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Of Words, Bloody Deeds, and Bestial Oblivion: Hamlet and Elektra

On July 17, 1904, Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote in his notebook: »Elektra« [...] Die Verwandtschaft und der Gegensatz zu Hamlet waren mir auffallend«. ¹ He reiterated the parallels in two letters to two different addressees, Christiane Thun-Salm (October 12, 1903) and Ernst Hladny (ca. 1909–1911), and in 1912 he wrote to Richard Strauss, whose opera based on the play had premiered in 1909, about the similarity between the two royal children: »[D]a sind alle Grundmotive identisch, und doch, wer denkt bei Elektra an Hamlet!« ² Indeed, comparing William Shakespeare's »Hamlet« (ca. 1600) and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's »Elektra« (1903) may not seem to be the most obvious task to undertake. At first glance, the English Renaissance humanism of »Hamlet« may appear utterly incompatible with the Viennese fin-de-siècle modernism of »Elektra«, but the parallels and similarities of the two plays far exceed the mere fact that both protagonists are children of murdered kings whose mothers pick their new lovers from among their relatives. In fact, I should like to suggest that »Elektra« is a direct response to »Hamlet«, and should be read as the modernist continuation of the humanist Prince of Denmark and his »antic disposition«. ³ This is particularly evident in the exploration of words and deeds – antagonists of one theme running through both plays – and the topic of forgetting and remembering. The affinities between »Hamlet« and »Elektra« have received surprisingly little scholarly notice, notwithstanding the fact that Hofmannsthal himself pointed out the literary kinship between the two title characters. In a letter to Anton Wildgans, dated February 14, 1921, Hofmannsthal owns the fact that he has been preoccupied, perhaps even obsessed, with this problem,

¹ SW XXXVIII Aufzeichnungen (Text), p. 477.

² BW Strauss (1970), p. 189.

³ William Shakespeare, Hamlet. In: The Norton Shakespeare. Ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York 1997, p. 1668–1756, here 1.5.173 (quotations list act, scene and line number).

das mich oft gequält u. beängstigt hat (schon im ›Tor und Tod‹, am stärksten in dem ›Brief‹ des Lord Chandos) [...]: wie kann der Sprechende noch handeln – da ja ein Sprechen schon Erkenntnis, also Aufhebung des Handelns ist – – mein persönlicher mich nicht loslassender Aspect der ewigen Antinomie von Sprechen und Tun, Erkennen u. Leben.⁴

Hofmannsthal's general preoccupation with and indebtedness to Shakespeare – whose collected works he owned and read in English besides having in his library various editions of numerous German translations – can be gleaned from his essays »Shakespeares Könige und große Herren« (1905) and »Shakespeare und wir« (1916), as well as from the various notes taken throughout his life. It is also discernible, for example, in the numerous references to blood in »Elektra«.⁵ Blood is a recurring motif especially in »Richard III«, but also in »Hamlet«, and again, its presence in »Elektra« is not surprising, for Hofmannsthal noted about the genesis of »Elektra«: »Der erste Einfall kam mir anfangs September 1901. Ich las damals [...] den *Richard III* und die *Elektra* von Sophokles. Sogleich verwandelte sich die Gestalt dieser Elektra in eine andere«.⁶ Even though this Elektra is completely unlike her ancient model, regarding the plot, the young Viennese playwright did not deviate much from his Greek source.

Hofmannsthal's »Elektra. Drama in einem Aufzug. Frei nach Sophokles« is a modern re-telling of the ancient Greek myth of the Atrean princess Electra, daughter of King Agamemnon, who, after his return from

⁴ SW XXXI Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, p. 296f.

⁵ One appalled critic at the play's premiere wrote: »Elektra schreit nach Blut, und sie schreit nicht allein aus Haß, sie scheint nach Blut zu schreien, weil sie das Blut liebt. [...] Blut, Blut – sie schwärmen alle vom Blut in dem Stücke« (Gotthart Wunberg, Hofmannsthal im Urteil seiner Kritiker: Dokumente zur Wirkungsgeschichte Hugo von Hofmannsthal in Deutschland. Frankfurt a.M. 1972, p. 116). This was corroborated by Fritz Engel, who postulated in the »Berliner Tageblatt« a day after »Elektra« premiered in Berlin: »Blutstimmung beherrscht von jetzt an alles« (Norbert Jaron et al. [Eds.], Berlin. Theater der Jahrhundertwende. Bühnengeschichte der Reichshauptstadt im Spiegel der Kritik [1889–1914]. Tübingen 1986, p. 531–542, here p. 533).

⁶ SW XXXVIII Aufzeichnungen (Text), p. 477. Richard III has his family killed off in order to become King. The fact that he has no scruples in murdering his own relatives makes his crime particularly heinous. Richard is described as a »bloody wretch« (William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of King Richard the Third. In: The Norton Shakespeare [see footnote 3], p. 507–600, here 5.8.5) who commits »bloody deed[s]« (ibid., 1.4.259) because he has a »bloody mind, / That never dream[']t on aught but butcheries« (ibid., 1.2.99f.). Elektra views her mother and Aegisth, and their bloody crime against her father Agamemnon in a similar way, but she has become the one who never dreams about anything but a bloody revenge – indeed, butchery of the cruellest kind.

the Trojan War, is slain during his bath by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover and accomplice Aegisthus, Agamemnon's cousin. Electra has devoted her life to the memory of her dead father and, along with her younger sister Chrysothemis, awaits the return of their brother Orestes, who has been raised outside of the Mycenaean palace. Electra needs Orestes' help to avenge their father's murder. The Queen lives in constant fear of her son's return and his retribution, which is indeed carried out in the end. While Sophocles' Electra simply (though somewhat unconvincingly) continues to live her life after her brother has killed their mother and Aegisthus, the modern Elektra, who is on stage from the first scene to the last, exults by dancing herself to death. This powerful exit allows Elektra to finally forget – an action she has deemed herself incapable of. The play is to a large extent about forgetting, and in it Hofmannsthal introduced his own discourse of forgetting, informed by Nietzsche's 1873 essay »Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben«⁷ and the animal encyclopaedia »Brehms Tierleben«, a staple in many German-speaking households at the time. Subtly affirming Nietzsche's claim that life is impossible without forgetting – »[E]s ist möglich, fast ohne Erinnerung zu leben, ja glücklich zu leben, wie das Thier zeigt; es ist aber ganz und gar unmöglich, ohne Vergessen überhaupt zu leben«⁸ –, Hofmannsthal maps animalistic characteristics, echoed in »Brehms Tierleben«, onto Elektra, showing that she, too, is both human and animal. The dichotomy between animal and human, and thus between forgetting and remembering, became for Hofmannsthal a matter of survival and loyalty that was absolutely central to his oeuvre.

