

STRAUSS

Elektra

A Guide for Educators



The Met
ropolitan
Opera



Elektra

Vengeful, implacable, pathological—the character of Electra has gripped audiences for nearly 2,500 years. Throughout her virtual existence, this mesmerizing protagonist, with her notorious lust for revenge and morbid father fixation, has given rise to representations and inspired discussion in formats as diverse as Ancient Greek tragedy, Expressionist opera, silent film, Marvel comics, and Jungian psychology. A prime example is Richard Strauss’s *Elektra*, a searing masterpiece of early 20th-century theater that sets the title character on an inexorable path to a final cataclysm of violence.

Patrice Chéreau, who directed the Met’s production, viewed this opera as a re-reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, with both title characters destroyed by the same fantasy of vengeance. “One can view in *Elektra* the ravages of a deadly faithfulness,” Chéreau explained when his staging premiered. “As in the Shakespeare, you can see the black wing of depression at work, with its exhausting alternation of wariness, fear, panic, and exultation.” Written early in Strauss’s operatic career, *Elektra* perfectly embodies this unremitting cycle of violence called forth by the Greek tragedy.

In addition to offering students an overview of the Ancient Greek world that produced the story of *Elektra*, this guide asks students to both empathize with and critique the title character’s feelings and actions. Central to the tale are questions of justice and pain, grief and resilience that remain as vital today as they were two-and-a-half millennia ago, and the opera offers opportunities for not only critical thinking but also self-discovery. Each layer of *Elektra*’s story—including her origins in Greek mythology, her musical depiction by Richard Strauss, and her embodiment on the Met stage by soprano Nina Stemme—enriches our understanding of this iconic character. At the same time, recognizing how Strauss’s anti-hero differs from her Classical forebear will allow students to develop a deeper appreciation for this opera’s radical libretto and its seminal score.



STEMME



PIECZONKA



MEIER



OWENS



ULRICH

THE WORK

An opera in **one act, sung in German**

Music by **Richard Strauss**

Libretto by **Hugo von Hofmannsthal**
Adapted from his play based on the tragedy *Elektra* by **Sophocles**

First performed **January 25, 1909**,
at the **Dresden Court Opera**

PRODUCTION

Patrice Chéreau
Production

Richard Peduzzi
Set Designer

Caroline de Vivaise
Costume Designer

Dominique Bruguière
Lighting Designer

Vincent Huguet
Stage Director

Gary Halvorson
TV Director

PERFORMANCE

The Met: Live in HD
Broadcast: April 30, 2016

Nina Stemme
Elektra

Adrienne Pieczonka
Chrysothemis

Waltraud Meier
Klytämnestra

Eric Owens
Orest

Burkhard Ulrich
Aegisth

Esa-Pekka Salonen
Conductor

Production a gift of Robert L. Turner

Additional funding from the National
Endowment for the Arts

HD Live in Schools is supported through
a partnership with the New York City
Department of Education.

Opera in the Classroom

The Metropolitan Opera Educator Guides offer a creative, interdisciplinary introduction to opera. Designed to complement existing classroom curricula in music, the humanities, STEM fields, and the arts, these guides will help young viewers confidently engage with opera whether or not they have prior experience with the art form.

On the following pages, you'll find an array of materials designed to encourage critical thinking, deepen background knowledge, and empower students to engage with *Elektra's* story, music, and themes. These materials can be used in classrooms and/or via remote-learning platforms, and they can be mixed and matched to suit your students' individual academic needs.

Above all, this guide is intended to help students explore *Elektra* through their own experiences and ideas. The diverse perspectives that your students bring to opera make the art form infinitely richer, and we hope that your students will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE:

Philosophical Chairs: A series of questions that will introduce students to the opera's main themes while sparking their creativity and encouraging debate

Who's Who in *Elektra*: An introduction to the opera's main characters and their roles in the plot

Synopsis: A complete opera synopsis for young readers

The Source: Information about the literary sources and/or historical events that inspired the opera

Timelines: One or more timelines connecting the opera to events in world history

Deep Dives: In-depth looks at various topics relating to the opera

Active Exploration: Interdisciplinary activities connecting the opera to topics in music, the humanities, STEM, and the arts

THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE, YOU'LL ALSO FIND:

Critical Inquiries: Questions and thought experiments designed to foster careful thinking

Fun Facts: Entertaining tidbits about *Elektra*



FUN FACT

The conductor Hans von Bülow, one of Strauss's mentors, used to refer to him jokingly as "Richard the Third." Bülow claimed that after Richard the First—the 19th-century operatic titan Richard Wagner—there could be no second. (It is also worth mentioning that Hans von Bülow's wife, Cosima, left him for Wagner.)

