or merely willed is never explicitly stated. Perhaps Harry really did push his young wife overboard during a sea voyage; perhaps she committed suicide. The shadows which darken his life lie further back: in his parents' unhappy marriage and separation, the details of which he now learns from his Aunt Agatha, a sort of Cassandra figure. He learns that his mother drove his father to his death, that his father and Agatha, with whom he was in love, had planned to kill his mother.

Although neither the plot nor the characters of the *Oresteia* are discernible as models, the text can say at one point: "Whether in Argos or in England, there are certain inflexible and unalterable laws." Eliot, with his religious bent, gives us a shadowy glimpse, behind his own play, of the web of murder and guilt in which the House of Atreus is entangled. He does this for one purpose only: to make visible the possibility of redemption, the redemption of all mankind by one man who takes upon himself the sins of all. Harry Monchensey renounces his inheritance and leaves his family—on his way to salvation. As Agatha says, he has crossed the frontier, the frontier of despair, beyond which safety and danger no longer mean what they mean to other people, the ones on this side. All this vaguely shades off into the realm of the transcendental, the religious order of the world.

The significant point is that it should be possible at all for a Christian savior concept to take the classical *Oresteia* and the figure of Orestes as its point of departure: in Sartre reshaped into an activistic idea of freedom, hence a humanistic idea; in Eliot still retaining its religious cast but so tenuously that even the germ of the redemption concept present in the *Oresteia* is no longer recognizable and only the occasional Orestes motifs, or allusions to them, remind us of Harry's connection with the antique figure. But for this very reason Eliot's play proves how seminal the Orestes problem was as it was stated in Greek tragedy and how many interpretations it will bear, all of them effective, from the most direct imitations to the most indirect of echoes.

3
ELECTRA

K. Hamburger, *From Sophocles to Sartre* (NY, 1969): 45 - 70. For O'Neill, see especially 61ff. Hamburger offers a good overview of the Electra tradition, from Sophocles to Sartre.

Sartre's *The Flies* undoubtedly represents the most striking treatment of the Orestes problem in world drama, amounting to a radical reversal of the theme of the Greek Orestes, whose actions are determined. It is therefore not surprising that the Electra figure should also be affected by this shift. She too is sharply scrutinized in the light of Sartre's idea of freedom, and in the process this astute philosopher comes up against a crux of the Electra problem which he is the first to expose, although it is inherent in this figure and in her role. For this reason it is profitable to examine the Electra problem, which has challenged so many dramatists, in the light of *The Flies*.

First, however, let us go back to the Electra figure as it was established in Greek antiquity and look at her from the point of view of freedom of action and will. We find that she is much freer than Orestes. Neither accepted custom nor, consequently, divine decree requires that Electra execute the blood vengeance, the matricide. Nobody is demanding anything of her and she could perfectly well go on living in King Aegisthus' house. The contrast she offers to Orestes from the very beginning lies in the fact that everything she does and feels has its roots in her own idiosyncratic personality. As the human personality became interesting in itself, the attention of tragedians dealing with the Oresteia theme was attracted to Electra and focused increasingly upon her.

What is her situation? Her traditional role is to encourage

Orestes to matricide, to make this irresolute man, who does not act on his own initiative or in response to his own feelings, psychologically ready to commit the unnatural act. This is also significant for the deeper motivation of Orestes' action, which becomes convincing as a truly critical conflict situation only if Orestes is not forced into it by external pressure alone. He must at least have been able to think of his mother's deed as something committed long ago of which he has no first-hand knowledge, and it must now be brought home to him in distressing, explicit immediacy. Seen in this light, Electra's role is already a master stroke of dramatic technique. She was present; she remembers; she cannot forget. Her hatred grows stronger and stronger. This element in the characterization is concretely accentuated by making her a maid in Aegisthus' house. Aeschylus first did this, and it persists in variations of all kinds down to Sartre. Euripides' variation (used again by Giraudoux) was to marry Electra to a farmer. She is always degraded in some way by those who fear her knowledge of their secrets and her hatred.

In the earliest version of the Electra figure in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers,* her personality is not yet so explicitly profiled as in the later Greek plays on this theme. After the recognition she does indeed incite Orestes to murder, supported by the chorus of maidservants, but it is characteristic that her grieving for her father and her wish to avenge him are not unmixed with thought for her own life—not merely its present shame and degradation but its future happiness. To our way of thinking, a passage like the following one seems odd. Kneeling at the grave, the brother and sister pray to their dead father for the success of their deed and for happiness in their future life. Orestes asks his father to let him become lord of the House of Atreus. Electra joins in, asking him to grant her a house and husband when Aegisthus has been killed, and beseeching Agamemnon's compassion for son and daughter alike.* This indicates that Electra is not yet clearly defined as a character, a person, an individual. She is not yet the frenzied Electra later to be created by Sophocles, the one who has survived in literature. That Electra, the psychological profile of the Electra figure up to

*Translator's note. This interpretation of Electra's prayer diverges slightly from the text, which, as given in the Loeb translation, says: "I . . . of the fulness of my inheritance will from my father's house at my bridal offer libations unto thee" (*Libation Bearers,* lines 486-488).

and including Freud's Electra complex, we shall discuss in its proper context from Sophocles to O'Neill. Let us now skip directly to Sartre. For there exists between the still incompletely defined Electra of Aeschylus and the Electra of Sartre a connection so natural that Sartre can take something which in Aeschylus, for example, is naively expressed, recognizable, if at all, only germinally, and sharpen it into a thematic problem and documentation of human behavior.

Sartre turns the brother and sister, accomplices in this one deed, into antithetical positive and negative embodiments of his philosophy of freedom. Orestes is the free man—and we have shown how his traditional problematic situation was changed and reversed to make him so. By contrast, Electra, who is free born, so to speak, and who loves, hates, and acts purely according to her own impulses, becomes in Sartre signally non-free in her actions and therefore morally contemptible. As Sartre sees the figure and the role, Electra wants the deed done, and wants it more passionately and for more personal reasons and emotions than Orestes, but instead of performing it herself she lets somebody else do it. For this reason she becomes, as it were, suspect to Sartre.

