Fin-de-siècle Fantasies: "Elektra", Degeneration and Sexual Science

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Fin-de-siècle fantasies: *Elektra*, degeneration and sexual science

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In 1903, Otto Weininger, twenty-three, Viennese, Jewish, and an imminent suicide, published his misogynist manifesto *Sex and Character* and created an international sensation. 'One began', reported a contemporary, 'to hear in the men's clubs of England and in the cafés of France and Germany – one began to hear singular mutterings among men. Even in the United States where men never talk about women, certain whispers might be heard. The idea was that a new gospel had appeared.'[1] Weininger's new gospel tied the spiritual progress of the human race to the repudiation of its female half. Women, said Weininger, are purely material beings, mindless, sensuous, animalistic and amoral; lacking individuality, they act only at the behest of a 'universalised, generalised, impersonal' sexual instinct.[2] For humanity to achieve its spiritual destiny, men – particularly 'Aryan' men, who had not suffered a racial degeneracy that made the task impossible – must achieve the individualistic supremacy first revealed by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In order to do this, they must both rid themselves of the femininity within them and reject their sexual desires for the women around them.

Within a few years, Richard Strauss had twice put woman, in Weininger's sense, on the operatic stage – and created an international sensation. In 1905 there was Salome, inflaming desire through her sensuous dance before Herod, crooning and shrieking over the severed head of John the Baptist, raising the voice of her hysterical desires amidst the babble of the 'stage Jews' who act as a chorus.[3] In 1909 there was Elektra, a dancer of another sort, sustaining herself on fantasies of blood sacrifice, eroticising her kinship with her sister and brother, raising the voice of her hysterical desires amidst the shrill babble of the serving maids who act as a chorus.

To be sure, Strauss's *Salome* and *Elektra* cannot merely be reduced to the misogyny of Otto Weininger, but neither can they be wholly detached from it, nor

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[1] Ford Madox Ford, 'Women and Men', *The Little Review*, 4 (1918), 40–1; cited in Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York, 1986), 218.

[2] Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (London, n.d.), 260. Further citations appear in the text.

[3] Sander Gilman, 'Strauss and the Pervert', in *Reading Opera*, ed. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton, 1988), 306–27.

protected from it by critical admiration of Strauss's orchestral virtuosity or musical structure. The immediate context of both Weininger's book (among many others) and Strauss's operas was a cultural formation that grew up in the nineteenth century and came of age in the *fin de siècle*. The categorical imperative of this formation, which I call supremacism, was the separation of what was 'higher' and 'lower' in human nature and society. Elaborate, indeed obsessive, systems of classification were deployed to the purpose, capable – like the Straussian orchestra – of combining great technical refinement with utter brutality. And the work was pursued in a climate of thought that made abnormality, as Strauss's *Elektra* made vocal shrillness and orchestral mayhem, virtually the norm.

The origins of supremacist culture lie partly in the rise of economic and social stresses on the middle-class family central to the organisation of nineteenth-century life, and partly in the ideological impact of evolutionary science. Basic to the formation was a dualistic, not to say phobic, contrast between cultural progress and cultural regression, evolution and degeneration. Weininger's organisation of this contrast is exemplary. The progress of civilisation rested with northern European men; regression to the level of the 'primitive' threatened from women (whom Darwin had argued were less evolved than men), from the urban poor (associated with dirt, disease and sexual excess), and from the savage 'lower races' who populated the colonial world.[4] Modern history had revealed that supremacy was innately vested in civilised Man, the normative human type, if only at the cost of a Darwinian struggle against his various Others. As Max Weber observed, 'in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value'.[5] Take away the saving sceptical irony of Weber's parenthesis, and the door is dialectically opened to demonologies like Weininger's.

The core concepts of supremacism had enough hegemonic force (in the sense of seeming self-evident: of going, once said, without saying) to make any kind of provisionality about them difficult to sustain. It is important to emphasise, given the ease with which anti-idealising criticism can now be dismissively labelled as politically correct, how rational and scientific the progression–regression model once seemed and how very explicit it was. One of the founding texts of modern anthropology, Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), outlined a typical 'order of culture' ascending from black African savagery to northern European civilis-

[4] Dijkstra, *Idols*, 3–24, 160–234, documents the coalescence of evolutionist and misogynist thought; see also Sander Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Literature, and Medicine', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 204–42; and especially Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989). A conspectus of nineteenth-century primitivism can be found in Nancy Bentley, 'Slaves and Fauns: Hawthorne and the Uses of Primitivism', *ELH (English Literary History)*, 57 (1990), 901–38; see also Patrick Brantliger, 'Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 166–203. On primitivism and modernity, see Marianna Torgovnik, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (Chicago and London, 1990).

[5] Max Weber, *Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, 1930), 13.

ation.[6] Scales like this proved to be smoothly interchangeable with divisions of both gender and social class. Mrs E. Lynn Linton shows just how smoothly in her antifeminist magazine article, 'The Partisans of the Wild Women' (1892). Too many modern women, Linton claims, resist their naturally secondary status and 'desire to assimilate their lives to those of men'. The degenerative result is the 'translation into the cultural classes of certain qualities and practices hitherto confined to the uncultured and – savages'.[7]

In this context, Strauss's operas of hysteria, like Weininger's hysterical book, could be received as sensationalist in their rhetoric yet rational and even profound in their misogyny. A fully historical understanding of both *Salome* and *Elektra* would accordingly be a feminist understanding that unsparingly grasps the participation of the operas in the cultural work of *fin-de-siècle* misogyny while at the same time being alert to their possible subversions of it. Recent criticism has approached *Salome* along these lines, but not *Elektra*, a situation I will try to rectify here, interweaving an account of the music with an account of cultural dynamics.[8]

1

Elektra is an especially striking instance of the simultaneous workings of participation and subversion. The protagonist that Strauss found in his libretto, the Sophocles-inspired tragedy by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1903), is a blatantly regressive figure. As if in reversal of the historical sequence traced by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Hofmannsthal has Elektra translate moral judgements into elaborate fantasies of abused bodies – bodies hunted down, tortured, penetrated:

> [to Klytämnestra:]
> Was bluten muß? Dein eigenes Genick,
> wenn dich der Jäger abgefangen hat!
> ... Das Dunkel und die Fackeln werfen
> schwartz-rote Todesnetze über dich –
> hinab die Treppen durch Gewölbe hin,
> Gewölbe und Gewölbe geht die Jagd –
> und ich! ich! ich! ich! die ihn dir geschickt,
> Ich bin wie ein Hund an deiner Ferse ...

[What must bleed? Your own neck, when the hunter has caught you! ... The darkness and torches throw black-red death-nets over you – under the stairs, through the vaults, vault after vault, goes the chase – and I! I! I! I! who set the hunter on you am like a hound on your traces ...]

The imaginary death-nets not only ensnare Klytämnestra's body but also score

[6] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols (London, 1871; rpt. New York, 1920), 27; cited by Bentley 'Primitivism' (see n. 4), 914–15.

[7] E. Lynn Linton, 'The Partisans of the Wild Women', *The Nineteenth Century*, 31 (1892), 596; cited in Dijkstra, *Idols*, 213.

[8] On *Salome* see Gilman's 'Strauss and the Pervert' and my 'Culture and Musical Hermeneutics: The Salome Complex', this journal, 2 (1990), 269–94.

it with the signs, black and red, of guilt and retribution. A later image fuses the victim's agony with the avenger's orgasm:

> [to Chrysothemis:]
> .... Wie du mich abwehrst,
> fühl' ich, was das für Arme sind. Du könntest
> erdrücken, was du an dich ziehst. Du könntest
> mich, oder einen Mann in deinen Armen ersticken!

[As you ward me off I feel what arms you have. You could squeeze whatever you drew to you to death. Me or a man you could smother in your arms!]

The pleasure Elektra takes in fantasies like these, culminating in the far greater pleasure of their coming true, is meant to provoke cathartic revulsion. When Elektra finally collapses from the weight of her gratification, her own body first stunned, then convulsed by it, the catharsis is complete and the audience edified.[9]

This misogynist conception provoked a double reading from Strauss. The Elektra of the opera is at once repellent and compelling, both a phobic personification of womanhood as brute bodily energy – pure Weiningerian Woman in sadistic form – and a tragic personification of moral outrage. Addicted to the higher portions of an enormous tessitura (*g* to $c^{\prime\prime\prime}$), punctuating her vocal line with extravagant leaps, musically characterised by a complexly dissonant signature-chord, Elektra embodies all the physical and emotional anarchy that the patriarchal order of culture exists to suppress. But she does so only as a consequence of her absolute devotion to that order, which she asserts with ferocious cadential authority at crucial moments, most notably at the ends of her opening monologue (Fig. 61), her diatribe against Klytämnestra (Figs. 258–9), and her colloquy with Orestes (Fig. 180*a*), and again at her moment of greatest triumph after the murder of Klytämnestra and Aegisthus (Fig. 230*a*).