Above: Richard Strauss

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

This guide invites students to explore the opera through:

English Language Arts
Classics
Drama
Literary Analysis
Critical Thinking
Psychology
Sociology
Music
Post-Tonal Music Analysis
Social-Emotional Learning



Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play a game of Philosophical Chairs, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element of the game is what happens next: Participants discuss their points of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussion. (For more tips on using Philosophical Chairs in a classroom or via a remote-learning platform, see the activity description in your Google Classroom.)

Each topic statement is deliberately open-ended yet ties into a number of the themes present in *Elektra*—including grief, betrayal, revenge, and familial strife. As you and your students explore and learn about *Elektra*, you can return to these statements: What do they have to do with the opera's story? How might these questions help us explore the opera's story, history, and themes?

THE STATEMENTS

- Gossip is harmless.
- Grief goes away.
- You must never betray your family.
- Revenge may be justified.
- Nightmares are reflections of reality.
- Family feuds can always be resolved.
- Obsession is a healthy and productive emotion.
- Avenging a wrong will restore honor.

Keep in mind that the *process* of this activity is just as important as the statements themselves. Imagine a world in which everyone actively listens to one another and engages in respectful dialogue, honoring others and showing respect for the wide array of diverse ideas and opinions that others hold. Philosophical Chairs fosters exactly this kind of space, encouraging students to take what they've learned and change the global landscape for generations to come.

Who's Who in *Elektra*

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Elektra (Electra)* Daughter of the murdered King Agamemnon	eh-LEK-trah	soprano	Implacable and possessed by an all-consuming desire for revenge, Elektra spends her days in fits of rage and mourning.
Chrysothemis Elektra's sister	kroo-ZOH-teh-meess	soprano	Unlike her sister, Chrysothemis longs for a normal life and hopes to become a wife and mother.
Klytämnestra (Clytemnestra) Elektra's mother, Agamemnon's wife, and one of his assassins	KLOO-tehm-NES-trah	mezzo-soprano	Fearsome and powerful, Klytämnestra is haunted by nightmares; seeking relief, she performs sacrifices to pacify the gods.
Orest (Orestes) Son of Agamemnon, exiled at a young age by Klytämnestra	oh-REHST	baritone / bass	Long absent from his native land, Orest is both a source of fear for Klytämnestra and one of hope for Elektra.
Aegisth (Aegisthus) Klytämnestra's lover	eh-GHIST	tenor	Aegisth helped Klytamnestra murder Agamemnon. A secondary character in the opera, he appears only briefly before being murdered.

*Character names are initially provided in the German of Hofmannsthal's libretto; those in parentheses are the English versions of these Ancient Greek names.



ELEKTRA



CHRYSOTHEMIS



KLYTÄMNESTRA



OREST



AEGISTH

Synopsis

Mycenae, an interior courtyard of the palace.

A group of maidservants to Klytämnestra, Queen of Mycenae, gossip by the well, wondering whether Klytämnestra's daughter Elektra will appear to grieve over her father, Agamemnon, as is her daily ritual. Elektra enters, and the maidservants mock her for her unkempt appearance and venomous attitude. Left alone, Elektra recalls Agamemnon's brutal murder at the hands of Klytämnestra and her lover, Aegisth, and she imagines her father returning as a shadow to oversee his own violent revenge. Elektra foresees the bloody completion of her vengeance, crowned by her dancing triumphantly on Agamemnon's grave.