It is interesting to note how this aspect, which has always been inherent in the Electra figure, was ignored in characterizing her before Sartre. Nevertheless a germ of it is to be found in Sophocles' Electra. Once she is convinced that Orestes is dead (for throughout the classical tradition Orestes, when he arrives at Mycenae, for tactical reasons keeps up the belief that he is dead, or allows his companion, Pylades or the tutor, to do so), she announces her resolution to kill at least Aegisthus herself :

> The deed must then be done by my own hand
> alone. For I will not leave it unfulfilled.[1]

But if we look at this passage from Sartre's viewpoint, its insertion just at this point takes on an almost symptomatic significance. Electra pronounces this decision after she has tried without success to secure the help and complicity of her sister Chrysothemis (whose function in the Electra problem will be discussed later); she is saved from having to perform the deed herself by Orestes' arrival just at that moment. Both these factors detract from or diminish Electra's readiness to commit the deed unaided.

Hofmannsthal's treatment of this factor in his *Elektra*, a free adaptation of the Sophoclean tragedy, written in 1903, shows this up even more plainly. With passionate, frantic insistence his Electra tries to persuade her sister to kill not only Aegisthus but Clytemnestra too, tries to give Chrysothemis a transfusion of her own will so to speak:

> I'll twine myself around you, sink my roots
> in you, inject my will into your blood.[2]

This drives her own part in the projected deed into the back of her mind, so that even this element of initiative which Sophocles and Hofmannsthal give her does not ultimately change the traditional Electra figure. She is still what she was in the legend: one who merely incites to murder and gets somebody else to do what she wants done. "Your task awaits you. You have drawn first chance at spilling blood," she says unequivocally in Euripides.

Sartre takes this as his starting point. His Electra exemplifies humanly weak, base, that is to say, non-free behavior as plainly as his Orestes stands for freedom of action and human dignity. Her traditional role of waiting for Orestes to come and avenge her is therefore stressed right at the outset. She says to Orestes, who is going under the name of Philebes: "Someone else will come and set me free. My brother isn't dead, I know. . . . I must stay here to guide his rage. . .to point at the guilty and say: There they are, Orestes. Strike!" (*The Flies,* p. 64). Even so, Electra's inciting to murder is not so strongly stressed in Sartre as, say, in Sophocles. She does not really dare to carry out her desires. In a very natural reaction, her desire to see the deed done is mixed with fear of it: "You have come after all, Orestes, and your mind is made up. And here am I, just as I am in my dreams, standing on the brink of an irreparable act, and I am afraid, just as I am in my dreams. Oh, how long I have waited for this moment—and dreaded it!" (p. 73).

What does this mean in the context of Sartre's philosophy? It means that Electra does not choose her deed, that, unlike Orestes, she does not want to be answerable for her will and her actions. It is also characteristic that her motives are quite different from those of Orestes. In earlier interpretations brother and sister are inspired by the same motive and are of one mind in the execution of the murder. In Sartre, however, their basic situations are entirely

different. Electra hates her mother for natural reasons: as the murderer of her father and because she herself is forced to lead a miserable life in Clytemnestra's house. Orestes, as we have seen, acts out of idealistic, not personal, motives: for the sake of freedom and man's human dignity. Thus Sartre completely reverses the traditional relationship of the pair toward each other and toward the deed. In the Greek tragedies Electra is the strong, resolute one on whom Orestes leans; in Sartre, by contrast, she is weak, despairing, seeking protection from the Furies. It is she, not Orestes, who sees them: "Orestes! There they are! Where have they come from?" Orestes, seeing only ordinary flies, answers indifferently, "What do the flies matter to us?" But Electra recognizes them as goddesses of vengeance: "Listen! Listen to the sound of their wings. . . .They're all around us, Orestes. They're watching us. Presently they'll swarm down upon us. . . .We'll never escape them" (p. 92).

The final scene is then skillfully brought to its climax, like a philosophical argument. Electra is forced to choose between Orestes and Jupiter, that is, between guilt and remorse. For guilt is Orestes' portion and at the same time, as we have seen, his freedom. Remorse, however, is the ransom payable to Jupiter for deliverance from guilt. From remorse Jupiter derives his power over men, giving them absolution in return. Here the notion of freedom appears in its dual sense. Absolution, deliverance from guilt by the grace of God at the price of "a little bit of remorse"—this is Electra's non-freedom. "Take care, Electra," begs Orestes. "That mere nothing will weigh like a mountain on your soul." Jupiter tries to persuade her that she never willed or desired the crime: "Why hesitate to disavow that crime? It was somebody else who committed it; you could hardly even be called his accomplice. . . .You never willed to do evil. . . .At an age when children are still playing with dolls. . . you played at murder." Orestes beseeches her not to deny that she willed it: "Electra! Electra! It's *now* you are guilty. Who can know what you really wanted except you yourself? Will you let someone else decide that for you?" (pp. 107–108). Unheeding, Electra throws herself at Jupiter's feet. The flies leave her. But she is not a human being in Sartre's sense. She does not choose her deed, her guilt, her willing, her "act," her autonomous actions; hence she does not choose herself, does not posit herself as a free human being, does not assume responsibility for herself.

The significance of responsibility in Sartre's activistic theory of freedom is revealed even more clearly in the comparatively simple negative case of Electra than in the positive but more complicated case of Orestes. The term "responsibility" as we use it today implies that one should be responsible for other people besides oneself, not in the sense of taking charge of them but by serving as an exemplary model, even as their representative. When I posit myself as a free man, answerable for myself, I do it on behalf of all mankind. "In saying that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he merely wishes to be responsible for his own individuality but that he is responsible for all men," says Sartre in *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (p. 25). In contrast to Orestes' extreme responsibility and freedom, Electra, who does not even want to be responsible for herself, acts irresponsibly in the true sense of the word.

