



Electra Myth – The Myth of Inter-Human Determinism

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Abstract:The present study proposes to investigate the system of the thematic elements of Electra myth from the synchronic one, following a number of defining features, principles and elements (theoretical, thematic and structural) correlated within one literary pattern. It is to be implemented the first, probably, study that focuses, in synthesis, methodologically and methodically, on Electra myth conceived as a literary system in itself, expressing in literature a fundamental situation for the human condition, where Electra becomes a literary *invention*, a literary *archetype* as universal symbol, reifying its own *literary myth* of individual essence.

Keywords: myth, fundamental situation of the myth, archetype, literary myth, literalised myth, mythicize, demythicize, sacred, profane, humanization, literary system, literary model, literary pattern, artistic originality, intertextualism.

Electra Miti – Kararlılığın İnsanlar Üzerindeki Etkisinin Miti

Özet:Bu çalışma Electra Mitinin eşzamanlı bakış açısıyla ele alıp, bazı tanımlayıcı özellikleri edebi modelle ilişkili ilkeler ve öğeleri (teorik, tematik, ve yapısal) takip ederek, tematik elementlerinin sistemini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Electra'nın bireysel özünün kendi edebi mitini ortaya koyduğu edebi bir buluş, evrensel bir sembol olarak *arketip* haline geldiği ve edebiyatta insanlığın durumu hakkında temel bir durumu açıklayan, Electra mitinin kendine has bir edebi sistem olarak algılanması üzerine muhtemelen ilk çalışma, sentez olarak, metodolojik ve yönetsel bağlamda, olarak ortaya konmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: mit, mitin temel durumu, arketip, edebi mit, edebileştirilmiş mit, mitleştirme, dünyevileştirmek, kutsal, dünyevi, insanlaştırma, edebi sistem, edebi model, edebi kalıp, sanatsal orijinallik, metinlerarasılık.

The literary character of Electra is the major concern of a number of important dramatic works (*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), but it has not been and is still not considered in the field of comparative literature as an independent literary model, being regarded as just an aspect, though important, of the story about the Atreus family, as it is not considered as the object of study of an adequate methodological research. When it is mentioned or shaded, Electra myth is often subject to abusive critical and theoretical opinions, hardly compatible with its essence; moreover, Electra is almost never referred to as archetype or myth, but as literary character. In this respect, our object of study – Electra myth – is to be considered in relation to the accomplishment of the following main aims of our research:

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- terminological and theoretical elaboration of an investigational model (on the thematic level) concerning Electra myth in relation to ancient and modern drama; and
- the attempt at avoiding the ambiguity of defining Electra myth as literary myth and literalised myth, and at establishing its coordinates as a literary myth through the identification of the fundamental situation that Electra myth expresses around a literary archetype as universal symbol that becomes representative for the human condition.

The remarkable interpretative attention given nowadays to the studies on myths, along with theatre and comparative drama studies, in the context of modern comparative literature studies that are continually re-evaluated according to the new acquisitions and experiences in the different fields of literary science, justifies and explains the critical suitability and the up-to-dateness of the chosen topic: **Electra Myth – the Myth of Inter-Human Determinism.**

An important argument in favour of our research represents the fact that, within the larger context of world and comparative literature, the aspect that considers the aesthetic value of literary myths has definitely entered the literary tradition. This important phenomenon is perceived more or less as a distinct entity in the context of comparative literature, while also representing a literary manifestation that satisfies the intellectual needs of the modern man in spite of the complexity of new cultural alternatives, and which reveals an increased value of interest manifested by both the larger reading public and the critical and theoretical exegesis.

Another argument, of a more general type, in favour of the critical suitability of the chosen topic, represents the fact that our paper is to be included in the cultural specificity of our times, in which one may notice a remarkable interpretative invasion, supported by the exponential increase of the scientists, the thirst for experiment of the modern and post-modern literature, the need to revive, having the educational and other purposes, the classic patrimony.

The theoretical and practical importance of the study consists of the establishment of the defining features of the literary myth of Electra, in matters of both its content and form, which have been for a long time ignored by the specialized criticism, as well as in the postulation of some possibilities of re-evaluation of the existing conceptions concerning the literary myth expressed in the dramatic discourse on the thematic level of the literary text.

Also, given the fact that our research refers to the issues of literary reception on the level of original work concerning the modalities of textual expression in the dramatic discourse of those elements that focus on action, character representation, human values and theoretical conceptions as elements of the literary system of Electra myth on the thematic level, we believe that the material and the results of our research may represent starting points for a number of other studies in this domain, among which the study of the dramatic discourse on the structural level concerning the literary strategies and techniques that organize formally the dramatic text, or the study of the modalities and possibilities of representation on the level of scenic expression of the dramatic texts focused on Electra myth, for each scenic representation is in itself a distinct interpretation, on behalf of the producer, of the text as the expression of myth, or the study of other literary and artistic genres and domains (novel, poetry, film, music etc.) that reveal connections to drama regarding artistic reception of Electra myth.