Elektra's younger sister, Chrysothemis, interrupts Elektra's reflections to warn her that Klytämnestra and Aegisth are planning to lock her away in a tower. Chrysothemis pleads with Elektra to renounce the blood feud that prevents them from leading normal lives. Noises from the palace signal the imminent arrival of the queen, and Chrysothemis urges Elektra to avoid their mother. Instead, she awaits the confrontation with glee.

Klytämnestra arrives, accompanied by her entourage, and finds Elektra in a more agreeable mood than usual. The queen sends away her followers and approaches her daughter, asking her whether she knows of a remedy for bad dreams. Elektra draws her mother into describing her nightly torments, and Klytämnestra asks Elektra to identify which animal sacrifice would appease the gods and cause her dreams to end. Elektra exultingly delivers her fatal blow: It is Klytämnestra herself who needs to die. Elektra describes with morbid pleasure how the queen will be chased and killed in her own palace by Elektra's brother, Orest.

Just then, Klytämnestra's confidante runs to her mistress and whispers a message in her ear. The queen returns to the palace with savage pleasure, without interacting further with Elektra. Chrysothemis enters to relay the terrible news that Orest is dead, as has just been announced by two foreign messengers. Elektra resolves to complete her revenge without the help of her brother and attempts to enlist Chrysothemis in her plan to murder Klytämnestra and Aegisth. Chrysothemis refuses and flees. Cursing her, Elektra decides to commit the murders on her own. She begins to dig wildly in the ground, looking for the axe used in Agamemnon's murder, which she secreted away and buried for this purpose.

Elektra becomes aware that she is being watched by one of the strangers who had come bearing the news of Orest's death. Her obvious grieving for Orest prompts the stranger to ask her who she is. When she reveals that she is Elektra, kin to Agamemnon and Orest, the stranger reels in shock. It is only when the aged servants of the palace throw themselves at the stranger's feet that Elektra realizes that he is in fact Orest, returned in disguise. Together, they mourn the ravages of body and mind caused





by Elektra's pursuit of revenge. Elektra and Orest are interrupted by his tutor, who comes to summon Orest to the palace: Klytämnestra is within, unprotected, and the moment of vengeance has come.

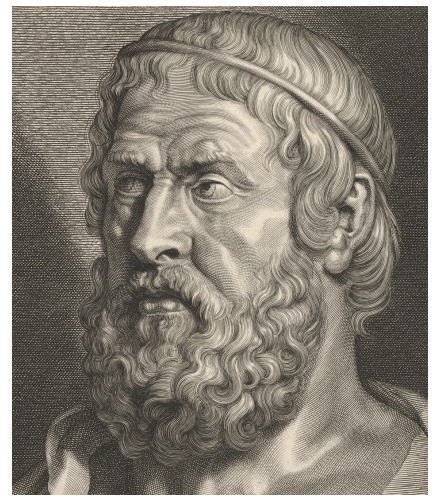
Orest enters the palace, and Elektra realizes that she has forgotten to give him the axe. From inside, Klytämnestra screams, and Elektra exults in her mother's death. The maidservants are thrown into confusion, and when Aegisth is heard returning from the fields, they flee in fear before him. Only Elektra is left to light the way for Aegisth, and she ushers him into the palace with fawning delight. Soon, Aegisth too screams for help and succumbs to the vengeance waiting for him within.

Chrysothemis enters to report on a battle within the palace between those loyal to Orest and Aegisth. Elektra exults in the final completion of her revenge and begins her triumphal dance. In an extreme state of ecstasy, she dances briefly in frenzied rapture before collapsing to the earth, dead.





Electra and Orestes by John Flaxman
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY



Sophocles (after Rubens) by Paulus Pontius (1638)
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The Source

THE PLAY *ELECTRA* BY SOPHOCLES

The works of the ancient Greek dramatist Sophocles date from the fifth century BCE and feature some of the most iconic figures of Classical tragedy, including Oedipus, Antigone, and Electra. His play *Electra* (ca. 410 BCE) explores the domestic fallout after the murder of the mythological King Agamemnon—one of the heroes of the Trojan War and a major character in the *Iliad*—by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. Agamemnon’s bereaved daughter Electra and her plot for revenge appear in similar works by Sophocles’s near contemporaries Aeschylus and Euripides. In his version, Sophocles explores Electra’s character and motivation, questioning what kind of person would so relentlessly pursue the goal of her own mother’s death.