If Giraudoux's *Electre* had not appeared in 1937, six years before *The Flies,* it might almost be taken for an answer to Sartre's play. Here Electra is condemned for reasons which are the exact opposite of Sartre's. In Giraudoux too Electra behaves irresponsibly. Here, however, this does not mean what it means according to Sartre's activistic theory of freedom: that she is unwilling to take responsibility for what she wants and thus deprives herself of human dignity. Here irresponsibility implies a wrong toward others, which is what we generally mean when we say that somebody is acting irresponsibly. In what way does Giraudoux see and condemn Electra's conduct as irresponsible? This emerges only when we explore the view of life that pervades this play, a view which in fact offers the greatest conceivable contrast to Sartre's.

Unlike Sartre, Giraudoux is neither a moralist nor an existentialist. He is not concerned with the showing man makes as man; what interests him is how he copes with life and circumstances as they are. He would never require, as Sartre does, that once thrown into the world, man is to be held responsible for everything he does. The essential thing in man's life, be he king or beggar, is the present, the here and now, the actuality of daily life and its demands. In his remarkable play, whose setting hovers even more indeterminately than that of *The Flies* between Greek antiquity and the present day, Giraudoux presents an Argos quite different from and, one might say, more serene than the one in the classical *Oresteia* and in Sartre.

The situation in this city and in the palace of the Atridae is this: Agamemnon is dead, said—and generally believed—to have slipped on the tiles surrounding the bath. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are there, in this case not even married yet; in any case, they are ruling Argos and are for the time being the recognized regents. This Clytemnestra can quite credibly claim to be happy in her love for Aegisthus and with the inner justification of genuine love can refute Electra's reproach of having "taken a lover." What happened in the past—the murder of her husband, the adultery—belongs to the past, no longer exists, has no relevance, no validity, no reality any more. Ideas such as justice, law, tradition, blood vengeance, divine command are ideas and nothing more, devoid of reality and existence; they become dangerous or troublesome only when people insist on putting them into practice, because then they disrupt life. As Theocathocles, the chief justice (one of the characters whom Giraudoux added to the traditional cast), says: "Justice, generosity, and duty, not selfishness and cleverness, are what ruin the state, the individual and the best families."[3]

In the reality of their daily life and needs, people do not live with lofty emotions and ideas, and thus the somber, bloody story of the House of Atreus is drained of its high tragedy, given a tone of irony, reduced in scale. The monstrous crime is made trifling. Clytemnestra openly admits that she hates Agamemnon. Even to call it hatred is too much: she simply cannot stand him; she has an aversion to him. Why? He always had an irritating way of crooking his little finger, which was as obnoxious to her as his carefully curled golden hair. When she calls to mind the sacrifice of Iphigenia it is not the terrible event itself that dominates her memory and feelings, but the way Agamemnon crooked his little finger even on that occasion. "From the day he appeared with his curled beard to take me away from home, with that hand of his with the little finger always sticking out, I hated him. He crooked it in drinking; he crooked it when he was driving and his horse bolted, in holding his sceptre. . . and when he put your sister Iphigenia to death at dawn—my god, I saw the little finger of both hands silhouetted against the sun!" (p. 104). Great passions are reduced to a commonplace erotic aversion which, according to this view of life, is sufficient motive for murdering one's husband. On the other hand, in this climate of skeptical, non-tragic rationalism, the characters are also humanized

by not being treated in the exalted style of high tragedy. Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, both murderers, are thoroughly likable people to whose reasonable views no one could take exception; the people of Argos are content under their enlightened rule.

The principle behind Giraudoux's treatment of the theme is to reduce it to the scale of human life. Life is all that matters. But life is disrupted if past crimes are kept alive by hatred and revenge. Even if Agamemnon was murdered, what good will revenge do anybody? What good does justice do anybody, or the right to revenge, or expiation? Chief Justice Theocathocles, who concurs in this attitude with his lord and master Aegisthus, says: "The only element . . .really fatal to humanity is embittered tenacity." The word "humanity" means both the human race as a whole and humanness, so that this key term in Giraudoux's *Electre* also conveys the ethical idea that embittered insistence upon a right, however legitimate it may be, is ultimately inhuman. This is stated again and again. The gardener whom Electra is supposed to marry says: "Joy and love . . .are preferable to bitterness and hatred. . . .Of course life's a mess, but it's good, life is, very good" (p. 59). And even one of the "little Eumenides," that is to say, the goddess of vengeance herself, utters the warning: "The righters of wrongs are the curse of the world."

It is already clear how Electra is conceived in this play, against the background of this amoral philosophy of life. She is a disturbing element in the kingdom of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra because she stands for the hating, anti-life principle. Giraudoux deviates from the traditional legend in order to transform the clearly defined, well-known story of Electra into a principle, to present it as a classic example of one of the disruptions that mar men's lives. Here Electra knows nothing of her mother's crime. Giraudoux deliberately takes some ten years off her age at the time of Agamemnon's murder to make her a child when it occurred. Neither does she know that Aegisthus is her mother's lover, so that the fact that they are not married, insignificant and hardly meaningful in itself, nevertheless supports the contextual idea of the play. The crime itself is secondary; the primary thing is the mental climate of hatred and bitterness which is inimical to happiness in life (represented by the gardener and by Orestes). Even though there are indications that Electra suspects and always has suspected what happened long ago, even though she does intuitively learn the truth through a vision of her father in a dream, a straightforward explanation of this kind is not incorporated in the structure of meaning.

