

The Princess, the Pauper, and the Perpetrator

A Trinational Electra in the Twentieth Century

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While explaining her deep interest in Euripides's plays in the 2008 radio essay broadcast *The Essay: Greek and Latin Voices*, neuroscientist Susan Greenfield described classical literature as "a vehicle for thinking about our human condition."¹ Be it war veterans who have turned to Sophocles's *Ajax* or feminists arguing over the validity of Medea's actions in her namesake Euripidean play, Greek tragedies have resonated strongly with various people throughout the ages. The *Electra* myth is no exception. All three canonical ancient Greek dramatists rendered their own take on the myth, each version of which naturally has its textual variations that "must be indicative of profound differences in artistic temperament and outlook."² Furthermore, the various adaptations of these three ancient Greek playwrights' works have textual differences of their own, in certain cases altering the portrayal of particular characters and the textual setting to fit the social and political environment of the adapter's country. These textual differences and their influences will be the primary focus of this paper. Taking three twentieth-century adaptations from three different Western countries—Jean Giraudoux's French *Électre*, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's German *Elektra*, and Eugene O'Neill's American *Mourning Becomes Electra*—I analyze these variations through a sociopolitical lens, providing evidence for not only why discrepancies exist in the adaptations themselves, but also why each author adapted a specific Greek version. To achieve this, I first summarize each of the ancient Greek tragic plays, highlighting the differences among them. I then discuss each adaptation individually, providing both a brief synopsis of the adaptation and an examination of the textual variations and reasons behind them, linking these observations to factors such as historical background to highlight the large extent to which political and social aspects shape literature.

The original myth remains largely unchanged among the three ancient Greek plays. The house of Atreus is still in turmoil years after Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus slayed Clytemnestra's husband Agamemnon upon his return from Troy. Orestes managed to escape from Argos and avoid death as well, but his sister Electra remained in the palace, where she became a subordinate of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Now, Orestes has returned in secret to Argos by the bidding of Apollo's oracle to exact revenge for his father's death. He seeks out the help of Electra, and together the siblings kill Aegisthus and their mother. Among these three tragedies alone, there are noteworthy variations, many of which have been written about extensively by scholars.³ For

¹ Christopher Pelling and Maria Wyke, *Twelve Voices from Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), vi.

² Friedrich Solmsen, "Electra and Orestes: Three Recognitions in Greek Tragedy," *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, AFD. Letterkunde Nieuwe Reeks*, no. 2 (1967): 31–62.

³ See John Davidson, "Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides," in *A Companion to Sophocles*, ed. Kirk Ormand (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 38–52; Robert Graves and Rick Riordan, *The Greek Myths* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); Paul Harvey, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954); Friedrich Solmsen, "Electra and Orestes: Three Recognitions in Greek Tragedy," in *Mededelingen Der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie Van Wetenschappen, AFD. Letterkunde Nieuwe Reeks*, no. 2 (1967): 31–62.

