

HOFMANNSTHAL, *ELEKTRA* AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S BEHAVIOUR THROUGH MYTH

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ABSTRACT

In *Elektra* Hofmannsthal created a drama more of its time than he cared to admit, but he concealed this specificity in the 'eternal' materials of myth. The play came into being in response to the promptings of a director (Max Reinhardt) and an actress (Gertrud Eysoldt). Contemporaries received the play as a revision, either for good or bad, of accepted ideas of the Greeks. In a climate which identified a parallel between the 'cathartic' effect of Greek tragedy and the 'cathartic' treatment of hysteria in the new psychoanalysis, *Elektra* was readily understandable as an 'hysteric'. Hofmannsthal does not present her specifically as such but participates in a *fin de siècle* trend to use hysteria as a synecdoche for female behaviours which challenged the status quo. Hofmannsthal's own attitudes to women imply an anxiety about counter-cultural behaviour which, in *Elektra*, he mediates through two literary precedents: Sophocles's *Elektra* and Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. The article concludes by illustrating how Hofmannsthal constructs *Elektra*'s behaviour as 'improper'.

No less disturbing to Hofmannsthal's native genius was his preoccupation with Greek tragedy. It transformed him temporarily from a delicate, subtle, suggestive poet, who dealt in shades and pastel tints and lilting lyrics, into a frenzied creator of turgid spiritual melodrama, whose findings remain extremely questionable, and against which one instinctively rebels.¹

Thus wrote an eminent British Germanist in an article on *Elektra* published in 1938. The sentiment expressed here so vigorously had been a common one in reactions to this play ever since its première in 1903. Indeed, the view that *Elektra* was some kind of aberration in its author's career originates with Hofmannsthal himself. Almost as soon as the dust had settled after the early performances, he began trying to *explain* the play, to account for the apparent disjunction between the small but perfectly crafted lyrics which had made his name and the 'Blutraserei mit Stil' (as one reviewer called it)² which seemed to blacken that name. The first opportunity came when Richard Strauss approached him for the rights to adapt the play as an opera. At Strauss's request Hofmannsthal supplied some new lines for the libretto which modify the effect at two important points. The process continues in the series of autobiographical jottings he

¹ E. M. Butler, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*: a Graeco-Freudian Myth', *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2 (1938-9), 164-75 (here p.174).

² Alfred Kerr, reprinted in *Hofmannsthal im Urteil seiner Kritiker. Dokumente zur Wirkungsgeschichte Hugo von Hofmannsthal's in Deutschland*, ed. Gotthart Wunberg, Frankfurt a.M. 1972, p.81. (References to this volume hereafter appear in the text as HUK.)

began during the First World War under the title 'Ad me Ipsum' (10/599–627)³ and in his notes for a lecture tour undertaken in Scandinavia in 1916 (9/28–42). These sources, where he seeks to impose a retrospective pattern on his career, have provided a rich hunting-ground for later literary scholars, but it is the contention of this article that the terminology in which Hofmannsthal here discusses the play, and the proliferating secondary literature which has evolved on the basis of these comments, is so abstract, so remote from the experience of anyone seeing (or even reading) the play as to be of doubtful value. In what follows I prefer to trust his comments made at the time of writing and to build up a sense of the context in which the play came into being. The question which we might then ask of these subsequent comments is not 'what does he mean by "die Antinomie von Sein und Werden"?' (10/603) but 'why this desperate need to explain?' Is it because the play touches on issues which are voiced with more reluctance than these high-sounding abstractions?

Around 1900 Hofmannsthal underwent a creative reorientation in which his focus of attention shifted from poetry to the drama. In summer 1901, seeking to educate himself in dramatic technique, he re-read Sophocles's *Elektra* and conceived the idea of making his own version (10/452). His new commitment to drama coincided with an upsurge of interest in Greek myth. From the period 1900 to 1904 date a whole series of projected but uncompleted dramas on mythical subjects: Leda and the Swan, Zeus and Semele, Gyges and his ring, Pentheus and Dionysus. One of the 1903 reviewers of *Elektra* suggested, with some reason, that Hofmannsthal was turning to Greek myth to win for his own work an immediacy and forcefulness that was lacking in his earlier writings⁴ – so that even this intellectual interest may have been driven by his dramaturgical ambitions.

The notion of reworking Sophocles lay dormant until May 1903 when Max Reinhardt brought his Berlin company to Vienna for a guest performance of Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, which Hofmannsthal saw (10/452). He was deeply impressed by the production and by one performance in particular, that of Gertrud Eysoldt. Hofmannsthal met Reinhardt and at once promised to write an *Elektra* for Reinhardt's theatre. What then happened is significant. The play was written relatively quickly, most of it between late July and early August. Although it cost him much effort ('Es war ... ein Arbeiten mit unsicherer, fast immer matter Stimmung', 10/452), he

³ Reference will be made to the collected editions of Hofmannsthal's writings using the following abbreviations:

Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden, ed. Bernd Schoeller et al., Frankfurt a. M. 1979–80: 1 *Gedichte*. *Dramen* 1: 1891–1898; 2 *Dramen* 2: 1892–1905; 9 *Reden und Aufsätze* 2: 1914–1924; 10 *Reden und Aufsätze* 3: 1925–1929. *Aufzeichnungen* 1889–1929. Roman numerals refer to volumes of the *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Rudolf Hirsch and others, Frankfurt a. M. 1975–.

Unless otherwise stated, letters are quoted from *Briefe 1900–1909*, Vienna 1937 (= 'B/II').

⁴ Alfred Klaar in the *Vossische Zeitung*, 31 October 1903. Quoted in Sally McMullen, 'From the Armchair to the Stage: Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* in its Theatrical Context', *MLR*, 80 (1985), 637–51 (here p.640).

completed it on schedule and, after a bitter exchange of telegrams with Reinhardt over financial terms (VII/382–3), *Elektra* received its première on 30 October 1903 in Berlin. During all those years of his reinventing himself as dramatist, between 1899 and 1904, it was the only play he managed to complete. Why? One reason must be the incentives (artistic and financial) of a specific commission. Reinhardt was then the rising star of German theatre. His first year in charge of the Kleines Theater, during which he staged Strindberg's *Rausch*, Wilde's *Salome* and Wedekind's *Erdegeist* in addition to the Gorki première which toured to Vienna, had placed him in the forefront of theatrical modernism, and Hofmannsthal could not afford to let slip this opportunity. In this commissioned text he exploited all the innovations of the Reinhardt theatre as it had so far developed. In the 'Szenische Vorschriften' which he wrote to accompany the performance (2/240–2) Hofmannsthal prescribes the integration of set, costume and lighting in accordance with Reinhardt's practice. Electric lighting, with use of colour filters (another Reinhardt speciality), provides a virtual subtext in this play, as at the lowest point in Elektra's fortunes when Klytämnestra receives news of Orestes's supposed death: the darkened courtyard where Elektra has her being fills with light and the walls are flecked yellowish-red (2/210). Nor was Hofmannsthal unaware of the controversies which had brought Reinhardt to prominence. All the plays presented in the 1902–3 season at the Kleines Theater had female protagonists who did not reflect conventional images of woman, whose modernity was seen as unnatural, unhealthy, socially threatening.⁵ Reviewing Reinhardt's production of *Erdegeist*, the *Vossische Zeitung* commented: 'Frau Eysoldt gab nun nach dem *Rausch* und der *Salome* zum dritten Male das dämonische Weib'.⁶ As we shall see, *Elektra* provided another version of this problematisation of women in the theatre of the day.