The concept of "the little Eumenides," one of the major changes and innovations that Giraudoux made in the traditional story, argues against any such explanation. Whenever the Furies appear in any Oresteia from Greek antiquity down to our own time, they appear as goddesses of vengeance, relentlessly seeking out their victim. In Giraudoux, on the contrary, they are beings who do all they can to prevent the man charged with matricide from killing his mother. They are Electra's inseparable companions: personifications of her inborn hatred. Little girls when the play opens, they grow with Electra's hatred, until in the end, after Clytemnestra has been killed, they are the same size and age as Electra herself. But they are recalcitrant personifications of Electra's hatred. As goddesses of vengeance they do not amount to very much. Good little harmless spirits, Eumenides as Aeschylus conceived them in the third play of his *Oresteia,* they stand on the side of humanity, for forgiving and forgetting, for life, seconding Aegisthus and the chief justice. Their warnings against hatred and revenge make the crime which calls for revenge less weighty than hatred in the totality of life and world order. "Look at the two innocents. The fruit of their marriage [the reunion of Electra and Orestes] will be to restore to life for the world and for the ages a crime which is already done with. And its expiation will be an even worse crime" (p. 57), says the beggar, a mysterious figure who is obviously a god, a Jupiter in disguise.

Only Electra's hatred—and this is the other change Giraudoux has made—brings to light and gives reality to the crime committed and even concealed so long ago, a crime which is for this very reason harmless. Aegisthus says that this hate-filled Electra is the only person who still gives signs to the gods—a reversal of the ancient belief that the gods gave signs to men, as Apollo did through his oracles, and in this way often led them into misfortune. "Every evening she goes and lures back everything which but for her would have abandoned this land of easy-going pleasure: the remorse, the confessions, the old bloodstains, the rust, the bones of the victims of murder, the rubble of tale-bearing" (p. 17)—things which are not to be taken in their literal sense but are cited as symbols of the general mood of hatred and bitterness. This is why Aegisthus wants to get rid of Electra and render her harmless by marrying her to

the gardener, who, of course (tending, cultivating, and loving natural things), represents the principle of sheer love of life to which Electra can never surrender. Through Orestes (who again appears as a stranger before making his identity known), another innocent, life-accepting, life-loving man, she obtains her "justice" after all and in obtaining it is branded as guilty and irresponsible. She sacrifices the beleaguered city to her lust for revenge, inasmuch as her preoccupation with her discovery of the murder prevents Aegisthus from defending it. She obtains her justice and her truth; Orestes kills his mother, and the Eumenides are forced to descend upon him. In Electra's guise they will pursue him until, despairing of himself, he takes his own life and curses his sister. When Electra insists that she has nonetheless triumphed, has achieved justice and a clear conscience, this too is carried *ad absurdum.* "Your conscience! You'll hear from your conscience in the early mornings that lie ahead of you. For seven years you couldn't sleep because of a crime committed by other people. From now on you are the guilty one" (p. 112).

Here Hans Rothe's German translation of *Electre* retains a passage from an earlier, unpublished version of the play which is worth quoting because it again contrasts very strikingly the right of life with the sterile idea of abstract justice. One of the Eumenides says to Electra: "Take a look at your justice. Weigh it in your innocent hands and tell me how many fish it will get you on the shore, how many loaves of bread at the baker's shop. A lot of good your justice does you! From today on it's not worth a dead crow."[4]

It is surprising and at the same time very illuminating to discover the quite separate, antithetical directions taken by French dramatists of the last three decades in dealing with the Electra problem. What is accentuated to the extreme in Sartre—man's freedom of choice and his responsibility for his freedom—is to Giraudoux uninteresting, devoid of validity, even threatening. For Giraudoux the moral imperative, right, duty, and so-called justice are hubris, man's hubris in the face of the greater power of life. The tragedy of the House of Atreus—that blood vengeance can breed only more blood vengeance, a fact which the chorus deplores even in Aeschylus—serves in Giraudoux as an exemplary warning against disrupting life through law and justice. The final words of Schiller's *The Bride of Messina,* the play in which he tried to revive Greek

tragedy, say that life is not the highest good of all, but guilt is the greatest of evils. Giraudoux's *Electra* might almost be an attack upon this high-flown ethic of human dignity, which reaches its climax in Sartre, upon this classical idea of morality. It is no accident that this *Electra* dissolves the form of high tragedy in irony. The exact opposite of Schiller's lines would apply to this play: life is the highest good of all; he who avenges evil is the curse of the world.

Giraudoux's conception of the Electra problem is undoubtedly just as novel and untraditional as Sartre's antithetical one. Nevertheless we can find a germ of this conception in Greek antiquity, not yet in Aeschylus' prototypal Electra, but in the characterization of the figure as seen by Sophocles, the first dramatist to devote a whole play in his *Oresteia* to Electra. His play establishes her as a woman totally consumed by lust for revenge, but also as one who suffers. The germ of Giraudoux's theme of sinning against life lies in a figure introduced by Sophocles who has not hitherto played a part, either in the legend or in Aeschylus: Chrysothemis, third daughter of the House of Atreus. It is she who stands for the principle of forgiveness, worldly wisdom, acceptance of things as they are, in contrast to her fanatically uncompromising sister:

> What have you come to say out of doors,
> sister? Will you never learn, in all this time,
> not to give way to your empty anger?
> Yet this much I know, and know my own heart, too,
> that I am sick at what I see, so that
> if I had strength, I would let them know how I feel.
> But under pain of punishment, I think,
> I must make my voyage with lowered sails,
> that I may not seem to do something and then prove
> ineffectual. (Sophocles, p. 138)

The Chrysothemis in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* reiterates:

> Have pity on us both. Who benefits
> from all this agony? Our father?
> Our father's dead. Our brother stays away. (p. 19)

The will-for-life motif is even more strongly accentuated in Hofmannsthal's Chrysothemis than in Sophocles', and this is char-

acteristic since the modern writer profiles his characters more sharply and more deliberately than the classical one—a process which our present thesis shows up very clearly. Hofmannsthal's Chrysothemis complains of her lot, for which her embittered sister is to blame. She is confined at home, constantly watched :

> It's you who keep me welded to the floor
> with iron bolts. If it were not for you
> they'd let us out!
> I must get out! I can't sleep here
> night after night until I die! I want to live
> before I die! I want to bear a child
> before my body shrivels. (p. 18)

Her protestation that what is truly disastrous for mankind is bitterness comes close to Giraudoux's theme :

> The heart of man was never meant to bear
> that horror! When that threatens,
> he ought to leave his house, escape outdoors
> into the vineyards, up into the hills . . . .
> Never remain with it. Never stay
> under one roof with that! (p. 21)

But it only comes close to it; for Hofmannsthal this never becomes the crucial, sustaining theme. In Sophocles and in Hofmannsthal, Chrysothemis, the upholder of the right to life against the destructive right to revenge, is not the one who triumphs or pronounces the sentence; it is Electra who wins the moral victory over her more cowardly, compromising sister. In Sophocles the chorus sings her praises as having rejected dishonor "to win at once two reputations/as wise and best of daughters" (p. 167).

