

Clytemnestra Returns: A Philosophical Inquiry into her Moral Identity in Colm Tóibín's *House of Names*

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Abstract

This article reads Colm Tóibín's latest novel, *House of Names* (2017), as a contemporary revision of Greek tragedy in which the mythic character of Clytemnestra takes centre stage, acquires a philosophical voice, and shows how her new refiguration is articulated around three major concerns: (1) the existential question of loss and grief, (2) the transgression of traditional power relations, and (3) the development of a modern metaphysical conception of the world. What emerges as a result of these particular characteristics of the new Queen of Argos is a powerfully revived character, a vengeful rationalist, a circumspect rebel, and a prophet for our liquid modernity.

Keywords: Clytemnestra; Colm Tóibín; House of Names; grief; power; faith.

1. Introduction

Since the dawn of Western literature, the name of Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon and Queen of Mycenae, has been declined time after time as a very prolific metronymic with variable spellings, Aeschylean wordplays, and everlasting meanings. The creative declension of her name has never fallen into decline throughout the ages. Beyond doubt, as American actress and scholar Rachel M. E. Wolfe (2009) states, Clytemnestra has persistently been 'one of the most versatile figures in Greek myth' (717). Her story finds its most ancient articulation in Homer's *Odyssey*, where the Queen is portrayed as a puppet of her lover Aegisthus, an irrational creature, an unfaithful wife, an adulterous perversion, and a 'stereotype of the malleable Greek woman' (Wolfe 2009, 695). However, in her very first representation, she is not yet amongst the most evil women that the world has known.

It is in Pindar's *Pythian* XI that the Queen of Argos becomes the very incarnation of evil, acts as a ruthless avenger for the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia, and murders her own husband. From this derogatory refiguration onwards, Clytemnestra takes centre stage as a ferocious and fearsome villain. In his Orestes cycle, Aeschylus presents her as violating gender norms, masculinising her behaviour, assuming manly duties of blood-revenge, and displaying the monstrous threat of feminine rule. Citing Wolfe's words (2009) once again, one can claim that, for Aeschylus, Clytemnestra truly 'represents the perversion of society and culture on all levels' (702). In a similar vein, when addressing the myth of Electra, Sophocles characterises the Mycenaean Queen as a tyrant, an evil-minded creature, and a model of moral vice, consolidating the vast mythical tradition of misogyny, aversion and demonisation against Agamemnon's wife.

In stark contrast to such a tradition, Euripides offers a radically different version of the Clytemnestra myth in his *Electra* and, more particularly, in *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Both plays justify the Queen's moral conduct, make her a just avenger, endow her with an extraordinary strength of character, and place the blame for the beginning of the whole tragic cycle on Agamemnon. This original, divergent and sympathetic Clytemnestra, although far less popular than her traditional malignant counterpart, is nevertheless a highly fertile character with a complex moral identity and an enormous potential, as Wolfe (2009) states, for an in-depth 'psychological analysis' (716).¹ Virtually as if in direct response to this fertility and with the aim of exploiting such potential, the well-known Irish novelist Colm Tóibín revisits the Euripedean Clytemnestra, finds her particularly fascinating, and proposes his own modernisation of the myth in *House of Names* (2017), his latest work to date.²

In Tóibín's novel, as this article seeks to reveal, the Queen of Argos examines her own consciousness profusely, exposes her deepest moral psychology, acquires a robust philosophical voice, and perhaps more importantly, shows how her reinvented existence is coherently articulated around three major concerns: (1) the existential question of loss and grief, (2) the Foucauldian pursuit of counter-power, and (3) the development of a modern metaphysical conception of the world. To analyse these particular features of the new Clytemnestra, exclusive attention will be paid to her two interior monologues within the novel in light of different philosophical notions, ancient and modern (from Epicurus to Nietzsche, Heidegger or Foucault). The outcome of this study will reveal that Tóibín's Clytemnestra is a well-rounded character, a pedantic thinker, a vengeful rationalist, a circumspect rebel, and even a prophet for our liquid modernity.