Elektra's double nature makes her the object of intense scrutiny, not only by the other characters but also by the orchestra. To a degree extreme even for Strauss, the orchestra of *Elektra* is dependent on the narrative action, obsessed with illustrating every detail, emotional and physical, remembered or imagined. The result, since the action is wholly dominated by Elektra – by her voice, her presence, her desire – is that the orchestra comes to seem as obsessed with her as she is with her family tragedy.

As the action develops, unfolding continuously for some two hours without intermission, the opera becomes a kind of enormous Lied expressing Elektra's subjectivity. The shifting expressive focus basic to opera as a genre is arrested; what we hear is the musical equivalent of obsessional thinking, half by Elektra, half about her. The orchestra's unremitting vehemence, the literal-mindedness

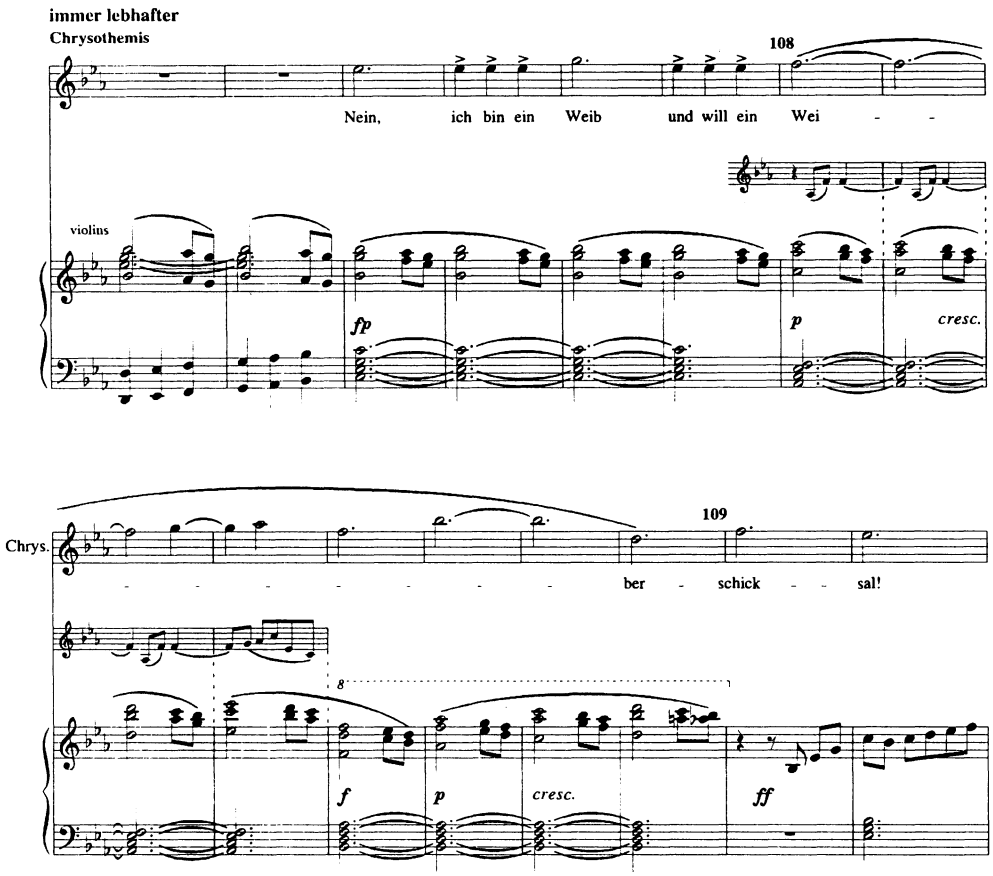
[9] On catharsis in Hofmannsthal see Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York, 1973), 82–4, 112–17.

it carries to the point of fetishism, the revulsion with which it immerses Klytämnestra in viscous sonorities, the overripeness with which it mocks and yet envies Chryosthemis's longing for marriage and motherhood, the erotic lyricism with which it backs the anticipation of *Schadenfreude* in Elektra's scenes with Orestes and Aegisthus: all these qualities are also Elektra's own. From her perspective, they are largely indivisible; from the partial perspectives of the other characters, they are baffling (all of Elektra's interlocutors bombard her with questions). Translated into the medium of the orchestra, the same qualities articulate and problematise Elektra's doubleness. They stand as symptoms of both cultural regression and physical and moral suffering, objects of both revulsion and identification. In sum, the orchestra's relationship to Elektra encapsulates the relationship of the supremacist masculine subject to his feminine object. He is obsessed by her, both attracted and repelled; he uses his higher faculties of interpretation and representation to position her properly in the order of things; and he risks, in doing so, being absorbed by her and reproducing her regressive character.

Strauss's double reading of Elektra represents a complex negotiation with the misogyny of supremacist culture. By privileging Elektra's subjectivity, Strauss goes against the supremacist grain that denies women legitimacy – in Weininger's case even existence – as individual subjects. Yet his characterisation of Elektra reproduces all the atavistic traits -- animalism, uncleanliness, sensual cruelty, erotic perversity, amorality, automatism – routinely ascribed to women in justifying that denial.

Thus when Chrysothemis, a supremacist cover girl, clamours for a properly general feminine destiny – 'Ich bin ein Weib und will ein Weiberschicksal' (I am a woman and want a woman's fate) – the orchestra recoils at her mindlessness by reproducing it in a bloated, mechanical sequence on the upper strings over pedal basses (see Ex. 1). Even in the bygone days when Elektra still defined herself within the circuit of masculine desires that defines 'woman's fate', a differing subjectivity of her own would intervene in the form of narcissistic pleasure. Speaking to Orestes, she recalls that she was beautiful: 'wenn ich die Lampe ausblies vor meinem Spiegel, fühlt' ich es mit keuschem Schauer' (when I blew out the lamp before my mirror, I felt it with a chaste shiver) (Fig. 159*a*). The lamp ceremony lets Elektra take possession of her own beauty; in blacking out the mirror, she turns the visual pleasure her body can give into a sensuous pleasure her body can feel. The orchestra transcribes this process by resolving from dominant to tonic at 'fühlt' (felt) amid 'shivering' string tremolos and the 'mirroring' of a lyrical motif among several solo instruments. With the tonic arrival, the shivering intensifies and the mirroring stops (Fig. 159*a*). Yet this is hardly an unequivocal affirmation. The texture is too nervous, too agitated; the fury of the Maenad is palpably latent in the young girl's narcissistic shiver. (Note the associative play between *Schauer*, thrill or shiver, and *schauerlich*, dreadful or horrible.) As an individuated subject, Elektra is always already monstrous.

In the famous episode following the murder of Klytämnestra and Aegisthus, the opera's double reading of Elektra finds its crowning moment. Rejoicing voices



Ex. 1. Chrysothemis to Elektra

sound from within the palace where the bloodshed has occurred, and Elektra, standing outside as if entranced, is asked by Chrysothemis, 'Don't you hear it?' (So hörst du denn nicht?) 'Don't I hear it?' she replies, 'Don't I hear the music? It comes straight out of me' (Ob ich nicht höre? Ob ich die Musik nicht höre? Sie kommt doch aus mir) (Figs. 229*a*–239*a*). The orchestra agrees: it figures this rapturous statement as literally true. As Carolyn Abbate has observed, the music Elektra claims as her own here is derived from her opening monologue.[10] An extended expression of grief, longing and retributive desire, the monologue establishes Elektra as a subject; she has earlier been both the object of spectacle, running from the palace and 'spring[ing] back like a beast' (spring[end] zurück wie ein Tier) and the source of quotation, but she has not yet been heard. By allowing the ecstatic Elektra to appropriate the orchestra's original reading of her subjectivity, Strauss upholds her claim to be the source of the music; from the moment

[10] Carolyn Abbate, 'Music and Language in *Elektra*', in *Richard Strauss: Elektra*, ed. Derrick Puffett (hereafter RSE), Cambridge Opera Guides (Cambridge, 1989), 107–27. Further citations appear in the text.

she speaks up to the moment she collapses, the roles of (male) composer and (female) protagonist fuse. This act of empowerment is remarkable. As Abbate remarks, 'it might seem odd that Strauss, cynical, paternalistic, and hardly a feminist advocate, would so efface himself, cede so much of his narrating voice' (p. 127). Yet though Strauss cedes power to Elektra, he does not concede authority to her. As we will see in following the course of this episode, what he gives with his right hand he takes away with his left.