example, in Aeschylus's *Choephoroi* (otherwise known as *Libation Bearers*), in spite of H. D. F. Kitto's description of the play as moving "in a new direction,"⁴ the majority of the characters demonstrate a simplistic, single-minded nature characteristic of other Aeschylean plays, driven purely by a singular emotion at any given point. Electra is assailed by grief on many fronts: grief from the brutal murder of her father, grief from the loss of her brother, and grief from the shameful predicament of her household. The power of this grief fuels her hatred for her mother, hatred she only gives action to with the return of Orestes. She prays that he "Only let Power and Justice, together with the third, the greatest of them all, Zeus, be with you" (<μόνον> Κράτος τε καὶ Δίκη σὺν τῷ τρίτῳ | πάντων μεγίστῳ Ζηνὶ συγγένοιτό σοι),⁵ as he strives to restore honor to his house by slaying Aegisthus and his own mother. This goal highlights the honor-driven mindset of Orestes. Only once, for a mere line in the Aeschylean play, does he openly consider the possible consequences of his deeds, as he himself is bent on committing the unthinkable crime of matricide to purify the house of Atreus. Additionally, it does not take many words from his companion Pylades to calm his nerves and convince him of the necessity of the deed. It is only afterward, when he appears before the people of Argos, that he sees the true horror of his deeds manifesting itself into the form of the Furies, whom he interprets as "my mother's wrathful hounds" (μητρός ἔγκοτοι κύνες)⁶ destined to hound him forever for his sins. The chorus of the play takes this sentiment one step further, maintaining a savage *ostinato* toward the entire situation and supporting the matricide. This stance may also be elucidated from the beginning of the play, when the chorus advises the uncertain Electra to "not use the libation intended for the purpose intended by Clytemnestra, but to ask in pouring it for the coming of an avenger."⁷ Even at the end of the play, when Orestes sees the Furies, the chorus is completely oblivious to their presence, attributing his inexplicable confusion to the mere fact that "The blood is still fresh on your hands" (ποταίνιον γὰρ αἷμά σοι χερσὶν ἔτι).⁸ However, despite the chorus's sentiments concerning the situation, the conclusion of the Aeschylean play seemingly rejects the validity of Orestes's crimes, with the ancient laws of the Furies subduing the oracular decree of Apollo.

The same cannot be said about Sophocles's *Electra*. A master of moral ambiguity, his version of the myth ends merely with a proclamation from the chorus following the capture and (the implied but not explicitly written) slaughter of Aegisthus: "Seed of Atreus, after many sufferings you have at last emerged in freedom, made complete by this day's enterprise" (ὃ σπέρμ' Ἀτρέως, ὥς πολλὰ παθὼν | δι' ἐλευθερίας μόλις ἐξῆλθες | τῇ νῦν ὀρμῇ τελεωθέν).⁹ We know nothing of what happens next, if the Furies arrive to hound Orestes for his matricide or if the house of Atreus may now truly be free with the rectification of Clytemnestra's sin, which in turn leaves much obscurity as to the lawfulness of Orestes's actions. Scholars are strongly divided on this issue; whereas Richard Jebb believed the deed to be justifiably glorious due to the condoning

⁴ H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954).

⁵ Aeschylus, "Libation Bearers," in *Oresteia: Agamemnon. Libation Bearers. Eumenides*, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein, Loeb Classical Library 146 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), lines 244–245.

⁶ Aeschylus, "Libation Bearers," line 1054.

⁷ Solmsen, "Electra and Orestes," 31–62.

⁸ Aeschylus, "Libation Bearers," line 1055.

⁹ Sophocles, "Electra," in *Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus*, trans. and ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library 20 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), lines 1508–1510.

decree of Apollo at the beginning of the play,¹⁰ John Sheppard rebuked Orestes for his foolishness in presuming that the oracular deity would ever approve of the vengeful act.¹¹

Similar to its Aeschylean predecessor, the play as a whole may be interpreted as a reestablishment and rebalancing of δίκη, with Sophocles portraying each character as how they should be, rather than as how they truly are (a trait noted by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: "Sophocles said he created characters as they ought to be" (Σοφοκλῆς ἔφη αὐτὸς μὲν οἷους δεῖ ποιεῖν)).¹² We see this rebalancing act being striven for not only by Orestes, but also by Electra. A far more daring character in this play, Electra has an intense bout of stichomythia with her sister, with the daughters seeking revenge against their treacherous mother and her lover now that Orestes has supposedly died abroad. With every push by Electra to convince her sister to join her in arms against their oppressors, Chrysothemis constantly rebuts her, proclaiming "You are a woman, not a man, and your strength is less than that of your adversaries" (γυνὴ μὲν οὐδ' ἀνὴρ ἔφυς, | σθένεις δ' ἔλασσον τῶν ἐναντίων χερί) and entreating her "to yield to those in power when you have no strength" (σθένουσα μηδὲν τοῖς κρατοῦσιν εἰκαθεῖν).¹³ This discord results in Chrysothemis abandoning Electra and imparting scathing words upon her, thus painting an overall scene largely resembling the opening lines of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Furthermore, in contrast to the fierce grief and vehemence of Electra in this version, as well as the chorus in the *Libation Bearers*, the Sophoclean chorus does not exhibit fiery sentiments regarding the situation. Rather, it acts as a true mediator between actors, advocating for moderation over wild passion throughout the play. The chorus's words therefore tend to be directed at the frenzied Electra, who is told time and time again to "beware" and restrain herself, as "time is the god that brings relief" (χρόνος γὰρ εὐμαρὴς θεός).¹⁴ The overall balance of this play is therefore centered around the moral ambiguity of the act, rather than around merely recounting the myth in a grand dramatic narrative.

