

Electra and Cordelia: Wild Women in Classical Literature

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Abstract:

This paper explores the archetypal construction of a feminine resistance through a comparative analysis of Sophocles' *Electra* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The "Wild Woman" as theorized by Clarissa Pinkola Estés and rooted in Jungian psychology, argues that both characters, Electra and Cordelia, embody the intuitive and morally grounded models of the feminine psyche that defy preexisting patriarchal constraints within their distinct historical and literary contexts.

Introduction

Across literary traditions, daughters have been portrayed as quiet symbols of loyalty who are characterized and often glorified for their absolute compliance. In plays like Sophocles' *Electra* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, however, we encounter two female figures who defy such generalization. Electra, who is consumed by righteous grief as she mourns her murdered father, channels her anguish into vengeance for justice. Cordelia remains devoted to love and moral clarity, even after being exiled for speaking the truth. Despite existing in vastly different historical and cultural contexts, both characters exemplify their unwavering inner strength as they are committed to resisting societal norms and authorities at the face of staying true to their own ideologies. They do not simply endure injustice but respond to it on their own terms. When both Electra and Cordelia are analyzed through an archetypal lens, and more specifically through Clarissa Pinkola Estés' theory of the Wild Woman archetype, these daughters emerge as expressions of an untamed feminine force that challenges the expectations placed upon women and daughters alike.

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes stems from the concept of the collective unconscious and is utilized to identify the recurring figures and symbols that appear throughout various myths and narratives. These archetypes are universal as they shape human perception and behavior. Jung believed that "all the most powerful ideas in history go back to archetypes," making them innate psychic patterns that seep through figures through their stories and inner psyche (Jung 15).

Among these is the Wild Woman, as developed by Estés, a Jungian psychoanalyst who coined this archetype to be the framework for feminine instinct as women embrace their intuition and creativity. The Wild Woman, as Estés writes in *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, is composed of attributes similar to that of a wolf, as they both share a "heightened capacity for devotion" while possessing "great endurance and power" often against the male-centered society, which forces them to live a marginal life (Estés 21-22). She may not always be rational or gentle, but she is always deeply authentic.

In *Electra* and *King Lear*, the Wild Woman appears in vastly different expressions through Electra's fervent lamentations and Cordelia's quiet refusal. Both, however, are driven by their innate and steadfast sense of self and justice. In analyzing these characters through Estés' proposition, their mythological and literary legacies that continue to shape the contemporary structures of feminine strength and resistance begin to surface.

Theoretical Background:

In the study of literature, archetypal criticism serves as a framework for understanding recurring myths, symbols, and character types. According to Jungian theory, these patterns arise from the collective unconscious

as it shapes narratives across cultures and timelines. When applied to texts like Sophocles' *Electra* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, archetypal criticism, and specifically the lens of the Wild Woman archetype as voiced by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, offers a deeper understanding of female characters who resist maltreatment and are ultimately able to reclaim power. Both Electra and Cordelia embody aspects of the Wild Woman as characters who display their untamed feminine instincts. Their stories of defiance and authenticity reflect archetypal paradigms that transcend their historical settings and interact with various dimensions of the feminine psyche.

Carl Jung described archetypes as "primordial images" embedded within one's collective unconscious, as it emerges in dreams, myths, religion, and literature (Jung 43). Anthony Stevens, in *Jung: A Very Short Introduction*, reinforces this theory by explaining how archetypes like the Hero, the Light in contrast with the Shadow, and the Anima shape human behavior and creativity (68-70). Based on Jung's claims, characters like Electra and Cordelia are not simply literary inventions nor plot devices but rather reflections of psychological truths that persist throughout history (Jung 77). These archetypes serve as universal templates, allowing readers to recognize emotional and moral patterns across different texts and cultures.