Elektra's monologue had ended with intimations of a dance, a solitary waltz, of triumph. The music that Elektra now recognises as coming out of her is leading, impelling her, towards that dance, though a strange heaviness, 'the enormous, the twentyfold ocean' (der ungeheure, der zwanzigfache Ozean), engulfs her limbs. None the less, she soon begins what the stage directions call her 'nameless dance' (ein namenloser Tanz), her knees and arms flailing, 'her head thrown back like a Maenad' (zurückgeworfen wie eine Mänade). The dance is at once the consummating expression of Elektra's subjectivity and a willing transition – in terms of supremacist culture a willing regression – from voice to body, spirit to matter, subject to object. Strauss's music projects this contradiction with merciless clarity. As a climactic elaboration of the close of Elektra's monologue, the dance forcefully articulates the large-scale structure of the opera. It establishes Elektra as both choreographer and composer of her own story, her own destiny. Yet as a dance the music is grotesque, its movement a heavy-footed lurching, its orchestral texture a suffocating mass. The music on which Elektra stakes her identity is a projection of her mysteriously heavy body: the repellent, engulfing, degenerative body prescribed by the culture of *fin-de-siècle* misogyny.

For Strauss and his audience, the music of *Elektra* offered a vicarious means to release the atavistic bodily energies supposedly embedded in women, and that the social and cultural subordination of women existed to constrain. The problem thus raised is the old one of getting the genie back in the bottle. At the close of the opera, Elektra collapses to – is felled by – the *fortissimo* sound of a dark, sustained, brutally orchestrated E flat minor chord (Fig. 261*a*). The orchestra spits out the same chord, similarly orchestrated, in place of the dominant in the concluding (C major) cadence. Strauss, who thought of tonalities symbolically, chose this one carefully. Chrysothemis uses E flat major to celebrate the natural destiny of women as sexual beings and childbearers; Elektra appropriates the key seductively in order to win Chrysothemis as an accomplice in the murder of Klytämnestra and Aegisthus, and then, the seduction failing, curses her sister in E flat minor. The curse, in a standard tragic irony, finally redounds upon her; the natural order of gender has its revenge. To what extent, however, does Elektra's scourging in E flat minor objectify and distance her, so that the restoration of the social order coalesces with the assertion of musical structure? To what extent does the scourging come to grief, intentionally or not, against the force of Elektra's haggard charisma and the braying C major fanfares that actually end the opera?

2

Clearly, these questions do not pose genuine alternatives, but specify the terms of a dynamic relationship. The best means to describe that relationship will prove to be a further character trait of Strauss's Elektra grounded in supremacist misogyny. The operative trait, to which Weininger's *Sex and Character* again serves as a shop-of-horrors guidebook, is a polymorphic energy that effaces boundaries, collapses distinctions and confuses identities.

Like her spiritual ancestor, Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Strauss's Elektra is fanatically, masochistically devoted to the Father's law, 'passionately in love with the death of her father' and the retribution it mandates.[11] Donna Anna, however, is also a *musical* fanatic, restricted to a vehement opera-seria fury that Mozart edges towards shrillness, tediousness and self-parody. At the end of the Enlightened eighteenth century, as Julia Kristeva notes, '[the Father's] political and moral law are crumbling enough ... to allow Mozart not to treat [their collapse] as a tragedy' (p. 152). But Strauss's Elektra, offshoot of an age in which the lightest infractions of the Father's law can be treated as tragedy, is musically as compelling as Donna Anna is bemusing. A virtuoso of styles and voices, she croons, howls, exults, mourns, teases, muses, admonishes and scourges, shifting her voice and her character to suit each new occasion with a volatility that matches the orchestra's obsessional tone-painting and onomatopoeia. Her emotional range, like her vocal range, is enormous: utter self-absorption in her opening monologue, prophetic rage in her denunciation of Klytämnestra, sadistic irony in her baiting of Klytämnestra and Aegisthus, erotic pathos in her dialogue with Orestes, predatory eroticism conflating wishes and lies in her attempted seduction of Chrysothemis. Although no less a monomaniac than Donna Anna, Elektra is also a polymorph; or, more exactly, she becomes a polymorph in order to service her monomania. That is why neither Aegisthus nor Orestes can recognise her at first, and why she can so easily mingle same-sex and cross-sex desire, fantasies of exogamy and incest, in her relations with Orestes and Chrysothemis.

In supremacist terms, what this amounts to is *così fan tutte*: Elektra acts just like a woman. According to Weininger, the materiality of women endows them with unlimited plasticity. Both their bodies and their characters are indeterminate, threatening the determinacy of men. 'Woman', Weininger writes, 'is always living in a condition of fusion with all the human beings she knows, even when she is alone. ... Women have no definite individual limits' (198; note the characteristic elision of 'woman' and 'women').

The dangerous fascination of polymorphism is arguably the leading theme of *fin-de-siècle* misogyny. One measure of its importance is the popular consumption of paintings that show women in groups, typically in wooded or watery settings, their bodies rhyming or overlapping with each other and blending into the material medium that envelops them. Gustav Klimt's series of underwater scenes – *Watersnakes* I and II, *Moving Waters*, the drawing *Fish Blood* – are the best known treatments

[11] The quoted phrase is from Julia Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York, 1988), 152. Further citations appear in the text.

of this subject; *Moving Waters* (see Fig. 1) alerts the male spectator to this danger with a perhaps ironic candour. A bearded head, decapitated by the edge of the picture plane, stares at floating female bodies from the lower right-hand corner just above Klimt's signature. The centre of the visual field, to which his stare is drawn, is the pelvis of one of the floaters, slightly thrust forward and crowned with red pubic hair – an icon of feminine sexuality as a self-reproducing, other-obliterating power.[12]

Broadly speaking, the *fin-de-siècle* construction of a primary gender antagonism

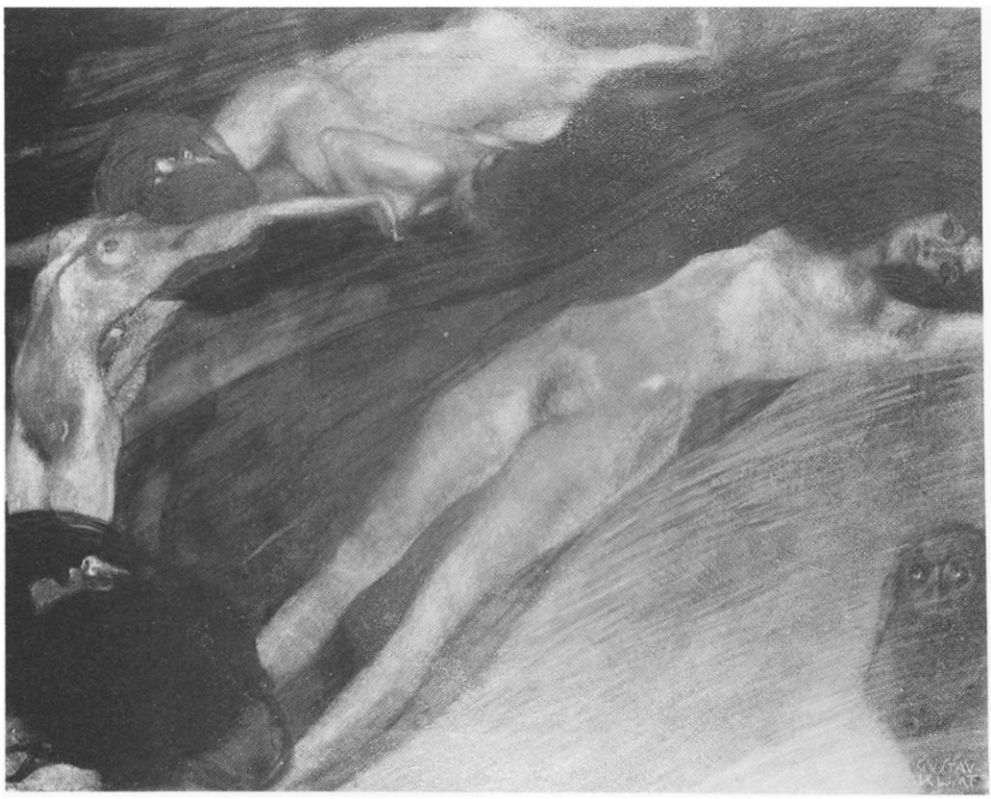


Fig. 1. Gustav Klimt, *Moving Waters* (1898). Oil on canvas, 21″ × 26⅛″. Courtesy Galerie St Etienne, New York. Private collection.

on the axis of fixed versus fluctuating boundaries can be taken as a social projection of the reigning epistemic paradigm of positive science. The positivist subject of

[12] Dijkstra, *Idols* (n. 1), reproduces a large number of these paintings. A good colour reproduction of *Moving Waters* appears in *Pre-Modern Art of Vienna: 1848–1898*, ed. Leon Botstein and Linda Weintraub (Detroit, 1987). On *Fish-Blood* and *fin-de-siècle* sexuality, see my *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800–1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), 142–3.

knowledge represents the acme of what might be called applied Cartesianism; it is normatively masculine, inflexibly clear and distinct, and capable of doubting everything but itself.[13] This epistemic perspective, however, does not account for the specific salience of *fin-de-siècle* misogyny; it does not clarify the sharp, panicky quality of the antagonism, or the obsessiveness with which the virile subject stages, paints, theorises or otherwise represents the feminine or feminised matrix that endangers him.

