

# **The Transformation of a Classical Heroine in the Modern Era: On the musical and theatrical Interpretation of Clytemnestra in the 20th Century**

## **Zur Transformation einer antiken Heroine in die Moderne: Die szenische und musikalische Interpretation der Klytämnestra im 20. Jahrhundert**

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In the world of classical literature Clytemnestra established a synonym for three sins: adultery, violence and murder. The daughter of Leda and Tyndareus, together with her lover Aegisthus, kills her husband Agamemnon as soon as he returns from the Trojan War; later they are both murdered by her son Orestes. Although the events in the House of Atreus in the literature of antiquity from Homer to Euripides are illustrated and interpreted differently, there is always a common element: the premeditated murder of her husband is an act of vengeance for his sacrificing of Iphigenia. But why was Clytemnestra considered as an individual of great wickedness in classical era, although her motherhood seems to justify her violent action?

To answer this question, it is necessary to begin with a brief overview of the representation of Clytemnestra in the classical era. While in Homer's *Odyssey* only a short mention can be found in the narration of the Trojan War, Stesichorus' lyric poem *Helen* stresses Agamemnon's guilt for Clytemnestra's disloyalty due to his failure to fulfil his obligations to the gods.

The first complete poetic description of their fate comes in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. In the trilogy, Clytemnestra is portrayed as a powerful queen who can manipulate her husband not only through her acts, but also with her words, who 'justifies' her murder of him murdering him as an act of vengeance for the murder of Iphigenia. Agamemnon's heroic violence, which was necessary in order to demonstrate his worthiness to perform his duties as a king, is transformed through Clytemnestra's vengeance into domestic violence. The murder of the husband is punished by the murder of the mother; the perpetrator Orestes is pursued by the Erinyes until the city goddess of Athens brings about a reconciliation before the Areopagus. According to Bachofen, the liberation of Orestes in Athens depicts the transition of Greek culture from the primitive state of maternal law to the higher level of paternal law and marks the beginning of Athenian democracy.

Forty-five years after Oresteia, Clytemnestra appears in Sophocles' *Electra* as a background figure whose personality is viewed mainly from the perspective of her role as a daughter. *Electra* emphasises Clytemnestra's desire for power that leads her to murder Agamemnon, while the queen again justifies her violent act as necessary to avenge the death of Iphigenia. In this tragedy the punishment of Orestes is not mentioned at all.

Euripides humanised Clytemnestra's personality in his *Electra* by having her confess that it was not only the sacrifice of Iphigenia, but also the adultery on the part of Agamemnon that urged her to violence. Her statement is confirmed by the hostility between mother and daughter, as the Clytemnestra's different treatment of her children — on the one hand her defence of the honour of Iphigenia, on the other hand her stubbornness against Elektra — would not appear credible to the audience.

The summary of Clytemnestra's presentation in the classical literature seems sufficient to answer the question formulated at the beginning: Clytemnestra did indeed have a sinister reputation, because she represents one of the few female figures in classical era who acted violently against men – the murder of king Agamemnon – an act that could have placed the patriarchal society at risk. Although the motives that led her to murder are addressed in all tragedies, her act remained unjustified for the social order of the time.

But why does the figure of Clytemnestra fascinate the literature of modern era?

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Opera *Elektra* by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal marked one of the major events in the history of opera. The single appearance of the queen in the libretto takes place during a violent argument between her and Elektra.

Hofmannsthal's stage directions described in detail the appearance of the Queen of Mycenae:

[...].

The description points out immediately that Clytemnestra has no longer has a regal appearance. Indeed she underlines her fear of Elektra in her very first lines:

[...].

The motive of vengeance is not present in her act and she also lacks any mention of Iphigenia's sacrifice, because the main intention of the libretto is not to legitimate the murder but to explore its effect on the female characters. The powerful Clytemnestra of the classical tragedy turns in Strauss's opera into a broken figure— a servant has to support her so that she

can stay upright – who has no physical strength to defend herself against Elektra for killing Agamemnon. Indeed, her violent act gives rise not only to her physical but also her spiritual exhaustion.

Clytemnestra tries to escape the unbearable memory of her husband's murder, a fact that her consciousness is not able to cope with, but is tormented by nightmares. The desire for amnesia leads to self-destruction:

[...].

Clytemnestra's essential property in the opera may be called the despair that destroys her intellectual ability. Her ruinous mental state is accentuated by the physical weakness she exhibits on stage.

The musical accompaniment of the Clytemnestra scene consists of chords with up to ten different tones that result in an unclear harmony. Yet there are also tonal complexes in all five parts dealing with the conflict between Clytemnestra and Elektra and the juxtaposition of these parts with the atonal lines may reflect Clytemnestra's mental state. The scene is based on three basic keys, namely d, b and f minor. In addition, there are three musical symbols connected with the figure of the queen according to her roles as queen, mother and wife, which are heard not only on her appearance on stage, but also on every mention of her name.