Hofmannsthal developed his discourse of forgetting against a backdrop of a theoretical engagement with forgetting, especially in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, which slowly changed society's out-

⁷ In Hofmannsthal's 1906 edition of Nietzsche's collected works in ten volumes, this is the essay revealing the highest number of marginalia. Since the poet had a habit of recording the dates of reading particular works, we know that he read the essay before owning the 1906 edition in January of 1892. January 14, 1913 and January of 1915 mark subsequently noted readings of that essay. Before and in between those readings, he read other works by Nietzsche, as numerous letters and notes confirm. For a more detailed account of Nietzsche's influence on Hofmannsthal, see Hans-Jürgen Meyer-Wendt, *Der frühe Hofmannsthal und die Gedankenwelt Nietzsches*. Heidelberg 1973.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*. In: *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin 1967. Vol. III/1, p. 246.

look on forgetting as a mere human weakness. This negative view of forgetting had a very long history that can be traced back, at least in written records, to Homeric times. Many of the canonical authors since Homer, both ancient and modern, deal in some way with questions of remembering and forgetting, and while society's rememberers usually save the day, the importance of forgetting certain things is given some room, as in Dante's »Divine Comedy«, for example. The emergence and long-lasting embrace of an *ars memoriae*, or a system of mnemonics, said to have been invented by the Greek poet Simonides (ca. 556–467 BCE), according to Cicero, did not really allow for a positive view of forgetting, and it was a staple didactic tool that was used well into the Renaissance. Very few attempts were made to establish an »ars oblivionalis«, the art of forgetting, alongside the very popular art of memory or remembering, as for example by an anonymous author in a 1774 essay entitled »Untersuchung, ob und wie die Vergeßlichkeit zu befördern sey,« published in the »Neues Hamburgisches Magazin.« However, some two hundred years later, the Italian semiotician, literary critic, and novelist Umberto Eco dismissed the possibility of a teachable and learnable set of rules that could aid in forgetting, after establishing that mnemotechnics is a semiotics. He asserts that »it is not possible to construct arts of forgetting on [this] model, because a semiotics is by definition a mechanism that presents something to the mind and therefore a mechanism for producing *intentional acts*«. ⁹ While a formal »ars oblivionalis« may not exist, in the examples mentioned and elsewhere, forgetting is recognized not merely as a deficiency but also as something positive, something to be embraced, and even necessary in certain circumstances. This is a product of the early modern age, for up to that point remembering had been considered the superior activity, as certain values of a community, eternalized in specific traditions, rituals, rules and laws, were observed and passed on through acts of memory. It also secured an individual's identity, setting the necessary boundaries for the individual's place in society, which would be more advantageous if he or she were a

⁹ Umberto Eco, An ars oblivionalis? Forget it! In: PMLA 103, 1988, p. 254–261, here p. 259. While Eco's is the only recent attempt to show the impossibility of a prescriptive ars oblivionalis (opposing the »ars memoriae«) that I am aware of, there is a plethora of literary and philosophical examples, in which forgetting is induced by various means and practices. For an excellent overview of the role of forgetting in the literature and philosophy of the Western tradition through the ages, see Harald Weinrich, *Lethe. Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*. München 1997.

good rememberer and practitioner of the adopted traditions. With the shift from the theocentric scholasticism of the Middle Ages to the more anthropocentric humanism of the Renaissance came also a decline of the monastic and clerical monopoly on learning. The 15th century, marked by discoveries in many areas, produced the invention that would change the world, and diminish the need for an ›ars memoriae‹: Johannes Gutenberg's movable type printing press, which printed parts of the Vulgate between 1452 and 1454, had the power to fix on paper the visualization of various places in which to store different objects and words for memorization, and produce innumerable copies for expeditious and broad dissemination.

This very cursory outline of remembering and forgetting, and society's ways of dealing with these human activities, serves to situate ›Hamlet‹ and ›Elektra‹ in their particular cultural-historical moments, especially since remembering and forgetting are at the core of the two plays. Whereas Shakespeare wrote at a time when the consideration of forgetting as potentially positive was just emerging, Hofmannsthal had a history behind him that had witnessed the new focus on the human individual during the European Renaissance, the philosophical foundations of the Enlightenment, and the 19th century development of historicism – among other things – as well as the resulting reflections concerning the individual's place and role in the history of humankind, which eventually led to more profound questions regarding forgetting and remembering.

As mentioned above, the topic of forgetting and remembering, the related problem of moving on and surviving versus loyalty and human dignity, as well as the question of the definition of humanity that accompanies it, were central to Hofmannsthal's life and œuvre: ›Man hat mir nachgewiesen, daß ich mein ganzes Leben lang über das ewige Geheimnis dieses Widerspruches mich zu erstaunen nicht aufhöre‹.¹⁰ It can be traced in most of his plays, and especially in the libretti he wrote for Richard Strauss (›Ariadne auf Naxos« [1912], ›Die Frau ohne Schatten« [1919], and ›Die Ägyptische Helena« [1928]), which also tend to revolve around female characters, and more subtly, but no less significantly, it is also at the heart of ›Ein Brief‹. In ›Elektra‹ this issue is personified in the characters of Chrysothemis and her older sister Elektra, as the following

¹⁰ SW XXIV Operndichtungen 2, p. 205.

excerpt from a 1913 letter to Richard Strauss illustrates:

Verwandlung ist Leben des Lebens [...] Beharren ist Erstarren und Tod. Wer leben will, der muß über sich selber hinwegkommen, muß sich verwandeln: er muß vergessen. Und dennoch ist ans Beharren, ans Nichtvergessen, an die Treue alle menschliche Würde geknüpft. [...] Chrysothemis wollte leben, weiter nichts; und sie wußte, daß, wer leben will, vergessen muß. Elektra vergißt nicht. Wie hätten sich die beiden Schwestern verstehen können? [...] Für Elektra blieb nichts als der Tod [...].¹¹

There are several objects of forgetting in the play affecting various characters: (1) individual and communal pasts and deeds; (2) the self; (3) a specific societal order, duties and rights; and (4) the present and its reality. Forgetting and remembering are addressed in three major ways:

(1) Language serves the purpose of constant reminding and remembering, and it is through language that Chrysothemis broaches the topic of forgetting with her sister, although in the course of the play, language turns out to be an increasingly inadequate means of (self-)expression.

(2) Elektra's deed, which consists not in killing Klytämnestra and Aegisth, but in the performance of a nameless dance, allows her to forget triumphantly all that she has been remembering so mercilessly; with the execution of the long-awaited matricide by her brother Orest her existence becomes redundant.

(3) The extensive use of animal imagery implies the characters', and especially Elektra's, forgetfulness. Despite her expressed contempt for animals, she is the one who acts most like an animal, since as a result of her pathological remembering, she has forgotten (how) to be human. Animal imagery as a marker of forgetting is used throughout the play, frequently intersecting with the other categories, bearing with it the subcategory of sexuality, alluded to in many different places.