But in Hofmannsthal's modern version—and again this is characteristic—Electra's victory is not quite so clear-cut; at any rate something is left open. "Electra's relation to the deed treated with irony, though," Hofmannsthal writes in the notes. He adds, "*Ad me ipsum.*"[5] The restrictive "though" refers to the anything but ironical motive of loyalty which inspires Electra's whole life, her actions, and her determination to commit the act of matricide. Hofmannsthal also noted that this loyalty motive was developed to the extreme in *Elektra* (p. 221). In Sophocles' *Electra*, filial affection and loyalty toward her murdered father are already inextricably

mixed with hatred of her mother. But Hofmannsthal underlines the loyalty, of which revengefulness and the refusal to forget are an intrinsic part, underlines her inability to forget and hence her inability to live, her constant reliving of past events, the attitude that nothing is "over," with which Chrysothemis reproaches her :

> Over? In there it's all begun again!
> Don't think that I don't recognize the sound
> a corpse makes as they drag it down the stairs.
> The whispering. The blood-soaked cloths wrung out. (p. 22)

Yet the motive of loyalty carried to the extreme is still not completely unproblematical and absolute. Filial loyalty which demands the murder of one's mother is a questionable loyalty fraught with irony in the most sublime sense. Certainly the irony is not immediately obvious in the text or the handling of the plot, but it is nonetheless concealed in the inner impossibility of Electra's tragic situation. It shows itself in the figure of Chrysothemis, whose natural will for life almost gets the better of Electra's will for revenge and murder. But this conflict and contrast grows even more acute and becomes for the first time truly ironical in the meeting between Clytemnestra and Electra. For here this murderer actually seems to be to some extent in the right against Electra. Hofmannsthal produces this effect by suggesting the tormented, desperate mental state of this woman who long ago acted in response to a half-unconscious instinct and is now ready to live and let live. She too speaks of forgetting, of the changes life brings :

> For does not everything dissolve and shift
> like mist before our eyes? And we ourselves!
> And our deeds! Deeds! We and deeds!
> What do words mean? Am I then *still*
> the woman who performed that deed? And if I am?
> Done! Done! (p. 35)

But Electra's overwrought, ecstatic triumph, which collapses just as it reaches its climax, makes one ask whether there is not something unresolved, something uncertain in her absoluteness, even if it is the absoluteness of loyalty. While the murder of the king and queen arouses frenzied rejoicing in Chrysothemis and the courtiers, Electra in her ecstasy goes into a maenadic dance :

> Be silent now and dance. Come. All must join in.
> Bearing my load of happiness I dance
> in front of all of you.
> Whoever shares our happiness must do just that:
> dance and be silent. (p. 75)

Dancing, she collapses; the curtain falls upon her rigid body. The final stage direction says simply: "Silence." It is the silence of death. It is quite logical and in accordance with the modern sense of tragedy that, contrary to tradition, Electra should not survive her triumph, that her story should not have a happy ending. Besides, Hofmannsthal's highly developed sense of style could never have permitted such a fundamentally tragic figure, whose tragedy he had heightened even further, to remain alive, untragically. But apart from this, Electra's death and the word "silence" can be interpreted as the open question whether Electra, a human being, a girl, has not, as it were, overreached her humanity and her maidenhood, has not gone too far, thus even anticipating Giraudoux's problem: whether men are called upon at all to exact vengeance and in doing so to violate life.[6]

That is still not the end of the Electra theme in world drama. Sartre focused attention on Electra's share in the deed, her responsibility, and the problem of her guilt, but other aspects of this classical figure have also challenged dramatists to make it a vehicle for modern themes. The path that leads from Aeschylus and Sophocles to O'Neill follows different motifs from the path leading to Sartre and Giraudoux. One might in fact say that the conception of Electra that finally culminates in O'Neill's play is much more obvious, much more traditional, than that of Sartre and Giraudoux, which first brought to light an intrinsic but concealed element in this figure. This element is not the primary reason why dramatic interest has focused on Electra in preference to Orestes. Rather, her particular individuality has caused her to come to the fore whenever the dramatist's interest in people was psychological rather than philosophical or ethical. This was first the case with Sophocles, and a survey of the extant work of this tragedian will show that it was not by chance that he made Electra and not Orestes the central figure.

Of the three tragedians Sophocles is the one who saw his characters from the standpoint of human greatness. All his heroes attain monumental stature, more or less irrespective of their motivation, since this is an absolute greatness. The motive may be trivial and apparently out of proportion to the suffering and destruction, as it is in the case of the mad Ajax, who suffers terrible shame, from which only death offers an escape, because, led astray by Athena in the darkness, he has slaughtered cattle instead of heroes. The only thing that matters is that man dedicate himself uncompromisingly and entirely, that he sacrifice himself to what he himself sees as the right, the essential, no matter what suffering, even including death, he may risk. Oedipus, innocent of what he has committed, still takes the consequences entirely upon himself and does not try to blame the oracle, chance, his unwitting innocence. On penalty of death Antigone buries her brother in defiance of Creon's prohibition. Human greatness arises out of suffering, so that suffering and greatness merge.[7]