The attempt at identifying a number of defining features on the thematic level of Electra myth comprises certain terminological delimitations and theoretical perspectives of research, and finds its starting point in the idea that the factor that generated the freedom of literary representation of Electra in the dramatic text is to be found in the structure of the myth of the Atreus family, in which Electra has not been established in the framework of some rigid parameters concerning her role and importance as an heir and avenger of Agamemnon. Hence the interpretation and free modification of the perspectives of thematic representation of Electra in ancient drama, while it is more important to see that this process has been followed by the dramatic authors belonging to end of the modern period in the 1st half of the 20th century.

In order to approach our object of study we have started from the premises that Electra myth, traditionally included in the mythological cycle of the Atreus family, represents actually a literary myth in itself, and expresses in literature a fundamental situation for the human condition, and manifests in the dramatic works of a number of writers belonging to two important periods of literary evolution: Greek Antiquity and the 1st half of the 20th century, and being absent in other periods. In the process of our research we have tried to argue that Electra myth – focused on the events and their consequences concerning the status of Electra as an emotional and psychological factor involved in and co-participant at Orestes' punitive action – represents a literary myth, narration-product of the artistic imagination, symbolic situation having a metaphysical aspect, which is born and exists in literature, and is expressed in the literary text that vary from one period to another, from one cultural background to another, and which is the dramatic discourse of tragedy.

The fundamental situation that confers to Electra and the action in which she is involved the status of myth refers to the *inter-human determinism* based on a large range of emotional and psychological states that manifest in the context of a symbolic typology of human existence regarding violence, crime, revenge, and an action that destabilises the universal harmony, the welfare of the city and the individual and family existence, where the perpetration of another crime as punitive action is expected to restore the lost values and to re-establish the personal and social well-being. Electra's role is to become aware of this situation and to confer to it the status of an existential model, a pattern of life through her own psychological and emotional significance as the expression of a tragic heroism, intense experiences, exacerbate emotions, unstable subconscious, extreme suffering, which will eventually give rise to the necessity of action and determine its perpetration by Orestes, where Electra involves and even participates in the required action, which is vengeful and liberating, brutal and rationalized, emotional and instinctual, egotistical and formative, depending on the thematic variety of different dramatic texts, and which confers to Electra the status of literary myth of individual essence, typologically patterned and at the same time open to artistic diversity based on creative imagination.

This is also the reason for the fact that Electra myth, having its origin in the ethno-religious myth of the Atreus family, but being developed in literature, and becoming a literary myth in the series of Faust, Don Juan, Cain, that is a literary system typologically arranged around an archetype as universal symbol, has mainly manifested in the two distinct periods of human evolution – Greek Antiquity and the end of the modern period (1st half of the 20th century) –, whereas the explanation of this fact is that Electra myth is framed literarily as tragedy, and tragedy, as a type of literary discourse, offers, on one hand, the gratification of eternal human aggressive wishes, and, on the other hand, the gratification of the human aesthetic needs that result from a tragic performance of life, where the beauty is transposed in the literary discourse amplified by the scenic representation, which leads to catharsis, purification of the receiver's senses as an aesthetic action of the myth.

The role of tragedy, in this context, is even more important, given the fact that this literary type gives the possibility of liberation, of psychological unloading of the tension of violent wishes through catharsis, and the possibility is given to the receiver of aesthetic discourse, who possesses aggressive tendencies, to free from negative emotions (purgation) while assisting at a tragic performance expressing violence, and watching the death or suffering (considered sacrifices for regeneration) of the protagonist, and achieving after this purgation the actual purification through the calmness and equilibrium recovered. Concerning the beginnings and evolution of the literary forms of Electra myth, our starting point is the idea that, according to literary evolution

marked by the spiritual need of the man for art (artistic beauty) rather than his spiritual need for the sacred, divine and representative for its condition, the epic as the representation of ethno-religious myths finishes its existence and is followed by tragedy that assumes the symbolic expression of myths and the conception regarding harmony, balance, obedience to norms and the human existence according to the model of divine existence, and which firstly manifests as religious ritual and then as exponent of artistic creation in matters of the transition from the sacred to the profane (literature).