A more local understanding might begin with the supremacist principle that savages, the uncultured and wild women are interchangeable terms, each of which both defines and threatens a cultural boundary: concentrically arrayed, the boundaries of civilisation (colonial empire), social hierarchy and private (domestic) life. Given, for example, the popular idea that 'up from the lowest savagery, civilization has ... caused an increasing exemption of women from bread-winning labor' (Herbert Spencer), the legitimation of nondomestic work for women would be 'complexly ruinous ... a step backwards toward savagery' (Joseph Leconte) taken in defiance of the evolutionary law that 'the pre-eminence of the male over the female ... [is characteristic] of superior races and species, the adult age, and the higher classes' (G. Delauney).[14] Supremacist ideology represents boundaries like these as sites of conflict between civilisation and an atavistic, promiscuously transgressive energy that is constantly shifting its point of attack from one boundary to another. 'Complexly ruinous', this energy can break through the system of boundaries at any point and overrun the whole with degeneration or '*anti-differentiation*' (Leconte).[15] The ironic result is that supremacist culture is a culture of panic, the ideological mandate of which is to police its boundaries at all times and at all costs.

By the *fin de siècle* this mandate had brought forth, again ironically, a close correlation between the preoccupations of 'advanced' European civilisation and what René Girard calls the 'sacrificial crisis' of primitive societies.[16] Girard argues that social order traditionally depends on a system of differences governing role and status, and that when these differences break down the community is threatened by an eruption of indiscriminate violence. This threat is countered by a dose of preventive medicine: the community unites to sacrifice a scapegoat, a 'surrogate victim' in whose 'monstrous' person the breakdown of differences is epitomised. The sacrifice concentrates and discharges the force of violence, symbolically expunges the source of the crisis, and rallies the community to restore the all-important system of differences. This historical event – if it is that – is later

[13] On gender and post-Cartesian epistemology, see Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis, 1984), 38–50, and Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany, 1987).

[14] Quotations from Russett, *Sexual Science* (see n. 4), 148, 149 and 146 respectively.

[15] Russet, 149.

[16] The term 'primitive' refers nonprejudicially to the absence of a legal system or the investment of custom with the force of law.

commemorated (or constructed in retrospect) by the ritual sacrifice, literal or figurative, of a 'substitute victim'.[17]

In civil society, sacrificial ritual migrates primarily to tragic drama,[18] and nowhere more fully than to the series of tragic operas produced between *Rigoletto* and *Lulu*. Most of these operas participate, though more ambivalently than she recognises, in the ideological project that Catherine Clément assigns to opera in general: the lamination of the Father's laws, of narratives bound to the 'undoing' of women, with so much musical beauty that critical resistance is lulled to sleep.[19] These 'sacrificial' operas, however, do more specialised and explicit cultural work than this, though many of them do it no less ambivalently. They are operas that culminate when a woman's sexuality leads to her murder (Carmen, Gilda, Desdemona, Nedda, Salome, Marie, Lulu) or when brutality drives her to suicide (Butterfly, Tosca, Liù, but not Brünnhilde). Within the operatic fiction, these characters are surrogate victims; as elements in an operatic fiction, substitute victims. All of them are polymorphs, Weiningerian dissolvers of boundaries, Girardian embodiments of the collapse of differences, vessels for the ritual re-enactment of sacrificial crisis. But not just any crisis: these victims are also historically specific. The identification of their polymorphism with their femininity, often supplemented by low racial or social status, marks them as the privileged victims of supremacist culture, figures of degenerative allure. As Girard notes, sacrificial victims are almost never women (p. 12); the most salient feature of *fin-de-siècle* supremacism is its reversal of this principle.

Elektra is surely the most extreme of sacrificial operas, not just because Elektra is the most polymorphic of heroines but because the ultimate murder weapon in *this* opera is the music itself. Like Salome, Elektra is crushed to death: not by a mass of shields, musically illustrated with clanging dissonance, but by the Straussian orchestral machine churning out its elephantine waltz, the very waltz that 'comes straight out of' its victim. Elektra, however, is not the only victim, and there is something strange in the fact that she is sacrificed at all. As commentators often point out, the Elektra of the classical tragedies is not the victim of a sacrificial crisis but the author of one; the victim is Klytämnestra, supplemented by Aegisthus. But although the opera overtly concerns this primary crisis, and resolves it into communal solidarity with choral acclamations of Orestes following the murders, the staging of a single sacrificial crisis turns out to be ritually inadequate in the face of supremacist panic. To be sure, Klytämnestra is a monstrous polymorph whose presence sends the orchestra into giddy spasms of deformity. But in order to expunge her, Elektra must become even more monstrous, more polymorphic, altogether more dangerous. The opera requires a doubling, a surplus of ritual: once Klytämnestra has been sacrificed to Elektra, Elektra must be sacrificed to the audience.

[17] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, 1977). Further citations appear in the text.

[18] Girard (p. 292) observes that Aristotle's *Poetics* 'is something of a manual of sacrificial practices, for the qualities that make a "good" tragic hero are precisely those required of the sacrificial victim'.

[19] Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1988).

3

Strauss articulates these relationships by multiple, overlapping means, all of them typically simple in conception despite the technical complexity involved in their execution. These include the stylistic and harmonic characterisation of Elektra and Klytämnestra, some of which has already been remarked on, the encapsulation of the drama in a broad tonal allegory, and the double framing of the action by memorable foreground patterns.

The tonal allegory is grounded in the association of consonant triads with the paternal law of culture and high levels of dissonance with deviance, abjection and transgression.[20] The name 'Agamemnon' is famously associated with a triadic motif (see Ex. 2), the most prominent in the opera, and often sounding in truncated form, as if to suggest both violence suffered and violence pursued. In maximal

Ex. 2. The 'Agamemnon' motif

contrast, Klytämnestra is characterised by a six-note collection bitonally combining two minor chords a tritone apart, usually on the roots B and F, and (as Tethys Carpenter observes) more often paired than superimposed.[21] The big scene between Elektra and Klytämnestra, where the Klytämnestra collection figures most prominently, is further marked by a 'total lack of definite dominants' and by suffocating whole-tone configurations, notably static clusters and parallel French sixths (Carpenter, pp. 96–7). Klytämnestra thus represents something incommensurate with the tonal and cultural order, a contaminated residue of otherness than can neither be contained nor banished.

Julia Kristeva suggests one way to name that something in her remarks on the classical Electra:

> Electra wants Clytemnestra dead not because she is a mother who kills the father but because she is a mistress (of Aegisthus). Let *jouissance* [a sexual pleasure unrepresentable within the symbolic order of culture] be forbidden to the mother: this is the demand of the father's daughter, fascinated by the mother's *jouissance* (p. 152).

Both vocally and orchestrally, Klytämnestra's music suggests the horror of the mother's *jouissance*, a pleasure so transgressive that once released it can appear

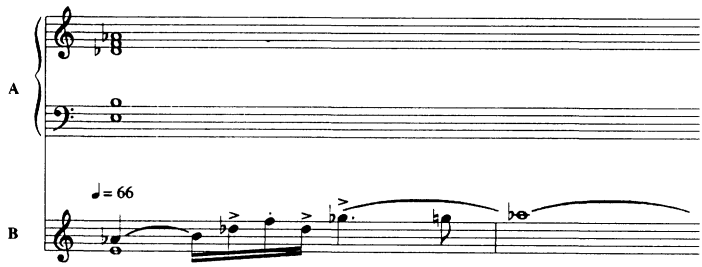
[20] Here as in *Salome*, the models for this allegory are *Parsifal* and, more remotely, *The Magic Flute*, with the proviso that, if Wagner's tonal authority is decentred with respect to Mozart's, Strauss's is decentred with respect to Wagner's, and desacralised to boot. On the tonal allegory in *The Magic Flute*, see Renée Cox, 'A History of Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48 (1990), 395–409.