Electra too could be conceived along these lines. We need only to compare Sophocles' Electra with those of Aeschylus and Euripides to see how Sophocles made her the embodiment of suffering and greatness purified of all the extraneous and fortuitous elements of the legend. It is true that she does not perish; she does not pay the price of death. But neither is she concerned with her personal future and happiness, as she is in Aeschylus; nor does her story end happily with her betrothal to Pylades, as it does in Euripides and almost all the later versions down to Gerhart Hauptmann's House of Atreus tetralogy. There is no Pylades in Sophocles' play; Sophocles replaced Orestes' companion, probably deliberately, in line with his conception of Electra, by a tutor. Thus when Hofmannsthal's Electra, who is a free adaptation of Sophocles', collapses in her wild maenadic dance, when the play ends in death and "silence," this is a logical ending for the Sophoclean conception. In Sophocles, Electra's last speech expresses only satisfaction that retribution is about to overtake Aegisthus too. Now that Clytemnestra is dead, she urges that it be exacted:

> Kill him as quickly as you can. And killing
> throw him out to find such burial as suits him
> out of our sights. This is the only thing
> than can bring me redemption from
> all my past sufferings. (p. 186)

It was Sophocles who established the conception of Electra that has remained dominant: the woman who hates fanatically and who suffers, and it was he who endowed her with the psychological traits necessary for this: purity and passion—passion arising out of the profundity of her emotional nature, which expresses itself, which in fact totally concentrates and expends itself, in love for her murdered father:

> . . .never shall I give over my sorrow,
> and the number of my dirges none shall tell. . . .
> What is the natural measure of my sorrow?
> Come, how when the dead are in question,
> can it be honorable to forget?
> In what human being is this instinctive?
> Never may I have honor of such,
> nor, if I dwell with any good thing,
> may I live at ease, by restraining
> the wings of shrill lament to my father's dishonor. (pp. 134–135)

Strong in love and hatred, "a wild, fiery soul," as Goethe called her—such is the Sophoclean Electra. But interfused with this is a rigorous chastity, her second basic character trait, which offers the first plausible explanation—and a brilliant one—for the hatred and loathing she feels for her adulterous mother:

> —if mother I should call her,
> this woman that sleeps with him.
> She is so daring that she paramours
> this foul, polluted creature and fears no Fury. (p. 136)

Again Hofmannsthal develops this motif even more strongly; his Electra is created out of twin flames of hatred and chastity. The chastity motif is suggested in such splendid lines as these:

> I think that I was lovely. When I blew out
> the lamp before my glass I used to feel
> with a chaste shudder how my naked form,
> untouched in its virginity, shone forth
> godlike into the sultry night. (p. 62)

In the extreme ecstatic quality of Hofmannsthal's Electra, however, the notion of chastity is almost dialectically reversed into the completely negative, utterly unreal and visionary realization of

her womanhood, to which her suffering and hatred bring her. Impregnated with the hatred which her dead father has "sent her as a bridegroom" instead of the natural love of a maid for a man, she matures into a woman who is and can be nothing but an avenger—vengeance personified:

> I had to let that hateful man
> into my sleepless bed. His viper's breath
> on top of me, forcing me to learn
> everything that a man and woman do!
> Oh, those nights in which I came to know it!
> My body cold as ice, yet charred and burned
> inside. And when at last I knew it all,
> then I was wise. And then the murderers—
> I mean my mother and that man of hers—
> no longer dared to meet my eye. (p. 63)

This passage occurs shortly after the one quoted above suggesting the chastity motif—a dubious chastity, to be sure. We called the sudden change from Electra's chastity to the experience of "love" dialectical, but this passage in fact takes on a dialectical significance in the Electra theme as a whole—as well as in general. What is here expressed suggestively rather than directly is a synthesis taking shape out of the antitheses of chastity and passion and forming the complex Electra figure which is finally presented in O'Neill as a generalized "Electra complex."

Here, however, another factor arises, one of decisive importance for the thematic problem: Electra's relationship to Clytemnestra. It is extremely interesting to see how the psychological deepening of Electra, what we might call the existential conception of this character as against the ideological conception of Sartre and Giraudoux (though Giraudoux's Electra really stands midway between the two), brings her into an increasingly strong relationship with Clytemnestra and how it becomes plain that mother and daughter are much more closely akin than the traditional story reveals. They are akin and yet different: two elemental, passionate, uncontrolled women who repel each other according to the law of equally charged poles. Even Aeschylus seems already to have perceived and subtly suggested this. Electra's prayer to Hermes and her father hints that she senses the danger in the closeness of their natures:

> And for myself, grant that I be more temperate
> of heart than my mother; that I act with purer hand.
> (*Libation Bearers,* p. 140)

Thus, once again, the modern writers are expressing something which for the Greeks cannot yet be a real psychological problem differentiated to this extent but can be, at most, implicitly indicated. Hofmannsthal's Orestes puts it quite plainly when he asks: "Sister, is not our mother much like you?" (p. 65). The kinship is more realistically, not to say cynically, shown in Giraudoux. Here, however, because of the nature of the play as a whole, it is perhaps too consciously stressed as a motive by both Clytemnestra and Electra. Here Clytemnestra accuses her daughter of exactly the uninhibited eroticism that is traditionally part of her own character, although she here disclaims it. She seems to see through Electra's much vaunted chastity: "Chastity! This girl devoured by her desires speaks to us of chastity! This girl who at the age of two couldn't look at a boy without blushing" (p. 44).

In all these cases, however, these traits are secondary, not central, characteristics. They are thus symptomatic of the changes the Electra concept has undergone and of the development of germs already existing in the antique versions. We should scarcely need to touch upon them if it were not for O'Neill's great work *Mourning Becomes Electra,* which stands out in modern world drama with a certain monumentality.