Whereas Sophocles portrayed his characters in their most idealized forms, those in the plays of the younger playwright Euripides were thought to be characterized "as they really are" (οἷοι εἰσίν).¹⁵ This quality brings out the brutality of the matricide in a way not explored by the playwright's illustrious predecessors. After Electra and Orestes have committed this unspeakable crime together, the siblings quickly become aware of the atrocious nature of their deed, with Electra lamenting how their mother "bore children none shall forget, and unforgettable more were the sufferings brought on you by your children" (τεκοῦς' <ἄλαστα>, | ἄλαστα μέλεα καὶ πέρα | παθοῦσα σὼν τέκνων ὑπαί).¹⁶ Orestes carries on this sentiment, decrying the obscure oracles of Apollo that have in turn given him the lot of a "murderer banished from Greece" (φόνια δ' ὥπασας | λάχε' ἀπὸ γᾶς Ἑλλανίδος).¹⁷ The vivid description of the slaughter of their mother further adds to the brutal nature of the matricide and its effects on the siblings, conveying this Euripidean quality of depicting the true nature of man. And yet, the gods seemingly take pity on the pair for attempting to exact vengeance for their mother's sin, as is evidenced by the direct intervention of

¹⁰ Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 130.

¹¹ J. H. Kells, "Introduction," in Sophocles: *Electra*, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 4.

¹² Aristotle, "Poetics," in *Aristotle: Poetics, Longinus: On the Sublime, Demetrius: On Style*, trans. Stephen Halliwell, et al., Loeb Classical Library 199 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), line 1460b34.

¹³ Sophocles, "Electra," lines 997–998, 1014.

¹⁴ Sophocles, "Electra," line 179.

¹⁵ Aristotle, "Poetics," lines 1460b.34–35.

¹⁶ Euripides, "Electra," in *Suppliant Women. Electra. Heracles*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs, Loeb Classical Library 9 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), lines 1186–1188.

¹⁷ Euripides, "Electra," lines 1192–1193.

the Dioscuri in a *deus ex machina*. Not only do they give their blessings for the marriage of Pylades and Electra, but the gods also provide an opportunity for Orestes to cleanse himself of his crime before the Furies turn their wrath upon him. With that being said, Electra's character throughout the rest of the play possesses implacable hatred for her mother, who killed her father, forced Orestes into exile, and married her off to a lowly farmer in an attempt to avoid any possible insurgence against the newly established royal house. This extreme hatred perhaps makes this martyr-like attitude less sympathizable and less accessible to the broader Athenian public.

In addition, the play as a whole seeks to achieve a different aim from those of its forerunners. Instead of exploring the morality of the matricide like Sophocles or placing emphasis on the grandeur of the myth like Aeschylus, Euripides seeks to generate a greater degree of dramatic thrill in his *Electra*, a goal partly achieved by the separation of individual death scenes for Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. In addition, it is interesting to note how Castor proclaims "For I shall ascribe this bloody deed to Apollo" (Φοῖβῳ τήνδ' ἀναθήσω | πρᾶξιν φονίαν),¹⁸ a factor distinguishing Euripides's version from those of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The purpose of this statement, coupled with Castor's answers to Orestes's questions concerning the recently unraveled events, is to perhaps diminish any debate concerning the morality of the deed. Furthermore, the statement enables the audience to focus on the dramatic element of the play, thus differentiating the Euripidean *Electra* more in its dramatically graphic style than in its content.