The objects of forgetting in Hamlet are the same as in Elektra, as are the ways in which forgetting and remembering are addressed, namely through language, deeds, and references to animals. Allusions and direct references to words or speech and deeds or acts are central to the Bard's play and the characters' interactions with each other. The relationship between, and more often than not, the incongruence of words and deeds, is at the forefront. Hamlet, the young scholar at the University of Wit-

¹¹ Ibid.

tenberg, is a wordsmith, not a sword wielder, though not all words he uses are created equal. Herein may lie one of the reasons for Hamlet's much pondered lack of action: while his father is described as a man of battle, and even his ghost appears »in complete armour, holding a truncheon, with his beaver up«¹² – Horatio remembers King Hamlet wearing that same armour »when he th'ambitious Norway combated«¹³ – Prince Hamlet can only »unpack [his] heart with words«,¹⁴ as he laments while explicating his plan to use the play he calls »The Mousetrap« as »the thing / Wherein [he]'ll catch the conscience of the King«. ¹⁵ Hamlet is full of words, which he tends to reserve for his soliloquies, since he has to »hold [his] tongue«¹⁶ and cannot say what he wants to in public, as we learn in his first soliloquy after his mother Gertrude's wedding to his uncle Claudius. In act 2, he scolds himself for being

[a] dull and muddy-mettled rascal [who] peak[s]
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of [his] cause,
And can say nothing.¹⁷

Even though he has established in 1.5 that his father's spirit is »an honest ghost«,¹⁸ he hesitates to fulfill »th'important acting of [his] dread command«,¹⁹ apparently looking for more proof, at which point he devises »The Mousetrap.« The actors do what Hamlet tells them to, but what he cannot do himself, namely to »suit the action to the word, [and] the word to the action«. ²⁰ Only after the performance of »The Mousetrap« is Hamlet ready to »take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound«, ²¹ and to truly start considering taking action. The opportunity to do so presents itself moments later, in the very next scene.

As Claudius attempts to pray, confirming to the audience the fratricide the Ghost has charged him with, Hamlet sneaks up behind him, drawing his sword. But he changes his mind when it occurs to him that he would

¹² Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (see footnote 3), 1.1.37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.1.60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.2.563.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.2.582.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.2.158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.2.544–546.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.5.142.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.4.98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.2.16f.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.2.263f.

be sending him to heaven, that »this is hire and salary, not revenge!«,²² if he took him »in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage«,²³ while his dear father had been taken »grossly, full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May«. ²⁴ Immediately following this scene, Hamlet has been summoned to his mother's private chamber. As he prepares himself to »set up a glass, / Where [she] may see the inmost part of [herself]«, ²⁵ he has to remind himself of the Ghost's command to spare his mother, for the thought of killing her seems to enter his mind, when he tells himself:

O heart, lose not thy nature! Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.²⁶

The very next line betrays him to be a man of words as opposed to one of action yet again: »I will speak daggers to her, but use none«. ²⁷ Although his unplanned murder of Polonius is an action, it is not the right action, namely the conscious fulfillment of the Ghost's command, and therefore falls into a different category. His words, on the other hand, achieve the desired effect, when Hamlet lists his mother's offenses against his father, which all revolve around the sexual relationship between her and her brother-in-law. ²⁸ Gertrude pleads with her son to stop talking: »Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul«, ²⁹ since »these words like daggers enter in mine ears«. ³⁰ One of the most important references to words occurs after Ham-

²² Ibid., 3.3.79.

²³ Ibid., 3.3.85.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.3.80f.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.4.19f.

²⁶ Ibid., 3.3.363–365.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.3.366.

²⁸ Hamlet cannot believe the speed of Gertrude's marriage to Claudius: »But two months dead – nay, not so much, not two [...] my mother [...] married with mine uncle [...]. O most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!« (Ibid., 1.2.138, 140, 151, 156) The Ghost feels similarly, telling his son: »Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest« (ibid., 1.5.82f.). The »incestuous sheets« correspond to the royal bed Klytämnestra shares with her lover Aegisth; Elektra, talking to her father's spirit, refers to his murder at the hand of »dein Weib und der mit ihr in einem Bette, / in deinem königlichen Bette schläft« (SW VII Dramen 5, p. 61–110, here p. 66). The fact that Aegisth is the product of an even more disturbing incestuous union between his sister Pelopia and his father Thyestes only amplifies the offense.

²⁹ Shakespeare, Hamlet (see footnote 3), 3.4.79.

³⁰ Ibid., 3.4.85.

let's initial encounter with the Ghost, who leaves with the farewell »Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me«. ³¹ Hamlet passionately exclaims:

Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmixed with baser matter. ³²

As we know, he does not quite keep this promise, and the Ghost appears again, this time in Gertrude's chamber, only visible to Hamlet, to tell his »tardy son [...] [who] lapsed in time and passion«. ³³ »Do not forget«, ³⁴ despite the fact that the Ghost's command is Hamlet's »word,« as he calls it, probably meaning his watchword. Not all words out of Hamlet's mouth are this pregnant with meaning, however, though always used to achieve a certain effect. When asked, for example, by Polonius at one point, what he is reading, Hamlet flings at him: »Words, words, words«, ³⁵ rendering them rather hollow. Following his conversation with the Ghost, Hamlet hides behind »wild and whirling words«, ³⁶ perhaps out of confusion and shock, but his fellow student Horatio demands clarity, which Hamlet usually exhibits, as well as a penchant for quibbling, a trait upheld in Elektra's character.

Hofmannsthal maintained the focus on the polyvalent nature of words, and uses especially the exchange between Elektra and Klytämnestra as a forum to present their different facets. As Jill Scott suggests, the rhetorical cat-and-mouse game Elektra plays with her mother can be seen as a psychoanalytic session, in which Elektra is the doctor, and her mother the patient. ³⁷ Desiring a diagnosis and a prescription for her guilty con-

³¹ Ibid., 1.5.91.

³² Ibid., 1.5.95–104.

³³ Ibid., 3.4.97f.

³⁴ Ibid., 3.4.100.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.2.192.

³⁶ Ibid., 1.5.137.

³⁷ See Jill Scott, *Electra after Freud: Myth and Culture*. Ithaca 2005, p. 61, 71.

science, the Queen opens up to Elektra, postulating: »Sie redet wie ein Arzt«. ³⁸ This, in turn, leads Klytämnestra to suspect the cure in words: »[D]u hast Worte. / Du könntest vieles sagen, was mir nützt«. ³⁹ This confirms the young Hofmannsthal's observation: »[F]ür gewöhnlich stehen nicht die Worte in der Gewalt der Menschen, sondern die Menschen in der Gewalt der Worte«. ⁴⁰ Therefore, he would vehemently disagree with Elektra's mother, when she quickly adds to her previous two sentences: »Wenn auch ein Wort nichts weiter ist«. ⁴¹ Hofmannsthal believes that »in [Sprache] redet Vergangenes zu uns«, ⁴² for »[w]enn wir den Mund aufmachen, reden immer zehntausend Tote mit«. ⁴³ Indeed, Elektra's words refer mostly to the past and to the future via the past. The right word is so important to Klytämnestra that she even threatens her daughter:

[A]us dir
bring' ich so oder so das rechte Wort
schon an den Tag[,] ⁴⁴

and again a little later:

Sagst du's nicht
im Freien, wirst du's an der Kette sagen.
Sagst du's nicht satt, so sagst du's hungernd. ⁴⁵

The entire conversation between mother and daughter is laden with references to words and the activity of speaking or lack thereof. Variations of the words »Wort« and »reden« appear eighteen times, »sagen« sixteen times, »schreien« six times, and related words, such as »sprechen«, »hören«, and »schweigen« appear throughout. Words and their inadequacy are at the heart of Hofmannsthal's 1902 »Ein Brief«, which he wrote while conceiving of »Elektra«, and which describes a crisis of language and identity not only experienced by the fictional penman Lord Chandos, but also by many literati, intellectuals, and artists at the

³⁸ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 75.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

⁴⁰ GW RA I, p. 480.