2. Controlled Grief, Revenge and More Death

House of Names opens with a proleptic narration that situates Queen Clytemnestra after the murder of her husband, exposes her obsessive preoccupation with death and likens her as such to other memorable female characters from Tóibín's narrative universe. In his fiction, indeed, the existential themes of mortality and loss exert such determinism upon events and characters alike, that it would be reasonable to classify Tóibín's works, including the novel interpreted in this paper, under the category of *literature of grief*, which he himself has regarded as one of the most fertile traditions in the global history of letters.³ Particularly, in his own oeuvre and from a very personal stance, the Irish novelist

has constantly explored ‘the business of silence around grief, the life of a woman alone, the palpable absence of a man, a husband, a father, our father, my father, the idea of conversation as a way of concealing loss rather than revealing anything’ (Tóibín 2014). In such works as *The South* (1990), *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999),⁴ *Mothers and Sons* (2006), *Brooklyn* (2009), *The Empty Family* (2011), *The Testament of Mary* (2012) or *Nora Webster* (2014), Tóibín writes as an elegiac lyricist and creates formidable heroines to look meticulously into destructive traumas, family tragedies, real and symbolic losses, lacks of existential meaning, literal human sacrifices, traumatic exiles, constant returns to an Irish deathbed, and all forms of rage and grief.

In *House of Names*, it is through the legendary character of Clytemnestra that the Irish writer tackles his common concerns with womanhood, family, death and grief. As soon as the novel starts, the Queen of Argos confesses in a long interior monologue how death haunts her not merely as a compulsive neurosis, but as a physically perceptible and even literally somatic phenomenon. For her, death assumes an olfactory power: its smell, she claims, ‘has entered my body and been welcomed there like an old friend come to visit. The smell of fear and panic. The smell is here like the very air is here; it returns in the same way as light in the morning returns. It is my constant companion’ (Tóibín 2017, 3). It becomes clear in these lines that death constitutes more than a physiological event that simply signifies the end of life. Clytemnestra is no Epicurus in this respect: for the Hellenistic philosopher, the issue of death should not trouble our psyche in the slightest due to the empirical fact that while we exist death has no presence and real impact on our life. The Queen of Argos rejects this positivistic attitude towards death and loss. For her, after the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia, death is neither a mere biological termination of life nor an anonymous fact that befalls some solitary individual. Death has become, for Clytemnestra, personalised through the cruel slaughter of her innocent daughter.

Moreover, in her dealings with death, Clytemnestra invalidates Heidegger’s celebrated notion of *Sein-zum-Tode*. In his masterpiece *Sein und Zeit* (1927), the German thinker develops a thanatological theory that understands finitude as a radical point in the future of any human existence that is inherently non-relational, individual and not sharable (or ‘ownmost’) by virtue of the simple fact that nobody can die somebody else’s death. One can share, enjoy and suffer the pre-mortem fate of others, yet the very encounter with death only involves the individual subject in its most naked solipsism. Although this thanatology sounds theoretically precise and logical, it does not treat the issue of human finitude in all its psychological and social complexity. Revising Heidegger’s concept of death, the British philosopher Simon Critchley observes that finitude constitutes fundamentally an intersubjective, communal or social experience that escapes any form of counter-intuitive individualism. According to Critchley (2002), Heidegger forgets that ‘death is first and foremost experienced as a relation to the death or dying of the other and others, in Being-with the dying in a caring way, and in grieving after they are dead’ (169). It is in loss, grief and mourning for some *other* that we encounter death in a way that affects us and ‘casts a long mournful shadow across the self’ (Critchley 2002, 170).

In losing her Iphigenia, the Queen of Argos faces directly up to the trauma of death. Her confrontation with this extreme wound, however, transcends the common psychology

of affective inertia, passive mourning and despair. Clytemnestra does not grieve as a weak, broken and silent victim. Instead, paradoxically enough, the experience of death, she asserts, 'has put life into my eyes, eyes that grew dull with waiting, but are not dull now, eyes that are alive now with brightness' (Tóibín 2017, 3). The Queen becomes fixated on death in a fully lucid manner. Her life is now devoted to the destruction or negation of life itself. Her eyes cannot see beyond the need to grieve her daughter's death not in a state of mere passivity, but with the resolute will to act in retaliation.