There was a further incentive. Hofmannsthal had found not only a director but a leading lady. Compared to her roles as Salome and Lulu, the part of Nastja in *The Lower Depths* which brought Gertrud Eysoldt to Hofmannsthal's notice was quite a small one. But she evidently invested it with the qualities so admired by contemporaries. Siegfried Jacobsohn wrote of her:

Sie hatte die Tendenz, vom Ende der Schauspielkunst, dem Imitieren der alltäglichen Wirklichkeit, sich ihrem Ursprung, der sangartigen Rede und der tanzartigen Bewegung, wieder zu nähern; durch malende Gebärden: ein Biegen des Nackens, ein Breiten der Arme, ein Gleiten der Glieder, die gleichsam gebundene Bildlichkeit des Wortes zu wecken.

⁵ Sally McMullen, 'Sense and Sensuality: Max Reinhardt's Early Productions', in *Max Reinhardt: The Oxford Symposium*, ed. Margaret Jacobs and John Warren, Oxford 1986, pp.16–33 (here pp.21–2).

⁶ 18 December 1902. Quoted in McMullen, 'Sense', p.187, note 24.

In the same year Hermann Bahr in his diary defined what he called 'die Eysoldt-Technik' as 'das ganze Leben in eine einzige große Gebärde zu pressen'.⁷ Now that the surviving correspondence between Eysoldt and Hofmannsthal has been published in full, we can see how far, in their exchange of ideas, these two were distancing themselves from the language-bound conventions of earlier theatres.⁸ There is constant talk of 'Gebärde', 'Gestalt', 'Tanzkunst' and the dissolution of words into other media. But what also emerges from the letters is the extraordinary degree of empathy between actress and dramatist, expressed with thespian excitability on Eysoldt's side, more guardedly on Hofmannsthal's, but proof of their shared conviction that Eysoldt was born to play Elektra and Elektra was born to be played by Eysoldt. In a letter of 1913 the actress reminds the author of 'das verwandte Wesen der Temperamente, das dunkle Etwas, was Sie trieb, Elektra zu schreiben' (*Sturm* 92). Hofmannsthal was concerned to defend himself from Eysoldt's confusion of art and life. In reply to Hermann Bahr's charge that he had treated her cavalierly when she was only seeking 'ein menschliches Verhältnis', Hofmannsthal snapped: 'Ich habe ihr doch eine Rolle geschrieben!'⁹

The first letter in the Eysoldt correspondence gives the actress's reactions on first reading the script:

Heut Nacht habe ich die Elektra nun mit nach Hause genommen und eben gelesen. Ich liege zerbrochen davon – ich leide – ich leide – ich schreie auf unter dieser Gewalttätigkeit – ich fürchte mich vor meinen eigenen Kräften – vor dieser Qual, die auf mich wartet. Ich werde furchtbar leiden dabei. Ich habe das Gefühl, daß ich sie nur einmal spielen kann. Mir selbst möchte ich entfliehen.

Sie haben nun ein paar Monate mit meinem brennenden Leben geschrieben – Sie haben aus meinem Blut alle Möglichkeiten wilder Träume geformt – und ich habe hier ahnungslos gelebt und an Sie nur in heiteren buntfarbigen Stunden gedacht – sorglos gewartet auf das Ereignis, das Sie mir bringen würden ... Und Sie haben inzwischen fern von mir alle wilden Schmerzen jener einstigen Zeiten – alle Empörungen, die meinen schwachen Körper je geschüttelt haben – all dies *unendliche brünstige* Wollen meines Blutes sich zu Gaste geladen und schicken es mir nun zu. Ich erkenne alles wieder – ich bin so furchtbar erschrocken – ich entsetze mich. Ich wehre mich – ich fürchte mich.

Warum rufen Sie mich da in meinen bängsten Tiefen! Wie ein Feind. (29 September 1903, *Sturm* 9)

What strikes one here is the emotional investment she expects to have to make in the part and her personal identification with the character. What-

⁷ Siegfried Jacobsohn, *Das Theater der Reichshauptstadt*, Munich 1904, p.130; Hermann Bahr, *Prophet der Moderne. Tagebücher 1885–1904*, ed. Reinhard Farkas, Vienna 1987, p.191.

⁸ *Der Sturm Elektra. Gertrud Eysoldt – Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Briefe*, ed. Leonhard M. Fiedler, Salzburg 1996. (Hereafter cited in text as *Sturm*.)

⁹ Bahr, *Tagebücher*, 2 October 1904 (p.204).

ever she responded to in this material, it was *not* 'die Antinomie von Sein und Werden'. Ten years later Eysoldt had still not forgotten that first reading: 'daß ich eine Nacht lang schluchzend lag, als ich Elektra zum ersten mal las' (*Sturm* 91).

So what *did* she read on that night in September 1903? According to the title-page, a 'free' adaptation of Sophocles. It is unnecessary here to make a detailed comparison of Hofmannsthal's play with the Greek original; this has been done several times in print.¹⁰ The phrase 'frei nach Sophokles' is apt, because the differences are more apparent than the similarities. I wish only to draw attention to those divergences from the Greek which appear significant for the present interpretation. There is, first, the omission of the Chorus. The Chorus is a notoriously difficult feature for modern producers – and audiences – but not an impossible one, as Reinhardt was to demonstrate with his later forays into 'Massenregie'. Here the omission of the Chorus must be seen as deliberate. In the Sophocles play they exert a moderating influence – Electra even apologises to them at one point for her impatience (ll.254–5; it is difficult to imagine Hofmannsthal's Elektra apologising to anyone) – and on occasion take the side of Chrysothemis, counselling prudence and caution against Electra's immoderation (ll.1015–16). By omitting this feature, Hofmannsthal leaves his heroine jaggedly exposed and colliding with the other characters in a series of abrasive encounters. Secondly, we note the downgrading of Orestes's importance. In the Sophocles original he appears in the opening scene; Hofmannsthal delays his entry until the latter stages of the action (2/219). Indeed, in his early remarks on the play, Hofmannsthal seemed ready to dispense with the male characters altogether. He agreed with the critic who said it would be a 'reineres Kunstwerk' if Orest did not appear at all,¹¹ and in his correspondence with Strauss regarding the libretto he suggested dropping the figure of Aegisthus, an idea which Strauss rejected.¹² Even without these cuts, which Hofmannsthal evidently felt would not adversely affect the play, the concentration on the female characters is an obvious, but little discussed, feature of the play, although it was commented upon by one of the first reviewers, who praised him for his irreverence towards the personnel of the House of Atreus, his courage in reducing Aegisthus to a 'Statist', Orestes to a 'Deklamator': 'Nur Weiber sollten hier hausen ... Nur Weiber dürften in diesem schwülen Winkel wohnen' (Harden, *HUK* 84). This heightened emphasis on the female figures is accompanied by another

¹⁰ Recent discussions include Hugh Lloyd-Jones, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* as a Goethean Drama', *PEGS*, 59 (1990), 16–34; Simon Goldhill, 'Hofmannsthal and the Greeks', in programme book for Strauss's *Elektra*, Royal Opera House London 1997, pp.17–20; and the *Kritische Ausgabe* (1997), VII/310–11, 476–91 *passim*.