⁴¹ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 79.

⁴² GW RA III, p. 24.

⁴³ GW RA I, p. 480.

⁴⁴ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 84f.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

time. Klytämnestra is the perfect representative of this crisis, since she both believes in the power of the word and negates it at the same time; all the while holding on to it, in hope that it will bring her the desired relief from her nightmares. Elektra incessantly refers to Klytämnestra's deed, who in turn tries to distance herself from it:

Unsre Taten! Taten! Wir und Taten!
Was das für Worte sind. Bin ich noch,
die es getan? Und wenn! getan, getan!
Getan! was wirfst du mir da für ein Wort
in meine Zähne!⁴⁶

The repetition of these words renders them meaningless, and Klytämnestra experiences Lord Chandos' crisis, while at the same time devaluing deeds in general. In Hofmannsthal's play on the contrast, and indeed, the battle between words and deeds echoes ironically Hamlet's answer to Polonius when asked about what he is reading, namely »[w]ords, words, words«.⁴⁷ Klytämnestra has buried the memory of her »heavy deed«⁴⁸ – just as Claudius tries to do – and is unwilling to think about it: »Davon will ich nichts hören«.⁴⁹ But Elektra is more than willing to do the digging for her mother: »Nein, die dazwischen liegt, die Arbeit, / die tat das Beil allein«.⁵⁰ Again, Klytämnestra dissociates herself from the deed and only considers the words: »Wie du die Worte / hineinbringst«.⁵¹

While working on *Elektra*, Hofmannsthal asked his friend Hermann Bahr: »Können Sie mir eventuell nur für einige Tage das [merkwür-

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (see footnote 3), 2.2.192. Both instances express the meaninglessness of words. This is also the starting point for Lord Chandos in »Ein Brief«, in which the inadequacy of language is lamented rather eloquently: »Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen. [...] die abstrakten Worte, deren sich doch die Zunge naturgemäß bedienen muß, um irgendwelches Urteil an den Tag zu geben, zerfielen mir im Munde wie modrige Pilze« (SW XXXI *Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe*, p. 45–55, here p. 48f.). In Hofmannsthal's source text, Sophocles' »Electra«, this is also a topic for discussion between mother and daughter. After Electra has explained to her mother that her lack of respect for her is justified, Clytemnestra is outraged: »I and my words and deeds, / give you too much talk.« Electra responds: »It is you who talk, not I. It is your deeds, / and it is deeds invent the words« (Sophocles, *Electra*. In: *The Complete Greek Tragedies*. Sophocles II. Ed. by David Grene und Richmond Lattimore. Washington Square 1968, p. 129–196, here lines 622–625).

⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (see footnote 3), 4.1.12.

⁴⁹ SW VII *Dramen* 5, p. 83.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵¹ Ibid.

dige] Buch [...] über Heilung der Hysterie durch Freimachen einer unterdrückten Erinnerung [von den Doktoren Breuer und Freud] leihen (schicken?)«. ⁵² In »Studien über Hysterie«, Freud and Breuer noted the relationship between deed and language: »[I]n der Sprache findet der Mensch ein Surrogat für die Tat, mit dessen Hilfe der Affekt nahezu ebenso »abreagiert« werden kann«. ⁵³ Since Klytämnestra lacks the words, she has to re-live the horrors of her crime in her nightmares, for which the word-strong Elektra readily provides the language. Although the fin-de-siècle discourse of repression can certainly explain elements of Klytämnestra's behavior and ailments, another important source can be found in Robert Burton's 1621 »The Anatomy of Melancholy«, of which Hofmannsthal owned a copy. A few passages seem to have directly informed the depiction of Klytämnestra's strange demeanor, which may well be a manifestation of melancholy. The fact that she cannot find the right words could be indicative of a melancholic condition, according to Burton, who observes that »[m]any of them cannot tell how to express themselves in words, or how it holds them, what ails them, you cannot understand them, or well tell what to make of their sayings«. ⁵⁴ Klytämnestra's self-loss – »[I]ch weiß / auf einmal nicht mehr, wer ich bin« ⁵⁵ – may also be explained by melancholy, for people afflicted with this disease »do not attend, or much intend that business they are about, but forget themselves what they are saying, doing, or should otherwise say or do, whither they are going«. ⁵⁶ Most importantly, the Queen's fears can be elucidated, for Burton notes: »Fear and Sorrow [...] are most assured signs, inseparable companions, and characters of melancholy«. ⁵⁷ One of the causes of Klytämnestra's nightmares is clearly her fear of her son's vengeful return to Mycenae. Sorrow would most likely be present if Hofmannsthal was not at the same time employing the discourse of

⁵² B II, p. 142 and 384.

⁵³ Josef Breuer/Sigmund Freud, Studien über Hysterie. Frankfurt a.M. 1995, p. 87.

⁵⁴ Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy. New York 1955, p. 354. This is also a symptom of the hysteric. Freud and Breuer's famous patient Anna O. is reported to have lost her language: »Zuerst beobachtete man, dass ihr Worte fehlten, allmählich nahm das zu. [...] In weiterer Entwicklung fehlten ihr auch die Worte fast ganz, sie suchte dieselben mühsam aus 4 oder 5 Sprachen zusammen und war dabei kaum mehr verständlich« (Breuer/Freud, Studien [see footnote 53], p. 18).

⁵⁵ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 79.

⁵⁶ Burton, Melancholy (see footnote 54), p. 335.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 327.

repression. Remorse is probably what initially caused her to repress the past and her own involvement in her husband's murder. The fact that Klytämnestra usually surrounds herself with an entourage and torches may be indicative of a fear that »every black dog or cat [s]he sees [s]he suspects to be a Devil, every person comes near [her] is maleficated, every creature, all intend to hurt [her], seek [her] ruin«.⁵⁸ This could explain why she likens her perceived enemies, namely her children, to dogs and cats. Klytämnestra's pallor is another sign of melancholy,⁵⁹ and she shares other symptoms of the ailment, such as »troublesome sleep, terrible dreams in the night, a foolish kind of bashfulness to some, perverse conceits and opinions, dejection of mind, much discontent, preposterous judgement. They are apt to loathe, dislike, disdain, to be weary of every object [...]«.⁶⁰ In addition to matters of diet – »[D]arauf kommt vieles an. [...] Und ob man satt ist, oder nüchtern«⁶¹ – the talismans, too, that are supposed to protect her from evils and nightmares – »[E]s wohnt in jedem / ganz sicher eine Kraft«⁶² – are known as a cure for melancholy. »[I]f hung about the neck, or taken in drink«, then »Precious Stones, Metals, Minerals, [and] Alteratives« can have healing powers.⁶³ These examples, of which there are more to be found, revealing Hofmannsthal's reliance on Burton's work, establish yet another link to »Hamlet«, and to Shakespeare and his time more generally, whose works at times alluded to current theories of the humor.