In spite of the chronological gap between the three Electra-based tragedies and the modern day, the significance of both the plays themselves and the differences among them have persisted throughout contemporary cultures. In fact, moving forward several millennia, the politically charged atmosphere of the twentieth-century saw a great rise in the popularity of ancient Greek tragedy, producing adaptations that further developed the existing disparities among the three ancient Greek plays concerning Electra. The *Électre* by French playwright Jean Giraudoux is one such adaptation. France's reputation as "one of the few countries where literature is an effective gateway to politics"¹⁹ allowed the renown of Giraudoux and his works to highlight the social importance not only of Giraudoux himself as a writer, but also of writers in general.

Using the Euripidean tragedy as its mold, *Électre* is set ten years after Agamemnon has died, allegedly slipping on some steps and stabbing himself with his sword. Orestes learns upon his secret return from exile that Aegisthus has decreed the marriage of his sister Electra to the royal gardener, so as to "go back to the family of Theocathocles all that may throw some day an unfortunate luster on the family of Atrides" (repasser sur la famille des Théocathoclès tout ce qui risque de jeter quelque jour un lustre fâcheux sur la famille des Atrides).²⁰ However, Electra unwittingly marries her brother instead, with whom—once learning his true identity—she strives to seek out their father's true murderer. It is this quest to find the truth that causes Argos's destruction at the hands of the Corinthians the following day, leaving Electra with nothing, while her brother is hounded by the Furies for his sin of matricide. Interestingly, although Electra's implacable hatred for her mother is a sentiment carried on from Euripides, the central strife in Giraudoux's adaptation is primarily caused by a dispute over whether Clytemnestra or Electra dropped Orestes as a baby, as opposed to over Agamemnon's death. Furthermore, this obstinate hatred blinds Electra, leading her to refuse to allow the marriage of Aegisthus and her mother, which could save the city from the attack of the Corinthians and rebellious mobs. Even after the Furies have stripped away everything from Electra, leaving the city to burn and the majority of

¹⁸ Euripides, "Electra," lines 1296–1297.

¹⁹ George May, "Jean Giraudoux: Diplomacy and Dramaturgy," *Yale French Studies*, no. 5 (1950): 88.

²⁰ Jean Giraudoux, *Électre* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 20.

Argos's citizens dead, she remains certain that she has won the battle, claiming that "I have my conscience, I have Orestes, I have justice, I have everything" (j'ai ma conscience, j'ai Oreste, j'ai la justice, j'ai tout).²¹ The Furies quickly reveal that this is not the case, telling her "you are nothing" (n'es plus rien).²²

Although *Électre* was written in 1937, before the Nazi occupation of France during which "no author could legally exercise his convocation and receive compensation without submitting to certain legalities designed to monitor the content of artistic output,"²³ the French dramatic work is nevertheless full of political nuances concerning its next-door neighbor. As a German-educated French diplomat, Giraudoux held several key offices at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between the two world wars, and therefore certainly would have had a firm understanding of the political atmosphere in Europe during this interwar period. His political affinities found voice in his literature, as is clear by the production of *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* during the reoccupation of the left bank of the Rhine by the Reichswehr in 1936. The *Électre* similarly draws from the contemporary European political tensions: George May holds the opinion that Giraudoux is referencing the Spanish Civil War of 1936, as the play was performed before an audience that supposedly "could hardly help but think of Franco and his rebellion while gazing on the stage."²⁴ However, I believe that the *Électre* follows in the footsteps of its predecessors *Siegfried* and *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* by further commenting on the tense relationship between Germany and France during this interwar period. Whereas the 1928 *Siegfried* has been regarded as a peace-seeking play,²⁵ one may interpret Giraudoux's *Électre* as reinforcing the fearful threat of war between these two countries, a message that can also be found in *La Guerre de Troie*.²⁶ One may subsequently support this interpretation by demonstrating that these fears have manifested themselves in the relationship between the royal children, their mother, and her lover Aegisthus. Electra's deep hatred for her mother could be seen as Germany's hatred of France for being so harsh in the Treaty of Versailles. The policy of appeasement may have also found voice in this adaptation. Clytemnestra's first confrontation with Orestes upon learning his identity is a testament to this. Not only does she not tell Aegisthus about Orestes's return (thus protecting Orestes from the onset of Aegisthus's guards), but she also attempts to reconnect emotionally with her son, although she only receives harsh words from both of her children, who are pushed away after her "minute d'amour filial."²⁷ Orestes is allowed to survive, granting him time to grow stronger in the shadows just as Germany had been allowed slowly to regain power in the interwar period. Furthermore, Aegisthus's release of Orestes after he is captured by the Furies—despite Clytemnestra's warnings that the children "will stab you in the back" (vont vous poignarder dans le dos)²⁸—gives Orestes the opportunity to exact revenge on his unfaithful mother and her lover, further alluding to the possible aftermath of the appeasement policy of the Western world toward Germany's direct violations of the Treaty of Versailles.