¹¹ Letter of 6 October 1904: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Eberhard von Bodenhausen, *Briefe der Freundschaft*, ed. Dora von Bodenhausen, Berlin 1953, p.51. The critic was Maximilian Harden.

¹² Conversation prior to 22 December 1907: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Richard Strauss, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Willi Schuh, 4th edn., Zurich 1970, pp.32–3.

deviation from source, the highly concentrated and explicit imagery, much of it of a sexual nature. This feature is not confined to the dialogue but even extends to the set, which is dominated by a huge fig tree (2/241). We are not meant to forget that a fig leaf hid Man's nakedness after the Fall or that folk belief saw the fig as an obscene symbol.¹³ A final, and revealing, alteration is the way in which Hofmannsthal *displaces* the action into a kind of mythical no man's land. In the 'Szenische Vorschriften' he is explicit about what he does *not* want: 'antikisierende Banalitäten', 'konventionelle Tempel und Paläste', 'jedes falsche Antikisieren sowie auch jede ethnographische Tendenz' (2/240, 242). We are not in the Greece of the classical philologists; if anywhere, we are closer to the prehistoric matriarchy described in one of his favourite books, *Das Mutterrecht*, by Johann Jakob Bachofen. Bachofen interpreted the *Oresteia* as the symbolic representation of the painful transition from matriarchy to patriarchy and the latter's final triumph.¹⁴ The recruitment of the Greeks into a debate about 'gender politics' was to prove a recurrent strategy at the turn of the century, as we shall see.

In Reinhardt's production the play was a considerable success. Hofmannsthal had achieved his self-transformation into serious dramatist. He wrote to his brother-in-law: 'Der sogenannte große äußere Erfolg ist also eingetreten' (B/II/132). Within the first four days, twenty-two German theatres showed an interest in mounting the play, three impressions of the book were sold out, and – what seems to have caused Hofmannsthal particular pride – the Berlin chattering classes were so preoccupied with the *Elektra* première that they gave short shrift to the first performance the following evening of Hauptmann's latest play, *Rose Bernd* (10/453). Inspiring all this interest, no doubt, was what Hofmannsthal calls 'ein großes Tapage in der Presse, teils enthusiastisch, teils wütend' (B/II/132). This judgement seems accurate. The contemporary reviews indeed divided into two camps, both turning on the question of the play's 'Greekness' and its presentation of a Greek mythical heroine. To the hostile critic Hofmannsthal's version was a betrayal of the 'edle Einfalt und stille Größe' which Germans had identified in Ancient Greece since Winckelmann's day. In the *Neue Freie Presse*, Paul Goldmann complained: 'Die hehren Bilder dieser Frauen, die der antike Dichter mit ewigen Zügen gezeichnet hat, hat der "modernisierende" Bearbeiter entstellt und verzerrt.' Elektra had been transformed into a 'sadistische Megäre', her sister into 'ein vor Mannstollheit außer sich geratenes Weibchen ... , das winselt, weil es seine Brunst nicht zu befriedigen vermag'; their relationship was little short of 'lesbian' (*HUK* 114–17). The opposite tendency among reviewers also saw Hofmannsthal as a moderniser, but acclaimed his 'modernisation' as legitimate in the wake of Nietzsche and Freud. Hermann Bahr found Eysoldt's

¹³ Mathias Mayer, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*. Der Dichter und die Meduse', *ZfdPh*, 110 (1991), 230–47 (here p.237).

¹⁴ Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Karl Meuli, Basel 1948, II, pp.177ff.

Elektra 'gräßlich. Aber eben darin griechischer, als es jemals die Kunst der strengen Linie, der klugen Mäßigung, der zarten Stille sein kann'. Another review praised the author for reviving the savage vitality of Greek life:

Diese Poesie haben kritisierende Esel 'dekadent' genannt. Mir erscheint das Werk Hofmannsthals urgesund, und es hat Stil, einen einheitlichen, wahrhaften, großen Stil, einen Stil, dessen ungekünstelte, aus dem Stoff organisch erwachsene Formen die alten, finstern, bluttriefenden Sagen vor uns lebendig werden ließen, als seien sie miterlebte Wirklichkeit.¹⁵

There is one further characteristic which all enthusiastic reviewers agreed upon. Maximilian Harden, in his favourable notice published in *Die Zukunft*, recognises that it is a play 'about' women and assumes that it is therefore 'about' hysteria, a malady to which they are uniquely susceptible. (In support of this view he quotes at length from a Munich psychiatrist reluctant to admit the existence of 'male hysteria'.) It is quite in order to 'modernise' Sophocles, in Harden's view, but if Elektra is given a human female body and placed in a godless world, her preoccupation will be not the Justice of Zeus but her own body and the mind-body relation within her (*HUK* 85). The classicist Theodor Gomperz could find only one word to describe the performance he saw: 'hysterisch' (VII/418). Gustav Zieler regrets that Hofmannsthal gave his characters the names of their Greek prototypes, for in truth they are 'moderne Hysteriker, die sich in ein antikes Gewand gehüllt haben'. Writing to Hofmannsthal in 1904, Bahr complimented him on capturing Eysoldt's 'hysterical' tone; and after reading the text he praised the presentation of the 'hysterical' Greeks.¹⁶ In these responses to the play two trains of thought overlap and converge, one concerning the 'hysterical' Greeks, the other concerning 'hysterical' women. Before examining *Elektra* in more detail, we should attempt to separate these strands.

One of the earliest impulses to a reevaluation of the Greeks in nineteenth-century Germany came from Jacob Bernays's work on Aristotle, first published in 1857. Since the eighteenth century the Aristotelian definition of *katharsis* from the *Poetics* had been given an ethical interpretation, relying upon Lessing's influential translation of the Greek words 'phobos' and 'eleos' as 'Furcht und Mitleid'. By his alternative translation of 'katharsis' as 'erleichternde Entladung' Bernays was recovering the original *medical* sense of the word, as it occurs also in a passage of the *Politics*, to mean

¹⁵ Hermann Bahr, *Glossen zum Wiener Theater 1903–1906*, Berlin 1907, p.276; John Schikowski, *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 7 November 1903, reprinted in *Im Geschwätz der elenden Zeitungsschreiber. Kritiken zu den Uraufführungen Hugo von Hofmannsthals in Berlin*, ed. Bernd Sösemann and Holger Kreitling, Berlin 1989, p.23.

