

## ANCIENT AND MODERN HYPOSTASES OF ELECTRA MYTH

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**Abstract:** The present study proposes to investigate the system of the thematic elements of Electra myth from the diachronic perspective of its beginnings, development and consolidation. Under the form of literary myth, that is being an independent literary system expressing its own fundamental situation, Electra myth develops and establishes itself as literary typology and dramatic tradition in *Electra* by Sophocles, *Electra* by Euripides, *Mourning Becomes Electra* by O'Neill and *Electra* by Giraudoux; under the form of literalised myth, that is being placed as literary system within the larger system of a different and ampler fundamental situation expressed by the myth of the Atreus family (as an ethno-religious myth rendered literary in dramatic texts), Electra myth reveals itself in *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, *The Flies* by Sartre and *The Family Reunion* by Eliot, all these texts, of both types, representing the actual object of our research.

**Key-words:** comparison, reception, influence, myth, archetype, character, action, theme, literary system, drama, tragedy, tragic, tragic quilt, text, intertextualism, psychology, psychoanalysis, subconscious, existentialism, chronotope.

**Özet:** Bu çalışma Electra mitinin içerdiği tematik elemanlar sisteminin başlangıç, gelişim ve sonuç açısından artsüremli bir bakış açısından incelenmesini önermektedir. Kendi temel durumunu ifade eden bağımsız bir edebi sistem olan edebi mit formatında Electra miti, kendisini edebi bir tipoloji ve dramatik bir gelenek olarak Sophocles'in *Electra*, Euripides'in *Electra*, O'Neill'in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (Matem Elektra'ya Yakışır) ve Giraudoux'un *Electra* adlı eserlerinde geliştirir ve tesis eder. Edebileştirilmiş mit şeklinde, Atreus ailesi mitiyle (dramatik metinlerde edebi olarak sunulan dini-etnik bir mit) ifade edilen daha farklı ve daha geniş bir temel durum sistemi dahilindeki bir edebi sistem olarak, kendisini Aeschylus'un *Oresteia*, Sartre'in *The Flies* ve Eliot'un *The Family Reunion* adlı her iki türe ait ve bu araştırmanın asıl hedefini teşkil eden eserlerinde gösterir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** karşılaştırma, algılama, etki, mit, arketip, karakter, hareket, tema, edebi sistem, tiyatro, trajedi, trajik, trajik suç, metin, metinlerarasılık, psikoloji, psikanaliz, bilinçaltı, varoluşçuluk, kronotip.

### 1. Introduction and Theoretical Preliminaries

The main aim of our study represents the scientific and value research, by applying adequate comparative investigation methodologies and a pre-established work program, of the system of artistic means and procedures developed and applied by ancient and modern dramatists to the literary representation of a character as part of the ancient myth and as literary archetype expressed in the Greek tragedy, as well its content aspects that have been subject

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to literary reception and modification on the textual level in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such a purpose requires a detailed comparative approach within the framework of our research, the emphasis being placed on the ways in which particular myths of individual essence (Electra myth) and of fundamental situation for the general human condition (myth of the Atreus family) have suffered changes of thematic expression in order to become compatible with the artistic conceptions belonging to different writers (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Sartre, O'Neill, Giraudoux, Eliot), periods (ancient and the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and cultural backgrounds (Greek, French, English and American).

The confirmation of this major desideratum in the context of a scientific research and value cognition regards the following concrete objectives:

- the research, diachronic and synchronic, of those thematic elements that marked the consolidation of Electra myth as literary tradition and literary system, following its development from within the rendered literary (literalised) myth of the Atreus family;
- the critical and theoretical evaluation of the literary system of Electra myth, showing its uniqueness by hermeneutically referring to the content elements of the literary work;
- the evaluation of tragedy writing tradition as a major aspect of the dramatic genre, and the approach to the modalities of artistic expression of Electra myth in ancient tragedy;
- the emphasis placed on literary reception and continuity, and on the importance of Electra myth as a major literary concern of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dramatic discourse;

The starting point of our research is the idea that the literary texts which form the nucleus of our analysis do not represent just a category that should be included in the general system of universal culture or that of the comparative literature with the purpose of arguing about its aesthetic integrity and validity, but, as another aspect of our topical interest and interpretative perspectives, the plays considered as literary hypostases of Electra myth constitute a type of literary discourse that must be studied as a system in itself, and that may attain the function to re-evaluate and even change the existing theories on literary

myths and literalised myths, in particular, and on the dramatic discourse, in general, suggesting new ones.