Estés expands upon the Jungian theory as she introduces the Wild Woman archetype in *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. She describes the Wild Woman as an embodiment of feminine intuition and resilience (Estés 22-25). Appearing in numerous myths and folklores as the witch, healer, forest-dweller, or truth-teller, the Wild Women are figures who have been banished to the edges of society because of their unwarranted behavior but possess profound wisdom and moral clarity. According to Estés, the Wild Woman "guides us on the path to power, authenticity, instinct, and intuition," displaying courage in staying true to their values (Estés 27). With the strength and insight to survive in exile while transforming suffering into wisdom, the Wild Woman serves as a symbol for the free and steadfast feminine psyche.

Through this framework, Electra emerges as a quintessential Wild Woman. Her mourning for her father is not passive but an active, ritualized form of resistance against the injustice committed by her mother, Clytemnestra. Electra refuses to stay silent or be submissive, as she channels her grief into a sacred duty of vengeance. In doing so, she reconnects with primal instincts of justice and memory. Estés writes that the Wild Woman "remembers everything" and acts from a deep well of knowing, which is an appropriate description for Electra's unwavering commitment to truth and loyalty. Her lamentations, often dismissed as excessive, can instead be read as expressions of sacred grief, reclaiming power through memorial and voice.

Cordelia, in contrast, represents a quieter but equally powerful paradigm of the Wild Woman. Her refusal to flatter her father, King Lear, is a radical act of authenticity. In a world where women are often valued for their obedience and charm, Cordelia insists on speaking truthfully, even at great personal cost. Her exile is not a defeat but a testament to her inner strength and integrity. Later in the play, she returns not with vengeance but with compassion, embodying what Estés calls the Wild Woman's capacity for both ferocity and deep care. Cordelia's moral clarity and emotional intelligence set her apart from her sisters and align her with archetypal figures of the healer and truth-bearer.

The application of archetypal criticism, particularly the Wild Woman lens, reveals that Electra and Cordelia are not merely victims or martyrs. They are complex figures shaped by and responding to archetypal forces. Their resistance, whether through lamentation or silence, through confrontation or exile, becomes a form of spiritual and psychological reclamation. As Estés writes, "the Wild Woman carries the bundles for healing; she carries stories that mend." Both Electra and Cordelia, in their distinct ways, carry such stories. They invite readers to consider how feminine strength can take many forms, both loud and quiet or even angry and forgiving, as myths and literature continue to offer essential insights into the psyche.

Understanding Electra and Cordelia through Jungian archetypes and the Wild Woman framework not only deepens our appreciation of their characters but also illuminates the enduring power of story and myth. These figures travel beyond their literary origins to represent a profound psychological reality: feminine resilience, intuition, and genuineness serve as vital forces in both personal and cultural transformation.

Electra (*Sophocles*) and the Wild Woman Archetype:

In Sophocles' *Electra*, the heroine is found in an extreme state of mourning, but manages to display her unwavering devotion to justice, which captures both the intensity and moral clarity of the Wild Woman archetype. As the daughter of King Agamemnon, Electra is consumed by the anguish of her father's murder at the hands of her very own mother, Clytemnestra. Years after the crime, Electra remains lamenting and is driven by her deeply rooted desire for vengeance as she refuses to let go or forgive the death of King Agamemnon. Hanna Roisman delves into this portrayal of Electra in "*Tragic Heroines in Ancient Greek Drama*" describing her as "zealously lamenting with no consideration of the practical implications of her behavior," a depiction highlighting both her emotional turmoil and unwillingness to accept the offense that shattered her world (Roisman 41). This constant mourning aligns closely with what Clarissa Pinkola Estés identifies as the "fierce and demanding" instinct of the Wild Woman, which is the feminine force that refuses to forget its truth or conform to oppressive societal norms. Electra becomes the very embodiment of the Wild Woman archetype: one who refuses passivity and is unwavering in following her inner instincts, regardless of the mental strain it places upon herself and in part defying societal expectations.