Regarding the relationship between words and forgetting, one further observation should be made. As language serves to remind and aid in remembering, and both Hamlet and Elektra constantly employ language to this purpose, a brief etymological excursion will illustrate the connection to forgetting. In his »Theogony«, Hesiod opposes Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, to Lethe, goddess of forgetting. Lethe is one of the five rivers of the underworld, of which the dead souls drank in order to forget the pains and horrors of their lives past. Central in classical literature's depictions of the afterlife, the Ghost refers to Lethe when he first tells Hamlet about Claudius' fratricide. After Hamlet demands:

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 328.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 340.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 354.

⁶¹ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 78.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Burton, *Melancholy* (see footnote 54), p. 567.

Haste, haste me to know it, that with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge[.]⁶⁴

the Ghost replies:

I find thee apt,
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That rots itself in ease on Lethe's wharf
Wouldst thou not stir in this.⁶⁵

The corresponding verb to Lethe is ›lethargeo‹, meaning ›to forget,‹ and the noun derived from it is ›lethargia‹, ›drowsiness.‹ Another word bears the stem ›leth-‹, namely ›aletheia‹, meaning ›truth, opposing lie or mere appearance.‹⁶⁶ The ›a-‹ in ›aletheia‹ is a negating prefix, and one could read truth as that which should not be or has not been forgotten, and indeed, truth and memory were linked for a long time (the passing down of rituals and traditions from one generation to the next was a part of this). The Ghost passes to Hamlet the truth, embodying memory, which is encapsulated in his watchword ›Adieu, adieu [...] Remember me.‹ The Judeo-Christian foundation of the play is obvious – Shaheen lists 98 biblical references⁶⁷ – and while ›adieu‹ literally means ›to God,‹ there is another, more covert, allusion to God and the Bible, hiding in the ›word‹, or the ›logos‹. John 1.1 reads ›In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God‹, and later the word is given a name: ›Thy word is truth‹ (17.17).⁶⁸ While the link between word and truth is still strong in ›Hamlet‹ – as Hamlet is dying he commands Horatio to tell his story ›to th' yet unknowing world‹,⁶⁹ and his friend

⁶⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (see footnote 3), 1.5.29–31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.5.32–34.

⁶⁶ Henry George Liddell/Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford 1996, p. 63. Martin Heidegger offered an alternative translation, or rather, a more thorough ›unpacking‹ of the Greek as ›die Unverborgenheit des Seienden‹ (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*. Stuttgart 1960, p. 33). In 1954, he wrote an essay on the Heraclitian fragment concerning the concept: ›Aletheia (Heraklit, Fragment 16)‹ (in: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Frankfurt a.M. 2000, p. 263–288). §44: ›Dasein, Erschlossenheit und Wahrheit‹, of ›Sein und Zeit‹ also deals with it. In his reading, the act of forgetting is an act of concealing, or ›Verborgen-machen‹.

⁶⁷ See Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Newcastle/London 1987.

⁶⁸ In the koine Greek of the New Testament, this ›truth‹ is *aletheia*: ›ὁ λόγος ὁ σὸς ἀλήθεια ἐστίν‹.

⁶⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (see footnote 3), 5.2.323.

promises to »truly deliver«⁷⁰ the events that have taken place – in »Elektra«, where Hofmannsthal presents a world devoid of gods, the belief in truth has all but disappeared, as Klytämnestra asserts:

Was die Wahrheit ist,
das bringt kein Mensch heraus. Niemand auf Erden
weiß über irgend ein verborgnes Ding
die Wahrheit.⁷¹

Both protagonists recognize and express the limitation, or the increasing inadequacy, of words just before their respective deaths. Hamlet's famous last words »The rest is silence«⁷² echo not only in the final stage direction of »Elektra«: »Stille. Vorhang«,⁷³ but also in Elektra's conviction that »zu sprechen ist nichts«,⁷⁴ and in her final command to Chrysothemis: »Schweig, und tanze«.⁷⁵ Once their fathers' murders have been avenged, both have lost their reason to exist, and both can and do forget, which is also in accord with Nietzsche, who writes: »[D]er Tod [bringt] das ersehnte Vergessen«.⁷⁶

With all the talk of bloody deeds and unnatural acts in both »Hamlet« and »Elektra«, one must consider the lack of the two protagonists' action with respect to the task at hand. Both have apparently committed themselves to the memories of their slain fathers.⁷⁷ Hamlet swears that the Ghost's »commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of [his] brain«,⁷⁸ and Elektra lives only in anticipation of the action that she will not even perform, in the process having given up her femininity, which she has replaced with hatred, and having lost her regal status, clad in rags, sleeping and eating with the palace's dogs. According to Nietzsche, »[z]u allem Handeln gehört Vergessen«,⁷⁹ which

⁷⁰ Ibid., 5.2.329.

⁷¹ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 77.

⁷² Shakespeare, Hamlet (see footnote 3), 5.2.300.

⁷³ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 110.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 91.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

⁷⁶ Nietzsche, Vom Nutzen und Nachteil (see footnote 8). Vol. III/1, p. 245.

⁷⁷ Both are also tortured by obsessive recollections of their fathers: Hamlet wonders in his first soliloquy: »Heaven and earth, / Must I remember?« (Shakespeare, Hamlet [see footnote 3], 1.2.142f.), and Elektra has »ihre Stunde« (SW VII Dramen 5, p. 66), the hour of Agamemnon's murder, which she observes ritualistically.

⁷⁸ Shakespeare, Hamlet (see footnote 3), 1.5.102f.

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, Vom Nutzen und Nachteil (see footnote 8). Vol. III/1, p. 246.

explains why Elektra, who consciously tries not to forget, cannot kill her mother and Aegisth. The same may be true for Hamlet to a certain degree, and Nietzsche himself draws the comparison to the Danish prince: »Die Erkenntnis tötet das Handeln, zum Handeln gehört das Umschleiertsein durch die Illusion – das ist die Hamletlehre«. ⁸⁰ While Hamlet's inaction, I maintain, is due, in part, to the double-bind enjoined on him by his murdered father's ghost – to avenge his murder while sparing Gertrude's life – Elektra's stems from within herself and her pathological remembering. Another contributing factor to Hamlet's idleness may be found in what Ross Poole calls »his refusal of the political. Insofar as he recasts the demand of the past in purely personal terms, he makes them impossible to satisfy«. ⁸¹ »Impossible« is also the word that Goethe puts into Wilhelm Meister's mouth, as he explains his reading of the tragedy of the Danish prince. Wilhelm believes, »daß Shakespeare habe schildern wollen: eine große Tat auf eine Seele gelegt, die der Tat nicht gewachsen ist,« and he continues:

Das Unmögliche wird von ihm gefordert, nicht das Unmögliche an sich, sondern das, was ihm unmöglich ist. Wie er sich windet, dreht, ängstigt, vor und zurück tritt, immer erinnert wird: sich immer erinnert und zuletzt fast seinen Zweck aus dem Sinne verliert, ohne doch jemals wieder froh zu werden. ⁸²

Perhaps the impossible for Hamlet stems from his neglect of his political and public roles, referring only once to his father as »my king,« rather than »my father,« at the same time complaining that Claudius »popped in between th'election and my hopes«. ⁸³ This occurs after his abortive trip to England, and something has indeed changed by the time he is back in Denmark in act 5, when he no longer displays any outward signs of

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*. In: *Werke* (see footnote 8). Vol. III/1, p. 53.