In 1903, the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal adapted Sophocles’s tragedy into a stage play for the director Max Reinhardt in Berlin. Strauss attended a performance, and within two years, he and Hofmannsthal were collaborating on an opera based on the play. Hofmannsthal had made a number of changes to the ancient Greek source that re-cast the characters in the light of the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis and the writings of Sigmund Freud, and he also altered the ending. The *Electra* of Sophocles finishes the play in triumph, whereas Hofmannsthal and Strauss’s comes to a different, much darker end.



Hugo von Hofmannsthal
WIKIPEDIA

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Revenge is a common theme in literature and other narrative media. Can you think of any other books, plays, movies, TV shows, video games or other works of art or entertainment that center on revenge?

Timeline

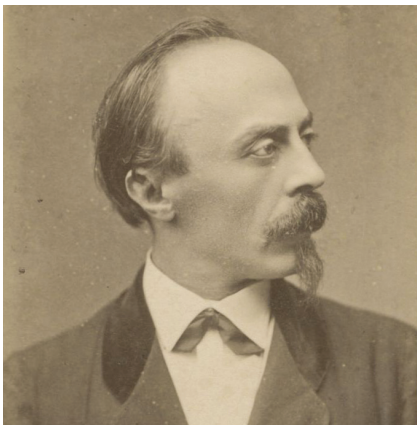
THE COMPOSITION OF *ELEKTRA*



Orestes killing Clytemnestra
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY



Portrait of Richard Strauss by
Max Liebermann (1918)
BERLIN STATE MUSEUMS / WIKIPEDIA



Hans von Bülow

ca. 410 BCE

The Greek playwright Sophocles writes *Electra*, about a mythical antiheroine who pursues revenge for the murder of her father, King Agamemnon, at the hands of her mother, Clytemnestra. The topic is a popular one among ancient Greek tragedians: Sophocles's contemporaries Aeschylus and Euripides will both write plays about Electra, and Sophocles himself will compose additional plays about her brother Orestes.

1864

Richard Strauss is born on June 11 in Munich. His father, Franz Joseph, is the principal French horn player in the Munich Court Orchestra. Richard's musical talent is obvious from an early age: He begins piano lessons at age four, is composing music by the age of six, begins studying violin at age eight, and starts formal composition lessons at age 11.

1881

Strauss sets to music a chorus from Sophocles's *Electra*. The resulting work for voice and orchestra is performed at his school.

1883

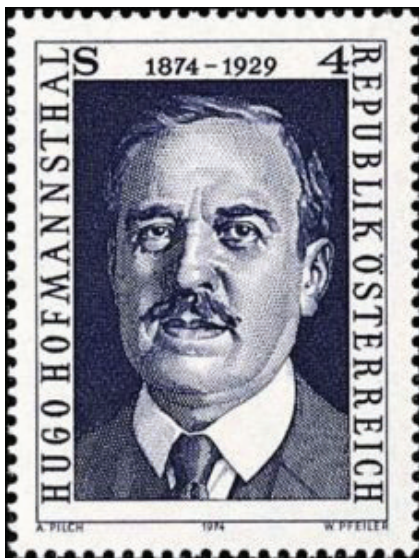
Strauss leaves university after just one year of study to concentrate on a career in music. He has already begun to make a name for himself as a composer, with premieres of several of his works (including a violin concerto and an orchestral serenade) taking place outside of his hometown of Munich.

1883

Strauss moves to Berlin, where he immerses himself in the wealth of artistic resources available in the Prussian capital.

1885

The conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow hires Strauss as an assistant. It is Strauss's first real professional position, and Strauss later credits Bülow for teaching him "the art of interpretation." Hereafter, Strauss's reputation as a conductor and composer continues to grow, and he occupies a series of increasingly prestigious conducting posts.