The trauma of loss does not devastate or paralyse the Mycenaean Queen: she develops a stoic sense of controlled grief that allows her to take action and seek revenge with sheer lucidity. In her state of grief, she does not lose her mythic power and cunning. Her pain is transformed into the catalyst for her vindictive schemes. Her being-in-loss,⁵ far from static or merely immanent, becomes a driving force for self-transcendence or, in other words, an opportunity to exert her freedom and authority in the Royal House of Atreus. It is from her instrumentalised grief that she derives the archaic moral doctrine of blood revenge. In her personal take on normative ethics, Clytemnestra follows the ancient law of talion that prescribes in her own words that 'death is ravenous for more death' (Tóibín 2017, 3). In this very maxim lies the origin of tragedy –and, in particular, the tragedy that befalls Agamemnon's family. According to Anne Carson's prologue to her *Grief Lessons* (2006), the experience of death engenders a destructive chain that goes from rage to grief, culminates in violence and perpetuates the very cycle of death. Clytemnestra embraces this idea of ineluctable and cyclical tragedy in a sadistic revelation: 'Murder makes us ravenous, fills the soul with satisfaction that is fierce and then luscious enough to create a taste for further satisfaction' (Tóibín 2017, 3).

As a result of her tragic moral creed of blood revenge, Clytemnestra ends up developing some kind of thanatophilia that leads her to view death as an aesthetic or poetic fact. For her, the murder of her husband Agamemnon proves to be a satisfactory achievement and even a nearly eroticised act of 'intimacy and precision' (Tóibín 2017, 3). This precision reveals how effectively the Queen of Argos manages to instrumentalise her grief as a principle of agency, a form of regulated anger, and a definitive motive for revenge. Accordingly, in her opening monologue, Clytemnestra remembers the regicide with absolute peace of mind and even self-legitimising complacency:

A knife piercing through the soft flesh under the ear, with intimacy and precision, and then moving across the throat soundlessly as the sun moves across the sky, but with greater zeal and speed, and then his dark blood flowing with the same inevitable hush as dark night falls on familiar things (Tóibín 2017, 3-4).

Nevertheless, a significant paradox comes to the fore in the Queen's view on death and revenge: she confesses at the end of her long initial monologue that, once she has killed her husband, she envisions 'the possibility of a bloodless future' and thinks that 'the worst was over' (Tóibín 2017, 65). This fantasy of prospective peace discloses how unaware she is of her own moral doctrine that death is always ravenous for more death. The elation that ensues after her crime precludes her from realising that her revenge is to be met with further revenge, since her archaic moral system perforce involves a tragic cycle of 'Old

crimes and desires for vengeance. Old murders and memories of murder. Old wars and old treacheries' (Tóibín 2017, 16).

Towards the end of the novel, in her second and last monologue, Clytemnestra comes to the realisation that her vengeful being-in-loss leads her to an inevitable encounter with her own death. She knows that the murder of her husband will be necessarily followed by her murder. Indeed, lonely in the royal palace, the Queen sees 'the shadows fold in on me' (Tóibín 2017, 227), feels the advent of her demise, and even drags herself 'as though I were alive' (Tóibín 2017, 229). Suddenly, she notices the dim and ominous figure of her son Orestes. He is her executioner in retaliation for Agamemnon's death. Death begets death: as the traditional version of the myth establishes, Orestes commits matricide in a final act that reproduces the very moral logic that his mother has upheld. The cycle of rage and revenge eventually leads the entire House of Atreus to a bloody tragedy precipitated by an all too devastating loss and a vicious sense of bereavement.