[21] Tethys Carpenter, 'The Musical Language of *Elektra*', RSE, 82–3.

only as rancid and destructive, even to the mother herself. Centred on a low tessitura from which it rises in flights of desperation, Klytämnestra's vocal line is positively glutinous, distinguished by broken phrasing and bouts of heavy, dragged-out syllabification that retard the flow of her utterance. Glutinous, too, is Klytämnestra's reading by the orchestra. She is introduced by a crude, oriental march expressive of animal sacrifice, famous for its brutal insistence, its slaps with the *Rute* and thuds on the bass drum, its chromatic slitherings. And her account of herself is punctuated by bursts of frenzied orchestral activity alternating or combining with static or slow-moving masses of sound, the latter dominated by trombones, Wagner tubas and the like. In sum, Klytämnestra embodies feminine fluidity in its most horrifying form: in her this fluidity congeals.

Between Agamemnon and Klytämnestra in the tonal allegory stands the figure of Elektra, who moves in both her father's tonal and her mother's bitonal orbit without belonging to either. Elektra is characterised by a five-note collection that can be taken as the conjuncture of D flat major and E major. In its bitonal aspect, this sonority links the daughter and mother; they are the only characters in the opera to be projected bitonally. The link has obvious psychological overtones suggesting Elektra's obsession with Klytämnestra, and vice versa, but its real work is sociocultural. Bitonal projection identifies as pariahs the two women who violate hallowed boundaries; it marks them off as sacrificial victims. Bitonal dissonance ascribes a dense, repellent materiality to the women and locates the source of pollution in their polymorphism. (Compare the tonal *Schlagober* lavished on the unsacrificable good girl, Chrysothemis.)

Unlike Klytämnestra, however, Elektra is not merely an enemy alien in the tonal and cultural order of the Father. Her harmonic signature is presented in a form that betrays both tonal and bitonal leanings: an 'Elektra chord' consisting of a dominant 4/2 over a nonharmonic bass (see Ex. 3). Like Elektra herself,



Ex. 3. The 'Elektra' chord (A) and its motivic elaboration (B).

this chord is both monomaniacal and polymorphic. Endowed with a 'very specific sonority', it is treated by turns as a colour chord, a voice-leading chord, and (with varying degrees of fictitiousness) as a functional chord.[22] The Elektra chord is also sometimes associated with higher dominants derived from its seven-note

[22] Carpenter, 78–82.

complement, which can be arranged to form a dominant-thirteenth chord.[23] By this means Elektra becomes the vehicle of contrary harmonic impulses, or rather of a single impulse doubly read: the very procedure that yields chromatic saturation also recuperates it through constellations of dominants – precisely what Klytämnestra's music lacks. Elektra's harmonic character positions her well within the tonal and cultural order and qualifies her to expunge Klytämnestra from it. But her position also guarantees the instability of the very order she so serves and adores. Elektra is more dangerous than Klytämnestra because she pollutes that order from within, or – worse yet – because she reveals and embodies that order's intrinsic susceptibility to pollution.

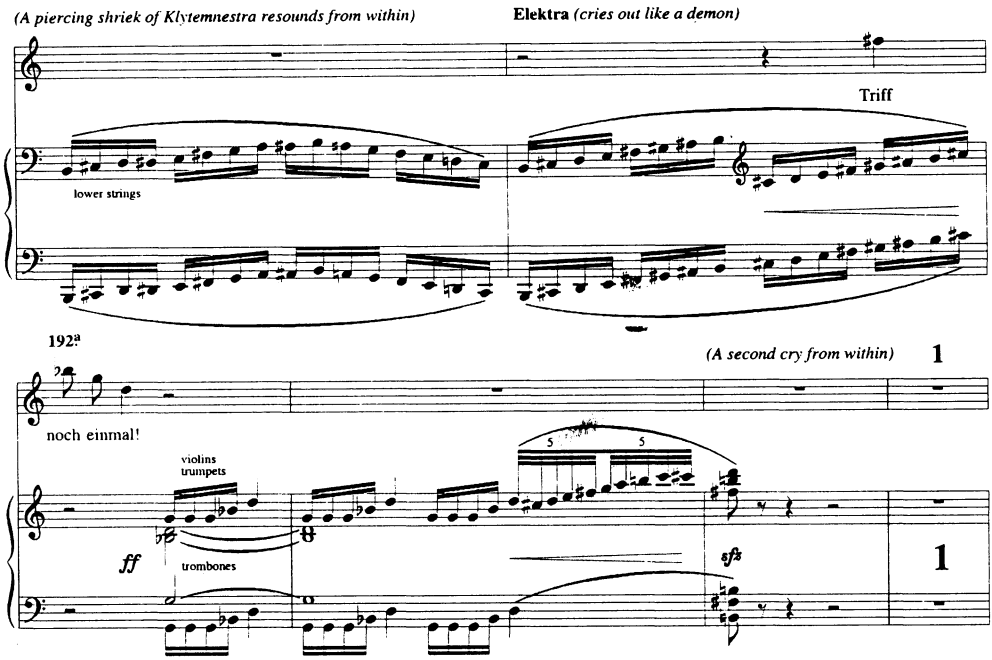
Elektra's transition from sacrificial agent to surrogate victim is inscribed in her changing relationship to the tonal triad as the retributive bearer of the Father's law. As in Sophocles' *Electra*, Klytämnestra and Aegisthus die at Orestes' hands but at Elektra's will. In dramatic terms, Orestes' arrival at Mycenae allows the deed to follow the word; Elektra's voice, which has hitherto only invoked the act of sacrifice, now figuratively inflicts it. In musical terms, the weapon Elektra wields is the triad.

When Elektra, alone on stage, hears Klytämnestra scream at Orestes' first blow, she herself screams '(*wie ein Dämon*): "Triff noch einmal!"' ([*like a demon*]: strike once more!) (Fig. 192*a*). With her first word she silences the orchestra, halting a series of agitated, chromaticised B-minor scales on their dominant; then, recasting the dominant as leading-note, she flings her voice shrilly into the silence she has cleared on a descending G-minor 6/4 chord. Without skipping a beat, violent figuration on *fortissimo* trumpets and strings delivers the death blow for her over a root-position G minor triad on trombones, then rounds back to B minor with a chromatic shiver for the second, and final, scream from Klytämnestra (see Ex. 4).

Elektra's triadic voice precipitates Aegisthus' death in similar terms. When Aegisthus, frantic for rescue, cries out 'Hört mich niemand?' (Does no one hear me?), Elektra condemns him with her memorable and terrible answer, 'Agamemnon hört dich' (Agamemnon hears you) (Fig. 216*a*). The phrase is backed, not by silence, but by a shrill $E^{\flat}$ octave high in the violins, doubled by flutes and piccolo, that pierces the silence and coils the spring of Elektra's rage. The spring uncoils in her voice on a C minor triad, again followed by two orchestral death blows: one in C minor while she is still speaking Agamemnon's name, the other in A flat minor following Aegisthus' death cry ('Weh mir!') in that key, to which Elektra's voice has sent him reeling (see Ex. 5). The third-relation, C–$A^{\flat}$, parallels the G–B relation heard at the death of Klytämnestra, and helps bring out the allegorical 'cadence' that connects the two deaths: Klytämnestra to Aegisthus, G to C.

It may seem surprising that the death of Aegisthus bears so much dramatic weight when the object of Elektra's obsession is Klytämnestra. But in allegorical importance Aegisthus is second to none. Elektra twice identifies him as a woman,

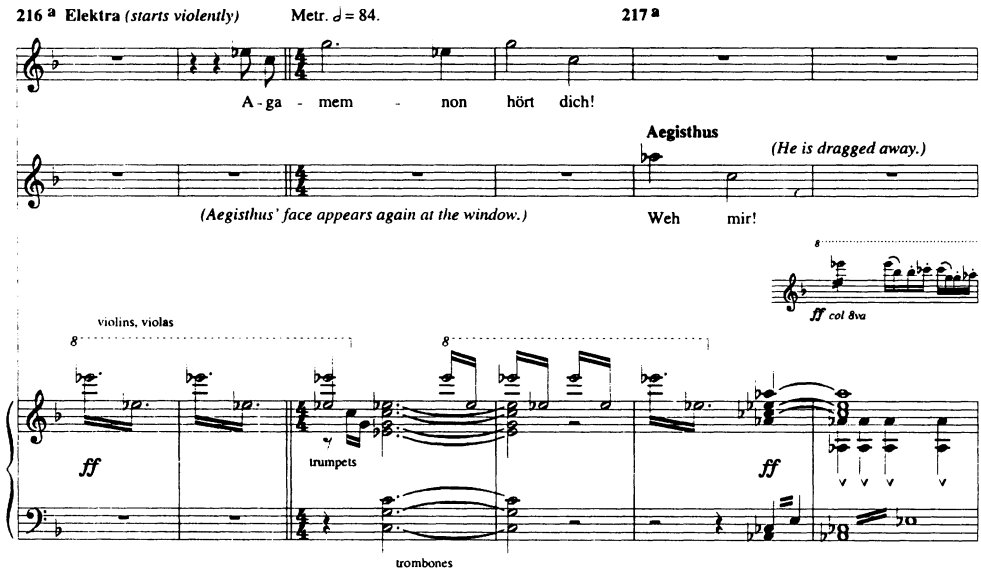
[23] Carpenter, 96–8.