¹⁶ Zieler, *Kreuz-Zeitung*, 31 October 1903, reprinted in *Geschwätz*, p.20; Bahr, 22 January 1904: *Meister und Meisterbriefe um Hermann Bahr*, ed. Joseph Gregor, Vienna 1947, p.165; Bahr, *Tagebücher*, p.149.

the expulsion of disease from the body.¹⁷ This revision of the earlier wisdom was picked up by Alfred von Berger (whose lectures on aesthetics at Vienna University were attended by the student Hofmannsthal) in his treatise on Aristotle appended to a new translation of the *Poetics*.¹⁸ Berger quotes Bernays approvingly (71–2) and, while endorsing Gomperz's rendering of 'katharsis' as 'Entladung', directs the reader to 'die kathartische Behandlung der Hysterie, welche die Ärzte Dr Josef Breuer und Dr Sigmund Freud beschrieben haben' (81) – that is, the *Studien über Hysterie* published only a few months earlier and reviewed by Berger in the *Morgen-Press*.¹⁹ In the *Studien*, the wheel comes full circle: Breuer and Freud reclaim for medicine a term which had fallen into the hands of literary criticism and aesthetics. The 'cathartic' method was based on the assumption that hysteria was the product of a physical trauma which had been forgotten by the patient; and the treatment consisted in inducing her, in a hypnotic state, to recall the forgotten trauma to the accompaniment of appropriate emotions.²⁰

Breuer and Freud had no need to gloss the reference to Aristotle in the *Studien*: it would have been familiar to their Gymnasium-educated readership. It was left to that Viennese gadfly Hermann Bahr to make the link between Greek justice and psychoanalytic health in his *Dialog vom Tragischen*, which he was writing in 1903 while Hofmannsthal was occupied with *Elektra*. We know from Bahr's diary that he was a frequent visitor to Hofmannsthal's home in Rodaun at this time and that they discussed the argument of the *Dialog*. Hofmannsthal's high opinion of the work may be judged from a letter written after publication: 'Das ist gescheit, daß Sie etwas so Kluges, Schönes, Inhaltsreiches zu schreiben die Muße gefunden haben ... So ist es mir wirklich in diesem Augenblick, als fühlte ich, wie Sie den Schlüssel meines Lebens in der Hand haben und ihn umdrehen' (B/II/128–9). The *Dialog vom Tragischen*, which Hofmannsthal rated so highly and took so personally, is an attempt to fuse Nietzsche's description of Greek tragic pessimism with the latest theories on hysteria.²¹ Acknowledging Bernays (20) and Breuer-Freud (17–18), but not Berger, Bahr argues that Greek culture was saturated with hysteria but luckily possessed a unique aesthetic means of 'abreacting' its hysterical symptoms:

¹⁷ Jacob Bernays, 'Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie' (1857), reprinted in *Zwei Abhandlungen über die aristotelische Theorie des Dramas*, Berlin 1880, pp.1–132. Cf. Michael Worbs, *Nervenkunst. Literatur und Psychoanalyse im Wien der Jahrhundertwende*, Frankfurt a. M. 1983, p.323, where there are further references on the history of the 'catharsis debate'.

¹⁸ Alfred von Berger, 'Wahrheit und Irrtum in der Katharsis-Theorie des Aristoteles', in Aristotle, *Poetik*, trans. Theodor Gomperz, Leipzig 1897, pp.71–98 (subsequently referred to by page number in text).

¹⁹ 'Chirurgie der Seele', *Morgen-Press*, 2 February 1896.

²⁰ The word 'catharsis' is introduced in the 'Vorläufige Mitteilung': Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studien über Hysterie*, 3rd edn., Leipzig 1916 [1895], p.6.

²¹ Hermann Bahr, *Dialog vom Tragischen*, Berlin 1904 (subsequently referred to by page number in text).

Die Tragödie will in der Tat nichts anderes als jene beiden Ärzte [i.e. Breuer and Freud] tun: sie erinnert ein durch Kultur krankes Volk, woran es nicht erinnert sein will, an seine schlechten Affekte, die es versteckt, an den früheren Menschen der Wildheit, der im gebildeten, den es jetzt spielt, immer noch kauert und knirscht, und reißt ihm die Ketten ab und läßt das Tier los, bis es sich ausgetobt hat und der Mensch, von den schleichenden Dämpfen und Gasen rein und frei, durch Erregung beschwichtigt, bildsam zur Sitte zurückkehren kann (23).

The *Dialog vom Tragischen* suggests a meeting-point for Ancient and Modern: they meet in the person of the hysteric. Just as, in Bahr's view, Greek culture was defined by 'hysteria', so in turn-of-the-century Europe 'hysteria' was the characteristic illness, and characteristically female both in the popular imagination and in the eyes of doctors often reluctant to admit the possibility of male hysteria (although, interestingly, Arthur Schnitzler, himself a medical man, ascribed an 'hysterical' character to Hofmannsthal's creativity²²). From a modern perspective, one has the impression that in the late nineteenth century hundreds of women slipped into invalidism, perceiving that sickness was one of the few ways to avoid the reproductive and domestic duties required of them. Writers of women's history have pointed to immense upheavals in the condition of women at the turn of the century, prompted by accelerating economic and social change, and a consequent pressure on the Victorian injunction that a woman's 'highest duty' was to 'suffer and be still'. In view of the inequities they endured, it is little wonder that many women were moved to react against their lot. This reaction, it has been suggested, took two forms, both peaking at the turn of the century, the one outer-directed, the other inner-directed. The first was feminism, the second 'hysteria'.²³ For half a century feminism and hysteria were mapped on to each other (principally by male authors, of course) as deviant forms of behaviour. The Viennese racial theorist Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, whose writings were devoured by the young Adolf Hitler, was typical in dismissing feminists as 'hysterical hermaphrodites' and those left-leaning men who sympathised with them as 'castrated collaborators in the genocide of the race'.²⁴ The connection between feminism and hysteria becomes explicit in the figure of Breuer's patient 'Anna O' – real name: Bertha Pappenheim – who, cured of 'hysteria', went on to become active in the movement for women's rights. The New Wave feminism of the 1960s rediscovered hysteria and an interesting debate ensued. On the one side were those like Hélène Cixous who viewed hysteria as the incarnation of revolt against

²² Arthur Schnitzler, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal. 'Charakteristik aus den Tagebüchern'*, ed. Bernd Urban and Werner Volke, *Hofmannsthal-Forschungen*, 3 (1975), 2–97 (here p.4).

²³ Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century*, Ithaca 1989, p.4.

²⁴ Quoted in translation in Harriet Anderson, *Utopian Feminism: Women's Movements in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, New Haven 1992, pp.3, 18.

patriarchy, a specifically feminine protolanguage communicating through the body messages that cannot be verbalised. On the other side were those like Toril Moi who saw it as a declaration of defeat – compliant, imprisoning and self-destructive.²⁵ The concern which unites all modern readings is less the medical diagnosis and treatment of hysteria (although that is an important episode in the history of medicine) than the force of the *idea* in the cultural construction of femininity.

