

# ELEKTRA

By Sophocles

Greek tragedy is the source of Western theatre and one of several major contributions to our culture to begin in ancient Athens. It started out as a religious celebration, consisting of choral hymns, or dithyrambs, that were sung in honor of the god Dionysus. But when a man named Thespis stepped forward one day to sing a solo as if he were the god, the dithyramb quickly developed into the tragedies that are still performed today.

By the way, tragedy translates into "goat song," and no one is sure where that name came from. Hundreds, if not thousands, of these tragedies, were written and performed in Athens, but only a handful survive today: 33 in all. One of these is "Elektra" by Sophocles.

Sophocles' "Elektra" may be likened to a single chapter in a long novel about a mythic Greek family. You might call it the ultimate Gothic novel, one which covers four generations of a family in which crimes and curses are repeated again and again.

It's a sordid story involving disfiguring pride, betrayal, murder, incest - and especially - cannibalism. The resultant family curses were potent. The Greeks believed they could be passed from one generation to the next. Not only do several curses haunt this family, but its members keep repeating the same crimes and outrages over time.

It would take too long to track the complete family history. Let's just say that it started with Tantalos, a son of Zeus who longed to be immortal. One of the stories told about him is that he tried to trick the gods by cutting up his son Pelops and serving the dish to them to see if they could tell they were dining on human flesh. None of the gods touched the dish, except Demeter, who was distracted by the abduction of her daughter, Persephone. (A different myth worth looking up.)

Demeter ate a portion of Pelops shoulder before realizing what she was doing. The gods restored Pelops to life, replacing the missing shoulder with marble and fashioning him into a strikingly handsome youth.

Tantalos was punished by being banished to the underworld where he stands in water which disappears when he bends to drink and underneath a tree which moves its fruit out of reach when he tries to eat. That treatment explains the origin of the verb to "tantalize."

Pelops had his problems, too, which resulted in a curse on his children. The twins Atreus and Thyestes. They fought each other throughout their lives. Later, Thyestes seduced Atreus' wife and Atreus followed his grandfather's example by cutting up Thyestes' children and serving them to their father in a stew.

The next generation included Atreus' two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus and Thyestes remaining son, Aegisthus. If you know the story of the Trojan War, you know that Agamemnon led the Greek forces against Troy in order to help his brother, Menelaus, recover his wife, Helen.

When the Greek army assembled at Aulis to embark for Troy, the ships could not sail because the wind was against them. The prophet Calchas divined that the goddess Artemis was angry with Agamemnon and would not change the wind unless he sacrifice his young daughter, Iphigenia. He obeyed and the Greeks sailed to Troy where they fought for ten years before finally winning.

Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, never forgave her husband for the loss of her daughter. She returned to Mycenae and took Thyestes' son, Aegisthus, as a lover. When Agamemnon returned from Troy, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus killed him as he was bathing.

Their older daughter, Elektra, fearful that Aegisthus might also kill her young brother, Orestes, sent him away to a distant city with a trusted retainer. She remained in Mycenae, treated as little more than a slave and denied any opportunity to marry. Her name, Elektra, means without the bed.

This is a quick background of all the things an Athenian audience would know about Elektra and her tortured family before sitting down to watch Sophocles' drama, and now you know it, too.

Not in great detail, I admit, but you can look up the stories of the whole family: Tantalos, Pelops, Atreus and the rest: dark mythic histories which make fascinating reading. There are also several variations about what happens to Elektra and Orestes later on, but that didn't interest Sophocles when he wrote his version of Elektra's story.

Now, let's look at the play.

It is about twelve years after the murder of Agamemnon. The action begins when three men enter the stage: Orestes, now a young man; Pylades, his friend; and the tutor, the old man who saved Orestes at the time of Agamemnon's murder by spiriting him away.

They plan their moves: Orestes will start by visiting his father's tomb and leaving there a lock of his hair as a mark of filial reverence. Pylades will accompany him. The old man will go to see Clytemnestra and get her to drop her guard by telling her that Orestes has been killed in a chariot accident.

After they leave, Elektra enters, mourning her fate and longing for Orestes' return. A chorus of Mycenaean women joins her. Then, Elektra's sister, Chrysothemis (a character invented by Sophocles for this play) enters on her way to Agamemnon's tomb. She explains that Clytemnestra has had a nightmare

which seemed to predict a coming danger, so she has sent her daughter to place a peace offering on her husband's tomb.

Elektra urges Chrysothemis not to dishonor their father with gifts from his murderer, but to go and offer her own prayers instead.