The literary texts that reify Electra myth – *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, *Electra* by Sophocles, *Electra* by Euripides, *Mourning Becomes Electra* by O’Neill, *Electra* by Giraudoux, *The Flies* by Sartre and *The Family Reunion* by Eliot – reveal the fact that Electra myth should be conceived as a myth of individual essence, as a literary system in itself, which, although showing definite synonymous affinities of thematic expression to the literalised myth of the Atreus family, represents a literary myth in itself.

Thus the theoretical and methodological foundation of our study focuses on those exigencies of the contemporary scientific research that find their applicability as interpretative premises and modalities (theoretical and critical) that would allow the exposition and argumentation of Electra myth as a literary myth in itself, having its own specific thematic and structural elements, along with the affirmation of its literary continuity through literary reception, influence, and intertextuality concerning its consolidation as a literary tradition. This matter, when investigated, prompts the consideration of the possibility on behalf of some writers to avoid the conventionalism of a literary model, and the continuation of a certain type of artistic pattern is confronted by the attempt at achieving the originality of creative imagination through the development of the writing style and substance representative of a particular creator of aesthetic values, whose work is unique and different in its essence from the others.

In this respect, our research represents more than just the critical review of different schools, principles and methods of research, or a compilation of different theoretical and methodological perspectives of analysis of the literary discourse. However, the theoretical and methodological basis of our research is connected to the most recent and accessible bibliography, or to the fully acknowledged and accepted nationally and worldwide contributions to literary analysis, and the essential reference points of our study constitute the theoretical contributions of J. Ceucă, O. Cauffman-Blumenfeld, A. Ciorănescu, F. Claudon, K. Haddad-Wotling, Ch. Cusset, O. Drâmba, R. Girard, G. Liiceanu, R. Surdulescu, M. Eliade, A. Ubersfeld, D. Grigorescu, A. Marino, R. Munteanu și D.-H. Pageaux.

Mention should be made of the fact that the simple taking over of the existing principles and methods of analysis in order to identify the best applicable

theoretical and critical premises for our study, together with an attempt at selecting ideas and opinions most compatible with the features of the chosen texts, is less important and even useless as compared to our consideration of the fact that the itinerary from theory (the existing theoretical principles of literary analysis) to practice (the direct approach to the chosen dramatic texts) should find its final point in the elaboration of some new theoretical arrangements and perspectives of research, whereas the achieved results and observations are systematized according to a pre-established plan of scientific research.

The theoretical preliminaries of our research focus on Electra myth in ancient genesis and modern reception, concerning the factors that have generated two distinct processes of the relationship between myth and literature regarding the status of Electra. These two processes represent, on one hand, Electra myth as a literary myth in itself, expressing in literature a fundamental situation for the human condition, where Electra becomes a literary *invention*, a literary *archetype* as universal symbol placed thematically and structurally in the framework of a particular *literary myth* of individual essence, and, on the other hand, Electra myth in relation to the ethno-religious myth of the Atreus family, in whose framework Electra myth finds actually its origin, is related to and actually belongs to according to the specificity of its thematic perspectives.

Starting from the premises that Electra myth is a combination of elements representative of both a literalised ethno-religious myth and a literary myth, mention should be made of the modalities of literary expression of the tragic in Electra myth, which would argue about the idea that the tragic represents the formative essence of the literary myth, and the expression of the mythic tragic could have not received any other relevance in matters of its aesthetic validity than under the literary form of tragedy as a textual type of dramatic genre. Electra myth expresses a transition from one mythology to another, from character to heroine, from one model situation for human community to another, in that the narrative of Electra's destiny represents a process of transition from the sacred to the profane and vice versa, from myth to literalised myth and literary myth, from profanation to a new mythicizing containing a new expression of the material and form.

The factor that differentiates Electra myth from the rest of the myths expressed in drama, and that has led to the separation between this myth and the more general myth of the Atreus family focused on Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Orestes and less Electra, is the emphasis placed by the authors on the inner

existence of the human being, contrary to heroism and physical action. Moreover, due to the thematic representation of some criminal acts concerning the punishment of and revenge for some previous criminal acts, the writers concentrate their attention on those aspects of inner life that represent suffering, hatred, instinct, and the tragic guilt that is assumed by the protagonist and that determines brutal and violent human action, all of these being aspects of the representation of the tragic in literary form.

This is the major reason for the fact that the ancient tragedy had become a major source of inspiration for the 20<sup>th</sup> century drama, for Electra myth manifested itself mainly in two distinct periods of human evolution – Antiquity and the end of the modern period (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) – being practically absent as a literary manifestation in Renaissance, Neoclassicism, Romanticism and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereas other types of myth belong to these periods, which is explained by the specificity of socio-cultural development and the system of values of each period.