Is Elektra an hysteric? Hofmannsthal was a keen reader of psychological literature, although suspicious of the determinism he recognised in Freud.²⁶ Some years after writing *Elektra* he was asked by Ernst Hladny whether he had consulted any scientific works in developing the characterisations in the play. He replied that he had leafed through a couple of books – Rohde's *Psyche* and 'das merkwürdige Buch über Hysterie von den Doktoren Breuer und Freud' (B/II/384). On the basis of this admission thousands of words have been written attempting to map the case studies of Breuer and Freud on to Elektra the character. Where it suggests direct correspondences this approach seems highly problematic, because it ignores how literature is made. Politzer, for example, contends that *Elektra* follows Charcot's four phases of hysteria as described by Breuer and Freud.²⁷ Worbs also finds a high level of correspondence with 'Anna O', but, again, a tendency to reductiveness (in an otherwise very valuable book) produces some equivocal readings. It is true that Elektra disclaims any womanly feelings (2/220), but does she resemble Breuer's patient, in whom 'das sexuelle Element war erstaunlich unentwickelt'?²⁸ We shall see later that the 'sexual element' is well to the fore in *Elektra*. Worbs reads her line 'ich bin kein Vieh, ich kann nicht / vergessen!' (2/195) to mean that, like an hysteric, she suffers compulsively from reminiscences.²⁹ But is it not the case that she *controls* her memory, cultivating it as the only vestige of her humanity? A more convincing argument (advanced by Lorna Martens) is that Hofmannsthal distributed 'hysterical' symptoms among his female characters, principally between Elektra and Klytämnestra. This argument respects his eclectic attitude to sources. So, for example, Elektra resembles Anna O in that she is traumatised by her father's death and suffers attacks daily at sunset, but Klytämnestra

²⁵ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La jeune née*, Paris 1975; Toril Moi, 'Representations of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's Dora', in *In Dora's Case: Freud–Hysteria–Feminism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, 2nd edn., New York 1990, pp.181–99 (pp.192). For an overview of the debate see Elaine Showalter, 'Hysteria, Feminism and Gender', in Sander L. Gilman et al., *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, Berkeley 1993, pp.286–344.

²⁶ Bernd Urban, *Hofmannsthal, Freud und die Psychoanalyse. Quellenkundliche Untersuchungen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1978, pp.17–19.

²⁷ Heinz Politzer, 'Hugo von Hofmannsthals *Elektra*. Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Psychopathologie', *DVjs*, 47 (1973), 95–119 (pp.97).

²⁸ Breuer, Freud p.15; Worbs, p.286.

²⁹ Breuer, Freud, p.5; Worbs, *ibid*. These two divergences from the 'Anna O' case are noted by Ritchie Robertson, ' "Ich habe ihm das Beil nicht geben können": The Heroine's Failure in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*', *Orbis Litterarum*, 41 (1986), 312–31 (pp.322).

resembles Anna O in being troubled by hallucinations of snakes and by loss of language.³⁰

Thus Elektra resists being reduced to an 'hysterical' case-history. Indeed, in one of his less opaque later pronouncements on the play, Hofmannsthal specifically rejects the word, preferring the term 'Besessenheit' (10/620–1). He agreed with Freud that an hysterical attack is not representable on stage (10/529). In the remainder of this article I will suggest that Hofmannsthal was using Greek myth to reflect a contemporary problem which he was constitutionally unable to confront directly – of which hysteria was seen then and is seen now (for different reasons) as the expression – namely, the debate about the status, role and nature of women. Schnitzler, whose plays tackle this issue with a deal less equivocation, could not relate sympathetically to his friend's propensity to conflate the everyday with the ineffable: 'Hugo gehört zu denen, die es als etwas ebenso Unheimliches schildern, wenn einer ans Sterben denkt, als wenn er ins Kaffeehaus geht'.³¹ Underlying Schnitzler's reservations seems to be the sense that Hofmannsthal's preoccupation with myth was a form of evasion, something which the younger man recalibrates as a virtue in an early letter boasting of his ability 'Nebensächliches anspruchsvoll auszusprechen und das, was ich gesagt haben möchte, zu verstecken'.³² Perhaps he felt that in *Elektra* he has not concealed himself sufficiently; the resultant discomfiture might account for his need over the next twenty-five years to 'explain' the play. I will examine this broader proposition first by considering general attitudes to women which emerge from Hofmannsthal's writing; secondly I turn to a weighty literary precedent for this most 'literary' of writers: Goethe's *Iphigenie*.

Within the inbred world of the Viennese intelligentsia, Hofmannsthal could not have been unaware of the feminist movement. He was friendly with Friedrich Eckstein, brother of Therese Schlesinger-Eckstein, activist for women's rights and a relative on his wife's side. And Erwin Lang (with whom there is a largely unpublished correspondence), later to marry the dancer Grete Wiesenthal, was a distant relative on Hofmannsthal's own side whose mother, Marie Lang, was a prominent 'Frauenrechtlerin' and editor of *Dokumente der Frauen*.³³ Even Marie Bashkirtseff, the pale, neurasthenic Russian artist whose death at the age of twenty-five so moved Hof-

³⁰ Lorna Martens, 'The Theme of the Repressed Memory in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*', *GQ* 60 (1987), 38–51 (here pp.47, 43).

³¹ Schnitzler, 'Charakteristik', p.21 (1 October 1896).

³² Letter of 1892 to Marie von Gumperz: Karl Gladt, 'Hugo von Hofmannsthal und Marie von Gumperz. Aus unveröffentlichten Briefen', in *Marginalien zur poetischen Welt. Festschrift für R. Mühlher zum 60. Geburtstag*, Berlin 1971, pp.299–309 (here p.302).

³³ Martin E. Schmid, 'Hofmannsthal und Friedrich Eckstein', in *Wahrheit und Wort. Festschrift für Rolf Tarot zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Beatrice Wehrli and Gabriela Scherer, Bern 1997, pp.389–408; Max Schönherr, 'Wer war Friedrich Eckstein?', *Anton Bruckner Jahrbuch*, 1982/3, 163–172; Anderson, pp.57, 59; *Österreichisches biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950*, Graz 1957–72, Vienna 1975–, entry 'Therese Schlesinger'; Hans-Albrecht Koch, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Erträge der Forschung*, Darmstadt 1989, p.17; Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History*, Cambridge 1989, p.31.

mannsthal and the other Jung Wiener, was active in the French feminist movement, a fact suppressed by the first editors of her famous *Journal*.³⁴ Such female self-assertiveness challenged Hofmannsthal's received opinions, for in his private life this author seems to have held views typical for one of his class and upbringing. As a young man he confided in the older Schnitzler his fear 'daß sich gar keine Sehnsucht nach den Weibern in mir regen wird ... [Ihre] Schriften machen mir Angst vor dem Weibe'. In another conversation four years later Hofmannsthal pointed to the difference between his and Schnitzler's relationships with women. He, Hofmannsthal, had no knowledge of the woman 'with a past' such as Schnitzler had depicted in *Das Märchen*.³⁵ At around the same time he recommended for publication a work called *Mimi: Schattenbilder aus einem Mädchenleben* by a young Viennese woman, Clara Loeb, apparently a treatment, influenced by Schnitzler's *Anatol*, of love, marriage and associated hypocrisies. Hofmannsthal's testimonial on the author's behalf is a fine example of what we might now call 'gendered reading':

Nun traue ich mir kein eigentliches Urteil über die Arbeit zu. Manchmal scheint mir erstaunlich viel an Beobachtung, auch an Mut des Heraussagens (für eine Frau) drinzustecken, das Milieu, die Aufeinanderfolge der Szenen scheint mir sehr glücklich gefunden und ausgeführt. Vielleicht aber überschätze ich alles das unendlich, so wie man Verse von Kindern überschätzt, weil es einen schon verwundert, daß sie überhaupt etwas zu sagen haben (I/314–15).