²¹ Giraudoux, *Électre*, 138.

²² Giraudoux, *Électre*, 138.

²³ Mary Ann LaMarca, "Guilt and the War Within: The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Giraudoux," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2008), iv.

²⁴ LaMarca, "Guilt and the War Within," 92.

²⁵ Gabrielle Ruchames, "A Shade of Beauty: Ambiguity in Jean Giraudoux's *Helen*" (undergraduate project, John Carroll University, 2013) 6, <http://collected.jcu.edu/honorspapers/12>.

²⁶ Ruchames, "A Shade of Beauty," 7.

²⁷ Giraudoux, *Électre*, 68.

²⁸ Giraudoux, *Électre*, 131.

The ending of Giraudoux's play is perhaps a foreshadowing of the dark future that lay ahead for the world. As Argos burns with the backdrop of a distant sunrise, a woman at the scene poses the question of what word could possibly describe the scene she is witnessing. A beggar simply responds that "[t]his has a very beautiful name, Narsès's wife. This is called dawn" (Cela a un très beau nom, femme Narsès. Cela s'appelle l'aurore).²⁹ This image may be Giraudoux's perception of what will happen to France with the rise of Germany, with the dawn perhaps representing the uncertainty of the times lying ahead for the country. Electra's excessive stubbornness depicted at the end of the play may furthermore be symbolic of Germany's sentiments, portraying Giraudoux's opinion that although Germany may be justified in its anger toward France, it will sacrifice too much through its mission of seeking revenge. Therefore, Giraudoux's *Électre* is a perfect example of an adaptation that has experienced alteration so as to resonate with the contemporary political atmosphere of its native country.

Some adaptations of the Electra tragedies from the twentieth century, however, are not as evidently influenced by contemporary politics as Giraudoux's play, preferring to explore psychological themes instead. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra: Tragödie in einem Aufzug frei nach Sophokles* seems to be proof of this fact. The libretto of Richard Strauss's single-act opera titled after the tragic heroine, the work premiered in Dresden, Germany at the Königliches Opernhaus in 1909. The general structure of the play resembles that of its Sophoclean source, with Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia in order to wage war on Troy and Clytemnestra murdering her husband with the help of her lover Aegisthus. With many years having since passed, she is now afraid that her three surviving children will take vengeance against her. When Orestes returns in secret disguised as a stranger bearing false news of his own death, he slaughters both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, purging the house of Atreus of its previous sin. The adaptation ends with the cries of joy from the maidservants and Chrysothemis as they learn of Orestes's actions, and they welcome him home as the liberator of their city.