Ex. 4. Death of Klytämnestra

and his vocal line makes the identification a third time: a decidedly high-pitched tenor, punctuated by irrational upward leaps, that rises to squeals of hysteria during his death-colloquy with Elektra. A publicity still from the first performance of the opera (Dresden, 1909; see Fig. 2) develops the point further. It shows an epicene Aegisthus (Johannes Sembach) with long curly locks and rouged lips; half cringing, half posturing seductively, he stands in the palace doorway, upstaged by a savage Elektra (Annie Krull) who glares out of kohl-rimmed eyes and brandishes a phallic torch. In the wax museum of supremacism, Aegisthus is the most degraded exhibit, the degenerate effeminate male who, abject in life, must be made even more abject in death. If Klytämnestra is the cause of sacrificial crisis, Aegisthus is the effect. In order to restore the Father's name and law, it is not enough to sacrifice his Nemesis; one must also sacrifice her handiwork.

But once the double sacrifice is made, the mantle of Nemesis passes from Klytämnestra to Elektra. The law of the talion strikes home: she who kills by the triad dies by the triad. As we saw earlier, the orchestra's E flat minor death-blow to Elektra stands allegorically for her alienation from the *Weiberschicksal* on which the law she enforces, the law of the Father, depends. The blow is transformed into a judicial act by the new tonal articulation that follows. For its reading of the fallen Elektra, the orchestra shifts from the E flat minor to the C minor triad, on which the truncated form of the Agamemnon motif blares out *fortissimo*.



Ex. 5. Death of Aegisthus

Then the E flat minor chord returns softly, a cold fact, then the blaring C minor fanfares; and again (see Ex. 6). The effect of this conjuncture is to put Elektra in her mother's place. The bitonal pairing of triads has been Klytämnestra's signature; the Elektra chord has been bitonal only by implication, and that implication has never been realised. More exactly, it has never been realised *before*. The E flat minor–C minor pairing forms a shadow version – as Carpenter observes, the bitonal complement[24] – of the D flat major–E major pairing implied by the Elektra chord. In her collapse, Elektra is not dispossessed, not degraded from her 'own' position to her mother's: the surrogate victim's position to which she falls is already her own as well as her mother's. Her signature chord has deferred, even repressed, her need to take this position, but has also guaranteed it. Elektra's place has been appointed for her from the beginning.[25]

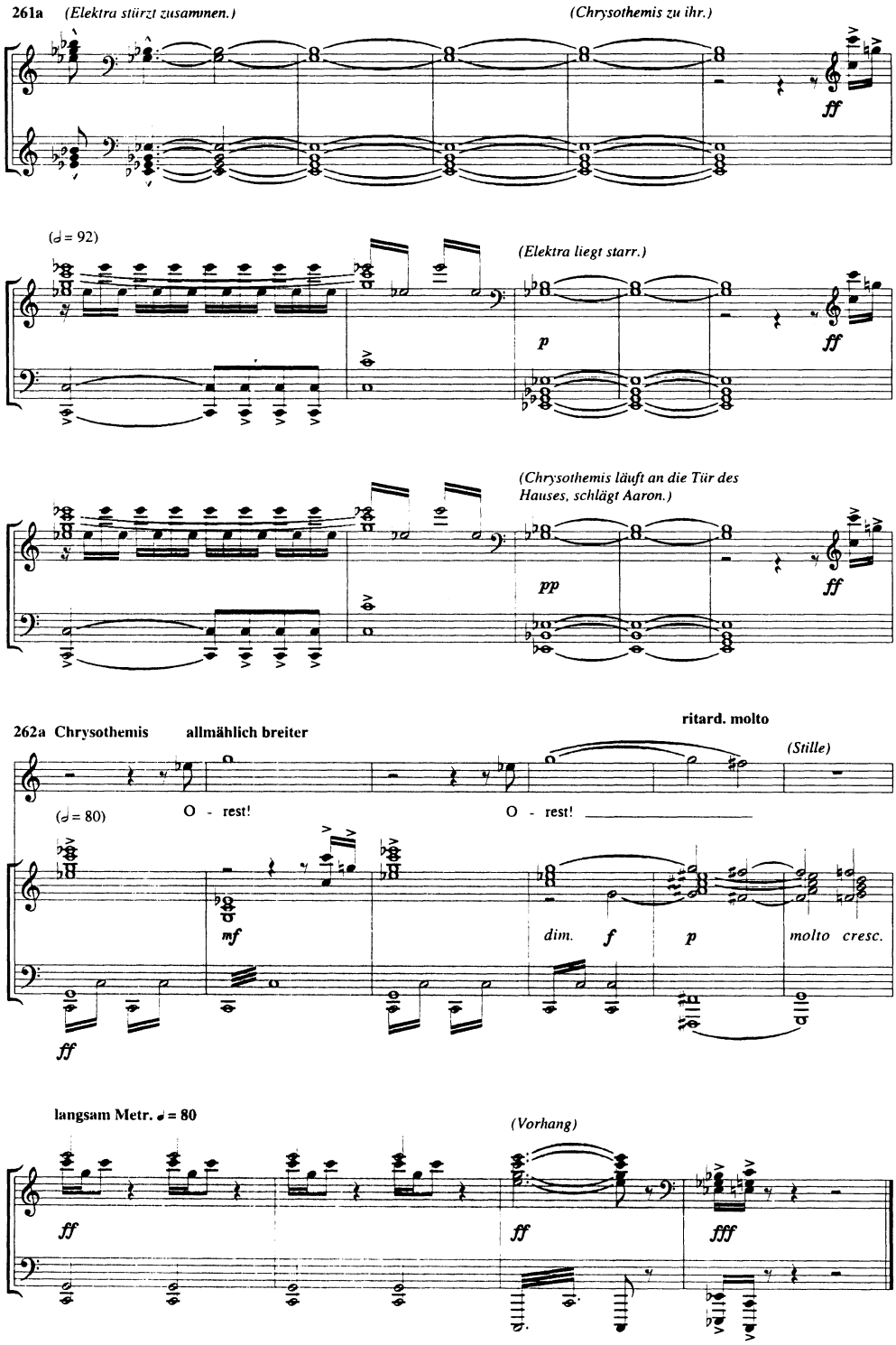
4

The architecture of the opera supports a similar understanding. On the largest scale, the double reading of Elektra as agent and victim is articulated by a double

[24] Carpenter, 103–6.

[25] A further technical detail is worth noting in this connection. The Elektra chord and its bitonal complement form a ten-note collection, excluding only D and A. These excluded notes, as Abbate has observed, form one of Elektra's distinctive 'voices', heard at several crucial moments of the drama (Figs. 90, 178, 10*a*; an additional instance occurs at Fig. 123*a*). The conjuncture of E flat minor and C minor can thus be taken, in an even fuller sense than the one already noted, to represent the latent position that Elektra holds off as long as possible – but that, especially given her impulse towards chromatic saturation, cannot be held off forever.

Fig. 2. Annie Krull as Elektra, Johannes Sembach as Aegisthus. Publicity photograph for the Dresden première, 1909. Original photograph in the archive of the Sächsische Staatsoper, Dresden.



Ex. 6. Elektra's collapse and the close of the opera

framing of the musical and narrative action. There is an outer frame affirming, however delusively, the law and the name of the Father, and an inner frame affirming, however grudgingly, the polymorphism of the feminine. The outer frame subdues the feminine energies it encloses, a role that, as Susan McClary has shown, frame structures characteristically at play in operatic mad scenes.[26] But *Elektra* takes feminine excess not only as a force to be framed but also as a form that frames. The result is to collapse the distinction between 'excess' and 'frame' (McClary's terms) and in so doing to call forth an outer frame of exceptional violence: violence enough – or is it? – to recapture the usurped boundary.

The outer frame is memorably efficient, as businesslike in the work of justice as an executioner. It begins the opera with a brutal *fortissimo* statement of the 'Agamemnon' motif and ends it with the 'Agamemnon' fanfares resounding over Elektra's fallen body. The long tradition of reading Agamemnon as the 'true hero' of *Elektra* rests on the combination of simplicity and grandiloquence in this frame, the 'true author' of which is not Richard Strauss but Johann Joachim Winckelmann.[27] Although *Elektra* is obviously not Winckelmannian in its aesthetic, its outer frame does invoke the association of simplicity and grandeur with cultural supremacy and idealised virility by which Winckelmann invented the moral idyll of ancient Greece for modern Europe.[28] The frame's stentorian minor triads supposedly ground the extravagance of Elektra's ravings in an abstract moral calculus and the gross materiality of her harmonic colour in an austere intellectuality. The spirit of the martyred Agamemnon sanctifies what would otherwise be merely lurid.