An Austrian postage stamp celebrating the 100th anniversary of Hofmannsthal's birth



The Met premiere of *Salome* in 1906
MET OPERA ARCHIVES



Gertrude Kappel in the title role of *Elektra* at the work's Met premiere in 1932
MET OPERA ARCHIVES

1888

Strauss's symphonic tone poem *Don Juan* premieres in Weimar, establishing him as one of the preeminent composers of the day and a leading proponent of musical modernism.

1900

While conducting in Paris, Strauss meets the young Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who is interested in collaborating to create a ballet. Strauss is impressed with Hofmannsthal's scenario but is too busy with existing projects to work with him at the time.

1903

Hofmannsthal writes the play *Elektra*, a free adaptation of Sophocles's tragedy. It is staged by the director Max Reinhardt in Berlin, and Strauss attends a performance.

1905

Strauss's opera *Salome* premieres in Dresden. Its lurid subject matter and sultry atmosphere are matched by Strauss's shockingly inventive musical setting. The opera is soon performed at all of the major European opera houses to great critical acclaim. The composer Gustav Mahler calls it "decidedly one of the most important works of our day."

1906

Strauss and Hofmannsthal agree to work together to create an opera based on Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*. Following this first joint effort, they continue to collaborate on operatic projects until the poet's death in 1929.

1909

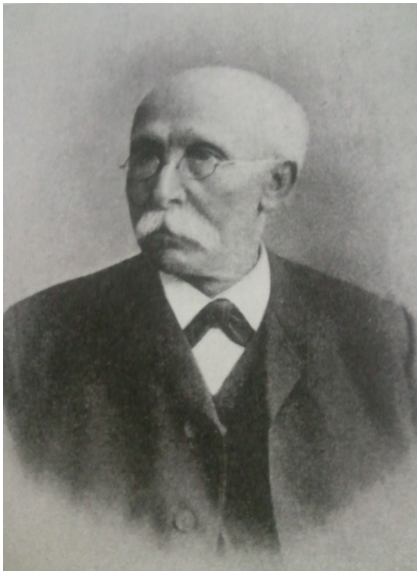
Elektra receives its premiere on January 25 at the Court Opera in Dresden. Its modern, emotionally fraught plot captivates the public, and it is soon a worldwide phenomenon.

1929

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, just 55 years old, suffers a fatal stroke and dies on July 15. Strauss is too distraught to attend the funeral, but he writes to Hofmannsthal's widow: "This genius, this great poet, this sensitive collaborator, this kind friend, this unique talent! No musician ever found such a helper and supporter. No one will ever replace him for me or the world of music!"



Stefan Zweig (standing) with his brother Alfred



Franz Strauss, Richard Strauss's father



Richard Strauss, age 74, in his garden at his country home in Germany in 1938
WIKICOMMONS

1933

Although apolitical by nature, Strauss is compelled to accept an appointment by German Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels to the presidency of the Reichsmusikkammer, the official organization of Hitler's Third Reich that coordinated all facets of the music industry.

1935

Strauss is forced to resign from the Reichsmusikkammer owing to his defiant insistence on working with the Jewish librettist Stefan Zweig.