As we know, O'Neill freed himself from the historical facts of the Atridae theme. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a family tragedy in a small New England town in the 1860's—the tragedy of the Mannons. At the same time it is of course a deliberate transposition of the legend of the House of Atreus into modern times. The symbolic use in the title of the name Electra for a heroine who in the play is called Lavinia or Vinnie, and of the name Orin, with its obvious echoes of Orestes, for her younger brother, reveals O'Neill's intention to show that the ancient tragedy can repeat itself among human beings of the bourgeois nineteenth century and to attest its universal human significance. The form too announces his intention. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a trilogy modeled on the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, except that the third play does not bring expiation. The stage setting also deliberately recalls that of the Greek tragedies. The Mannon house, the stage directions say, is a large Greek-revival

mansion, and most of the action takes place in front of the white columned portico, much as the action in the Greek theater did. The antique archetypes on which the characters are modeled are clearly discernible; they, not the plot, are the essential thing. The action, though basically modeled on the classical story, follows it very loosely.

The father, General Ezra Mannon, who has returned home from the Civil War on the day the play begins, is of course the Agamemnon. His wife, Christine, is the Clytemnestra; Lavinia and Orin represent Electra and Orestes. There is an Aegisthus figure too: Christine's lover, a Captain Brant, who, like the Greek Aegisthus, is related to the family but out of hatred for Ezra Mannon (the reasons for which we need not go into here) has changed his name. The husband is killed by poison which Brant provides at Christine's instigation. The second play, *The Hunted,* deals with the revenge of the brother and sister (essentially, Lavinia's, however). They murder Captain Brant on his ship. There is, however, no actual matricide: after Brant's death Christine Mannon commits suicide. Nonetheless Orin, who is very close to his beautiful mother, blames himself for her death and thus sees himself guilty of matricide, and he too takes his own life. Lavinia, who for a time had intended to marry her young cousin, is left behind, the prey to terrible anguish—the title of the third play is *The Haunted*—tormented by the spirits of the dead, pursued by the evil destiny of the House of Atreus. The play ends with her immuring herself in the gloomy house, whose shutters are nailed closed forever. There can be no expiation such as we find in the original *Oresteia.*

There can be no expiation and no reconciliation because in this play destiny is no longer fulfilled through external circumstances but through the particular nature of the characters—with which it is in fact identical. Only the two women, the mother and daughter, are important; the other characters are not decisive but merely serve the purposes of the action. But the mother-daughter relationship, already touched upon in the Greek tragedies, becomes truly thematic for the first time in O'Neill.

Mourning Becomes Electra appeared in 1931, when Freudian psychoanalysis was being widely discussed and was influencing both the writing and the interpretation of literature. With some justification it has been taken as a typical dramatization of the psycho-

analytical incest problem, of the Electra complex, as Freud named the counterpart of the better-known and psychoanalytically more important Oedipus complex. Freud interpreted the Oedipus legend as a mythological symbolization of the son's infantile mother fixation, which arouses his unconscious wish to kill his father-rival and marry his mother. Similarly the Electra situation represents the daughter's father fixation, which leads her to identify herself with her mother, to want to take her mother's place with her father, and therefore to hate her mother.[8] We do not need to go into the infantile sexual and biological phenomena on which Freud based these complexes, since only the result, the adult's relationship to his mother or father, is relevant to the literary application of Freud's incest theory.

Assuming that we accept the Freudian interpretation of the legends, it seems more plausible to relate the Oedipus story than the Electra story to unconscious psychic processes. Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Unknowingly does not of course mean the same as unconsciously. But, as Freud says, "the ignorance of Oedipus is a legitimate representation of the unconsciousness into which, for adults, the whole experience has fallen."[9] The crucial element of unknowingness is not found in the Electra legend; there is nothing but a completely conscious wish, a resolutely pursued determination, to kill her mother, together with a love for her father (already emphasized by the classical tragedians) which adds emotional depth to her desire to see Orestes exact blood vengeance. In Euripides' *Electra* Clytemnestra herself brings this home to her daughter, and the motive is thus given more prominence than if it were suggested by Electra's words alone:

> My child, from birth you always have adored your father.
> This is part of life. Some children always love
> the male, some turn more closely to their mother than him.
> I know you and forgive you. (p. 55)

Unlike the Oedipus story, the Electra legend and the Greek tragedians' interpretations of it contain neither the factor of unknowingness nor the committing of incest, and this seems to explain why Electra's psychological state and Freud's Electra complex have been more challenging to modern dramatists than the Oedipus complex or the Oedipus figure in general. That which has not been

enacted but has merely been felt or desired is a matter of latent possibility rather than fact, and so offers more scope for literary creativity. Electra's desire to kill her mother could be attributed to a father fixation, even though any incestuous action was precluded by the legend. Her real—and traditional—motive in urging the killing of her mother in revenge for Clytemnestra's murder of her husband would then be exposed as a masking of her unconscious incestuous desires, or even, more consciously, as a screen which allows Electra to deceive herself.

There is no doubt that O'Neill does make use of the Electra complex. In the first scene between the mother and daughter, Christine tells Electra-Lavinia to her face: "I know you, Vinnie. I've watched you ever since you were little, trying to do exactly what you're doing now. You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place."[10] Indeed, O'Neill stresses Lavinia's passionate love for her father, as revealed in the homecoming scene, for instance, as well as her jealousy of Orin, their mother's favorite, and, even more, her jealousy of Brant, her mother's lover. There is no doubt that Electra's desire to get rid of her mother and take her place pervades her relationship with all three men.

Yet to interpret O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* purely as a manifestation of an incestuous Electra complex seems inadequate. The dramatic, or rather psychological, conflict on which it is based is a wider one. Here the traditional Clytemnestra-Electra relationship is sharpened to culminate in a clash between two sensual women of the same type whose passions are no less ardent for being somber. They are closely akin and therefore they repel one another to the point of mutual destruction. O'Neill made this very clear in the expansive, descriptively written stage directions which are so characteristic of him. He keeps reverting to the outward resemblance and equally marked differences between the two women. When Lavinia comes out on to the steps of the house, where Christine has just been standing, her mother is described as a fine, voluptuous figure, who moves with a flowing animal grace. She has thick copper-bronze hair and dark violet, deep-set eyes. The stage directions then describe Lavinia: "Tall like her mother, her body is thin, flat-breasted and angular, and its unattractiveness is accentuated by her plain black dress. Her movements are stiff and she

carries herself with a wooden, square-shouldered, military bearing . . . .but in spite of these dissimilarities one is immediately struck by her facial resemblance to her mother. She has the same. . .copper-gold hair. . .and dark violet-blue eyes" (pp. 21–23).