3. The Domestic Trojan Horse

Despite her effort to transform her grief into vindictive action, Clytemnestra knows that her society, regulated by what American classicist Froma I. Zeitlin calls 'the dynamics of misogyny' (1978), allows very little room for women to become publically vocal, visible, vigorous or violent. This patriarchal determinism, ancient and modern, imposes on them an overwhelming facticity, confines them to a repressive immanence,⁶ and robs them of any truthful possibility of existence beyond the domestic world. However, in the face of these constraints, Clytemnestra shows a Foucauldian awareness of power relations: she understands that at the heart of any hegemonic structure of control there exists a nook of resistance.⁷ Power inevitably engenders movements or even gestures of counter-power. One such gesture is embodied by a helpless yet dissident Iphigenia who refuses her sacrifice, curses her father and strives to liberate her oppressed body. Clytemnestra recalls and celebrates her daughter's final struggle as a miniscule act of rebellion against abusive patriarchal/paternal authority:

I am proud that she never ceased to struggle, that never once, not for one second, despite the ingratiating speech she had made, did she accept her fate. She did not give up trying to loosen the twine around her ankles or the ropes around her wrists so that she could get away from them. Or stop trying to curse her father so that he would feel the weight of her contempt (Tóibín 2017, 4).

Immediately after this passage, Clytemnestra reveals yet another symbolic instance of dissidence against patriarchalism: she prepares her daughter to pronounce a feminine curse that has passed down from mothers to daughters and whose power can infuse atavistic fears in Agamemnon and his soldiers. The Queen knows that no rational arguments and no appeals to compassion can change her husband's political and religious will. He is adamant that the gods themselves demand his daughter's sacrifice in order to favour the navigation of his boats towards Troy. For this reason, the Queen believes that only the numinous fear of a power tantamount to the supernatural or divine can dissuade Agamemnon and his court from perpetrating the sacrifice of a princess. For Clytemnestra, a tragic curse can cause such fear, since it is common knowledge among the Greeks that

the weight of a hex may lead kings and heroes to their decline. Although Iphigenia is gagged and prevented from uttering the curse at the moment of her slaughter, she does manage to scream aloud ‘so that her voice pierced the hearts of those who heard her’ (Tóibín 2017, 5). Once again, Clytemnestra evokes this piercing shriek as an act of bravery, self-assertion and even micro-feminism. As quoted above, the Queen feels hugely proud that her daughter ‘never ceased to struggle, that never once, not for one second [...] did she accept her fate’ (Tóibín 2017, 4). Iphigenia fought back, resisted and died in all dignity.

Further into her monologue, the Queen explains how she herself tries to do everything in her power to prevent the sacrifice. As soon as she arrives in Aulis with Iphigenia and learns the true motive behind Agamemnon’s need to see his daughter, Clytemnestra organises a swift escape plan, takes refuge in a sanctuary, involves Achilles in her machinations, and even tries to ‘threaten and terrorize’ anybody that stands in her way (Tóibín 2017, 25), all within a dramatic display of her Brechtian maternal courage. On the day of her daughter’s sacrifice, the Queen cannot repress herself: ‘I stretched out my arms and raised my voice and I began the curse. I directed it against all of them. Some of those in front of me started to run in fright’ (Tóibín 2017, 33). Her intention is to complete the hex that Iphigenia tried to utter, but Agamemnon and his men react immediately and brutally to the Queen’s act of defiance. Since her power poses a real threat to male authority and order, Clytemnestra is captured and buried in a hole for three days. It is during her captivity, however, that she decides the course of her future: ‘I determined that I would kill Agamemnon in retaliation for what he had done. I would consult no oracle or priest. I would pray to no one. I would plot alone in silence’ (Tóibín 2017, 36). In some symbolic way, the Queen dies as a captive of her patriarchal society and experiences a complete rebirth as a new woman and a vengeful revenant.

Clytemnestra recounts that, immediately after her release, she begins to make her plans for vengeance. In developing them, she turns into the radical nemesis of Homer’s Penelope. Her sense of patience is not at all a display of family love, innocence and fidelity. Clytemnestra waits stoically for her husband’s return with a false attitude of forgiveness and a calm disposition. However, her apparent hospitality –her open arms, smiles and erotic scent– amounts to nothing but a Machiavellian scheme to cover up her vicious hostility and exert her counter-power in the most surreptitious manner. The Queen transforms her daughter’s final screams into a well-organised force of secret rebellion:

Her screams as they murdered her were replaced by silence and by scheming when Agamemnon, her father, returned and I fooled him to thinking that I would not retaliate. I waited and I watched for signs, and smiled and opened my arms to him, and I had a table here prepared with food. Food for the fool! I was wearing the special scent that excited him. Scent for the fool! (Tóibín 2017, 5).