Despite some similarities to the original tragedy, Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* alters various notable attributes in his character portrayals. For example, his treatment of Electra is much harsher than in the Sophoclean counterpart. At the beginning of Hofmannsthal's adaptation, five maidservants are outside of the palace gathering water, when suddenly they see Electra briefly look at them before quickly leaping back into her room. The maidservants' conversation then develops a derogatory tone concerning Electra, using animalistic comparisons to describe her look as "Poisonous like a wild cat" (Giftig wie eine wilde Katze).³⁰ One maidservant even goes so far as to say that she would lock Electra up, if she were her own daughter. In the end, there is only one maid who truly stands up for Electra, claiming that the others "are not worthy to breathe the air that she breathes" (seid nicht wert, die Luft zu atmen, die sie atmet).³¹ However, as explicitly written in the director's notes, this particular maid is quite young and speaks this line "with a trembling, excited voice" (mit zitternder erregter Stimme),³² therefore heavily implying that the audience should consider her views naïve. Thus, the general consensus regarding Electra's frenzy portrays her as an irrational and almost shameful liability for the royal house, invoking great criticism of her extreme character.

²⁹ Giraudoux, *Électre*, 139.

³⁰ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Elektra: Tragödie in einem Aufzug frei nach Sophokles* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 3.

³¹ Hofmannsthal, *Elektra*, 5.

³² Hofmannsthal, *Elektra*, 5.

Furthermore, this German adaptation builds upon the Sophoclean moral dilemma of the matricide's ethical justifiability, adding another moral element concerning the fundamental nature of mankind. In direct contrast to the words of the maidservants at the beginning of the play, all that is heard at the end are words of joy as the chorus chants Orestes's name and "They kiss his feet" (küssen seine Füße),³³ according to the description from Chrysothemis. Chrysothemis herself undergoes a similar transformation, although to a lesser degree. Despite hating the fact that she has been unable to wed, she refuses to help Electra kill their mother, constantly imploring Electra to "leave me" (Lass mich)³⁴ as she literally holds onto her sister in hopes that she will relent. And yet, once Orestes had done the deed, Chrysothemis springs to his side, and the audience is left hearing her calls of Orestes's name as the play ends. The transformation of these characters throughout the progression of the play is then a possible indication of human nature's tendency to submit to one's superiors, no matter the morality of their actions. Should this be the case, then Electra's character can be considered very admirable psychologically in its strength to not yield to the criticism of those around her, contradicting the view that Electra could merely be "readily understandable as a 'hysteric.'"³⁵ Therefore, the influence of psychological and moral themes, as well as interpretations of characters, may be perceived as more prevalent than political and social influences within this particular adaptation.

While primarily discussing the portrayal of women in *Elektra* in his work "Hofmannsthal, Elektra and the Representation of Women's Behavior Through Myth," Philip Ward remarks that "Hofmannsthal created a drama more of its time than he cared to admit."³⁶ His statement may in fact also apply to the political realm, in opposition to the view of *Elektra* as merely a "study in obsession and mischannelled sexuality."³⁷ Although the *Elektra* was not his own creation, director Max Reinhardt—who requested the writing of this play along with actress Gertrud Eysoldt—was famously known for writing plays himself as a form of sociopolitical protest for freedom against authoritarian rule. At the time when the play was written, Otto von Bismarck had already been dismissed from his position as chancellor by Emperor Wilhelm II in 1890. However, von Bismarck's reform policy advocating for rapid socioeconomic modernization created an environment of constant crisis that persisted even after his dismissal, as this modernization proceeded to clash against the authoritarian rule of the emperor. It thus is quite plausible that such a message can be found within von Hofmannsthal's play as well. Indeed, we see the toppling of a regime through the slaughter of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by Clytemnestra's own children. Furthermore, the joy of the handmaids after Orestes liberates them may be an additional allusion to the lower classes gaining victory over the aristocracy. Although a system modification only occurred at the end of the First World War with the creation of the parliamentary Weimar Republic (roughly a decade after the premiere of this play), the play's resolution could be a reflection of Hofmannsthal's aspirations for the future of his country. Therefore, although at first seemingly devoid of political influence purely based on textual context, it is hard to ignore how politics may have been on the minds of both the director and the writer when this adaptation was written.

American playwright Eugene O'Neill's work *The Hunted*, the second in his grand trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra*, may be analyzed under a similar lens as the *Elektra*. Modeled off of

³³ Hofmannsthal, *Elektra*, 44.

