Elektra 2000

In her critical intervention with *Electra after Freud*, Jill Scott (a Germanist at Queen’s University in Ontario) investigates the continued cultural-revolutionary relevance of the Electra myth in our modern cultural consciousness. Through close literary analysis and feminist psychoanalytic criticism, Scott explores—using Julia Kristeva’s well-known formulation—the “revolt” staged by Electra against Oedipus in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German and Anglo-American drama, literature, and music. Situating the Electra myth across a matrix of complementary cultural texts and critical methodologies, she uncovers the heroine’s role in engendering new configurations of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity at the vicissitudes of death, hysteria, and mourning (p. 2).

In seven engaging chapters, the book analyzes—through some innovative research—key dramatic, literary, and musical adaptations of Electra in works by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Richard Strauss, Heiner Müller, Robert Musil, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), and Sylvia Plath.

Scott argues that Electra not only challenges the predominance of Oedipus in the western cultural imaginary, but also his privileged status as the paradigm of a singularly unified human subjectivity. Of course, Oedipus’s patriarchal position has endured within our collective cultural memory since ancient Greece; only since his discursive naturalization by Freudian psychoanalysis in the fin-de-siècle, though, has Oedipus’s cultural capital significantly increased. Scott convincingly shows that the mythological re/configuration of Electra in a variety of post-Freudian aesthetic texts, which are identified by their destruction of master signifiers, creates new gynocentric constellations of power/knowledge in society. Because Electra embodies dangerous ambiguity, sheer unpredictability, and unbridled sexuality, she is able to question—and subvert—dominant representations of women through her experimentations of radical femininity. Her capacity for anger and hatred, but also love and understanding (often occurring at the crossroads of misogyny and emancipation) never reduces Electra to an absolute archetype, but rather a polyvalent actor of feminine subjectivities: aggressor, mourner, survivor, and victim (p. 60). For those authors engaging Electra, she is a powerful constellation of “fragmented images and allusions, which [can be employed] to construct a plurality of subject positions” (p. 127).

With the first chapter, Scott begins her textual analysis of the myth with Austrian author Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s groundbreaking re/interpretation of the heroine’s matricide in his play *Elektra* (1903). Written during the ascent of psychoanalysis, this play serves as the catalyst for all subsequent adaptations of the myth. For Hofmannsthal, Electra is a powerful female protagonist, whose sexuality challenges the restrictive social codes of diseased and morbid women in fin-de-siècle Europe. The unexpected inclusion of Electra’s *Totentanz* (“Dance of Death”) in the play’s final act becomes both a triumphant affirmation and celebration of her corporeality, femininity, and matriarchy. Scott returns to *Elektra* in the third chapter, which focuses on the symptom of hysteria and its orchestration as a performative strat-
In H.D.'s poem cycle, “A Dead Priestess” constantly re/creates a maternally connoted femininity that might be re/imagined by a melodramatic, hermaphroditic bond uniting the novel's two central characters, Ulrich and Agathe, constructs a “revolutionary, sexual ethics” that destroys—in a manner analogous to Electra herself—oedipal subjectivity as the primary mode of self-identification in modernity. Scott's reading of the novel has the feeling of being analytically over-compensatory for the lack of explicit references to Electra. Nevertheless, her analysis is clearly a labor of love and could easily benefit from her very own monograph. In her final two chapters, Scott investigates the reincarnation of Electra in the works of Anglo-American poets H.D. and Sylvia Plath, whose mythopoetics appropriate the heroine as an “intricate web of hermetic allusions” that constantly re/creates a maternally connoted femininity. In H.D.'s poem cycle, “A Dead Priestess Speaks” (n.d.), for example, Electra banishes the hatred and violence associated with Oedipus to engage a “feminine politics of renewal” that is characterized by beauty, hope, and peace (p. 139). Likewise, in the Plath's poems, most notably "Daddy" (1966), the narrative voice assumes an Electra-like persona that uses language’s multi-referentiality to mourn and work through the loss of the dead father.

**Electra after Freud** is a fine scholarly work. Although not intended as a comprehensive overview of the Electra myth in modernity, it nevertheless offers a fascinating insight into how literature, psychoanalysis, and cultural politics contribute to the poetic re/invention of Electra. Scott’s readings of the above texts are persuasive, and her scholarship is distinguished by its careful textual analysis, astute ideological critique, and graceful prose style that is free of jargon. Even though her characterizations of Freud as egomaniacal are occasionally unfair, Scott’s discussions of Electra’s mythopoetic powers actively participate in the ongoing feminist re/assessment of Freudian psychoanalysis. Thus, her readings of Electra’s polyvalent femininity, through the critiques of Luce Irigaray, Melanie Klein, and Kristeva, provide a kind of maternal antidote to Freud’s wilder speculations on sexual difference. In this re/appraisal, however, Scott retains her critical distance and refuses to mythologize Electra as the messianic heroine of the new millennium.

As a reflection on the suitability of theoretical paradigms for cultural analysis, the significance of Scott’s monograph also resides in its investigation of psychoanalysis’s impact on modernist drama, literature, and music. Published on the eve of Freud’s 150th birthday, *Electra after Freud* re/affirms the actuality of psychoanalysis as a provocative literary-metaphorical method of interpretation (among its other possible uses). In reading cultural texts alongside psychoanalytic theory, Scott clearly illustrates how myth participates in the “cultural and ideological implications surrounding the pathologization of human behavior” (p. 57). That is to say, psychoanalytic criticism—when coupled with the analytical approach of cultural studies—remains a powerful explanatory tool for understanding the desires, hopes, and wishes surrounding the social construction of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity. To help accomplish this task, then, Scott calls on us to unlock Electra’s “potential energy in radical [new] ways” (p. 17).