Obviously it is difficult to make this ambivalent similarity and dissimilarity visible on the stage, in the actresses. O'Neill is a very epic dramatist, who seeks to transcend the limit imposed by the genre upon the description of environment and physical detail by means of extensive stage directions going far beyond the normal range. While he continually emphasizes Lavinia's puritanically austere appearance, her thinness, her black, nunlike dress, his extension of the stage directions to include even psychic traits shows that her appearance is not meant to denote a genuinely chaste, nunlike mode of existence but a life of duress, of being forced to forgo all that her mother enjoys as a sensually attractive, beautiful, radiant woman who wins the love of men. Hofmannsthal had already adumbrated the elements of chastity inherent in the Electra figure as the obverse of an erotic, libidinous element. In O'Neill it emerges perfectly plainly as being nothing but the forcible repression of the erotic instinct that makes Electra her mother's daughter. The daughter shares her mother's nature, but in her it is oriented toward the dark side of life. The fact that Lavinia loves all the men who love her mother (her father, her brother and—though this, of course, she barely admits to herself—the insignificant Brant) seems to have less to do with the Electra incest complex than with their similarity in nature and character. However, this distinction cannot be made with any precision because the one is manifested through the other and, to push the matter farther, because instinctual psychic processes cannot be broken down into separate, explicable elements. This is the realm of the sub-rational, the irrational. Lavinia acts in response to her deeply confused, instinctive nature, which is far less able to understand itself, far less aware of itself, than is the case with her mother. After Christine kills her husband, this Electra resolves to kill not her mother but Brant, the Aegisthus figure. Certainly the action is directed against her mother, but evidently her deeper, unconscious motive is to revenge herself on the man she loves, who loves her mother instead of herself.

When both Brant and her mother are dead, Lavinia blossoms in a remarkable way, for she now has in her power the one survivor

of the men her mother possessed, her brother Orin, whom she makes completely subservient to her. For once she has succeeded in taking her mother's place, and now the stage directions describe how she assumes her mother's outward appearance, dresses like her, takes on her mature, attractive femininity, until she becomes the image of Christine and at first glance might even be mistaken for her. She blossoms; she wins the love of her cousin Peter and becomes engaged to be married to him, until the man she thinks she possesses, Orin, eludes her through his own death. But the curse upon the house continues to work through the dead Orin, destroying all hope of redemption through pure love, such as might have emerged from Lavinia's association with the young Peter. Orin, who hates his sister because of the murder they have committed and who demands atonement, leaves a note for the engaged couple in which he accuses Lavinia, rightly or wrongly, of having lost her virginity. Whether this twist in the story is successful or not is irrelevant; the point here —and this is what distinguishes the Mannon family tragedy from the legend of the Atridae on which it is based—is that everything that happens—murder, guilt, and suffering—is relegated to the dark realm of the instincts instead of being somehow brought up into the consciousness where a healing process could ensue.

Wolfgang Schadewaldt said of Sophocles' *Electra* that the matricide, and hence Electra's determination to act, represent "the cleansing, through the sacrifice of suffering in accordance with the will of the gods, of a world utterly corrupted by the murder of Agamemnon."[11] The exact opposite is true of O'Neill's Electra: hers is a godless world in which man and his actions no longer have any connection with divine will and man is thrown back upon himself. This may come about in the way in which Sartre understands the notion of man thrown back upon himself: as the humanistic freedom and responsibility of the man who no longer needs God. But it may also mean the abandonment of man to his instincts, which is the fate of O'Neill's characters—and not only those in *Mourning Becomes Electra.* Lavinia Mannon's suffering represents not a cleansing but a confirmation of the corruption of the world and thus of the inevitability of suffering itself, from which even bodily death cannot offer deliverance—as it still can to Hofmannsthal's Electra. Lavinia imprisons herself in her house for the rest of a long life to atone for the curse of the sensuality which has

destroyed her race and which will not be wiped out until "the last Mannon is let die."

There is no doubt that from Electra's character as the Greek tragedians had already formulated it, even such an ultimately nihilistic conclusion could be drawn—as it has been drawn by writers of our time and world for whom, behind humanism as European classicism had understood it, there came into view again the dark, chthonian, instinct-dominated ground from which new threats to humanity can always arise again. Gerhart Hauptmann's conception of Iphigenia bears this out in quite a different way from O'Neill's Electra play and on a broader scale—in a more unexpected way too, since the noble figure of Iphigenia, as literature has conceived it, seems much less apt than the passionate Electra to become connected with chthonian forces of this kind.

4

IPHIGENIA

The story of Iphigenia, eldest daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, occupies a special place in the saga of the House of Atreus and its dramatic interpretations. From the viewpoint of myth in literature and the evolution of the problem, it stands completely apart from the *Oresteia*, although it is associated with that work as an important part of its prehistory and also by the fact that Orestes (and in Gerhart Hauptmann, Electra too) appears in the Iphigenia plays. Another indication of its special place is that there are fewer Iphigenia plays in world literature than plays about Orestes and Electra, especially in modern literature, where only one writer, Gerhart Hauptmann, has attempted this subject. Seeking the reason for this, we may come to the purely hypothetical conclusion that the problem of Iphigenia seemed less challenging to the dramatists than the problem of her younger sister. Iphigenia was a victim, sacrified at Aulis, whereas Orestes and Electra are active characters; as we have tried to show, their situation offered the dramatists a many-faceted complex of problems. Iphigenia, on the other hand, provided almost no basis for a conflict of conscience or action. Only her tragic and unusual mythical history was of any interest. Thus only three important versions of the Iphigenia story exist: those of Euripides, Goethe, and Hauptmann.

Another factor that makes this legend a special case is that it falls into two parts, each presenting separate problems: Iphigenia