⁸¹ Ross Poole, *Two Ghosts and an Angel: Memory and Forgetting in Hamlet, Beloved, and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. In: *Constellations* 16.1, 2009, p. 125–149, here p. 131.

⁸² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. München 1977, p. 263f. For Stephen Greenblatt, arguably one of the most eminent Shakespeare interpreters of our time, Goethe's reading is »probably the most influential of all readings of *Hamlet*« (*Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton 2001, p. 229). This statement may also acknowledge and reflect the significance of Goethe's Shakespeare reception within German literary history. While Hofmannsthal may not necessarily have read »Hamlet« in the same way as Goethe, his deep appreciation for Goethe's thoughts and works, as well as Shakespeare's, is evident throughout his life, beginning with the musings of the sixteen-year-old in his »Aufzeichnungen,« and maturing in his various »Reden und Aufsätze«.

⁸³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (see footnote 3), 5.2.66.

melancholic brooding, but instead assumes his regal persona, proclaiming »This is I, / Hamlet the Dane«⁸⁴ at Ophelia's grave, as he is about to leap into it after her brother Laertes. Even though he had proclaimed in his last great soliloquy, dropped from the play's folio version, before his departure: »O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!«,⁸⁵ it seems that yet again, other people's actions entangle him, arresting his own endeavors in fulfillment of the Ghost's command: Ophelia has drowned (perhaps herself), and Claudius and Laertes have plotted to have Hamlet killed in the fencing match of the final scene. In its confused melee, the opportunity to do the deed finally presents itself to Hamlet, who seizes it, ensuring his success by not only stabbing Claudius with the envenomed sword that will kill Laertes and Hamlet himself in a moment, but by also forcing him to drink the remaining portion that has poisoned Gertrude. For all his words, Hamlet dies before he has the chance to tell any of the courtiers about the motives for these actions, and Horatio appears to be the only one who knows why Hamlet refers to Claudius as »murd'rous«.⁸⁶ As he is dying, he reverts to words again, addressing the bystanders:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time [...] O, I could tell you.⁸⁷

He then charges Horatio to »report [him] and [his] cause aright / To the unsatisfied«.⁸⁸

Elektra's deed consists in the performance of her strange and nameless dance before she dies. Whereas Hamlet's final action is very public and violent, Elektra does not even witness Orestes kill her mother and Aegisth; she only hears the effect of the murders. Afterward, the stage directions read: »Elektra hat sich erhoben. Sie schreitet von der Schwelle

⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.1.241f.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 4.4.9.55f.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 5.2.267.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 5.2.276–279. Hamlet cannot let the act speak for itself; he needs to contextualize or interpret it, by the power of his words. The pre-meditations of his various actions provide the reasoning for their justification, creating a proper context, within which Hamlet can carry them out. Elektra only ever »talks« about the act of final revenge, but has no hand in its execution.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 5.2.281f.

herunter. Sie hat den Kopf zurückgeworfen wie eine Mänade. Sie wirft die Kniee, sie reckt die Arme aus, es ist ein namenloser Tanz, in welchem sie nach vorwärts schreitet«. ⁸⁹ Since this ›danse macabre‹ is an extremely individualistic form of self-expression, the description of Elektra resembling a maenad is fitting: as followers of the god Dionysos, the maenads became so intoxicated by their ecstatic dance rituals that sometimes they ended up tearing people apart. Even though Elektra invites others to join her dance, it is a highly personal way of communicating with herself, unintelligible to anyone else. The fact that her dance is ›nameless‹ contributes to making this particular form of communication unidentifiable in terms of traditional conventions. This is corroborated by the music she hears »Ob ich nicht höre? ob ich die / Musik nicht höre? sie kommt doch aus mir / heraus« ⁹⁰ – for it appears that other people do not hear it, again pointing to a different level of communication. ⁹¹ It is no coincidence that the Atrean princess, who has been excelling in the power of speech, becomes silent at this point. She has increasingly withdrawn from language, a fact which also implies forgetting. She forgets her weapon of choice, ⁹² and with it – perhaps quite consciously – a language tradition that has become deficient as an adequate means of (self-)expression and communication. Since the women of ancient Greece performed maenadic dancing and singing, among other things, in order to mourn their

⁸⁹ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 110.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

⁹¹ Music plays an important role in Hofmannsthal's aesthetic, and although it cannot be discussed here, it should be pointed out that it seems to fulfill different roles in the author's understanding. While he described Shakespeare's works in terms of masterful musical compositions, »die unnennbar süße Musik des Ganzen« (»Shakespeares Könige«, SW XXXIII Reden und Aufsätze 2, p. 79), he felt that the true meaning of his own »Elektra« might only be fully revealed by the addition of the music Strauss was composing for his operatic adaptation of the play: »Allerdings, gerade Dieses [sic], dass so viel Hintergrund in der *Elektra* ist, das wird erst die Musik herausbringen. [...] Die Musik hat ganz andere Mittel. Deshalb glaube ich, dass vielleicht erst die Musik das herausbringen wird, was an dem Stück wirklich dran ist« (SW VII Dramen 5, p. 430). The operatic settings of Shakespeare's works cannot be considered in the same vein, since the Bard never worked with a composer, as opera was a newly emerging art form at the beginning of the 17th century.

⁹² Elektra forgets her weapon of choice both literally and figuratively. She literally forgets to give Orest the axe with which Klytämnestra and Aegisth killed Agamemnon, and which Elektra kept and buried until the appropriate time for revenge. This is an important aspect in her vehement disdain for animals and their forgetfulness, as it betrays and exposes her own animalistic nature. Figuratively, she »forgets« to use language as a weapon, as it has become obsolete once her mother and Aegisth are dead, and she expresses herself through her individualistic dance.

dead,⁹³ I believe that Elektra finally allows herself to properly mourn her father's loss. She can let go of – forget – all the misery and darkness she and her sister had to endure over the past years, expressing this liberation by inverting her body language as it has been presented up to this point: instead of closing herself by cowering, staring at the floor, and digging – all animalistic characteristics – she opens herself by throwing back her head and kicking her arms and legs. The last sentence out of her mouth may imply both loss and retrieval, resembling Dante's pilgrim's act in *Earthly Paradise* of drinking from the rivers Lethe and Eunoë, the river of good remembrance, in preparation for *Celestial Paradise*: »Wer glücklich ist wie wir, dem ziemt nur eins: / schweigen und tanzen!«⁹⁴

The execution of the dance liberates Elektra from the animalistic characteristics she has been exhibiting, which points to the final way of addressing forgetting and remembering in »Hamlet« and »Elektra«: the dichotomy between human and animal. It is especially here that Hofmannsthal, with a long cultural and philosophical history behind him, takes the ideas far beyond Shakespeare. Animals and humans are clearly on opposite ends, as Hamlet points out while pondering in his first soliloquy his mother's »o'er-hasty marriage«⁹⁵ to his uncle: »O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer«.⁹⁶ What distinguishes animals in the passages where they are mentioned is their deficiency in relation to humans, which is not surprising, given the humanist project that Hamlet represents. On his journey to England, Hamlet asks the question most central to that project, namely »What is a man [...]?«⁹⁷ – a question previously put to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the form of an exclamation: »What a piece of work is a man!«⁹⁸ Here, the superiority of humans, perfect and god-like, is emphasized – in Hamlet's words man is the »paragon of animals«⁹⁹ – whereas in act 4, when reflecting his own inactivity regarding the Ghost's cry for revenge, and accusing himself of »bestial oblivion,« the inferior elements humans share with animals are the focus. He wonders:

⁹³ See Scott, *Electra after Freud* (see footnote 37), p. 25f.