It should not be surprising that a male character who never appears should be said to preside over an opera in which the male voice, rarely heard, does little more than wheedle and bully. The claim follows entrenched cultural routines that automatically enshrine any term of authority as masculine. Besides, Strauss clearly wanted to be understood along these lines. Making an important alteration in Hofmannsthal's text, he gave Elektra's monologue a tight, clear frame structure based on repetitions of the name, sung to the motif, of Agamemnon. The structure is emphatically ritualistic, its fulcrum an internal chiasmus between the phrases 'Agamemnon! Vater!' and 'Vater! Agamemnon!' (Figs. 44/3–8, 46/1–3).[29] As a macrocosmic version of this structure, the opera as a whole does no more than reinscribe Elektra's slavish dedication to her father's mystique. The possibility of hearing that reinscription as ennobling is largely responsible for the entry of *Elektra* into the operatic canon.

None the less, the Agamemnon motif is not as unequivocal as its partisans

[26] Susan McClary, 'Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen', in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota, 1991), 80–111.

[27] On Agamemnon as true hero, see Kurt Overhoff, *Die Elektra-Partitur von Richard Strauss: Ein Lehrbuch für die Technik der dramatischen Komposition* (Salzburg, 1978), and Richard Specht, *Richard Strauss und sein Werk*, 2 vols (Leipzig, Vienna and Zurich, 1921), II, 165–214.

[28] For a succinct account of Winckelmann's intellectual legacy, see Joan DeJean, 'Sex and Philology: Sappho and the Rise of German Nationalism', *Representations*, 27 (1989), 148–71.

[29] For an extended account of the structure of the monologue, see Derrick Puffett, 'The Music of *Elektra*: Some Preliminary Thoughts', RSE, 33–5.

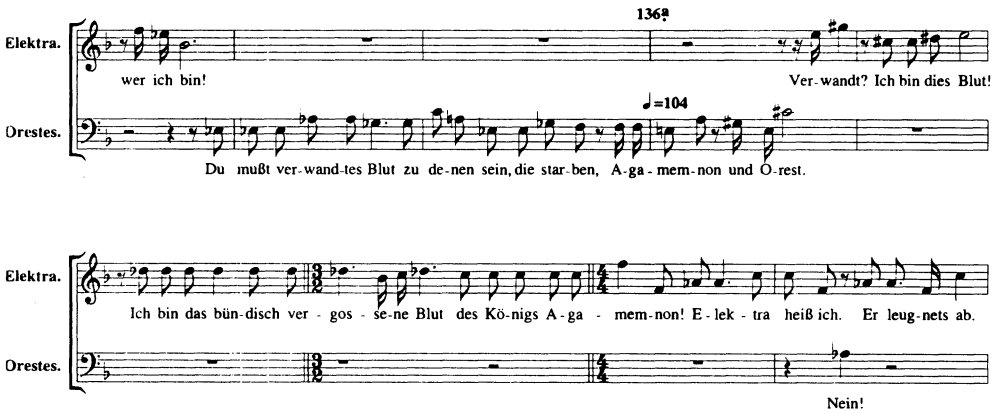
would like to believe. Carolyn Abbate has shown how much understanding is lost if we read the motif apart from its relation to Elektra:

> The thing for which the motive stands, in the classic semiotic sense, is not Agamemnon at all, but rather Elektra's *voice*; more specifically, the mourning lament that so strongly marks her existence (p. 111).

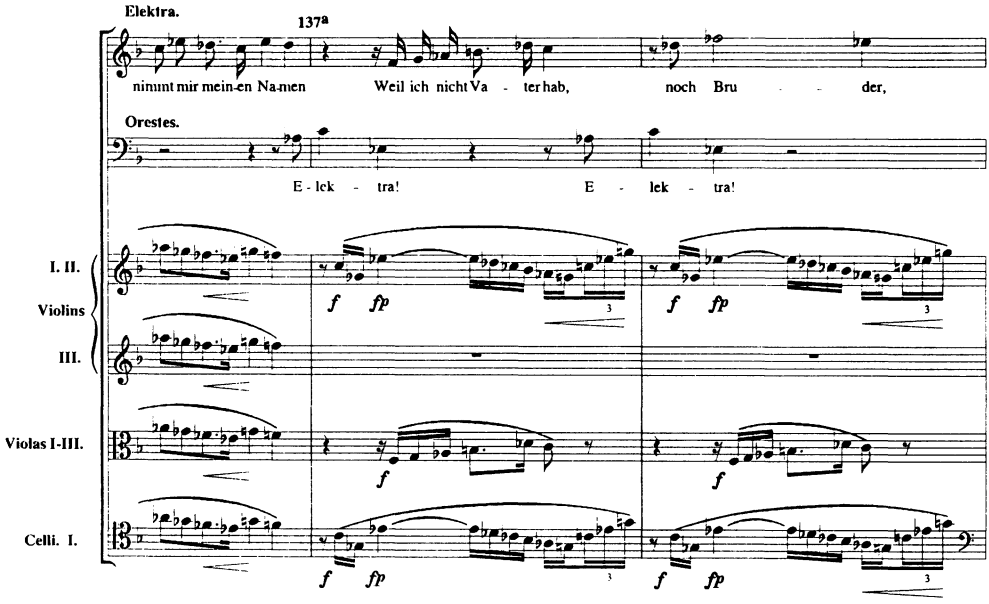
This counter-reading is compelling, but only if it engages rather than replaces the reading it counters. It must be teased apart from the desire to fix the motif as a univocal sign, to identify *the* thing for which the motif stands.

As the mantra of Elektra's subjectivity, the Agamemnon motif is necessarily protean in its meanings, the full range of which escapes control and includes the obnoxious significations of Agamemnon as *éminence grise* and 'true hero'. The only fixed meaning of the motif is its magical, superstitious or obsessive-compulsive link to Agamemnon's name, which Elektra confirms by never singing the motif except to utter the name. But this provides no fixity at all. As Kristeva observes of Sophocles' Electra, 'that the father is made a symbolic power – that is, that he is dead, and thus elevated to the rank of a Name – is what gives meaning to her life' (p. 151). But the price of this meaning is a permanent alienation from the cultural order that confers it. The meaning, indeed, may be available only *on condition of* the alienation, which is soldered to Elektra's gender. Orestes, who inherits Agamemnon's cultural position, sings his father's name with no reference to the famous motif, and with a casualness inconceivable to Elektra. Elektra, in turn, even though she thinks him dead, cannot sing the motif in Orestes' presence, even though in singing her father's name she couples it with her own for the first and only time (see Ex. 7). A distorted version of Agamemnon's motif in violin–cello octaves even seems to swipe abrasively at Elektra's name when Orestes subsequently addresses her (see Ex. 8).

The desires that Elektra voices through the Agamemnon motif, whether for



Ex. 7. Orestes and Elektra



Ex. 8. Orestes to Elektra

justice or for love, are unappeasable in principle, as she reveals most clearly when she sings the motif longingly, bringing out the *Tristan*-esque rising minor sixth that ends on the stressed syllable of the name. Desperate to ground her identity in the symbolic power of the motif and so to signify her fusion with the psychic and cultural Father, Elektra repeatedly finds that the motif can ground no identity at all because it is not self-identical. Although the outer frame originally pitches it in D minor, Elektra picks up the motif in B minor at the start of her monologue and carries it through C minor to C major; the death-sentence she later metes out to Aegisthus presses for a definitive C minor, but the close of the outer frame restores bimodal statements in C minor and C major. Similarly, Elektra is unable to appropriate the motif in any of the several 'voices' – lyrical, exultant, doom-laden – in which she sings it. Except at the start of her monologue (in the askew B minor), the orchestra never voices the motif in unison with her, but only anticipates, echoes or cuts across her utterance. In sum, Elektra provides a literal illustration of Jacques Lacan's principle that the name of the Father is what guarantees the symbolic order of culture.[30] But for Elektra (as Lacan would predict) the true name of the father is literally unspeakable.