1948

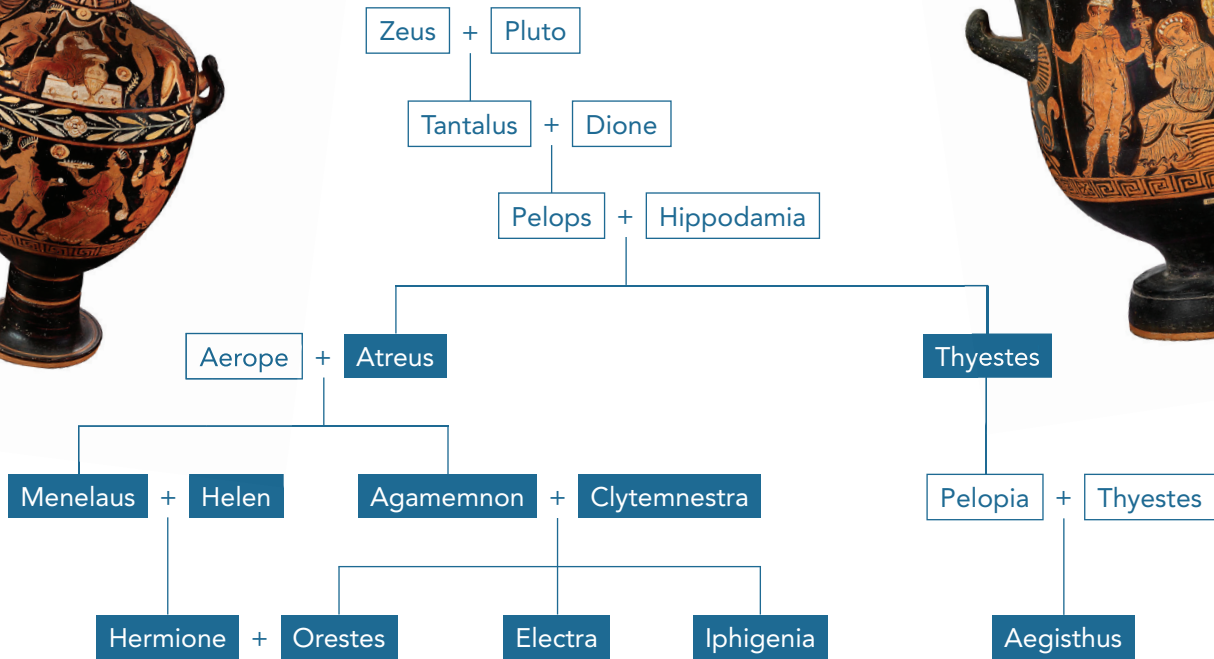
Strauss composes four songs for voice and orchestra, later published as *Vier Letzte Lieder* (*Four Last Songs*). With their massive orchestral accompaniment, texts by Germany's leading poets, and captivating melodies, the songs bring together the myriad compositional techniques Strauss has spent a lifetime perfecting.

1949

Strauss dies on September 8, having suffered from declining health for several years. At a memorial service in Munich, conductor Georg Solti leads the final trio from Strauss's opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, a scene that reflects on memory, experience, and the inevitable passage of time.

FUN FACT

Richard Strauss's father was an accomplished musician who held the post of principal French horn player in the Munich Court Orchestra. His musical tastes tended strongly toward the conservative, and he much preferred Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven over composers of his own generation. The conductor Hans Richter is supposed to have once said, "Strauss's son may be happy that he doesn't have his father in his own orchestra."



Deep Dive

THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

The devastation that Electra wreaks upon her household, while extreme in its own right, is only one chapter in the bloody history of her family, the House of Atreus. Greek mythology and literature include the histories of several dynasties—those based in Thebes, Crete, Athens, and Mycenae—whose inveterate moral failures brought down retribution upon generation after generation. The curse of the House of Atreus began with King Tantalus, a mythological son of Zeus. He had attempted to test the gods’ omniscience by offering them a gruesome feast—a dish made from the flesh of his own son, Pelops—to see whether they would recognize it. The gods denounced Tantalus’s act as an atrocity. As punishment, they imprisoned him for all eternity, hungry and thirsty, in a pool of water beneath fruit-laden branches that forever elude his grasp. (Tantalus’s name is the root of the English word “tantalize.”)

Left: Hydria vase from ca. 350–320 BCE depicting a scene at Agamemnon’s tomb (Orestes finds Elektra mourning, and they plan to kill their mother and her lover). Right: Bell crater vase from ca. 375–350 BCE illustrating a meeting of Orestes and Electra (Electra is seated in the center with Orestes to her left and Chrysothemis to her right). BRITISH MUSEUM

The gods restored the butchered Pelops to life, and he went on to ascend the throne of Arcadia, marry the former king’s daughter, and sire many children, both legitimate and illegitimate. The curse of his forebear was revisited upon his generation when his twin sons Atreus and Thyestes conspired with their mother to murder their half-brother Chrysoippus, the favorite son of the king. Atreus and Thyestes then fled to Mycenae, where their spectacular rivalry included such barbaric acts as Thyestes’s seduction of Atreus’s wife, Atreus’s revenge by butchering Thyestes’s sons and feeding them to Thyestes, and Thyestes’s rape of his own daughter, whom Atreus then took as a new wife. She gave birth to Aegisthus, who was raised by Atreus (although his natural father was Thyestes). When the grown Aegisthus discovered the circumstances of his birth, he slew Atreus and forced Atreus’s sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, into exile.