Electra's loyalty to her father and her principle of justice compel her every action. In rejecting Clytemnestra's maternal authority, her battle is not only personal but also symbolic of a woman resisting the corrupt patriarchal system that her mother upholds. Clytemnestra, having seized the throne through the murder of her husband, depicts the distorted reality of female power that is a mere extension of the violence abused by male authority. Electra's refusal to submit is not just to her mother, the queen, but more so to the corrupted order that dictates how her world functions. While mourning, she chose to stand outside the palace, wailing in public, defying societal expectations of female decorum and obedience. Her language is raw and unapologetic as she claims that: "Never will I cease from dirge and sore lament... I will wail without ceasing...come, help me, avenge the murder of my sire" (*Electra*, l. 112–121). She calls upon the Furies, goddesses of vengeance, to further justify her grief as righteous and warranted by the gods. This relentless expression of grief is not performative, but rather a form of ritualized resistance, as it challenges the expectations of a submissive and obedient woman. Electra becomes a vessel for cosmic justice with her untamed, unremorseful, and *unfeminine* behavior, which makes her a Wild Woman in a world that demands her silence.

In contrast to Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, where Electra plays a more subdued, supportive role in Orestes' vengeance, or Euripides' *Electra*, where she is more pragmatic and cynical, Sophocles' version of Electra is emotionally exposed as she is portrayed as a confrontational and singularly driven character. Roisman notes that this Electra is "an extremist," but her extremism is not madness, but an archetypal necessity. When surrounded by moral decay and betrayal, the Wild Woman must be uncompromising. Like Artemis or Hecate, goddesses of the wilderness and the liminal, Electra exists on the fringes of society, as she is feared by those who wish to tame her for her emotional intensity but also revered for her unwavering vision of justice.

Electra's behavior, as she beats her breast, howls to the sky, invokes the underworld gods, underscores her primal, instinctive nature. She channels the shadowed and often shunned aspects of the feminine: rage, sorrow, and unrelenting memory. These are not weaknesses, but rather sacred tools she can use to rebalance the universe after betrayal and murder. In Jungian terms, Electra embodies the feminine shadow that is not repressed but released into the world, demanding reevaluation. Her howls are not merely cries of pain as they call for justice from the purest and primitive parts of the soul.

In this light, Electra is far more than a tragic figure. She embodies the Wild Woman whose grief and fury refuse to be tamed. Through her, Sophocles does not simply tell a story of familial revenge. He offers a powerful vision of feminine truth that resists silence, embraces instinct, and dares to challenge the corrupted structures of power.

Cordelia (Shakespeare) and the Wild Woman Archetype

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Cordelia emerges as a quietly radical figure, whose power lies not in dramatic action or verbal manipulation, but in her unwavering integrity. As Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia refuses to flatter her father when he stages the infamous test of filial devotion. Her declaration, "I love your majesty / According to my bond; no more nor less," sets the tone for her role throughout the play as an honest, instinctive, and unyielding character in the face of corrupt authority. This act of **quiet defiance** results in her disinheritance, but it also signals her alignment with the archetype of the Wild Woman, as described by Clarissa Pinkola Estés: a woman governed not by external approval, but by her inner voice and truth.

Unlike her sisters, Regan and Goneril, who speak in performative excess to gain political advantage, Cordelia refuses to dissimulate. Her refusal is not born of pride, but of principle. In a world where words are currency and power is gained through deception, Cordelia's truthfulness reads as a divergence from the female norm and an instinctual resistance to systems that reward dishonesty. Estés writes that "the Wild Woman carries the bundle of healing; she carries everything a woman needs to be and know." Cordelia's loyalty, compassion, and moral clarity exemplify this inner completeness. She does not need to prove her love with spectacle; her actions speak with greater force.

Cordelia's strength is not dramatic in the conventional sense. She is not confrontational like Antigone, nor furious like Electra. Instead, her power is **quiet** and deeply rooted in an inner fortitude that comes from listening to her own moral compass. In Jungian terms, she represents the individuated feminine: one who acts in harmony with her unconscious instincts and higher sense of justice. Her rejection of Lear's demand is not rebellion for its own sake, but an act of authentic selfhood. Estés cautions that when women deny their instincts, they lose access to their deepest wisdom. Cordelia does not deny her instincts. Even when the cost of upholding her sense of morality is exile and the loss of her family, she refuses to betray her sense of truth.

