



The Pathology of Revenge

Diagnosing Elektra with Dr. Carol Pierce-Davis

Carol Pierce-Davis, Ph.D. is an Austin psychologist and an avid fan of the opera. She has been in private practice for twenty-seven years, the last sixteen in Austin, Texas. While identifying herself as a Jungian Existentialist, she employs reality-based cognitive psychotherapy with clients who are depressed and/or anxious. Additionally, she is a Board Certified Fellow in Psychopharmacology and Serious Mental Illness.

Dr. Pierce-Davis was interviewed by Chuck Lutke, author of the Austin Lyric Opera's newsletter, *The Opera Insider*, in anticipation of the opening of Richard Strauss' *Elektra*, January 8, 2005.

What makes Elektra one of your favorite operas?

Two reasons. I love opera and I am a psychologist. My profession attracts me to matters of depth and complexity and opera epitomizes both. For example, opera is the only art form that presents a *universe* of art forms simultaneously. In opera you have poetry of the libretto, orchestral and vocal music in solos, ensembles, and chorus, sets, costumes, lighting, movement – all going on at the same time! Opera fans return to see the same opera again and again because there is so much to experience that once is not enough. Each and every time we return, we learn more about the music, the drama, and more about ourselves, particularly with a production like *Elektra*.

Obviously, as a psychologist, I'm intrigued with how Elektra's psychosexual development is played out in the story – what happens when it is arrested and how it becomes so malignant. Secondly, the opera has profound things to say to us about the

pathology of revenge. I have always contended that classical Greek authors and philosophers were our first anger management specialists, probing deeply into what happens when anger overpowers reason. And no where is this more evident than in the most dangerous and insidious form of anger that we see consuming Elektra – righteous anger.



What is the Elektra Complex?

According to Sigmund Freud, the Oedipal process – and I really prefer the term “process” as opposed to conflict or complex – occurs when, at a certain stage of development, little boys become very attached to their mothers and subconsciously seek to get rid of their fathers so they can marry their mothers. Every parent of a son has seen some version of this. The parallel for girls, the Elektra process, is based on Freud’s theory that little girls subconsciously believe they once had a penis and lost it. The attachment to their fathers makes them desire to have a child by the father in order to regain the penis. Remember that Freud was a neurologist and his theories were centered on the body, basic human drives and instincts. Later theorists revised the concept of the Elektra process -- minus penis envy -- as that time in a little girl’s life when she is very attached to Daddy, wants to marry him and take care of him, and sees mother as a rival for his affection.

In healthy families little boys and girls grow up to realize that they are not going to marry their mother or father. Instead they observe how lovingly daddy treats mommy and how lovingly mommy treats daddy. They then identify with the same-sex parent in order to win the other parent’s love. The little girl thinks, “Daddy loves Mommy, so if I act just like Mommy, he (and later, boys who are like him) will love me.” Or, as in little boys’ situation, “If Daddy discovers that I want to get rid of him and marry mommy, he will kill me. So I will act just like him, and he won’t hurt me and mommy will love me like she loves daddy.” These thoughts reduce his anxiety, and allow the little boy to grow up and “find a girl just like the one that married dear old dad.” In a healthy, happy family, this is a positive and seamless process.

And in unhealthy families?

It does not work well. In an unhealthy family where parents are not getting along as husband and wife, they frequently use children against each other. They may use the attachment I described to build an alliance against the other parent, criticizing and degrading him or her. The developing child can then become fixated on the opposite sex parent, rejecting the same sex parent which means ultimately rejecting and despising self. In less malignant situations, milder forms of fixation can occur. For example, I have

visited with young women who are still fixated on their fathers because they think mom is not taking good care of him. They will tell me, “She doesn’t cook very well, and she doesn’t clean house. So on the weekends, I go home and clean and cook for my father so he has something good to eat.”

How could Elektra have such a strong attachment to Agamemnon, knowing that he murdered her sister?

This is one of the complications that occur when a child is profoundly attached to a parent who is also abusive. Agamemnon was not a kind, loving father or a loyal husband. He was oppressive and controlling. He was the ultimate abuser in that he murdered his own daughter so he could have a little bit of good weather for his fleet to launch out on a mindless war. And yet, Elektra remains deeply attached to him. This is a perfect example of what we see in many abusive families. Children who have been abused and removed from their family want only one thing. They want to go back to their family.

Why would an adult do this?