The daughter's inner exile takes on a different valuation in the inner frame of the opera. This consists of the opening scene, in which a group of five serving maids gossip about Elektra, and the opera's only duet, shared by the ecstatic Chrysothemis and Elektra just before the latter's dance unto death. Constituted by the intricate interweaving of female voices, the substance of this frame is a matrix of undifferentiated femininity, a matrix in which, to recall Otto Weininger's

[30] Jacques Lacan, 'The Field and Function of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), 65–8.

dictum, 'woman is always living in a condition of fusion with all the human beings she knows'. In supremacist fantasy, which is the only place it exists, this matrix figures as both degraded and seductive. The opera agrees: the maids' scene is dominated by unpleasant dither, both vocal and orchestral, and the duet is rejected as seductive by Chrysothemis, who breaks away from it to seek Orestes. Yet the musical treatment of these scenes chafes at the boundaries of supremacist values, and even presses for a reversal of them, a supremacism of the (supremacist) feminine. The maids' scene discloses an impulse towards 'higher' development within the matrix of femininity, and the duet carries this impulse into the region most discomfiting to the cultural order: feminine *jouissance*.

The first three maids who speak of Elektra are completely hostile to her, the fourth largely so; their hostility is countered by the fierce, hero(ine)-worshipping partisanship of a fifth maid, still 'quite young', not yet subjugated by her *Weiberschicksal*. The fifth maid is an obvious prefiguration of Elektra. In dramatic terms, the moral gravity of her passion differentiates her from the general feminine mass, which is merely spiteful, but the hysteria of her devotion blurs the lines of demarcation. In musical terms, this ambiguity becomes a form of empowerment as the fifth maid rehearses what Elektra will assume, a highly discriminate identity still brimming with the indiscriminate polymorphic energy of the feminine matrix.

The vocal lines of the first four maids are not melodically individual and show a strong tendency to run together in a continuous stream. Much of the time the maids complete each other's sentences or make interjections. Pauses for articulation are well marked within each maid's statements, but rare between statements and perfunctory when present; most of the movement between voices goes by overlap or relay, one voice beginning just before or immediately after the other ends. Two passages even heighten the continuity among voices by common-tone links, which seem to act as crystallisations of a common tessitura. In their successive entries, the four maids – an alto, two mezzos and a soprano – fill out the ordinary spectrum of the female voice, from the *a* of the first maid's entry to the $a^{\natural}$ (quickly reprised as $a^{\natural}$) of the fourth's. Instead of specialising, however, the voices tend to gravitate towards the common ground of the middle register, where their qualities merge to produce a generalised female voice.

The fifth maid cuts across this web of similitude with a piercing, strongly profiled melodic line, but she is too overwrought to make a difference. The web closes again as the other maids, backed by their overseer, cast the fifth maid out and resume their discourse. It remains for Elektra to claim and hold the position of individuated identity. She does so, however, only in the context set up by the maids' scene, and in that context the formidable dynamism of Elektra's identity does not constitute a denial of her similitude with the maids – all of them, not just the fifth – but an extension and transformation of it.

In their colloquy, the first four maids quote Elektra continually. Her voice is dispersed among them, split off from the frighteningly agitated and feral body that the audience glimpses at the start of the scene. In this form, Elektra's voice is woven tightly into the feminine matrix. The maids make no melodic distinction between their own voices and Elektra's, and for the most part they do not set

Elektra's speech off from their own by using rests as quotation marks. In general, it is impossible to draw musical boundaries between Elektra's utterance and the maids'; everything is mixed into the generalised feminine voice. The fifth maid finally breaks this continuity, but only by adding new fragments of Elektra's dispersed subjectivity to the scene. In presenting what must count as Elektra's own self-image, the fifth maid also anticipates her idol's expressive style and elevated tessitura; to the other maids' representation of Elektra's textual voice, the fifth maid joins a representation of her musical voice.

In this context, Elektra's subsequent entry for her monologue is above all a rhetorical event, an act of personification in which her body, her textual and musical voices, and her sense of mission are totalised into a single form. (The closed, highly structured character of the monologue supports the effect of totalisation on a larger scale.) The Elektra that we see is the temporarily stabilised figure – that is, the trope – in which a loose collection of citational effects crystallises. And the Elektra we will shortly come to see is a figure, too, one that redisperses this 'original' Elektra into the multiplicity of persons who traverse the opera in her name. Given her polymorphism, we should be wary of endowing Elektra with a unified selfhood that the maids' scene only *presents* in fragments. The fragmentation, in the language of deconstruction, is *originary*, and as such it sponsors the irrepressible feminine dynamism that is (this) opera's obsession.

Elektra's duet with Chrysothemis crowns her affirmative transformation of the feminine matrix. Like the scene with the maids, it is organised as a movement from similitude to contrast and back again. Its point of departure is the strange heaviness, 'the twentyfold ocean', that overcomes Elektra in her moment of triumph and prevents her from dancing. The duet is her rite of passage to the dance; it reanimates her by immersing her vocally in an ebb and flow of feminine energy fully as 'oceanic' as her heaviness. For some thirty-five bars (Figs. 237*a*–43*a*) the two voices, sister-voices indeed in tessitura and expressive style, intertwine closely and sensuously, continually exchanging the upper and lower positions in their counterpoint. As my language suggests, the passage seems to gratify the erotic fantasies voiced by Elektra during her attempted 'seduction' of Chrysothemis. In the process, the vocal continuity of the maids' scene is transformed from a vehicle of hysteria to the vehicle of rapture, a rapture so compelling that even Chrysothemis, the good girl, is swept away by it. Eventually, the two voices intertwine more loosely in overlapping solo statements. At the last, though, they reunite again even as Chrysothemis cruelly abandons Elektra for Orestes – fleeing from the *jouissance* that her voice cannot help but express.

Chrysothemis, we might say, flees the inner for the outer frame, and in so doing she raises the question of the relationship between the two. No doubt we are supposed to follow her, but if so are we also supposed to be left knocking at a closed door? A possible answer, at least for the audience Strauss expected in 1909, may lodge in the curious manner of Elektra's death. In dramatic terms, it is clear that when Elektra collapses she is, like the Wicked Witch of the East, most sincerely dead. Yet her death is emphatically non-naturalistic. Hofmannsthal's stage direction, faithfully followed by Strauss, says 'Elektra liegt starr' (Elektra

lies rigid): Elektra passes from maenadic frenzy to rigor mortis in an instant. What is the meaning of this strangely rigid body?

5

One answer is that Elektra, as sacrificial victim, at last becomes the emblem of the order she serves: lying rigid, extinguished as a subject, she becomes the phallus. This suggestion tallies well with another, even more sinister one, that we can fetch back from one final excursion into the badlands of supremacism.

In his monumental study of the *Freikorps*, the protofascist private armies that were active in Germany in the years following World War I, Klaus Theweleit describes what I would call a basic supremacist personality type.[31] This 'soldier male', in Theweleit's phrase, lacks a normal ego. He cannot draw imaginary boundaries between himself as a subject and either the outside world or the stream of his own sensations and desires. Hence he lives in dread of being absorbed into an indiscriminate mass that can be represented, indiscriminately, by rabble (communists, Jews, the urban poor) and women. In response, the soldier-male trains himself to identify his own body as a kind of armour, a protective barrier that is also a weapon. This steel-hard body is usually secure within the larger machinery of what Theweleit calls the White Terror. In the tumult of battle, however, the soldier-male risks being sucked into the very mass that he is busy exterminating. So, after every encounter with that mass, his body must be rehardened, his armour recast.

Perhaps the fallen Elektra anticipates this rearmouring of the male body. As a sacrificial victim, Elektra restores by her death the cultural boundaries that her life has both defended and dissolved. Her rigid form, materially present in the body of the performer and musically present in Strauss's granitic E flat minor chords, might be needed as a symbol of that restoration: almost, indeed, as a talisman. Elektra's own sex would do nothing to inhibit this transformation of her into a phallic charm: quite the contrary. Her femaleness would itself be a kind of armour for the supremacist male spectator: something to immunise him against a contaminating identification with the polymorphic mass or matrix that Elektra has scourged in Klytämnestra, and that the outer frame of the opera has scourged in her.

Some foretaste of the White Terror may help to explain, though it cannot condone, Strauss's unparalleled degree of sadism towards Elektra. The sadism is a cultural, not a personal, pathology. In her remarks on Sophocles, Kristeva observes that

> the Electras ... militants in the cause of the father, frigid with exaltation ... [may be] the dramatic figures emerging at the point where the social consensus corners any woman who wants to escape her condition. (p. 152)

Strauss's Elektra does not corner so easily. With its inner frame, his opera releases

[31] Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies II: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis, 1989).

energies and pleasures thought to be feminine against the grain of its own discourse. The outer frame cannot revoke these things, but it can, and does, refuse to enfranchise them, all the while sublimating that refusal with music of stark simplicity, the sign of the tragic ethos. Here, too, we meet again the final image of Chrysothemis beating on the closed door, crying for Orestes, which is shrewdly chosen to convey the impression of tragedy. Yet it would not be hard to imagine a latter-day staging in which the rigid Elektra held centre stage even at the end: a staging that distanced the consolations of the tragic ethos and acknowledged that the opera's true protagonist is not Elektra at all but the condition of being obsessed with her.