⁹⁴ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 110.

⁹⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (see footnote 3), 2.2.57.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.2.150f.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.4.9.23.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.2.293f.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.2.296.

What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? – a beast, no more.¹⁰⁰

The proof is provided in Ophelia's so-called ›madness‹ – unwitnessed by Hamlet – following her father Polonius' death, which is accompanied by incomprehensible behavior. Horatio describes her speech as ›nothing‹,¹⁰¹ though potentially dangerous, and Claudius observes:

[P]oor Ophelia
Divided from herself and her fair judgement,
Without the which we are pictures or mere beasts,¹⁰²

not ›the beauty of the world‹¹⁰³ by virtue of our ›god-like reason‹.¹⁰⁴ In Claudius' words rings an almost imperceptible and ironic self-reflection, if we recall the Ghost's previous description of his brother as an ›adulterate beast,‹ who may have been emboldened to his ›bloody deed‹¹⁰⁵ by having himself been ›divided from [him]self and [his] fair judgement.‹

Similar to the characters in ›Hamlet‹, Elektra perceives humans and animals as binary opposites, also homing in on sleeping and feeding as the chief activities of animals, when she responds to Chrysothemis' question whether she cannot forget the dark past and move on to a brighter future:

Vergessen? Was! bin ich ein Tier? vergessen?
Das *Vieh* schläft ein, von halbgefreßner Beute
die Lefze noch behängt, das *Vieh vergift* sich
und fängt zu kauen an, indes der Tod
schon würgend auf ihm sitzt, das *Vieh vergift*,
was aus dem Leib ihm kroch, und stillt den Hunger
am eignen Kind – ich bin kein *Vieh*, ich kann nicht
*vergessen!*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 4.4.9.23–25.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 4.5.7.

¹⁰² Ibid., 4.5.80–82.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 2.2.297.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 4.4.9.28.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 3.4.26.

¹⁰⁶ SW VII Dramen 5, p. 71f. (emphasis added).

Although Elektra claims to be unable to forget, it appears rather that she is unwilling to forget, as, for example, her ritualistic behavior would indicate. Furthermore, it is possible that she uses »nicht können« in a way that implies a moral responsibility, not connoting inability. Elektra's insomnia – Chrysothemis refers to her »schlafloses unbändiges Gemüt«¹⁰⁷ – could be further evidence for a conscious refusal to forget, especially since she tells her sister: »Wer schläft, ist ein gebundnes Opfer«.¹⁰⁸ It is no coincidence that in Greek mythology *hypnos* (sleep) and *lethe* (forgetting) are both related to *nyx* (night).¹⁰⁹ While we do not catch her sleeping at any point in the play, Elektra does display animalistic characteristics, both in her behavior, as described in the stage directions, and in her interaction with others. She is most often compared to a wild cat, as Brehm portrays it in his encyclopaedia: hiding in her »Schlupfwinkel,« displaying a »wild look,« using her claw-like fingers as weapons, crying like a cat, preferring solitude, digging in the ground, hunting her mother like prey, thirsting for blood, but the text also mentions dogs, snakes, flies, horses, vultures, birds, moths, donkeys, cows, besides the more generic beasts and animals. Most of the female characters are at some point likened to animals, suggesting also a gendered nature of Hofmannsthal's discourse of forgetting. There are countless instances of animal imagery in »Elektra« employed to comment on forgetting and remembering in one way or another, which cannot be discussed in detail here, and Hofmannsthal's interest in this particular matter may have been roused by his reading of »Hamlet«.

The relationship between human and animal was much more complex at the fin-de-siècle, a time of crisis, in which the status quo on all levels of life was being questioned and scrutinized, than during the Renaissance, which had good reason to celebrate the human subject. Hofmannsthal

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 92. Elektra, it seems, has learned from the Ghost's mistake. He was »sleeping in [his] orchard, / [His] custom always in the afternoon« (Shakespeare, Hamlet [see footnote 3], 1.5.59f.), and he tells Hamlet: »Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand / Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched« (ibid., 1.5.74f.).

¹⁰⁹ In Hesiod's »Theogony«, *hypnos*, *thanatos* (death), and »the tribe of Dreams« are, in fact, all children of »nyx«. Another daughter of hers is »eris« (strife), mother of »lethe« (Hesiod, Homeric Hymns. Epic Cycle. Homeric. Cambridge 2000, p. 94–97). In his »To be, or not to be«-soliloquy, Hamlet acknowledges the close relationship between sleep and death when he says twice: »To die, to sleep« (Shakespeare, Hamlet [see footnote 3], 3.1.62; 66), and a few lines later: »For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil / Must give us pause« (ibid., 3.1.68–70).

witnessed individualization and fragmentation defining the human landscape, and certain developments had to be reevaluated. One of them was the binary opposition of human to animal. Hofmannsthal and his contemporaries were experiencing the popularization of the natural sciences, most prominently through writings by Ernst Haeckel and Carl W. Neumann, as well as in popular magazines, such as »Die Gartenlaube«. Consequently, Charles Darwin's theories were disseminated to a broader audience, thus likely dispersing some of the beliefs people held about non-human animals that were deeply steeped in folk tales and superstition.¹¹⁰ The scientific explorations of language as that which sets humans apart from animals, especially in the work of Heymann Steinthal – while at the same time acknowledging that humans originated from animals – contributed to a different and new approach of thinking about the relationship between man and animal. This relationship was also of great interest to Franz Kafka, whose short stories are riddled with – at times extremely puzzling – animals,¹¹¹ and the »Blaue Reiter« cofounder Franz Marc was deeply engaged with it as he was developing his ideas on the animalization of art, which resulted in his various expressionist animal depictions.

For Stephen Greenblatt »Hamlet« is »a play of contagious, almost universal self-estrangement«,¹¹² and elsewhere he writes: »It is as if the play were giving birth to a whole new kind of literary subjectivity«.¹¹³ Both statements are also relevant to »Elektra«, but the kind of subjectivity that isolates her from her surroundings is nearly absolute, whereas Hamlet still shares a deep friendship with Horatio.¹¹⁴ If »Hamlet« is indeed »das

¹¹⁰ The animal encyclopaedia »Brehms Tierleben« is an example of popularized natural science, though it still refers to and seemingly confirms the age-old superstitious associations with certain animals and their behaviors.

¹¹¹ Kafka also had a copy of »Brehms Tierleben« on his bookshelf.

¹¹² Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (see footnote 82), p. 212.

¹¹³ Greenblatt, *Hamlet* (see footnote 3), »Introduction«, p. 1661.