Clytemnestra’s vindictive intelligence clashes starkly with Agamemnon’s foolish moral behaviour. Upon his return to Argus, he acts as if he had obliterated every memory of his daughter’s sacrifice with no load of guilt or grief. His hands seem unfairly ‘free of all stain, [...] his arms outstretched to embrace his friends, his face all smiles’ (Tóibín 2017, 5). He simply wishes to commemorate his epic triumph in Troy, enjoy the relief of being

home and cast ‘all thought of danger far from his mind’ (Tóibín 2017, 5). Nevertheless, little does he know that his own palace is home to his most cold-blooded foe. Clytemnestra reveals with uttermost self-congratulation that, while her husband behaves like a careless fool, she is discreetly bent on revenge, leaving nothing to chance and planning every single step. Initially, she takes control of the royal palace, haunts its corridors every night like a Hamletian ‘hungry ghost’ (Tóibín 2017, 39), disposes of the private guards sent by her husband, then subdues the whole court of state counsellors with the abduction of their children and grandchildren, and finds a lover and an ally in the dungeons – Aegisthus, an enemy of Agamemnon. In less than no time, Clytemnestra has carried out a discreet *coup d’état* that facilitates her eventual act of vengeance.

When Agamemnon returns home, his wife has already become the domestic version of the horse that served the Greeks to enter the city of Troy and win the war. The Queen presents herself as a gift to her husband when he enters the palace, welcoming him with a feast, preparing for him a bath of perfumed water, feigning an attitude of absolute contentment, and expecting him to ‘bathe in the relief of being home. Yes, home. That is where the lion came. I knew what to do with the lion once he came home’ (Tóibín 2017, 6). For the vengeful Queen, the domestic sphere constitutes the seat of her power, the intimate space of female action, and hence the equivalent of the virile battlefield where she knows she can win her war against her husband. As a matter of fact, she receives the monarch with deceitful bliss, dupes him into believing that the palace is a space of relief, makes him feel safe in her presence, treats him ‘as if he were a god’ (Tóibín 2017, 58), and eventually murders him by surprise in the privacy of a room where he is vulnerable and she holds all power. In this manner, Clytemnestra transforms her home into a place of radical action and makes a domestic use of the military stratagem of deceit that her compatriots deployed against the Trojans. She is the horse that Agamemnon could never have expected to find in his own home.

4. The Twilight of the Gods and the Liquid World

Tóibín’s Clytemnestra declares that, after the sacrifice of Iphigenia, she renounced her faith in the gods and never prays for their intervention in her vindictive schemes. The cause of this renunciation is not self-evident. One could argue that the Queen lays the blame of the sacrifice upon the gods for having commanded Agamemnon to murder his own daughter in exchange for better wind conditions for his warships. It is reasonable to think in this line that Clytemnestra associates her grief with the monstrous authority of some sacred deontology that her husband has to obey. If this were the case, it would then prove to be perfectly logical that the Mycenaean Queen decides to deny the gods any form of devotion or allegiance. Nevertheless, in her view, the deities play no role whatsoever in her daughter’s death for a simple theological reason: ‘The gods have their own unearthly concerns, unimagined by us. They barely know we are alive’ (Tóibín 2017, 7).