The appearance of *Mimi* in the *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* was to have been followed by publication in book form, but Clara Loeb's parents were so scandalised by what had already appeared (albeit under the pseudonym 'Bob') that they prevailed on Hofmannsthal and Schnitzler to intervene with the publisher, Fischer, to scotch the whole enterprise. What became of the abruptly silenced Clara Loeb is unclear. Schnitzler wrote to Hofmannsthal in July 1897: 'Clara fühlt sich sehr verlassen von Ihnen. Sie hat es anders ausgedrückt, aber das ist der Sinn'.³⁶ In 1901 Hofmannsthal married. The story of this marriage has hardly been told – we still lack a detailed biography of this writer and few of the 750 letters he wrote to his wife have been published – but some of its character may be glimpsed from the diaries of Bahr and Schnitzler. In 1904 Bahr complained that Gerty existed only to create an 'atmosphere' for her husband's work and deplored Hofmannsthal's custom of leaving town when his wife was about to give birth. On another occasion in the same year Schnitzler leapt to

³⁴ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, 'Introduction', *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*, trans. Mathilde Blind, London 1985 [1891], p.xiii. Hofmannsthal reviewed the original French edition in 1893.

³⁵ Schnitzler, 'Charakteristik', p.17 (23 October 1892); p.21 (14 January 1897).

³⁶ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Therese Nickl and Heinrich Schnitzler, Frankfurt a. M. 1964, p.94.

defend Hofmannsthal against Bahr's charge that he was 'ein Mensch, der das Gesicht seiner Frau nicht kennt'.³⁷ In Hofmannsthal's lyric dramas of the 1890s we find variations on the familiar *fin de siècle* polarisation of women into *femme fatale* and *femme enfant*.³⁸ For example, the play *Der Kaiser und die Hexe* presents as alternatives the witch and the wife. The eponymous Witch is given over to sexual pleasure but is herself barren. The Empress, by contrast, is the philoprogenitive mother who, summoned to appear before the Emperor, excuses herself on the ground that it is the royal children's bath-time (1/499). She is also the 'Kindweib', and this is her attraction for the Emperor:

Über alle
Worte klar begreifs ich heute:
Welch ein Kind du bist, wie völlig
Aus dir selbst dies Kinderlächeln
Quillt. Ich bin so froh, zu denken,
Daß... ich mein, daß du es bist,
Die mir Kinder auf die Welt bringt. (1/504)

Several poems written at this time and addressed to his future wife show Hofmannsthal engaging in a similar process of infantilisation; like the Empress, Gerty was expected to make a smooth transition from *being* a child to *bearing* a child.³⁹

There was, however, another role allowed to women in Hofmannsthal's mental economy. He was fascinated by performing artists, particularly female ones. This goes much deeper than – though it may have originated in – the commonplace of the time that women were incapable of achieving spiritual insights and were more suited to the physical nature of the performing arts.⁴⁰ In Eysoldt he admired what he called her 'doppeltes Wesen' – 'de[r] Mensch und die Schauspielerin' (*Sturm* 34). In 1894 he and Schnitzler had a 'deep conversation' about the actress Adele Sandrock, Schnitzler's mistress at the time. As with Eysoldt, what Hofmannsthal admired in Sandrock was the bifurcation of 'ihr bewußtes Ich und das traumhafte, das schauspielerische', two halves which knew nothing of one another but communicated when an experience passed from the 'bewußtes Ich' to the 'schauspielerisches', there to achieve 'complex expression'. Hofmannsthal noted in his diary: 'Diese Spaltung des Ich

³⁷ Bahr, *Tagebücher*, p.204; Schnitzler, 'Charakteristik', p.4 (7 August 1904).

³⁸ Lore Muerdel-Dormer, 'Saint and Sinner: Some Reflections on the Image of Woman in the Works of Hofmannsthal and His Viennese Contemporaries', in *Turn-of-the-Century Vienna and its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Daviau*, ed. Jeffrey B. Berlin, Jorun B. Johns and Richard H. Lawson, [Riverside, Calif.] 1993, pp.1–18.

³⁹ Lore Muerdel-Dormer, 'Das kleine Stück Brot...', in *Seltene Augenblicke: Interpretations of Poems by Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, ed. Margrit Resch, Columbia 1989, pp.22–28.

⁴⁰ Stated in, for example, Karl Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst. Eine Studie*, Berlin 1908, and most influentially by Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter. Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung*, Vienna 1903, of which Hofmannsthal owned two editions, but not the first (Michael Hamburger, 'Hofmannsthals Bibliothek. Ein Bericht', *Euphorion*, 55 (1961), 15–76 (here p.27)).

scheint die Daseinsform des reproduzierenden Genies zu sein' (10/388). Thus we see that the acceptable female roles envisaged by Hofmannsthal reduce to alternative forms of 'reproductive genius'. There is the genius of *biological* reproduction, embodied in the mother, and the genius of *artistic* reproduction, embodied in the actress. The proximity of these two realms was grasped intuitively by Eysoldt when she was trying to coax the author into creating another part for her: 'Wüßten Sie doch nur, wieviele [*sic*] junge kräftigste Erde für Ihre Saat in mir bereit liegt. Lassen Sie mich nicht unfruchtbar. Ich verschmachte künstlerisch. Schreiben Sie wieder für mich. Ich will wieder meine Stunde haben' (*Sturm* 10–11).

Hofmannsthal's attitudes to women are embedded in the intertextual relationship between his play and another 'classic' which has been influential in promulgating images of women, Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. One of Hofmannsthal's deviations from his Greek source concerns the matter of Klytämnestra's self-defence. In Sophocles Clytaemnestra argues that Agamemnon's murder was justifiable because of his readiness to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia for a fair wind at Aulis (1.526ff). Hofmannsthal omits this detail; his Klytämnestra is driven by carnal lust, her crime a *crime passionel*. But he does more than that; he wipes Iphigenia from the mythical record. In Elektra's invocation of her dead father she enumerates her siblings: 'wir / dein Blut, dein Sohn Orest und deine Töchter, / wir drei' (2/191). Elektra, Chrysothemis: no mention of a third sister. What lends force to this evidence of absence is that Hofmannsthal had Goethe's treatment of the Iphigenia legend much in mind when writing his *Elektra*. The diary entry of 1903 headed 'Verteidigung der Elektra' notes: 'Gestalten der Goetheschen Iphigenie nur leicht getaucht in ihr Geschick' (10/443). A few months later, recalling the circumstances of composition, he wrote: '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" (Goethe an Schiller)' (10/452). And in a letter to Ernst Hladny, when asked about his original conception, he replied:

Mein Ausgangspunkt war der Elektra-Charakter, das erinnere ich mich ganz genau. ... Die Zeile aus der 'Iphigenie' fiel mir ein, wo es heißt: 'Elektra mit ihrer Feuerzunge' [Goethe, line 1030] und im Spaziergehen phantasierte ich über die Figur Elektra, nicht ohne eine gewisse Lust am Gegensatz zu der 'verteufelt humanen' Atmosphäre der Iphigenie (B/II/383).