¹¹⁴ For Hofmannsthal, »[d]as Drama [...] ist ebensosehr ein Bild der unbedingten Einsamkeit des Individuums wie ein Bild des Mit-einander-da-seins der Menschen« (»Shakespeares Könige«, SW XXXIII Reden und Aufsätze 2, p. 91), and both »Hamlet« and »Elektra« explore their title characters' psychological isolation whilst being part of communities they feel they do not really belong to. The fact that in »Elektra«, this isolation is even more extreme than in »Hamlet«, since it is also physical – she is not part of the palace community – is further indication for the princess being the modernist continuation of »Hamlet«. This modernism is moreover of a radical nature, as she has been condemned to eat and sleep with the dogs, while the servant maids feel superior to Elektra.

Trauerspiel [...] der Willensschwäche,« as Hofmannsthal called it,¹¹⁵ then »Elektra« might be termed »das Trauerspiel der Willensstärke.« However, even headstrong Elektra, who is the modernist continuation of »Hamlet« brought to an extreme, and who tries assiduously not to repeat his mistakes and weaknesses, cannot will her human essence and nature away. Neither Hamlet nor Elektra succeeds in overcoming or eliminating their animalistic forgetting, with the crucial difference that Hamlet accepts it as an essential part of his being and his humanity, whereas Elektra considers it merely an accidental characteristic she can give up like her regal claim or her physical beauty.¹¹⁶ Notwithstanding the three hundred years that separate »Hamlet« and »Elektra«, the basic themes and issues are essentially the same, and even some of the differences in details establish a connection.

Both royal children hide behind the shield of their eloquence for the better part of their respective plays, which should not be surprising, given the fact that they both try to set themselves apart from animals, who lack the particular communication tool of verbal language. So unbalanced is their reliance on words that they have become incapable of acting, especially in the crucial moments that could potentially lead to the fulfillment of their individual tasks at hand. The ultimate act of both is their dying: Hamlet only fulfills the Ghost's »dread command« once he realizes »there is not half an hour of life«¹¹⁷ left in him, and Elektra's act, her nameless dance, takes place only once the deed she has been anticipating for so many years has been executed – without her involvement – making her existence obsolete. Both Shakespeare and Hofmannsthal were obviously fascinated with the human-animal dichotomy,

¹¹⁵ GW RA III, p. 351.

¹¹⁶ It is as if in Elektra Hofmannsthal was exploring from a modernist perspective the power and effect of what he described to be the genius of Shakespeare in »Shakespeares Könige und große Herren,« namely the all-encompassing »Atmosphäre« (SW XXXIII Reden und Aufsätze 2, p. 76–92, here p. 85) that always includes the opposite of whatever characteristic he is painting in the foreground, as well as that which is not explicitly mentioned. Part of what makes Hamlet so great, as Hofmannsthal explains, is the fact that he is »ein Prinz, so durch und durch ein Prinz« (SW XXXIII Reden und Aufsätze 2, p. 84). Elektra, by contrast, is »nur mehr der Leichnam« of »eines Königs Tochter« (SW VII Dramen 5, p. 101). However, although Elektra is outwardly not recognizable as a princess, both characters display »ein bewußtes Gebrauchen« of their regal »Übermacht, ein ironisches und schmerzliches Ausspielen [ihrer] Überlegenheit« (SW XXXIII Reden und Aufsätze 2, p. 91), especially in the scenes, in which they are alone with the offending parent.

¹¹⁷ Shakespeare, Hamlet (see footnote 3), 5.2.258.

which both explored in the opposition of forgetting and remembering, and the antagonistic presentation of words and deeds.¹¹⁸ Hofmannsthal's employment of animal symbolism – ubiquitous in »Elektra« – indicates the extent to which he was in the literary and cultural vanguard, as animals, and especially anthropomorphized animals, became ever more culturally pervasive throughout the 20th century.¹¹⁹

The preoccupation with the human-animal dichotomy has not subsided, but the discursive methods employed in its exploration have changed significantly, as has the status of animals in society. While animals have been increasingly treated as a commodity, especially in terms of food production, but also with respect to medical research, emancipatory efforts of especially the first half of the 20th century have extended to animals, and human coexistence and interaction with them, ultimately leading to the announcement of the Universal Declaration of Animal Rights by Unesco in 1978.¹²⁰ Animals and human interactions with them have been the subject of philosophical inquiry from its beginnings in the ancient world, and more recently, thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben have explored the non-human animal other, moving away from traditional considerations.¹²¹

Remembering and forgetting are human activities that also have not ceased to occupy our minds. However, while Nietzsche's admiration for oblivion was rather unusual in the nineteenth century, the desire to be able to forget is probably one most of us who live in the fast-paced information age, and whose senses are continually (over-)stimulated, can relate to. At the same time, our need for memory – the formerly glorious »ars memoriae« – has decreased, as much information can now be

¹¹⁸ Reading »Elektra« this way not only takes the existing Hofmannsthal scholarship in new directions, but also situates the play in a larger framework within which Hofmannsthal operated throughout his life, as is evidenced in his numerous notes and letters, in which he confesses to being obsessed with the antinomy of speech and action, and the dichotomy of remembering and forgetting, and thus of human and animal.

¹¹⁹ While anthropomorphism of animals can be traced back to Aesop's »Fables« and beyond, advancements in film technology guaranteed a wider audience, as Mickey Mouse and friends started to delight viewers in 1928, and do so to this day.

¹²⁰ As it never really gained any traction, new efforts are currently underway to get the UN to accept a Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare.

¹²¹ There is a line of philosophers – from Aristotle to Descartes, to Heidegger, Levinas, and Lacan – who consider animals in terms of their abilities, or lack thereof (thought, reason, speech), but in »The Animal That Therefore I Am«, Derrida rather picks up Jeremy Bentham's simple question of whether they can suffer, providing his inquiry with a different premise.

obtained at the click of a button. Advances in medical research (and the necessary technology) have not only equipped us with much more knowledge about memory and forgetting – especially in the form of dementia – and how the brain and the human psyche work (building, among other things, on Freud’s theory of repression), but also with the ability to manipulate memories, to the point where most recent developments include a »forgetting pill«, which targets traumatic memories, thus diminishing the distress they can cause.¹²² Given the continuous plethora of artistic engagements with these human activities – such as W.G. Sebald’s 1999 »Luftkrieg und Literatur« and his 2001 novel »Austerlitz«, Umberto Eco’s 2004 »La misteriosa fiamma della regina Loana«, or films, like Tom Tykwer’s »Winterschläfer« (1997), Christopher Nolan’s »Memento« (2000), Brad Anderson’s »The Machinist« (2004), Michel Gondry and Charlie Kaufman’s »Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind« (2004), and Christopher Nolan’s »Inception« (2010), to name only a few – the topic has apparently lost nothing of its fascination in our own time, and to use one of Shakespeare’s insights, giving Hamlet the final word, art is still used »to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature,« and »to show [...] the very age and body of the time his form and pressure«.¹²³

¹²² See, for example, Jonah Lehrer, The Forgetting Pill. How a New Drug Can Target Your Worst Memories – and Erase Them Forever. In: Wired, March 2012, p. 84.

¹²³ Shakespeare, Hamlet (see footnote 3), 3.2.20–22.