Later in the play, this archetypal integrity evolves into active compassion. Though wronged by her father, Cordelia returns from France not in bitterness, but with the intent to rescue Lear from the tyranny of his other daughters. Her leadership is **quiet** but brave; she brings an army not to conquer, but to restore. In doing so, she refuses to create a cycle of vengeance and retribution. Her actions reflect what Estés identifies as "fierce loyalty" that stems from love, not obedience. This combination of inner strength and outer compassion reveals a distinct expression of the Wild Woman archetype, one that balances emotional depth with ethical action.

Cordelia's refusal to seek revenge, even after suffering injustice, distinguishes her further. Unlike her sisters, who hunger for control, Cordelia remains rooted in relationship and restoration. She does not fight to dominate; she fights to protect. This is consistent with Estés' vision of the Wild Woman as one who moves instinctively toward wholeness, healing, and love. When Lear finally recognizes his failure and begs her forgiveness, Cordelia's response is gentle and direct: "No cause, no cause." There is no bitterness, only the instinct to forgive and reconnect.

Even in death, Cordelia embodies quiet power. She dies not as a victim, but as a figure of moral resolution. Her execution is not just tragic, as it marks the destruction of the only character who consistently chose truth over manipulation, love over politics. In many ways, her death parallels that of other sacred feminine figures in literature: women who act out of deep intuition and are silenced by a world unready for their truth. Yet her silence, like her honesty, becomes more powerful in contrast to the chaos surrounding her.

Cordelia thus represents an essential expression of the Wild Woman archetype: not wild in behavior, but wild in spirit as she is untamed by the expectations of patriarchal power and courtly performance. Her strength lies in her refusal to abandon her instincts, even when it costs her position, power, and ultimately, her life. She moves through the world with **quiet defiance**, channeling a feminine force that is at once nurturing, steadfast, and morally exacting. As Estés writes, the Wild Woman is "the soul voice... the knowing." Cordelia's every action flows from

this place of knowing, making her one of Shakespeare's most spiritually grounded heroines.

In the end, Cordelia is not merely a tragic daughter or symbol of virtue. She is a woman who listens to her instincts, acts with moral clarity, and refuses to be swayed by artifice. Her defiance is not loud, but it is unbreakable. Through her, Shakespeare gives us a vision of feminine power that is deeply intuitive, radically honest, and profoundly transformative as she embodies the Wild Woman.

Comparative Analysis:

Electra, from Sophocles' *Electra*, and Cordelia, from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, exemplify what Estés describes as the Wild Woman archetype, through their authenticity, defiance of injustice, and loyalty to truth and love. Both characters embody a fierce femininity that, while differently expressed, represents a shared refusal to be silenced or shaped by corrupt authority. Their stories, one rooted in a demand for justice within an ancient Greek society and the other in the moral philosophy of Renaissance England, show the broad spectrum of the Wild Woman as theorized by Estés, derived from Jungian psychology.

At the core of both characters is unwavering inner strength. Electra refuses to forgive her mother, Clytemnestra, for murdering her father, Agamemnon, and lives in constant mourning and protest, isolating herself from societal norms. Cordelia, though less dramatic in expression, also defies unjust power when she refuses to flatter King Lear with exaggerated declarations of love. Their choices lead to exile, suffering, and ultimately death, yet neither of them betrays their principles. Estés describes such women as "fierce and loyal," qualities that define both Cordelia and Electra. Cordelia remains faithful to her principles and her father, even when he disowns her. Electra remains determined in her commitment to her father's memory and in her pursuit of justice, even if it meant gambling with her fate. These women suffer not because they are weak but because they are too strong to conform.

Their divergence is pronounced in their methods. Electra is active, even violent, participating in the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in order to restore moral balance. Her world, defined by Greek notions of fate and justice, demands blood to compensate for the bloodshed of her father. In contrast, Cordelia's response is principled restraint. Even when wronged, she refuses to retaliate. Her virtue lies in self-sacrifice, echoing Christian ideals of mercy and redemption, fitting with the English morals surrounding her narrative. This distinction demonstrates how cultural context shapes the expression of the Wild Woman. Electra emerges as a fiery, wrathful figure, while Cordelia is presented as a Christ-like symbol of redemptive love. Despite these differences, both challenge gender norms as Electra seizes the role of avenger, a role often reserved for men, and Cordelia rejects the performative demands of Lear's court as she stays true to herself.