Whereas Iphigenia is eliminated from Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, the reverse is not true; Elektra is always just 'out of shot' in Goethe's *Iphigenie*, invoked three times by name (ll.620–5, 1022–36), the last occasion actually drawing attention to her absence: 'Wohl, Schwester, dir! Noch fehlt Elektra' (l.1311). As Mueller argues, Goethe's purpose in embedding Elektra's story within that of her sister was to establish a parallelism between the two:

The events at Tauris have the significance of the trial scene in the *Eumenides*: an era of conflict and violence is brought to an end in an action that gives rise to a new order of peace and reconciliation ... The re-enactment of the Elektra plot, which fills most of the first three acts, is a formal feature that points to the 'trilogic' ambitions of the play. Its subject is the Orestes myth as a whole, its scope no less than that of the *Oresteia*.⁴¹

Hofmannsthal's purpose was the exact opposite, to create 'etwas Gegensätzliches', and that is why Iphigenie disappears *in name* as she is remodelled into something else. In nineteenth-century schools Goethe's *Iphigenie* was used to present an image of the purifying and ennobling influence of 'true womanhood'. Reproductions of Anselm Feuerbach's painting *Iphigenia* ('Das Land der Griechen mit der Seele suchend', 1.12) hung in innumerable middle-class drawing rooms. Any possible emancipatory significance in her actions was lost in later reception.⁴² Thus when problematising the nature and role of woman at the turn of the century it was natural for Hofmannsthal to write from within and against this grandest of conduct-books.

Hofmannsthal's strategy is to play off characteristics of Goethe's heroine, either imitating them or inverting them. Iphigenie is a priestess (1.815), so is Elektra, despite appearances (2/223).⁴³ Elektra knows nothing of the gods (2/228), whereas Iphigenie's heart is attuned to them (1.494). Iphigenie's 'herrliche Erscheinung' (1.811) is reduced to a pathetic figure in 'kurzen Lumpen / statt eines wallenden Gewandes' (2/223). Iphigenie's constitutional inability to lie has turned into Elektra's monomaniac conviction that the 'truth will out' ('Vater! dein Tag wird kommen!' 2/191). Both heroines have dedicated themselves to virginity, but only Iphigenie's is an admirable outcome of her priestly vocation (1.200). Both can exert influence only vicariously, through men. Women's healing and redemptive influence, dramatised in the 'cure' of Orest's madness (1.1355ff), becomes in Hofmannsthal's play the duplicitous 'talking cure' by which Elektra, 'wie ein Arzt' (2/199), purports to cure Klytämnestra of her sleepless nights while actually foretelling the retribution that awaits her.⁴⁴ Thus the modern *Elektra* engages with Ancient Greece on two literary levels simultaneously, by adapting Sophocles and by revising the existing revision of Greece embodied in German eighteenth-century neo-

⁴¹ Martin Mueller, 'The Neoclassical Vision of Greece: *Iphigenie auf Tauris* and *Penthesilea*', in *Children of Oedipus, and Other Essays on the Imitation of Greek Tragedy, 1550–1800*, Toronto 1980, pp.64–104 (here p.82).

⁴² Ritta Jo Horsley, 'A Critical Appraisal of Goethe's *Iphigenie*', in *Beyond the Eternal Feminine: Critical Essays on Women and German Literature*, ed. Susan L. Cocalis and Kay Goodman, Stuttgart 1982, pp.47–74 (here pp.49–51).

⁴³ Cf. Juliane Vogel, 'Priesterin künstlicher Kulte. Ekstasen und Lektüren in Hofmannsthals *Elektra*', *Colloquium Rauricum*, 5: *Tragödie. Idee und Transformation*, ed. Hellmut Flashar, Stuttgart 1997, pp.287–306; and Robertson, op. cit., p.323.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, in his review of the *Studien über Hysterie*, Berger compares the 'cathartic' method of Breuer and Freud to Orest's cure in *Iphigenie* (Berger, 'Chirurgie der Seele').

classicism. Whoever it was who hit upon the idea of opening Reinhardt's production with Gluck's overture *Iphigenie in Aulis* (VII/309–10) showed singular insight into Hofmannsthal's intentions.

I turn finally to examine the figure of Hofmannsthal's Elektra in more detail and ask in what ways she challenges the 'proprieties' of female conduct. The most obvious is her attitude to motherhood. In the opening scene the 'Aufseherin' reports Elektra's reaction to the sight of children:

Und wenn sie uns mit unsern Kindern sieht,
so schreit sie: nichts kann so verflucht sein, nichts,
als Kinder, die wir hündisch auf der Treppe
im Blute glitschend, hier in diesem Haus
empfangen und geboren haben (2/190).

By contrast, Goethe's *Iphigenie* equates feminine 'nature' with that of children: 'Ach! ich sehe wohl, / Ich muß mich leiten lassen wie ein Kind' (ll.1401–2). Childbirth is next door to murder in Elektra's estimation: 'Das ganze Haus ist auf. Sie kreißen oder / sie morden' (2/196). Chrysothemis watches wistfully as the women of the palace grow pregnant and are delivered of babies, while she and her sister are left 'auf der Stange / wie angehängte Vögel' (2/194), but all this procreation leaves Elektra unmoved. Whereas Sophocles's Electra regrets her lack of children (l.188), Hofmannsthal represents it as a deliberate choice. Similarly, whereas Sophocles indicates that Chrysothemis and Elektra are prevented from bearing children by Aegisthus's fear of an avenging male heir (ll.964–6), this motif disappears in Hofmannsthal. In his play, Klytämnestra tells her daughters that they could be given in marriage if they would drop their opposition to the new familial regime (2/207). But this modern Elektra already has a bridegroom – 'den hohläugigen Haß' (2/225); it is a union which is by implication sterile.

Secondly, she challenges propriety through inappropriate sexuality. Nineteenth-century orthodoxy held that women were not troubled with sexual feelings of any kind. In the words of the Victorian physician Dr William Acton, 'a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him.'⁴⁵ Having renounced the 'love' appropriate to a woman, the only love which can creep into Elektra's breast is the inadmissible. As we have seen, male reviewers were quick to describe Elektra's relations with her sister as 'lesbian'; Otto Rank was not alone in diagnosing a 'libidinal' fixation on her father.⁴⁶ Certainly, the scenes which provoke these responses are calculated constructions of 'deviance'. Consider the bizarre recognition scene: as soon as Orest has revealed himself as her brother, Elektra launches into a long speech recalling, in erotically charged terms, her former sensuality

⁴⁵ Quoted in Finney, pp.3–4.