Panorama with the Abduction of Helen Amidst the Wonders of the Ancient World by Maarten van Heemskerck
WALTERS ART MUSEUM / WIKIPEDIA

Agamemnon and Menelaus allied themselves with King Tyndareus of Sparta and married his daughters, Clytemnestra and Helen, respectively. With the military support of Sparta, Agamemnon returned to Mycenae. When Menelaus's wife Helen was abducted by Paris of Troy (the precipitating event of the Trojan War), Agamemnon assembled 100 ships to sail on his rival. But the fleet was forced to stay in the harbor by contrary winds sent by Artemis. To appease her, Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter Iphigenia to the goddess. The winds lifted, and Agamemnon sailed to war. By the time Agamemnon returned to Mycenae ten years later, Clytemnestra had taken Aegisthus, Agamemnon's cousin and rival for the throne, as a lover. Together, they plotted Agamemnon's death in

repayment for Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia. The events of Strauss's opera *Elektra* begin after Agamemnon's murder, when Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have occupied the throne for some years.

In each succeeding generation, the House of Atreus was plagued by corruption, curses, betrayal, and the most heinous crime of all, the murder of family members. This cycle of never-ending, bloody retribution ultimately ended only with Orestes, who accepted the guilt of killing his mother and sought to make amends for his crime (and to be delivered from the torments of the Furies). According to Euripides, he was eventually acquitted at a formal trial of the gods, and the curse of the House of Atreus was finally broken.

FUN FACT

Strauss's first opera, *Guntram*, met with some success when he conducted the premiere in Weimar in 1894. But the first performance in his native city of Munich the year after was a dismal failure. Strauss took the rejection very personally. Years later, he placed a gravestone in the garden of his villa with the inscription, "Here rests the honorable and virtuous young man Guntram, who was horribly slain by the symphony orchestra of his own father."

LOUVRE MUSEUM / WIKIPEDIA



Deep Dive

THE SURPRISING ETYMOLOGY OF TRAGEDY

Tragedy (noun): A drama typically exploring serious events, often including the main character’s downfall caused by personal faults and/or fate, and with an unhappy or disastrous ending

It may not make immediate sense that the word tragedy originally meant “goat song”—derived from the ancient Greek “tragos” (“goat”) and “oide” (“ode” or “song”). To understand what this says about the nature of tragedy, we need to go all the way back to Greece in the seventh century BCE and the ancient rituals, or Dionysia, held in Athens in honor of Dionysus, the god of vegetation, wine, and fertility. The Dionysia were religious festivals associated with the harvest and vintage, and they included ritual sacrifices and fertility celebrations. They also featured wild dancing and singing by characters wearing goat skins in imitation of the satyrs, Dionysus’s attendants. These rustic episodes eventually acquired a greater degree of literary refinement and included the dramatic performance of poetry by choruses called “tragoidoi.” In time, these dramatic entertainments came to include spoken portions, as well as serious plots inspired by the Dionysia’s commemoration of death and the renewal of life. Long after these performances had left the immediate context of religious ritual, they continued to explore matters of solemn import to the culture: the causes of suffering, the nature of guilt, and the absence of justice.

Left: Terracotta figurine of a theatrical mask representing Dionysus (between ca. 200 and ca. 1 BC); Right: The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens, Greece



CRITICAL INQUIRY

Ancient Greek plays typically include a chorus—but this “chorus” is not the same as the chorus in an opera. Spend a little time researching these two different meanings of the word chorus. How do they differ? How might they be the same?

Above: A scene from Andrei Serban’s 1974 production *Fragments of a Trilogy* (*Medea, Electra, and Trojan Women*)
KENN DUNCAN / NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Deep Dive

DRAMA IN A TRAGIC KEY

The genre of tragedy has been one of the most enduring artistic forms across history: With roots in Greek Attica (a region of Greece that includes Athens), it has inspired writers for more than 25 centuries. And despite continual transformations reflecting the shifting interests of the ages, tragedy has always emphasized topics of solemn import, involving the whole community in issues of moral and social consequence. This focus has resulted in recognizable qualities that have remained fairly consistent in works of tragic literature since the days of the first Greek tragedians.