³⁴ Hofmannsthal, *Elektra*, 31.

³⁵ Philip Marshall Ward, "Hofmannsthal, Elektra and the Representation of Women's Behavior Through Myth," *German Life and Letters*, no. 1 (2000): 37–55), 37.

³⁶ Ward, "Hofmannsthal," 1.

³⁷ Michael Ewans, *Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 86.

the *Libation Bearers*, this 1931 adaptation is set in the outskirts of a small New England seaport town toward the end of the American Civil War. With his father Ezra Mannon now dead but unburied, Orin returns from the front line, only to face his sister Lavinia's seemingly wild accusations of their mother's infidelity with Captain Adam Brandt and her responsibility for their father's death (the true cause of which is unknown to the wider public). With the young man unable to truly believe this at first, his mother Christine attempts to manipulate him against his sister so as to prevent Orin from finding out the truth. Although she initially succeeds, Orin makes it very clear that great harm would befall both her and her lover should the accusations prove true. Upon realizing that Adam could be in grave danger, Christine rushes to warn him the minute she believes the children have left to visit their cousins in Blackridge. However, the children witness this interaction between the two lovers, and Orin then takes vengeance by killing Adam in his boat. When they later confront their mother with the news, Christine takes her own life, fearing her son's hatred and deranged by the loss of her lover.

In a similar vein to Aeschylus, *The Hunted* lays particular emphasis on the psychological nature of each character's mentality. However, greater importance is placed on intercharacter relations rather than on each individual alone, which becomes increasingly apparent through the portrayal of Orin's character within the first three acts of the play. For instance, despite Lavinia's warnings to Orin that their mother "bab[ies] you the way she used to and get[s] you under her thumb,"³⁸ it takes very little effort for Christine to manipulate her son into believing that Lavinia is falsely accusing her of having an affair with Captain Brandt, playing on fond memories from his childhood and his strong affection for her. In contrast, when Lavinia reveals everything she knows to her brother shortly after, he rails against her, attributing her accusations to her "crazy imagination" and threatening to have her "declared insane by Doctor Blake and put away in a mental asylum."³⁹ After all of her efforts, Lavinia is only barely able to convince her brother to allow her the chance to prove the validity of her accusations.

O'Neill himself was particularly interested "in whether the sense of fate in Greek tragedy could be recreated in modern psychological terms."⁴⁰ His interest manifests itself in the derangement of Christine, which gains potency as the play progresses. This is especially apparent when Christine pressures the ominously mute Lavinia with questions in the hope of learning her plot, afraid that the lies to the public concerning the death of Ezra might not be so readily accepted by her son, should Lavinia tell him of their mother's secret affair. Even by the end of the play's second act, Christine begs her daughter not to tell Orin about Adam, lest he kill him in anger. The loss of her lover would be too great for her to bear, without whom she would "kill [herself]" in heartbreak.⁴¹ It would thus seem as though the fate of death prescribed to her from the beginning was unavoidable, despite her attempts to manipulate Orin, and—when this did not seem to be a sufficient safeguard for her web of lies—to warn Brandt of the impending danger. As such, similar to Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, one may at first be inclined to believe that the psychological and moral implications of the text outweigh any potential political and social influences.

However, there are further implications for the characters' personalities and interrelations in O'Neill's adaptation, moving beyond the purely psychological. Given the play's setting at the end of the American Civil War, character portrayals hardly escaped political influences. Indeed,

³⁸ Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Elektra* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2005), 69.

³⁹ O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Elektra*, 88.

⁴⁰ Christine Dymkowski, "Introduction," in *Mourning Becomes Elektra*, by Eugene O'Neill (London: Nick Hern Books, 2005), xii.