Electra myth is expressive of such a process, and there are two distinct evolutions in ancient culture that are based on the ascending determinism of the literary discourse, which are also revealed by the ancient literary texts about Electra's destiny, meaning that these two cultural processes develop in parallel, expressing and determining directly the development and consolidation of the literary Electra myth, while strengthening its aesthetic validity. The first process regards Tragedy as theatrical expression and religious ritual (Aeschylus), that through Sophocles becomes Tragedy of the dramatic genre in textual and scenic expression (Euripides, Shakespeare, Sartre, O'Neill). The second one reveals that Electra's destiny - as a minor aspect and an abstract symbol in the wholeness of the religious and philosophic conception of the ethno-religious myth of the Atreus family as a sacred and representative for the humanity narration (folk tradition, Homer, Aeschylus) - through Sophocles becomes Electra myth as literalised in the framework of the myth of the Atreus family and as literary myth of individual essence resulted from the process of imaginative creation that offers the freedom to modify and interpret the sacred essence of the ethno-religious myth through humanised action and individualised characters (Euripides, Sartre, O'Neill, Giraudoux).

Following this line of argumentation, it appears that Electra of the ancient tragedies is represented in three different ways, each having its own status, personality and role, which may give the impression – suppressed, however, by the strict delimitation of the thematic perspectives in the mythological context regarding the hereditary curse, personal suffering and inherited guilt as determinant aspects of the manifestation of the existential tragic – of the existence of three different literary characters:

1. Electra by Aeschylus reveals submission to the ethno-religious myth and creation of the dramatic discourse in the framework of the sacred religious ritual. Here, concerning the act of revenge of Agamemnon's death by murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Electra, together with Orestes, serves the plans of divinity without being clearly revealed any personal motivations, whereas being emphasised the necessity of social welfare and restoration of universal harmony that have been thwarted by the crimes of the predecessors.

2. Electra by Sophocles expresses partial submission to the sacred myth and the religious ritual, and the attempt at both the creation of literalised myth through individualised character and humanised mythic action, and the creation of literary myth of individual essence. Here, concerning the act of revenge of Agamemnon's death by murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Electra presents complex determinants resulted from personal motivation (despair, suffering, hatred, desire to revenge and act) and a larger perspective of universal harmony as a result of divine creation (of less importance in the context of events), as well as from the requirements of community concerning the values and principles of piety, measure and duty, where the liberation from tyranny and the restoration of ethical norms correspond to individual freedom and the restoration of the social welfare.

3. Electra by Euripides reveals a profane myth as a result of literalised characters and action through humanised thematic context (common aspects of existence) and character (individualization through psychological and emotional complexity), and the consolidation of Electra myth as a literary one. Here, concerning the act of revenge of Agamemnon's death by murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Electra presents primarily a personal motivation due to her humanized character, although she is reduced as human value and mythic symbol (driven away from the palace, living with a common man in a hut), and hence the expression of some animal and immoral drives as expression of egotism and closeness in the limited and instable sphere of individualism, even if by the end she manifests as a person capable of suffering and despair in the positive sense of assuming the guilt for the committed crime.

The fact that in ancient mythology Electra is not under constraints of any typological pattern concerning action and character representation, in which she is involved, marked the development of a particular myth of individual essence – Electra myth – having multiple perspectives of artistic representation, which is also the reason for its creative vitality at the end of the modern period, when Electra myth was subject to free modification in accordance to the cultural complexity of the 1st half of the 20th century. There are, however, in the relation of ancient Electra myth to modern Electra myth, many similar points that reveal the aspect of artistic continuity and vitality of a thematic and character representation typology: the tragic guilt in ancient and modern view determined by divine will, fate, and personal will of the character who has to choose an action that disturbs the ethical norms, where choice results from the freedom of decision, but it also requires suffering; alienation and anxiety of the modern man fallen into sin and guilt similar to those of the ancient man marked by hybris, which presupposes the continuity of the tragic guilt and suffering that are self-imposed following the imposition of unjust choices by destiny, divinity, background, family, personal conscious.

The strongest similarities between ancient and modern versions of Electra myth are vivid in relation to the character representation strategies and the main aspects of action, which form a syntagmatic structure of the following elements of a literary myth that resulted from an ethno-religious myth rendered textually and scenically in ancient and modern dramatic discourse: (1) conflicts among the members of a cursed family; (2) perpetration of wrongdoings and crimes; (3) revenge achieved by the perpetration of other crimes by the descendents; (4) the status and role of Electra as a factor of inter-human determinism and co-participant at the punitive action; (5) acceptance of the consequences of the avenging action. In the ancient and modern literary expression of Electra myth these thematic elements focus on two essential concepts for human existence, which could be identified as *success* and *failure* concerning the consequences of the avenging act perpetrated by Orestes through Electra's determinism:

Electra myth in its literary expression	Failure (personal and/or social) as the consequence of the punitive crime	Success (personal and/or social) as the consequence of the punitive crime
Aeschylus – <i>Oresteia</i>	Partial on personal level in case of Orestes, manifested through remorse and suffering;	Absolute on social and divine level, and partial on personal level;
Sophocles – <i>Electra</i>	–	Absolute on personal, social and divine level through the restoration of harmony and equilibrium;
Euripides – <i>Electra</i>	Partial on personal level in case of Electra and Orestes, manifested through violence and indecisiveness, respectively;	Partial on social level through the liberation from tyranny, and partial on personal level through the consciously assumed guilt and suffering
O'Neill – <i>Mourning Becomes Electra</i>	Absolute on personal level in case of Orin (who remains immoral and non-valuable as victim and criminal);	Absolute on personal level in case of Electra through the consciously assumed consequences, acceptance of the guilt and punishment;
Sartre – <i>The Flies</i>	Absolute on personal level in case of Electra, who fails in the process of becoming a human being, and partial on the personal level in case of Orestes through his social alienation;	Partial on personal level in case of Orestes, due to the successful becoming a human being, and absolute on social level, due to the restoration of welfare and the self-awareness of community;
Giraudoux – <i>Electra</i>	Absolute on social level through the accomplishment of personal revenge in the detriment of the city, and partial in case of Orestes to whom the entire guilt is attributed.	Absolute on personal level in case of Electra through the success of avenging crimes, and partial in case of Orestes.

As a general conclusion concerning modern drama, it appears that O'Neill, Sartre, Giraudoux, Eliot accomplish two distinct processes of literary representation of Electra myth: (1) on one hand, they create realistic characters and life situations as dominant elements of the system of a literary myth of individual essence that has developed from the system of a literalised and humanised ethno-religious myth (myth of the Atreus family); (2) on the other hand, the modern dramatists, through their focus on the constituent aspects of the ancient myth, recreate a deep mythological essence, revive the myth and confer to it the tragic substance of expression of some archetypal human and behaviouristic types having epical resonance, superhistorical and metaliterary values, and framing a fundamental scheme representative of individual existence in the context of the literalised myth of the Atreus family and of the literary myth of Electra.

The first process signifies the aspect of *demythisation* of the dramatic discourse on the level of textual expression concerning the thematic aspects, along with the making of the myth profane through the literalised and humanised subject, action and character, which would result, regarding Electra, in an individual literary expression.

The second process means the *mythisation* of the material and content of the literary work, along with conferring to the subject, action and character the status of narration representative for human condition and framed around an archetype having the value of universal symbol and expressing general human existence and static models with timeless values (which influence, however, the individual and social life) through the admission of the system of elements expressing themes, ideas and values of an already established myth as literary tradition and system. The authors may also assume the liberty to reinterpret and modify thematically and formally the literary expression of a myth already established as literary model (without affecting its ideative essence), which constitutes the aspect of *originality* of every new version of the traditionally established myth.

The *demythisation* and *mythisation* of the subject, action and characters, revealed by the motive of inter-human determinism facing an impossible choice as an element *sine-qua-non* of the human condition, represent two simultaneous processes of the story about Electra and mark its diachronic evolution as literary discourse, which determines the rise of different thematic and character representation perspectives as a result of different types of artistic sensibility, representative of different writers, and of different points of view on existence that the authors attempt at transmitting as messages of their literary discourses.

The characters Electra in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Lavinia in O'Neill, and Electra in Sartre and Giraudoux represent ancient and modern hypostases of a single mythic prototype, a single archetype called Electra, which belongs to a myth having universal resonance and being representative for the human condition, in general, and for female condition, in particular, and which assigns a series of defining characteristics of our existence, such as the complexity of the subconscious, a type of relationship with the self and the tragic destiny, an individual and social posture, the facing of extreme situations, having aesthetic significance framed in the evolutionary parameters of the relationship between tradition and originality, in the continuous process of *mythisation* and *demythisation* through universalised and literalised approach, and the confirmation of the symbolic and general human status to the level of psychological and emotional experience.

The *demythisation* and *mythisation*, simultaneous processes taking place in a single literary text, signify the permanence of Electra myth, its literary continuity, its consolidation as a dramatic tradition open to innovating perspectives and creative originality. At the same time, Electra myth represents a well-structured system that keeps its essence unmodified, disregarding the chronotope of action, the names of characters and the concourse of events, and thus proving the truth according to which myth survives, continues its evolution, and remains representative and didactic for the human condition and community only as being placed in the framework of the literary discourse.

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