The fact that Electra myth manifests as a literary experience in ancient period and in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is due to its unique thematic perspectives that correspond to a period marked by existential crisis, loss of values and equilibrium, the prevalence of brutality and cruelty in social and inter-human relations, individual alienation and frustration. All these aspects, representative for the end of the modern epoch in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have found their literary expression in Electra myth as an independent literary system and as a system of literary elements framed in the larger tradition of the literalised myth of the Atreus family, suggesting, through the revival of the tragic and the permanence of the human suffering, an exemplary didactic and ethic modality to solve the existential crisis and to rectify and purify the human spirit.

The existential crisis, the individual alienation and suffering become in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the determinant elements for the revival of the tragic in the literary work, where tragedy as a textual type of the dramatic genre offers, through the evolutionary relationship between modern literature and ancient drama, perhaps the most convincing modality of expression of the tragic in human condition by reifying the continuity of certain fundamental aspects and situations of the myth, which is especially vivid in the dramatic works of O'Neill, Sartre, Giraudoux, etc.

## **2. Practical Argumentation: Electra Myth in Ancient Genesis and Modern Reception**

In the first part of our study we have attempted at accepting a methodological pluralism of literary analysis, focused on different aspects and elements that constitute the thematic components of Electra myth as system and literary typology, in order to establish the theoretical and critical preliminaries most compatible to the essence of our research and which belong to the domains of comparative literature, comparative drama (on the level of dramatic text), mytho-criticism, intertextualism, as well as to literary history and the history of philosophic ideas, and which are applied as the theoretical substratum for the practical part of our study, which includes the direct approach to the ancient and modern literary texts that express Electra myth.

Our research represents now a retrospective investigation focused on the ways in which the tragic poets of the Greek Antiquity have contributed to the literalising of the myth of the Atreus family and the consolidation of the literary myth of Electra. Firstly, mention should be made of Aeschylus' contribution to the affirmation of the myth of the Atreus family as a literary fact. Aeschylus' merit is that of introducing the character of Electra in drama, that is in the context of the literary creation as a modality of literalising the ethno-religious myth of the Atreus family, although Electra appears in his trilogy as a frugal and passive character, as if lost in the imposing heroic abeyance of the play *Oresteia*, which resembles that of the epic poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Due to his subtlety, depth and remarkable erudition, Aeschylus marked a new evolutionary step in culture and art, which reveals the transitional context from epic to dramatic work, from the hero of epic poetry to the tragic hero, or, in more general terms, the transition from mythic hero to epic hero and then to tragic hero, which represent three distinct aspects, diachronically viewed, of the representation in literature of the hero of ancient myth. Firstly Aeschylus, followed by other tragic poets of the Greek Antiquity, focuses on Agamemnon's life and presents extensively the continuation of the destiny of the doomed family of Atreus as mentioned in Homer's work.

By a creative impulse, Aeschylus assumes and develops this moment in his trilogy *Oresteia*, whose title suggests an epic, but it represents a literary work belonging to a totally different genre – a tragedy belonging to the dramatic genre – in which the heroism, fantastic and adventurous are supplied by the personal

experience and the analysis of the dramatic consequences of the relationship among human existence, divinity and fate, where Electra, although included as a distinct character, is not a constant presence, Orestes being the carrier of the action in his role of the avenger on masculine line of the crimes of his predecessors.

Sophocles' contribution is even more important, given the affirmation of Electra myth as a literary fact, where Sophocles opens the perspective of placing Electra in the centre of creative attention, and of representing this character as the central and dynamic element of the tragedy, which, due to its volcanic spirit, becomes the active consciousness and the animator of the action, and marks the beginnings of evolution of Electra myth as literary tradition and typology.

Sophocles' play *Electra* is an almost human tragedy, in which the character of protagonists and their points of view on existence decide their action, success or failure. Electra is characterised by excessive hatred towards Clytemnestra and by an ardent wish to avenge her father's death, which, the author suggests, result firstly from a deep sense of duty and justice as important components of an individual human personality and not as typological features required by the creation of a tragic character marked by the force of destiny and subject to the consequences of the hybris. Moreover, the series of the existential aspects that become dimensions of Electra's tragic destiny – (1) loss of the parent, (2) father's death without being avenged (3) personal non-accomplishment due to loneliness, lack of husband and children, (4) her life passing under the sign of suffering, (5) the inferior condition of a slave in her own house, (6) loss of the relationship with mother, (7) the pressure on her being by her mother's hatred for having saved her brother, (8) unjust and despotic political administration of the state, (9) the disorder brought over the equilibrium of the universe and the loss of moral and spiritual values, (10) doubts concerning Orestes' return – do not just justify the hybris, but suggest actually its *necessity*.

