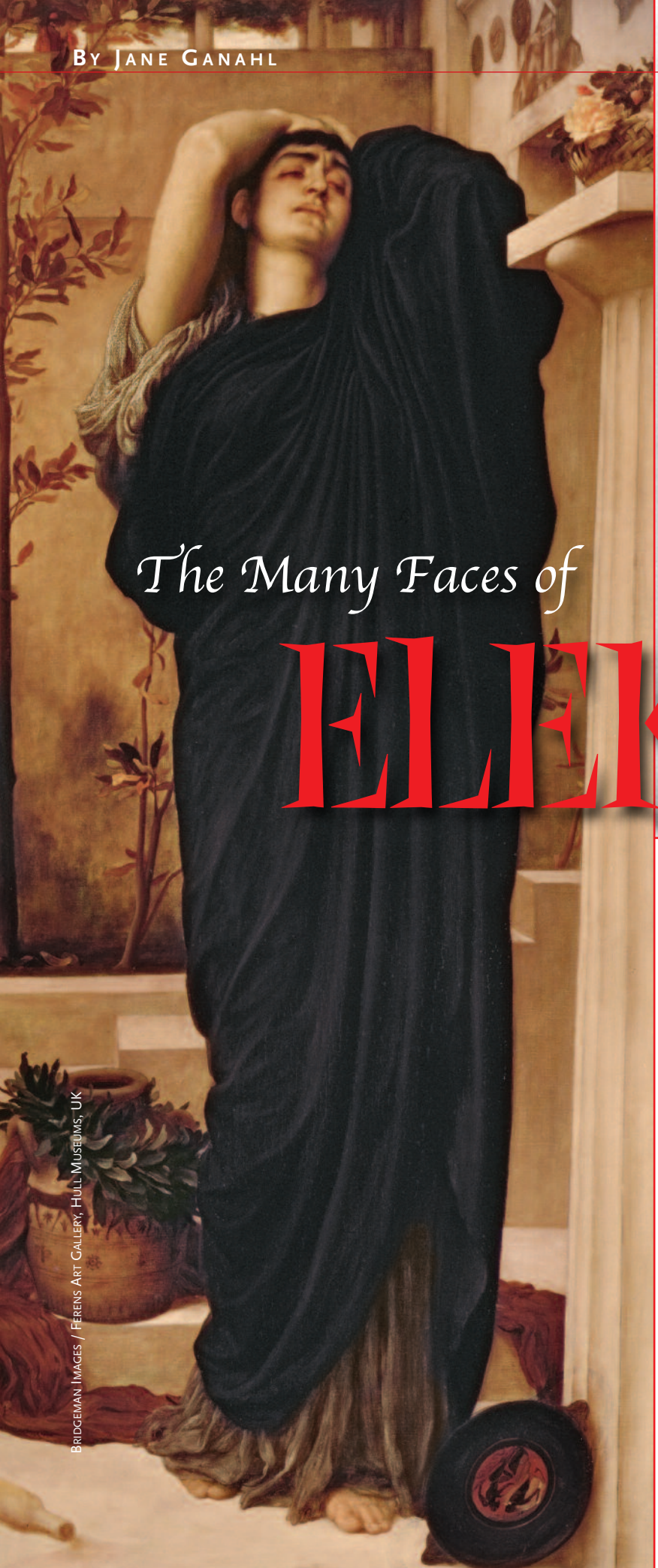
By Jane Ganahl

The Many Faces of ELEKTRA



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You may have seen her in the form of Jennifer Garner's sword-wielding assassin in the 2005 film *Elektra*, on stage as a bitter Civil War spinster in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in the words of Sylvia Plath's controversial poem "Electra on Azalea Path," in the famed portrait by Frederic Leighton, *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon*, and indeed, in Richard Strauss' opera *Elektra**.

In the 2,000-plus years since her name was first etched on paper, Electra—the myth, the character—has inspired dozens, if not hundreds, of works of theater, literature, art, opera, and psychoanalysis. Around a century ago, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung suggested there was an "Electra complex" suffered by many little girls who were in love with their fathers in competition with their mothers, thus tainting forever the innocent tag "Daddy's little girl."

Even today, the vengeful, father-worshipping anti-heroine of Sophocles' tragedy continues to fascinate and perturb us—perhaps in part because her story of familial murder and mayhem makes *Game of Thrones* pale in comparison.

In the years following the Trojan War, Electra has waited for nearly a decade for the return of her brother Orestes

**When referring to the Sophocles play, the standard English spelling is "Electra." "Elektra" is the German spelling.*

For centuries, the mythic figure of Electra has served as inspiration for artists. Examples include (from left to right): Frederic Leighton's circa 1868 painting Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon*; Eugene O'Neill's* Mourning Becomes Electra *with Rosalind Russell and Michael Redgrave in the 1947 film adaptation; the ancient Roman stone statue Electra and Orestes; and the eponymous 1962 film, directed by Mihalis Kakogiannis.*

from exile, hoping then he would take vengeance on their mother, Clytemnestra, and stepfather, Aegisthus, for the murder of their father, King Agamemnon. To Clytemnestra, her husband's murder was justified because Agamemnon had sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia in order to win the war. To Electra, true justice can only be achieved with the murder of her mother and stepfather.

Perhaps one reason the Electra myth has continued to pique our curiosity over the millennia is because of its moral ambiguity. What constitutes right and wrong? Shouldn't murdering one's own mother be considered wrong, even if one's own mother is murderous herself? We are intrigued by the fact that Electra's moral compass seems to be broken, as she has convinced herself that virtue and justice is on her side, not her mother's.

