SOPHOCLES AND ELEKTRA

Elektra may have been written in about 413 or 412 B.C. Thousands of revolutions of the earth around the sun have occurred between its first performance and tonight’s, and we still grapple with the major issues of the play: How do we regard a community where the punishers are as brutal as those they punish? If a civilized society endorses personal vengeance, can we call it civilized? What constitutes heroic behavior?

Aeschylus explored these questions in the Oresteia trilogy, the second part of which, The Libation Bearers, is an earlier telling of the Elektra story. Taken as a whole, the Oresteia is a mythic account of the founding of the Athenian system of justice meant to supplant vendetta. The Oresteia was perhaps an expression of optimism, a hope that Athens might yet live up to its self-assigned position as the world’s most civilized state.

Euripides’ more skeptical Elektra, written perhaps forty years after Aeschylus, depicts a brother and sister muddling through to a bloody conclusion ordered by a god, in addition to questioning Apollo’s wisdom in commanding Orestes to murder his mother. Sophocles’ Elektra, probably written a few years later, has at its center a daughter whose implacable demand for vengeance makes her look remarkably like her revenge-bent mother, suggesting that the rational society of Aeschylus’s masterpiece remained a long way off. Blood still demanded blood.

The stories that Athenian playwrights told were enduring and known to all; what was new was the way each treated familiar material. The Athenian audience could see in Sophocles’ play a reference to Euripides and Aeschylus. They also had images of Orestes from the Odyssey, in which he was depicted as a glorious hero. In Sophocles’ Elektra, the audience saw an Orestes who was certain that he would gain greater glory through matricide. This isn’t surprising: Sophocles, who was also an admired general, had seen on the battlefield the kind of brutality that men with weapons inflict on other human beings.
Athens was a violent, militaristic society, but it was also a democracy whose citizens relished a good debate. They witnessed *Elektra* as both a story and an argument about what it meant to be civilized. They saw images of a society that referred to everyone else as barbarians, but which itself remained seriously flawed. Combining stark drama, intense emotion, and rational argument, *Elektra* reminded Athenians that personal vengeance wasn’t merely personal: the play takes place in front of the royal palace of Mycenae, a public space where the personal becomes a matter of civic concern.

In Timberlake Wertenbaker’s new version, the word *now* appears seventy-nine times in seventy-five pages. After more than two millennia, *Elektra* challenges us to look clearly at our own attitudes toward justice and right and wrong, provoking us to ask ourselves, What now?

—Michael Paller, *Dramaturge*