Concerning Euripides, one may notice the anti-sacral aspects of the myth and his psychologising dramatic discourse in that Euripides manages the complete affirmation of Electra myth as literary tradition and typology, showing a remarkable spirit of observation in the treatment of the human existence in the context of its daily aspects, and achieving a regeneration of the mythic subject through its expression with surprising artistic freedom concerning the chronotope of action and the characters, although Euripides also reveals in his

tragedies a conventional treatment of the myth, without fully abandoning the sphere of the sacred and the symbolical representation of the myth.

One may notice Euripides attempts at including common characters and experiences of life in the sacred and ideal context of the mythological characters and events, in order to achieve the density of idea and emotion, where the density comprises: (1) a complex range of intense emotions, among which excessive passion manifested in contradictory ways (love – hatred, happiness – suffering, pride – jealousy), and representing the motive of action; (2) the psychological complexity and the obscurity of the subconscious manifested through illogic action, Electra's cruelty, Orestes' obsession; (3) calm and common feelings, such as love between brothers, respect towards those morally strong, which glorify the true human heroism of a man fighting his own pre-conceived ideas.

These aspects are noticeable in *Electra*, in that the play is a complex literary work in which the above-mentioned elements co-exist in the authorial treatment of the heroine's personality, fallen and at the same time morally superior. The mythic perspectives in Euripides' work are thus diminished, as well as the tragic subject, which leads to the diminished sacred element in his drama through the combined expression of the different aspects of existence (especially the incomprehensible factors and principles that govern human existence that is eternally instable and subject to continuous change) as literary themes and motives. These aspects would be later found as major elements of the modern dramatic discourse, in particular, concerning Electra myth, in Giraudoux, O'Neill and Sartre, who, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, regarded Euripides as their major source of inspiration, in the detriment of the literary continuity of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

O'Neill, Sartre, Giraudoux and other representatives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century drama found in ancient Greek theatre a major source of inspiration and an artistic modality of expression, within the already established thematic perspectives, of the issues concerning modern human condition. Mention should be made, firstly, of the psychoanalytic dimension of Electra myth in Eugene O'Neill's version, revealing modalities of literary reception and achievement of the creative originality concerning Electra myth as expressed in the famous trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra*.



This play is the only one in which O'Neill focuses on a single myth, which leads to the combined expression of traditional aspects of the tragedy in both form and content, having at its basis the thematic and character representation perspectives influenced by the tradition of the literalised myth of the Atreus family and the literary Electra myth as conceived and developed by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in ancient tragedy. Eugene O'Neill's formal conception reveals structural similarities to Aeschylus' trilogy, whereas the content appears to follow and amplify the psychological states of the character prior to and after the avenging crime as conceived by Euripides. Like Aeschylus' tragedy, O'Neill's work is a trilogy that follows the thematic line of the ancient myth of a cursed family transposed, concerning the chronotope of action, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States during the civil war.

The doomed family of Atreus becomes the Mannon family, whose history has its roots in the past in which a certain Abe commits the crime that disturbs the laws of nature and begins the series of crimes that will mark continuously the tragic destiny of the family, framed in a cyclical process of crime and revenge, hereditary curse and tragic guilt, which are inherited according to a modern approximation of the destiny that is expressed through the psychological analysis (of the interaction between conscious and subconscious), in relation to the puritan background, of the last descendents of the family: Lavinia (Electra) and Orin (Orestes). In the context of literary experimentation of the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in O'Neill's version of Electra myth, there are two levels of the system of thematic and character representation elements: first, the dominant one, represents the individualization of the personality and the characters' action through the literary materialization of the psychoanalytic principles; second, less important, represents the concern with the social background in relation to history and the puritan mentality.

Jean-Paul Sartre follows the literary continuity of the representation of Electra's destiny and expresses the involvement of myth as a means of expression of the existentialist principles, where *The Flies* appears to have at its basis Sophocles' version, from whom Sartre borrows the emphasis placed on the tragic condition of Electra, her pathetic fate, her condition of a slave in her own house, the excessive suffering prior to the act of revenge, hatred towards Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the violent conversation with her mother, expectation of Orestes' arrival as an avenger, recognition scene, Electra's role as participant at the act of revenge. From Aeschylus Sartre borrows the idea of punishment by the Furies of those who have perpetrated the hybris, and from Euripides he assumes the

attempt at psychological analysis and Electra's status after the act of revenge, which is expressed through remorse and deep suffering.