⁴⁶ Otto Rank, *Das Inzest-Motiv in Dichtung und Sage. Grundzüge einer Psychologie des dichterischen Schaffens*, Leipzig 1912, p.328. Whether there is a connection here with Jung's introduction of the term 'Electra complex' in 1913, I have been unable to discover.

(2/225). Or the verbal seduction of the sister in the attempt to recruit her for an act of matricide which promises to be fulfilling in every sense:

Du könntest
mich, oder einen Mann mit deinen Armen
an deine kühlen festen Brüste pressen,
daß man ersticken müßte! (2/216)

Third, there is a challenge in her use of language. Goethe's Iphigenie uses words to influence outcomes; her words are never false and never out of place: 'Ich habe nichts als Worte, und es ziemt / Dem edlen Mann, der Frauen Wort zu achten' (ll.1863–4). Other classical heroines display the ornament of silence – Alcestis, Antigone, Elektra herself in Orest's youthful memory of her, living apart from humanity, passing her days in tending a grave, noiselessly served by two or three maids and surrounded by animals (2/222–3). But the present-day Elektra is none of these. As her mother concedes, she possesses the power of language ('Du hast Worte', says Klytämnestra). In fact, 'sie redet wie ein Arzt' (2/199), that is, like a man. Might Hofmannsthal even be using Elektra to rehearse supposed differences between the characteristics of male and female speech? In the encounter with her mother she uses words ironically, with sharp thrusts, each one a surgical intervention, 'wie ein Arzt'. In her first monologue, by contrast, there is a rank flow of words, a single unbroken sentence stretching over thirty-three lines of the printed text (2/191), an example of what male mythology sees as the incontinent outpouring of women's speech.⁴⁷

Fourth, there is the emphasis on the fixed gaze. Where ladylike deportment expected a demure lowering of the eyes, a discreet avoidance of inappropriate eye contact, Elektra meets the world with a basilisk stare. 'Niemand ist hier im Haus, der ihren Blick / aushält!' says the Fifth Servant (2/189). The scene between mother and daughter ends with an eye-to-eye confrontation – Elektra refusing to back down (or look down) – which is broken only by the news of Orest's supposed death (2/210). The corollary to looking is 'being looked at'. Feminist criticism has alerted us to how in art made by men women have traditionally been objects of perception rather than subjects in their own right. Elektra's appearance presents an affront. She is dressed in 'ein verächtliches elendes Gewand, das zu kurz für sie ist', her arms and legs bare (2/242). In the scene with her brother she shows an equivocal awareness of how she is constituted by the brother's gaze: 'Wer bin denn ich, daß du auf mich / so liebe Blicke heftest?' At one point she is inviting the male spectator to validate her story of maltreatment at her mother's hands: 'Sieh mich doch an, was sie aus mir gemacht hat' (2/226). At another point she resists that gaze: 'laß / mein Kleid, wühl nicht mit deinem Blick daran' (2/223). In a fea-

⁴⁷ As in Juvenal's Sixth Satire. Cf. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford 1975, pp.41–2.

ture which recalls Jugendstil art, emphasis on the eyes is accompanied by a fetishisation of the hair. In *Der Kaiser und die Hexe* eyes and hair are the only two physical features of the witch ever mentioned. She reminds the Emperor how he was in thrall to her for seven years: 'Festgebannt an diesen Augen / Und verstrickt in dieses Haar' (1/506). Elektra locates the evidence of her sister's, as yet unproven, strength in her hair: 'Überall / ist so viel Kraft in dir! ... Sie flutet / mit deinen Haaren auf die starken Schultern / herunter!' (2/216). Elektra herself once possessed 'solches Haar, vor dem die Männer zittern' but now that she is beyond the pale of conventions that same hair is 'versträht, beschmutzt, erniedrigt' (2/225).

Towards the end of the play Elektra admits that her behaviour is counter-cultural. Reverting to her ironic tone (and echoing a similar line in Sophocles, ll.1464–5), she tells the returning Ägisth:

Und ich,
die oft durch freche unbescheidne Näh
dich störte, will nun endlich lernen, mich
im rechten Augenblick zurückzuziehen. (2/232)

It is in the final scene that she throws down her final challenge. The power of language now deserts her. After Klytämnestra's murder she falls silent (to the surprise of her sister, 2/230) and after that of Ägisth she *calls* for silence: 'Schweig und tanze' (2/233). But even this final act is transgressive. She calls for a 'Reigen', a social dance, which she will lead. However, she embarks upon a solo dance, '*den Kopf zurückgeworfen wie eine Mänade*'. Dying as she has lived, she is identified with the female followers of Dionysus whose immodest indulgences posed a threat to the body politic of Greece. In the course of the play she shows herself incapable of either of the forms of 'reproductive genius' which this author thought appropriate to women. She cannot be a mother, nor would wish to be one. And she cannot transform her experience of vindication into that second 'schauspielerisches Ich'; when she attempts to do so, she collapses.

Elektra came into being in response to specific circumstances, in particular the inspiring support of a director (Reinhardt) and an actress (Eysoldt). Hofmannsthal is known as a writer with a horror of self-revelation and a distaste for the time-bound specificities of Naturalist theatre. This article has argued that he was, nevertheless, more of his time than many later scholars are willing to admit. Contemporary responses to the play turned, ostensibly, on how 'Greek', or more often 'un-Greek', it was. But like a palimpsest beneath the 'Greek' debate was another controversy about the 'proper' behaviour of women at the turn of the century. Drawing on the newly fashionable psychoanalysis, Hermann Bahr brought these two debates together by reference to the concept of 'hysteria'. 'Hysteria' is far more than a medical condition: in the late nineteenth century it was a portmanteau term for demonising transgressive female behaviour. Having established what constituted norms of female behaviour for Hofmannsthal, we saw that in *Elektra* he created a character outside those

norms, a reflection of both cultural and personal anxieties. These purposes were cloaked in myth, not only as he found it in Greek tragedy but as transmitted through Weimar Classicism, which had turned Elektra's sister Iphigenia into a model of feminine deportment. By his stated intention to create 'something contrary to *Iphigenie*' Hofmannsthal therefore, under the guise of engaging with a literary precedent, was in fact confronting a powerful stereotype of femininity. *Pace* E.M. Butler, it was not the case that contact with Greek myth upset the delicate balance of Hofmannsthal's mind, but rather that such myth provided a culturally acceptable medium for saying what, for this writer, was the unsayable. Ultimately, Hofmannsthal's attempts to use the Electra myth to reaffirm normative values were undermined by the dramatic effectiveness of *this* Electra, as she appeared in Reinhardt's production, Eysoldt's performance, and Hofmannsthal's own verse (and lives on in Strauss's opera).