moreover,

her final moments are far from the triumphal dance she had envisaged in her opening soliloquy.[21]

In the diary entry about the genesis of the play, Hofmannsthal compares the death of Electra to that of a drone. The comparison balances waste and destruction against fertilization, and it supports a positive reading of Electra's death as a moment of fulfillment. On the other hand, in a letter written shortly after the première, Hofmannsthal distances himself from the play's "intolerable" claustrophobia and looks forward to release in a projected but never written play about "Orestes in Delphi." The ending of the opera partly resolves the ambiguities of the play in the direction of transfiguration or at least consolation. The change is largely governed by the conventions of the genre. The dramatic soprano cannot "[b]e silent and dance." In the additional words that Hofmannsthal provided for the composer, the operatic Electra becomes a cousin of Isolde and Brünnhilde, and sings:

> Wenn einer auf mich sieht,
> muß er den Tod empfangen oder muß
> vergehen vor Lust.
> .....
> Ai! Liebe tötet! aber keiner fährt dahin
> und hat die Liebe nicht gekannt!
>
> Whoever looks at me
> must receive death or expire in love.
> .....
> Ai! Love kills, but nobody lives
> without knowing love.

In the Ariadne letter, Hofmannsthal's interpretation of his earlier work is shaped by his turn to comedy and the theme of transformation. Thus, Ariadne is an Electra who only appears to die, and in retrospect Electra becomes her forerunner:

> Die unmeßbaren Tiefen der eigenen Natur, das Band von uns zu einem Unnennbaren, Ewigdauernden hin, das unseren Kinderzeiten, ja den Zeiten des Ungeborenen in uns nahe war, können sich von innen her zu einer bleibenden, peinlichen Starrnis verschließen: kurz vor dem Tode, ahnen wir, würden sie sich auftun: etwas der Art, das sich kaum sagen läßt, kündigt sich in den Minuten an, die dem Tod der Elektra vorangehen. (*Prosa*, III, 139)
>
> The immeasurable depths of one's own nature, our ties to something unnamable and eternal, so near us in our childhood or before our birth, can close up from the inside into a permanent and painful rigor: shortly before death, we sense that they may open again; something of this kind, barely sayable, announces itself in the minutes that precede the death of Electra.

Whether this is the Electra of the play or of the opera remains unanswered.

## NOTES

1 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Briefe, 1900–1909* (Wien, 1937), 132. (See also *Briefe, 1890–1901* [Berlin, 1935].) Page references to these two volumes are included parenthetically in my text.

2 Hofmannsthal, *Dramen*, II, in *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, ed. Herbert Steiner (Frankfurt am Main, 1947–1959), 501–530.

3 Klaus A. Bohnenkamp, "Deutsche Antikenübertragungen als Grundlage der Griechendramen Hofmannsthals," *Euphorion*, 70 (1976), 198–202.

4 *Hofmannsthal im Urteil seiner Kritiker. Dokumente zur Wirkungsgeschichte Hugo von Hofmannsthals in Deutschland*, ed. Gotthart Wunberg (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), p. 117.

5 Hofmannsthal, *Aufzeichnungen*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 131.

6 Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

7 It is not obvious why Hofmannsthal should have looked at Sophocles' *Electra* rather than some other ancient tragedy when he was thinking about a play taken from *The Ring and the Book*. The play seems to have had an exemplary character for him. In 1892, he took a volume of Sophocles along with him on a summer vacation, and in a letter written during that vacation to Richard Beer-Hofmann, he mentions a plan for a Renaissance tragedy to be constructed according to the following strange set of ingredients: a novella by Bandello, eleven genuine letters of a lady, the diary of Marie Bashkirteff, a few nuances of his own, a stage property of Shakespeare, and a monologue of Sophocles' *Electra* (Hofmannsthal, *Briefe, 1890–1901*, 1, 144). This is the only reference by the very young Hofmannsthal to a particular play by Sophocles. Perhaps he read it at school with the relentless attention to detail in which one read Greek texts in a German Gymnasium. In any event, the Sophoclean *Electra* appears very early as a staple of Hofmannsthal's literary furniture.

8 Richard Strauss, *Richard Strauss Hugo von Hofmannsthal Briefwechsel*, edd. Franz and Alice Strauss, rev. Willi Schuh (Zurich, 1952), 27 April 1906, p. 16.

9 Oscar Wilde, Salome *and Other Plays. The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 9 (New York, 1927), 165–166.

10 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zurich, 1949), 20, 872; 10, 700. For a fuller discussion, see my *Children of Oedipus and Other Essays on the Imitation of Greek Tragedy 1550–1800* (Toronto, 1980).

11 Goethe, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, trans. Charles E. Passage (New York, 1963), ll. 1022–1038.

12 Alfred Schwarz's translation in Michael Hamburger's edition of Hofmannsthal's *Selected Plays and Libretti* (New York, 1963), pp. 13, 10. Subsequent page references in the text are to the German edition followed by the translation.

13 Naturalistic and exotic elements are close together on this stage. In the scenic directions for the play, Hofmannsthal compared the setting alternately to an oriental palace and a slum tenement. The Little Theatre staged Hauptmann's *Rose Bernd* the night before the première of *Electra*, and Hofmannsthal first saw the actress of his play in a performance of Gorky's *Lower Depths*.

14 Robert R. Heitner, "The Iphigenia in Tauris Theme in Drama of the Eighteenth Century," *Comparative Literature*, 16 (1964), 289–309.

15 Hofmannsthal, *Prosa*, II, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 81.

16 Electra's vision of Agamemnon in the basement of the palace (23, 27) in all probability owes something to Goethe's Tantalus, though the cellar ghost of *Hamlet* and the subterranean figure of John the Baptist in *Salome* also come to mind.

17 Pierre Corneille, *Writings on the Theatre*, ed. H.T. Barnwell (Oxford, 1965), p. 48.

18 Jean Racine, *OEuvres complètes*, ed. Raymond Picard (Paris, 1950), II, 853. See my *Children of Oedipus*, pp. 65ff., for a fuller discussion of the criticism of Electra's cruelty in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drama.

19 The recognition is modeled on the Euripidean scene, with borrowings from the recognitions in *The Odyssey*: after the servant silently falls down at the feet of the master, Orestes says: "Die Hunde auf dem Hof erkennen mich,/ und meine Schwester nicht?" (*Dramen*, II, 62). There are no dogs around, but the poet could not resist an allusion to Argos. According to Hans-Joachim Newiger in "Hofmannsthal's 'Elektra' und die griechische Tragödie," *Arcadia*, 4 (1969), 138–163, Hofmannsthal said that he did not know Euripides' play until several years after the writing of *Electra*. But in addition to the recognition scene, there is Chrysothemis' desire to be married, "even to a peasant," which looks suspiciously like an adaptation from Electra's marriage to the farmer in Euripides (*Dramen*, II, 18).

20 Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Hellas und Hesperien* (Zurich, 1960), p. 581.

21 Heinz Wetzel, "Elektras Kult der Tat – 'freilich mit Ironie behandelt'," *Jahrbuch des freien deutschen Hochstifts 1979* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979), 354–368. Wetzel's fine essay, which pays close attention to gesture and scenic detail, makes a persuasive case for the tragic failure of Electra, relating it to the contrast between the silent action of Orestes and her obsession with ritual and loquacious action.