In Jungian terms, both characters access powerful archetypal energies, channeling the inner instincts often repressed by patriarchal society. The Wild Woman archetype, as Estés presents it, is a manifestation of the feminine unconscious that is intuitive, emotional, and often transgressive. Electra embraces the shadow aspect of the Wild Woman as she is consumed by grief, rage, and a desire for vengeance. She moves beyond socially accepted behavior into the raw wilderness of human emotion. Cordelia, on the other hand, embodies the light aspect as she is rather forgiving, truthful, and committed to love without embellishment. Yet both are expressions of the same archetype. Electra acts with primal intensity, while Cordelia presents herself with quiet integrity. As Estés notes, the Wild Woman is not one type but rather a spectrum that encompasses various women who may choose to scream or whisper their truths.

Electra and Cordelia demonstrate the breadth and power of the Wild Woman archetype. They are not opposites but complements: two faces of the same psychic force. One screams while the other whispers, but both resist erasure. In Estés' words, the Wild Woman is "indestructible," and both Electra and Cordelia prove this through their refusal to betray their inner truths. Their legacies, immortalized in myth and drama, continue to inspire a deeper understanding of feminine power in all its forms of rage and serenity, vengefulness and mercy, shadow and light.

Conclusion:

Viewing Electra and Cordelia through the lens of the Wild Woman archetype reveals how female agency and strength have long existed in classical literature, even when masked by tragedy or constrained by patriarchal structures. These characters are not simply dutiful daughters, but rather fierce carriers of instinct, intuition, and moral conviction. Electra's demand for justice, sharpened by grief and rage, and Cordelia's unwavering love, grounded in quiet resistance, represent two ends of a spectrum of feminine power. Estés reminds us that the Wild Woman archetype embodies both "untamed wrath and compassionate wisdom," qualities that Electra and Cordelia fully embody in their own respective modes (Estés 37). Though one screams and the other whispers, both refuse to betray their truths and assert a timeless, intuitive strength.

Their powerful presence finds relevance in the modern world as both Electra and Cordelia continue to resonate in contemporary contexts. The term "Electra complex," coined by Carl Jung in contrast to Freud's Oedipal theory, shows how her character has become central to modern psychoanalytic understanding of female subjectivity and familial bonds. While the theory itself has been contested, the name remains a touchstone in feminist debates about patriarchal interpretations of daughterhood and female desire. More affirmatively, Cordelia has been cited in educational and feminist writing as a symbol of moral courage, especially in resisting coercion or performative speech. In literary feminism, Cordelia's refusal to flatter Lear has been reclaimed as a gesture of integrity against systems that demand women's self-erasure. The Wild Woman's legacy can also be seen in broader movements—from second-wave feminism's reclamation of "hysteria" as power, to modern portrayals of grief and rage in art by female creators like Louise Bourgeois or Kara Walker, who channel shadowed feminine emotions for public reckoning. In theater and literature, figures like Medea, Antigone, and even more modern anti-heroines such as Lisbeth Salander (from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) carry traces of Electra's defiant core.

This archetypal framework underscores that "wild" feminine energy was always present in ancient texts, even though it simply wore the cultural clothing of its time. When we engage with *Electra* and *King Lear* using Jungian and Estés-inspired approaches, we recover a richer, fuller image of womanhood. These daughters resist being coerced into virtue or madness. They are not only literary figures but also mythic forces, serving as symbols of instinctual feminine power that resist domestication.

Examining Electra and Cordelia through the Wild Woman archetype challenges us to rethink not only classical literature but also how we interpret female strength today. Their stories, shaped by defiance, loyalty, and clarity of vision, remind us that resilience is not singular. It is multifaceted, sometimes being violent or quiet, but always rooted in deep inner knowing. Archetypal criticism does more than analyze character; it recovers the wisdom embedded in myth and drama. In reclaiming these archetypes, we make space for the enduring legacy of feminine resistance, both on the page and in the world.

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