⁴¹ Dymkowski, "Introduction," 82.

in her paper titled "An American Tragedy: Memory and History in Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet and Mourning Becomes Electra*," Aurélie Sanchez describes how Ezra Mannon "embodies the military, political and industrial power of the United States, as he is a general in Grant's army, a judge, the major of his town and a successful businessman."⁴² Furthermore, she analyses how Adam Brandt personifies the desire to conquer "America, since he has been west to search for gold and has also traveled all around the world."⁴³ Despite being set in this time period, one may find a certain resonance within the play with the contemporary political situation of the Western world at the time when the play was written. With the devastating impacts of the First World War still felt by countries on both sides, this adaptation may be subtly alluding to the war reparations that Germany had to pay at the end of the war, and their repercussions. The death of Ezra at the hands of Christine and Adam could be symbolic of the destruction caused by Germany to France during the war, with the latter country suffering great losses regarding both their territories and their population.

Furthermore, should America represent Lavinia and Orin, then the slaughter of Christine and Adam by Christine's children could be interpreted as the consequences of the Young and Dawes plans in the early 1920s. These economic reform plans originally sought to alleviate the burden on Germany by reducing the reparation costs imposed on them by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. However, although the level of inflation in Germany was greatly reduced as a result, the German government, as well as extreme nationalists, continued to denounce both economic plans. This, in turn, escalated anti-Western sentiments in Germany, which only was further incensed by the Great Depression beginning in 1929. Orin's laments after his mother's suicide could thus be a foreshadowing of the regret felt by some in the Western world. At this stage in history, the popularity of the Nazis had slowly increased as a result of the heightened anti-Western sentiment, in turn posing a greater threat to the treaty. With the power of hindsight, we are able to see that this not only allowed the Nazis to gain political control in Germany, but it also encouraged the empowered country to instigate the Second World War. One may even say that O'Neill foresaw such an outcome at the time, thus allowing a possible interpretation of Orin's regrets as symbolic of the playwright's laments concerning Germany's treatment and fears for the future.

A later letter correspondence with his son Eugene O'Neill Jr. on June 1, 1942 may show that the elder O'Neill did indeed hold such beliefs all along. In spite of his strong loathing for his son's attempted involvement in the Intelligence Corps, O'Neill does admit that O'Neill Jr.'s decision to do so was right, given that there was "no longer any possible choice"⁴⁴ for the ending of this war. He writes that the only way to proceed was to "win the war and win it by a complete extermination of the Japanese and Prussian military caste," so as to avoid leaving the opposition with "too many 'outs'" as they did with the Germans at the end of World War I.⁴⁵ Thus, although *Mourning Becomes Electra* was written before this particular correspondence, it is very possible that the American playwright held similar opinions when writing this play, and such ideas may have in turn manifested themselves in his work. The various outlined arguments may therefore suggest that contemporary politics had an influential role in the writing of this adaptation.

⁴² Aurélie Sanchez, "An American Tragedy: Memory and History in Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet and Mourning Becomes Electra*," *Miranda* 2 (2010): 5.

⁴³ Sanchez, "An American Tragedy," 5.

⁴⁴ Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer, *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 529.

⁴⁵ Bogard and Bryer, *Selected Letters*, 529.

English poet Algernon Swinburne wisely proclaimed that Greek tragedy was "the greatest achievement of the human mind."⁴⁶ The preeminent status of this genre has led to its survival in contemporary times through various textual mediums, such as translations and adaptations. Through an analysis of the ancient Greek tragedies concerning the Electra myth, I have portrayed the differences between each ancient dramatist's version, as well as how those variations have been exploited and added upon by modern dramatists in their own adaptations. As we have seen through an analysis of three different twentieth-century adaptations from three different Western countries, the additional variations behind these adaptations can be attributed to the influences of the contemporary political and social atmospheres in the countries in which they were written. It is interesting to consider just how much influence these aspects had in shaping these adaptations. Even in cases such as Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, in which these influences are perhaps initially less evident within the text, a brief look at the contemporary history in a given country can quickly elucidate how politics may have had a subtle influence. Therefore, I believe that politics indeed have a great impact on the significance of adaptations, much more so than may appear on the surface.

⁴⁶ Robert Garland, *Surviving Greek Tragedy* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 2004), 1.

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