Elektra is fixated, which means that instead of an adult relationship with her father, a relationship that would allow her to see him realistically, her relationship with him is “fixed” at a much younger and primitive age. Young children have an almost unquenchable love and capacity for forgiveness where their parents are concerned. Elektra automatically forgives and overlooks every evil thing Agamemnon did. He becomes her only love object! And then she witnesses his brutal murder at the hands of her mother and her mother’s lover. Elektra’s case was profoundly traumatic. She undoubtedly suffers from PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. And that’s why the conflict is so intense for her. As a young adult, she is locked up in cognitive dissonance reaching psychotic levels. How does one reconcile love and murder? Elektra cannot, so she cloaks herself in righteous anger – which is the most malignant form of anger that anyone can exercise. She shuts herself off from any other information that could help her entertain alternative perceptions of her family, and becomes obsessed with revenge.

She did transport her little brother, Orestes, out of that environment so he would not be influenced by it.

Yes, but then she goes back! She does not stay with her brother and build a new life. She chooses, instead, to go back to the palace to live like an animal and torment her mother. Later, Orestes will come back, but he doesn’t want his sister to know that he is alive. He knows that if he is found out, he will be expected to carry out still another act of revenge. I think he wants to stop the cycle and fears that he will not be able to do so if pressured by Elektra. He is correct. Once he reveals to his sister that he is alive, he succumbs to her pressure, and commits the murders. Why? Because Elektra convinces him that it is his obligation to exact revenge for their father’s death. He must do so out of loyalty to his father and to her. What is it that makes a family have undying loyalty for

another family member, no matter what? Look at the word we use to describe family ties: blood kin. They are my blood. He is my blood. And of course as this opera ends, Elektra and Orestes are covered in the blood of their family.

What's the purpose in Elektra's daily ritual of grieving for her father?

If you have a truly loving relationship with a person who dies, you go through a healthy grieving process with great sadness and tears. As time goes on, there's a gradual healing, a return to participation in life and happiness. What allows healing is the absorption of your loved one into your own psyche, into your identity. In a sense, that person comes to reside within you, allowing you to go on with life fortified with the qualities given you by him. Once you go down through this "death cycle," you come back up into new life, a better reality.

Elektra's daily mourning process was a reflection of the dysfunctional, conflicted relationship she had with her father. Instead of absorbing his strengths, and returning to life, she kept him "alive" and separate from herself in her hallucinations and delusions. She remained stuck in the death cycle. She dug herself in deeper and deeper by ritualistically mourning every day. It would be as though you had a horribly abusive father and, after he died, you spent every day for the next twenty years going to his gravesite.

I also think she did this to punish her mother, throwing her agony and madness into her mother's face day in and day out. And it worked as we see when Clytemnestra confesses her own nightmares and mental anguish. Clytemnestra suffers for the revenge she perpetrated on her husband. And Elektra suffers for the revenge she plots on her mother.

Do Elektra figures exist in modern society?

Sure they do. So do Clytemnestra and Agamemnon figures. We read newspaper accounts of abusive parents who kill their children, of children rising up and killing an abusive parent or an abused wife murdering her husband. We see less malignant forms of revenge in passive-aggressive individuals who do not address the target of their anger in a healthy, modulated, productive fashion. Rather, they become passive and sneaky in exacting their revenge, they get depressed, or they get crazy. Or they go to the aggressive pole, where they throw temper tantrums or go into rages, where they become abuse perpetrators themselves. The original issue is never addressed, and never resolved when revenge is the only option considered. Sound familiar to our plot?

How would you treat Elektra?

Therapeutically, I'd go with a multi-modal approach addressing physical, biochemical, psychological, and social well-being. The first thing I would do is call her family practice physician to schedule a complete physical exam. Here is a woman who has been living like an animal in the elements, suffering severe physical deprivation, inadequate diet, and disturbed sleep. Nutrition and sleep deficits have very powerful effects on the psyche. Her physician or health care professional will want to initiate immediately a

restorative diet, supplements and instruction in good sleep hygiene. Then I'd get her in with a psychiatrist for medication to treat her aggression, depression, hallucinations and delusions.

As her therapist, I'd start off with clear cognitive behavioral approaches. We would examine her irrational belief structures and try to do some cognitive restructuring of them. That would be just the beginning, however. Elektra will require long term in-depth, insight-oriented therapy to help her better understand herself, her mother and her father. We would work together to reduce her parents from being all-powerful archetypal figures in her life to finding acceptance of them as flawed human beings, and ultimately finding acceptance of herself as a free-standing individual.

I think that group support and therapy will be vitally important to her social reintegration. Remember, Elektra has lived like an animal outside the walls of the palace almost all her life. She would in all likelihood need instruction in hygiene, manners, and basic social skills before she would fit into society. Not to mention, basic education and job skills.

How long would it take before you would see any improvement?

You might begin to see some progress within a year. But I think Elektra – with all that she has seen, done, and lost – will be in for a lifetime of treatment. She is a tragic and always illuminating figure and I am looking forward to hearing the music and seeing her incredible drama played out again on the stage!