In her approach to the divine, Clytemnestra defends an Epicurean theistic position that characterises the gods as indifferent and distant spectators of what happens among mortals. For her, ‘the idea that the gods allowed my husband to win his war, that they inspired every plan he worked out and every move he made [...] or that they watched the

murder of my daughter with approval' (Tóibín 2017, 6-7) is simply ludicrous and infantile. Here, in her theological conviction that the deities are not responsible for anything, the Queen implicitly sees her husband as the only one to blame for the sacrifice of Iphigenia. His hubris is the truthful motive. He regards himself as the centre of the world, believing that the gods favour his causes, that his political ambitions are blessed, and that his war matters more than anything else. For Clytemnestra, it is his narcissism that leads Agamemnon to trade the life of his own daughter for the glory of his name and nation, and the gods take no part in his achievements. If the wind changed and propelled his ships, if his men did not perish in the battleground and if his war reached a glorious end, it was an outcome of what the American philosopher Nicholas Rescher (2014) calls 'the machinations of luck.' For this thinker and for Clytemnestra alike, luck constitutes an inevitable force in a godless world and hence 'a key factor of our existence' (Rescher, 169). The Queen is very clear in this respect: 'My husband was lucky with the wind, that was all, and lucky his men were brave, and lucky that he prevailed. It could easily have been otherwise. He did not need to sacrifice our daughter to the gods' (Tóibín 2017, 8).

The question remains, however, as to why the Queen of Argos abandons her religious faith. There was a time, she confesses in her monologue, when she truly believed in the direct intervention of the Greek gods in the world of human affairs. In a remote, perhaps pre-modern and vivid past, the deities had a real value and even attributed meaning to human existence: 'they listened to our desires and tried to fulfil them for us, when they knew our minds and when they could send us signs' (Tóibín 2017, 7). Nevertheless, this old theism, understood as a very personal and emotional relationship with the divine, no longer has any validity in Clytemnestra's modern worldview. More an heir to Nietzsche's famous *deicide* than to her original Greek sense of *eusebeia* (or piety), the Queen maintains that she now lives alone 'in the shivering, solitary knowledge that the time of the gods has passed' (Tóibín 2017, 6).

The reason for such a Nietzschean turn is not explicitly clear, but Tóibín does provide some hints. Well into her elaborate narration, Clytemnestra reveals that her intimate communication with the gods breaks at some point and her prayers, consequently, find 'no source and no destination, not even a human one, since my daughter is dead and cannot hear' (Tóibín 2017, 6). In light of these words, one may suppose that the Queen is incapable of maintaining her religious devotion after the loss of her Iphigenia. Clytemnestra has no motivation for showing piety towards some passive gods that have done nothing to prevent her daughter's death. Her prayers for the salvation of Iphigenia fall through the cracks. The gods turn a blind eye to the Queen, and so she responds in kind: she grows indifferent to the deities, suspends her faith, and resolves to lead a secular life with a purely mundane language: 'I am praying to no gods,' she remarks, 'I am alone among those here because I do not pray and will not pray again. Instead, I will speak in ordinary whispers. I will speak in words that come from the world' (Tóibín 2017, 6). Clytemnestra thus refuses to worship the old passive gods, abandons her religious faith, changes her own language, and assumes, as mentioned above, the 'solitary knowledge that the time of the gods has passed' (Tóibín 2017, 6).

Nonetheless, the symbolic deicide that Clytemnestra perpetrates brings about major consequences for how she perceives the world now. With the deities gone, the world loses any inherent meaning, any transcendental value, any teleological sense, and hence any horizon of ultimate justice. Instead, for the Queen of Argos, ‘what had once been powerful and added meaning to everything is now desolate and strange’ (Tóibín 2017, 8). In these words lies a particularly Nietzschean thought: the difficult recognition that the world is nothing but ‘a meaningless, goalless process of becoming that is indifferent to human demands for meaning’ (Williams 2012, 273). Clytemnestra here adopts a very philosophical voice that rejects the pre-modern metaphysics of divine determinism and stable metanarratives in favour of a more modern or even postmodern conception of the world as an uncertain place devoid of transcendental values and fixed meanings, and at the mercy of the machinations of luck.