Concerning the originality of Sartre's version, on the thematic level of the text, besides a number of changes in the status of Electra and Orestes as dramatic characters, an ironic Jupiter, as the expression of the divine will, and the bad-smelling flies as personification of the Furies that dominate as a plague the citadel and its inhabitants, mention should be made of an individual (Orestes) who chooses, exerting his freedom of choice and creating his own existential I, and acting against the divine will or any other factors that may suppress his freedom of choice and action. This aspect forms in *The Flies* a relationship that represents the essential stimulus for the revitalisation of tragedy by Sartre and constitutes the source of dramatic expression of the existentialist philosophy by the French philosopher and writer.

Electra myth offers thus, in the literary context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not just the opportunity for various creative expressions, but also the opportunity for the materialization in the dramatic text of an original philosophy concerning the condition of the human being at the end of the modern period, where Orestes and Electra represent the possibility of successful application, and, respectively, the failure of applying in practice the philosophic existentialist conceptions and ideas:

Orestes	Wish (to be identified with Argos and save the citadel)	Free choice concerning the action of murder	The actual perpetration of action	Assuming the responsibility and the consequences	Successful becoming a human being
	→	→	→	→	
Electra	Wish to avenge (rebelliousness)	Free choice concerning the action of murder	Co-participant at the actual perpetration of action	Rejection of the responsibility and the consequences	Failure of becoming a human being

Concerning other modern versions of Electra myth one should focus on certain important authors of the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who framed their work in relation to the literary reception of the ancient myth as subject to the process of

being literary rendered and of dramatic innovation, among whom the French dramatist Jean Giraudoux.

Giraudoux' s play *Electra* follows the main elements of thematic consolidation of Electra myth in ancient drama (Clytemnestra and Aegisthus run the city of Argos after Agamemnon's death, Orestes disappeared in childhood, Electra detests her mother and waits for the arrival of her brother, the socio-ethical and the personal dimensions represent the reference points for the action of revenge by Orestes and Electra, etc.), rendered in the dramatic genre under the form of a tragedy thematically focused on a cursed family having general human repercussions, especially revealing the literary continuity of Aeschylus' version. Yet Electra eventually marrying a common man and the consolidation of action into a rational system of analysis of the human passion and violence bring Giraudoux closer to Euripides' version of the literary Electra myth, whereas distinct thematic elements of Giraudoux's play remind of Sophocles' version, among which Electra's expectation, her hatred towards her mother and Aegisthus, recognition scene, Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus' guilt being proved, the psychologically taken decision to commit the avenging crime.

Giraudoux expresses, as O'Neill and Sartre do, two distinct thematic concerns, two contrary points of view, two important aspects of organization of the dramatic discourse on the textual level, which are focused on the relationship between the individual and the society and social requirements, where Electra, searching for truth, in Giraudoux's version, learns about her mother's guilt and confronts Aegisthus in relation to the fact that (1) the duty of honour to avenge the crime, the importance of re-establishing the justice and the necessity to punish an older crime prevails over (2) the duty of honour to save the city, the importance and the necessity for Argos to have stability and unity in front of the enemy's invasion. This confrontation becomes a dilemma, an ambivalent argument, producing different opinions and questions that the reader of the dramatic work will answer according to his/her own point of view.

The beginnings and evolution of the thematic perspectives of Electra myth are to be found in ancient drama, and its origins are related to a large range of thematic elements, typological principles and literary categories that appeared in Antiquity and that would be later detected as aspects of primary importance of Electra myth expressed in the modern drama. The literary system of Electra myth reveals its vicinity to both the literalised ethno-religious myths of Antiquity and the literary myths born in different periods, that is Electra myth

refers to both types of myth representation in the literary context of the creative imagination.

Electra myth has its origin in the first type of myth, but establishes itself as literary tradition in the form of a literary myth due to Sophocles, Euripides, Sartre, O'Neill and others who have assumed and followed an established essential scheme from the ethno-religious and then literary rendered myth of the Atreus family, whereas the creative reception of these authors marked the modification of the basic scheme of the myth of the Atreus family and the creation of an original symbolic situation as a literary and mythic tradition – that is what we consider as Electra myth – along with the complexity of perspectives dealing with theme, motive, character representation, strategies of structural organization of the dramatic discourse, all representative of the creative personality of each writer.

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