A central aspect of any tragedy is the **tragic hero**, the protagonist of the story, who features these qualities and experiences:

High Character: Tragic heroes often possess an elevated position in society. But more important than their social status, tragic heroes exhibit goodness and virtue and face their destiny with courage and nobility of spirit.

Hamartia: A personal flaw, mistake in judgment, or misstep that leads to the tragic hero's change in fortune.

Hubris: An example of hamartia, hubris refers to the excessive pride of tragic heroes. It may lead them to break a moral law, ignore warnings, or aim beyond their station—all with disastrous results.

Anagnorisis: A moment of recognition, self-discovery, or sudden awareness of one's true situation on the part of the tragic hero.

Peripeteia: A sudden reversal of fortune for the tragic hero. This reversal often follows anagnorisis and starts the protagonist on the path toward destruction.

Catastrophe: The conclusion of a tragedy, with actions and events resulting from the climax of the play. The catastrophe ends the dramatic conflict and usually involves the death of the tragic hero, thereby offering a final demonstration of the hero's nobility of character and fulfilling the hero's unavoidable destiny.

Catharsis: The proper objective of tragedy, in the view of Aristotle: a beneficial purge of unhealthy emotions that restores a viewer's proper emotional balance. More specifically, watching tragic action unfold will cause the viewer to experience pity and fear; after the hero's downfall, the viewer can let go of these unhealthy feelings and enjoy a period of emotional relaxation.



Fragment from a marble sarcophagus with scenes from the Oresteia—a legend known especially from the Greek plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides from mid-2nd century CE.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



FUN FACT

Sophocles wrote more than 100 plays, but only seven are extant today.

Above: *The Remorse of Orestes or Orestes Pursued by the Furies* by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825)
CHRYSLER MUSEUM OF ART

Active Exploration

The following activities will help familiarize your students with the plot of *Elektra*, forge connections between a variety of classroom subjects, and encourage creative responses to the opera. They are designed to be accessible to a wide array of ages and experience levels.

“BLOOD WILL HAVE BLOOD”

Delve into the question of revenge. Have students read Sir Francis Bacon’s essay “On Revenge,” and then help them apply the ideas in the essay to *Elektra*. As they work through the opera’s story, invite them to consider: When (and under what conditions) may revenge be justified?

“WE’RE ALL MAD HERE”

Explore a variety of psychological theories, and then invite students to create a diagnostic examination of a character’s mental state by considering the character’s conflicts, dreams, desires, insecurities, and fears.

FAMILY MATTERS

Teach students about trauma and resiliency. Ask students to apply what they’ve learned to analyze the characters in *Elektra*, and then invite them to think more broadly about what makes a healthy basis for a person’s life.

MUSICAL CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Using a variety of analytic and close-listening techniques, help students explore three arias (“Allein! Weh, ganz allein,” “Ich kann nicht sitzen,” and “Wie stark du bist!”) and an orchestral passage (“Elektra!—Schweig, und tanze!”) from *Elektra*. Guide their analysis towards comparing and contrasting the music of Elektra and her sister, Chrysothemis, and then use their musical analysis to identify the sisters’ different perspectives, priorities, and motivations, as well as the state of their relationship.

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

These activities directly support the following ELA-Literacy Common Core Strands:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.11

Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama, aesthetically and philosophically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events, and situations.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.11c

Develop innovative perspectives on texts, including historical, cultural, sociological, and psychological contexts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1c

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives

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FUN FACT

In 1898, the Metropolitan Opera offered Strauss the position of principal conductor, at twice the salary of a rival offer from the Royal Court Opera in Berlin. Strauss turned down the Met in favor of Berlin’s more generous vacations and pensions. At the time, he wrote to his mother, “I shall still be able to graze in American pastures ten years from now, while at the moment it’s more important to make myself still better known in Europe.”

The original Metropolitan Opera House at Broadway and 39th Street
MET OPERA ARCHIVES