5. Conclusion

In *House of Names*, Tóibín shapes a psychologically cogent, dramatically powerful and even philosophically complex subjectivity for the legendary figure of Clytemnestra. To shape his Queen of Argos, he takes the classical Euripidean referent as his starting point and reworks it into a well-rounded novelistic character whose identity is far from plain. In effect, his new Clytemnestra seems to function within a stark contrast: on the one hand, Clytemnestra appears as a methodical rationalist that transmutes her grief into revenge, perpetrates a Machiavellian *coup d'état*, and attains her vindictive purpose with clarity and precision. However, on the other hand, the Queen of Argos develops her own metaphysical theory of the world as a liquid modernity in which ‘nothing is stable’ (Tóibín 2017, 9),⁸ no truth is absolute, and everything seems strange, blurred, arbitrary and ungodly. It seems that, in *House of Names*, Tóibín distinguishes at least two consecutive stages in Clytemnestra’s psychological development: at first, before her crime, she embodies only courage, lucidity, methodism, and political intelligence, and these attributes are all put to the service of her blood-revenge. In this stage, the Mycenaean Queen has a purpose, a teleological grand narrative and a fixed meaning that fixates her existence on the archaic ethics of revenge. Once she has achieved her sole goal, she inevitably falls into some kind of ‘meaningless, goalless process of becoming’ (Williams 2012, 273). Not only does Clytemnestra lose the certainty and clarity of having a specific purpose in mind: she also seems to realise that the attainment of such a purpose amounts to nothing. The act of revenge brings her neither peace nor satisfaction. Her grief for the loss of Iphigenia does not go with Agamemnon’s blood. Her own life hangs on a thread. Her ancient truth of vengeance gives way to a more contemporary metaphysics of absurdity, instability, ‘blankness, strangeness, and silence’ (Tóibín 2017, 228). As a result, Tóibín’s Clytemnestra is not merely a dauntless and pragmatic heroine, but also a vulnerable and wounded voice that speaks our contemporary language of uncertainty.

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Notes

¹ For a more recent and exhaustive study of the Clytemnestra myth in classical and modern texts, see De Martino, Morenilla et al. (2017).

² In an article for *The Guardian* (2017), published shortly after the release of *House of Names*, the Irish writer points out that it was his close reading of Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* that made him discover the great complexity underlying the character of Clytemnestra. He writes: 'When I began to study closely a late play by Euripides called *Iphigenia at Aulis*, I began to see Clytemnestra as more complex, her wounded voice as more needy and uncertain.' In another digital article for *Penguin*, he explains: 'I came across a reference to a late play by Euripides called *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and I found a copy of it. This play opened up a world for me and showed me Clytemnestra's motive for killing her husband in full detail.' The result of what Euripides opened up for Tóibín and of his particular fascination with Clytemnestra is precisely the audacious reworking of Greek tragedy that the Irish novelist proposes in *House of Names*.

³ See Tóibín's article in *The Guardian* (2014), where he discusses several works that had a great impact on his fiction and informed his own notion of death and grief.

⁴ For an in-depth discussion of death, loss, grief and other existential concerns in this particular novel, see Cantillo (2015).

⁵ Here I take my cue from Storolow (2011), whose idea of *being-towards-loss* seeks to conceptualise the experience of death as an extra-regarding, transcendent and social one, dissociated from the Cartesian individual and deeply connected with our lived *Mitsein* (our being-with-others).

⁶ Here I take the notion of immanence as postulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949): for the French philosopher, the female subject is metaphysically stigmatised as an immanent object, an *en-soi*, deprived of the essential freedom to define herself, to decide upon her own life, to oppose abuse and authority, and to become an authentic individual.

⁷ I define Clytemnestra's notion of power as essentially Foucauldian for a rather simple reason: Michel Foucault (1978) is the philosopher who has articulated, in the most transparent manner, the idea that 'where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (95). In *House of Names*, Clytemnestra sees and seizes this very possibility of resistance not outside the hegemonic centre of power, but directly at its core—in the very royal palace and, more specifically, in the domestic sphere that she controls.

⁸ By liquid modernity I refer to Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) sociological idea that our time is essentially characterised by constant fluidity, vagueness, existential fugacity, epistemic chaos, and hence a complete lack of lived fixity. Tóibín's Clytemnestra concurs with this vision: for her, the godless world is nothing but a strange, unstable and erratic process in which she no longer finds a teleological horizon.

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