Clytemnestra then enters and she and Elektra trade insults. The old man returns, asking for the Queen. He says he has important news for her: her son, Orestes is dead. He then launches into a lengthy speech, describing the manner in which Orestes competed in several athletic contests, winning them all. Next he gives a vivid account of the chariot race in which Orestes was supposedly killed and finishes with the news that Orestes' ashes are being brought back to Mycenae for burial.

(While messengers in Greek tragedy are reliable witnesses of offstage events, this is the only instance we have from that period in which the entire messenger's speech is a lie.)

Clytemnestra is caught between two emotions: sorrow at her son's death, but relief that she is now safe from his revenge. She invites the old man into the palace, leaving Elektra to mourn her twin losses: of her brother and of her revenge.

Suddenly, Chrysothemis runs in with joyful news: Orestes is alive and he has returned to Mycenae! She has seen a lock of hair on the tomb and reasons that he is the only one who would have made such an offering. Elektra tells Chrysothemis that she is wrong: Orestes is dead. An old man has brought the news and some of his companions are bringing his ashes home for burial.

Elektra then urges Chrysothemis to join her in finding a way to kill their mother and her lover, but Chrysothemis protests that it's an impossible task for two women and leaves Elektra alone in her grief.

At this point, Orestes and Pylades enter. Neither the sister nor the brother recognize each other: it has been many years since Orestes left as a child. Elektra begs to hold the urn supposedly containing her brother's ashes and weeps over them.

Orestes had intended to keep his identity a secret from everyone until after he had exacted his revenge, but he is moved by his sister's grief and gradually reveals himself. Their joyful reunion is interrupted by the old man who cautions them that they may be heard in the palace and lose the element of surprise.

All four enter the palace, but Elektra quickly returns to keep a lookout for Aegisthus who has been summoned to hear what he thinks will be good news. Clytemnestra's voice is heard from within the palace, begging for mercy. As Orestes strikes her, she screams. Elektra's chilling response is: "Strike her

again!"

The chorus sees Aegisthus coming. Elektra tells him that messengers are waiting for him. He is anxious to see proof of Orestes' death, so a body is brought forth. When he opens the covering, he sees that it is Clytemnestra and immediately understands that the man attending it is Orestes.

After a brief exchange with Agamemnon's children, he goes into the palace to his death. The chorus closes the play with a final comment.

O seed of Atreus!  
You have broken free from your suffering,  
you took aim and struck.  
You have worked your will at last.

Electra was the subject of plays by all three of the major Greek tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Each is different, but the main thrust of the story - the revenge killing of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus - is at the heart of each.

Aeschylus' play is the second part of a trilogy, The Oresteia. It was the custom for a playwright to present three related tragedies, followed by a satiric play on the same theme. The Oresteia is the only complete trilogy surviving from classical times. Aeschylus starts with Agamemnon's murder, moves to Orestes' revenge, and then ends with an account of how the gods use this story to end the endless cycle of murder and revenge by placing the issue of crime and punishment in the hands of the Athenian jury.

This plea to give up personal revenge has been no more successful than succeeding bans on revenge by the major religions. People still say: "Don't get mad, get even." That could come from the lips of Elektra.

A final word on presentation. These plays were designed to be performed by only three actors. When an actor left the stage, he put on a different costume and mask to take another part. That's why there are usually only three actors present at one time. You may have noticed that four are sometimes on stage during "Elektra," but one character, Pylades, never speaks.

The Genesis Guild has adopted a performance mode which suggests something of the manner in which these works were originally staged. While there are individual actors for each part, all wear full masks. A chorus is present during the play, participating in and commenting on the action.

Guild performances of Greek tragedy begin with a solemn and stately entrance, to give some indication of the serious nature of the work and the style is ceremonial throughout. A normal scene usually consists of a fairly long speech by each actor, followed by a quick exchange between them.

The plots are simple, but it is the simplicity of the sea. Beneath the surface of the story, there are depths to be plumbed and discoveries to be made.

A deeper study of Greek tragedy is thought-provoking. Many of the plays offer an overarching and straightforward ethical message. In "Antigone," the message is that every individual, even an enemy, must be accorded some bare level of respect. In "Alcestis," we understand that we must die our own death; no one can do it for us.

In "Elektra," the message is more subtle. We see an inevitable and rather cold-blooded revenge exacted and how it brutalizes the people involved. The author simply shows us what happens and lets us think about it. That's the way tragedy works and why it still has meaning for our lives and significance for our society.