The second version of the fate of Clytemnestra was written almost twenty years later and belongs to the last works of the Weimar Republic. In 1929, Krenek synopsised the tragic story of Atreus, as found in the Oresteia of Aeschylus, the two Iphigenia dramas and the Electra of Euripides, in a five-act opera entitled *Das Leben des Orest*. These five acts are divided into eight tableaux, a technique which gave the composer the opportunity to establish large time distances between the scenes. In this version, Clytemnestra appears once in the first and once in the third act, the setting being the house of Agamemnon. The first tableau is set before the beginning of the Trojan War, and Clytemnestra remains largely in the background of the events throughout.

Interestingly, it is Aegisthus that advises Agamemnon to sacrifice his son Orestes and to hide this fact from Clytemnestra - both in its own claim to power and from hatred and fear of Orestes, the young successor of the throne, who is very popular among the people. Krenek already makes it clear from the first act that Aegisthus is following his own plan for vengeance and is trying to benefit from the mood of the people and the hatred of Clytemnestra towards her husband. The queen is now presented as a secondary character, whose feelings are exploited to send her lover to the throne.

Clytemnestra fulfils her duty as a mother in trying to bring Agamemnon to reason, so that he will give up the sacrifice of his son. He insists on his decision and Orestes' life is saved only by the intervention of Clytemnestra, who sends him to the country of Phocis under the care of the nurse Anastasia. It can be seen that the queen of Mycenae in the *Das Leben des Orest* is completely freed from the malevolent characteristics attributed to her in the classical period. Krenek describes a Clytemnestra who, in contrast to the many classical versions, does not long for power but is concerned chiefly with the well-being of her family.

Clytemnestra's impasse situation is described musically even before her appearance; Krenek, according to the stage directions, has her express her pain with a loud cry from the backstage. On her first appearance on stage, she begins to sing a melody built by descending half-tones, while the syncopation reflects her psychological breakdown for the coming death of her son. The composer has the queen express her exasperation with a phrase that moves gradually downwards.

[...]

Her unstable (in terms of melody and rhythm) melodic line is in direct contrast to the line of Aegisthus, which is constructed of solid rhythmic motifs and large interval jumps.

The return of Agamemnon from the Trojan War takes place in the third act, Clytemnestra trembling before his appearance:

[...].

Her disbelief is underlined by the two repetitions of the same motif that she sings at the beginning, while the orchestration remains the same.

Aegisthus tries once again at this point to incite the hatred of Clytemnestra against her husband, referring to Agamemnon as the murderer of his own children and also doubting his loyalty to his wife, even before the Trojan War. The queen, however, remains calm and refrains from any expression of negative feelings toward her husband, although she is insulted in the following brief discussion with Agamemnon. Strangely, Clytemnestra's participation in the killing of her husband is missing from Krenek's libretto and is only carried out by the pretender to the throne, Aegisthus.

But why did the composer abandon the tradition myth at this point? He himself spoke about this major change:

[...].

The vengeance motive, present in the classical dramas – based on the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the adultery and the bringing of Cassandra from Troy – is no longer mentioned. Clytemnestra appears only as an instrument fully subject to the power and the will of Aegisthus, occupying a marginal role in the structure of the drama. Yet another irony is integrated in this version of the Atreus myth: Orestes kills his saviour Clytemnestra to avenge the death of his father, for whom he was nothing more than a victim.

So far we have mentioned only the newer versions' deviations from the classical schema. What can we say about similarities or differences between the two librettos? The common feature of the figure of Clytemnestra's in both operas is the elimination of her vital role in the further course of the drama. The absence in both treatments of elements such as hatred or power, which are strictly associated with her personality, puts the queen on the side of the events, a powerless observer, unable to intervene actively.

Strauss' Elektra throws light on Clytemnestra's personality from a psychological point of view; he is not interested in why she came to murder her husband, but in what effect this has on her psyche. Throughout the opera, the queen alternates between two levels: reality and inner madness. This perspective corresponded perfectly to the cultural milieu of the era, which also gave rise to Sigmund Freud and his groundbreaking psychological theories.

Unlike Strauss, Krenek accentuates the negative elements of all his characters on the social level in his proposed version of the Atreus source material, a tactic that leads to an interpretation of the play as political satire. Power is embodied in his opera in two male figures, Aegisthus and Agamemnon, who determine the course of the action as a whole with their power-political ambitions. Clytemnestra is mainly in the background, merely a supporting figure, who tries to use her reason to convince the men to do what is right. Her feelings are not described at all, her reactions merely being based on a logical motivation.

Clytemnestra's transformation was has only been considered here from the perspective of musical theatre, with reference to two operas. Her personality, however, not only left a mark on the opera, but on all artistic fields. From ballet to the novel, Clytemnestra has remained a fascinating figure to the present day, one whose fate provides impulses for new treatments.