To Electra, there are no shades of gray, only black and white. In the end, bloodbath concluded, we are divided over whether justice has been achieved or whether Electra has gone mad.

Another reason the Electra myth continues to resonate with modern audiences is that it challenges the virtue of expediency: is it better to take action against injustice or to turn a blind eye? Electra tries to convince her sister Chrysothemis to participate in the plot, but Chrysothemis refuses. Despite her anger toward their mother, she does not want to upset the apple cart of her pleasant life as a princess.

Chrysothemis is not the only one who vacillates. Electra may have vengeance on her mind, but waits for years to carry it out—and only then because her brother has joined forces. Her anger without action is reminiscent of another fascinating but tragic figure, Hamlet. Although it should be noted that in Sophocles' day, loyalty and justice were seen as supremely important, and women were expected to be faithful and obedient to men. For these reasons, Electra was regarded as a heroine of that era.

Cicero, the Roman historian and orator, considered *Electra* a masterpiece, and British scholar Edith Hall called Electra "a remarkable figure, driven by deprivation and cruelty into near-psychotic extremes of behavior; no other character in (Sophocles') extant dramas dominates the stage to such an extent."

So it was only right that the theatrical character would get new life in other media, especially opera, which has always been a home for tales of high drama and low behaviors. When composer Richard Strauss saw a German theatrical version of *Electra,* written by Viennese-born playwright and poet Hugo Laurenz August Hofmann von Hofmannsthal, he was drawn to the story as a potential opera. They agreed to collaborate, and the opera version of *Elektra* came to fruition with its 1909 premiere in Dresden.

According to Strauss biographer Tim Ashley, "it was greeted by the critical equivalent of fits and screaming." The modernist score

Left and center: Two objects from the the fifth century B.C. depict the meeting of Orestes and Electra at the tomb of Agamemnon: a relief and red-figure krater; right, the oil painting Electra Receiving the Ashes of her Brother Orestes *by 19th-century French painter Jean Baptiste Joseph Wicar.*

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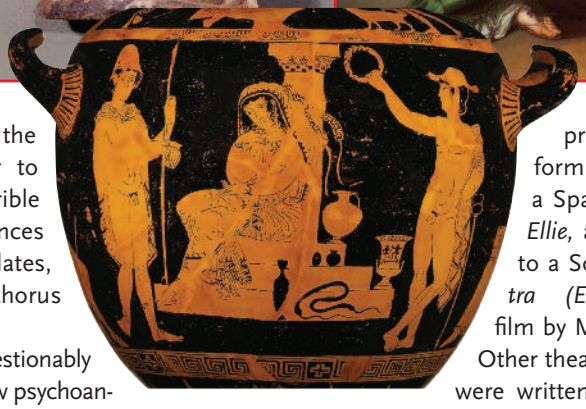

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was challenging for some critics, while the character of Electra caused one writer to opine, "the blood mania appears as a terrible deformation of sexual perversity." Audiences were also divided on Hofmannsthal's updates, such as converting Sophocles' Greek chorus into a cluster of gossipy maids.

Soon after the opera's debut, though questionably connected to it, was the introduction of a new psychoanalytical theory of sexual development. Although Sigmund Freud had been the first to describe the psychodynamics of a girl's sexual competition with her mother for her father as the feminine version of the Oedipus complex, it was his collaborator Carl Jung who created the term "Electra complex" in 1913. That term would eventually be applied to existing works of literature from *Cinderella* to *The Flies* by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Hofmannsthal's play would become the inspiration for Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which was a Broadway hit in 1931, with its chorus of townspeople substituting for Hofmannsthal's maids and Sophocles' divine chorus. Electra is now Lavinia, a wealthy spinster angry with her mother's infidelities while awaiting the return of her husband from the Civil War. Spun from O'Neill's play were a 1947 film starring Rosalind Russell, a 1967 opera by Marvin David Levy, and a 1978 TV mini-series starring Joan Hackett.

Other Electra-inspired creations include the novel *Electra* by Henry Treece, in which she narrates her own story; a crime-fiction series set in Italy by American author Donna Leon, whose young protagonist is named Elletra (the Italian form of Electra); *The Forgotten Pistolero*, a Spaghetti Western by Ferdinando Baldi; *Ellie,* a 1984 film which transfers the story to a Southern U.S. locale; *Szerelmem, Elektra (Electra, My Love*), a Hungarian film by Miklós Jancsó, starring Mari Törőcsik. Other theatrical productions of the Electra myth were written by Jean Giraudoux (*Electra*, 1937), Ezra Pound (*Electra*, first staged in 1987), and, most recently and perhaps most interestingly, *Electricidad*, a 2004 play by Luis Alfaro, which is set in a Chicano barrio.

And so Electra continues to... electrify.

Why continue to resurrect Electra today? What connects us with the questionably sane heroine of 2,000 years ago? Perhaps more than anything, it's the stark view Sophocles takes of the effects of revenge on its perpetrator, as well as the story's moral ambiguity. As the story unspools, Electra's quest for righteousness becomes just a quest for blood, and we watch her become increasingly irrational—and perhaps even mad.

Living in complicated times such as these, with the world a virtual powder keg, perhaps through Electra we see the dangers of viewing the world in black and white.

Jane Ganahl is the co-founder of Litquake, the West Coast's largest independent literary festival, and contributor to many magazines from Harper's Bazaar *to* Rolling Stone, Ladies' Home Journal, *and* San Francisco Opera Magazine.