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**The Curse of the House of Agamemnon: Revisiting the Characters  
of Orestes and Elektra in Colm Tóibín's *House of Names* (2018)  
and Jennifer Saint's *Elektra* (2022)**

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## Abstract

Throughout the years, numerous pieces of literature have been written using as basis the ancient Greek myths of Electra and Orestes as transmitted by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. This paper will analyze two of said retellings of the events surrounding the fate of the House of Atreus: *House of Names* (2018) by Colm Tóibín and *Elektra* (2022) by Jennifer Saint. Our thesis will delve into the differences between the representation and roles of the main characters in the novels with respect to the ancient sources, thus offering an insight into the influences behind the construction of these retellings. However, this study will particularly focus on the two main focalizers of the novels, namely Tóibín's Orestes and Saint's Elektra. The analysis will revolve around four main points: the characters' relationship to Agamemnon, their connection to Clytemnestra, their views on their mother's murder of their father and their role in the avenging of Agamemnon. The methods used to develop this in-depth analysis include perspectives on gender roles, sexuality and psychology among others. On the one hand, we conclude that Tóibín's Orestes greatly differs from the ancient Greek sources, because he is a completely inactive man: he is incapable of making any decision on his own and far from wanting to avenge his father as society would ask from him, he prefers to lead a life away from the palace with his lover Leander. As a result, Orestes is portrayed as an easily swayed character that lends himself to Electra's manipulations and ends up murdering his mother despite his own unwillingness, simply because he has been ordered to do so. On the other hand, Saint's Elektra is characterized following the popular perception influenced by Jung's theory; that is to say, Elektra's complex—a young woman with semi-incestuous feelings towards her father. The adoration she feels for Agamemnon transforms her into a revenge-obsessed, manipulative and unnatural woman by the standards of the time. In other words, she is virtually a copy of Clytemnestra, the mother she hates precisely because of her upsetting of social and gender roles. In short, both Orestes and Elektra are non-normative subversive characters—especially in regards to their gender performances—because they fail to meet the expectations that both their parents and the society have placed upon them.

Key Words: Orestes, Elektra, myth, ancient Greece, retelling

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## 1. Introduction: The Tradition of Mythmaking

Myths are narrations and stories which supposedly relate facts associated with religious beliefs; they are narratives about gods and other types of superhuman beings that are involved in a certain way in human stories (Buxton, Smith, et al.). Some of these stories have a real origin, while others are fictional, but all of them explain the world and the experiences of humankind (Buxton, Smith, et al.). One of the best-known myths of Ancient Greece is that of the House of Atreus—“a family line from Greek mythology” (*Greek Legends and Myths*).

The details of this myth have arrived to us mainly through the plays written by Aeschylus, usually referred to as the *Oresteia*. First performed in 458 BC, it is the only complete trilogy from ancient Greece that has survived to this day (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, “*Oresteia*”). The three works that make up this trilogy and narrate the curse of the House of Atreus are *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*. The first play of the trilogy narrates the murder of Agamemnon committed by his wife Clytemnestra; the second play deals with her death at the hands of her son Orestes, and the saga closes with the account of Orestes’ trial (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, “*Oresteia*”). Along with Aeschylus, two other authors, Sophocles and Euripides, also wrote plays about the same family, both titled *Electra*, which tell the story from the point of view of the youngest daughter of Agamemnon. Additionally, Euripides also wrote a sort of prequel in *Iphigenia in Aulis*—which tells the sacrifice of Agamemnon's eldest daughter—and *Orestes*. All these works form a chain of retelling and adaptations that have been added to over the years, to which both the Irish writer Colm Tóibín and the British writer Jennifer Saint have joined with their novels *House of Names* (2018) and *Elektra* (2022).

Each of these recent novels, taking advantage of all those already existing myths, add a twist to the same general plot lines and characters. In the case of Tóibín, he chooses to tell the story through the three main characters of the myth, that is, Clytemnestra, Electra and Orestes, the latter being the most important as will be seen. Moreover, Tóibín decides to use part of his native Irish folklore in the descriptions of the landscapes that are reminiscent of Ireland and he even includes the mythological

Irish Cailleach<sup>1</sup> (Beleuță 69). In addition, Tóibín decides to make a small change in Elektra's name, changing the 'k' to a 'c'—maybe to make the name more contemporary. As a result, when referring to this character in *House of Names*, the form of the name used will be 'Electra'. On the other hand, in the case of Saint, she makes use of three women to tell her story: two of them are central characters in the Greek plays, Elektra and Clytemnestra, but the third character, Cassandra, is not a main character in ancient myths where she is barely mentioned. Furthermore, Saint creates two different starting points in her narration—Clytemnestra's and Cassandra's lives before Agamemnon—, which end up coming together as the novel progresses. It should be noted that Saint's transcription of Elektra's name differs from Tóibín's and thus, the name used to refer to the character will be that of its eponymous novel.

The aim of this paper is to compare these retellings of the myths surrounding the House of Atreus, by focusing on the author's choices of main focalizers, namely Tóibín's Orestes and Saint's Elektra. Consequently, this thesis will be divided into two blocks, the first one dealing with *House of Names* and the second with *Elektra*. Both blocks will begin with an introductory section that explores the ways in which the books' versions may differ from the ancient sources, followed by a point that delves into the aforementioned focalizers, Orestes and Elektra. This in-depth study will focus on four main axes: the character's relationship with Agamemnon, their opinion of their father's crime, their relationship with Clytemnestra and their views on the impending matricide.

To sum up, this paper will try to illustrate the ways in which the aforementioned choice of focalizers give way to different perspectives of the children of Agamemnon, Electra/Elektra and Orestes, but manage to recreate their respective focalizers as agents that upset the social rules ascribed to them because of their gender and lineage, thus subverting their parents' expectations.

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<sup>1</sup>*Cailleach* is a common word in both Scottish and Irish Gaelic meaning "old woman" or "hag." [...] One of the great Celtic ancestors, the Cailleach was the goddess of the cold and the winds (Wright).

## 2. **An Insight Into Orestes' Exile: The Myth of the House of Atreus in Colm Tóibín's *House of Names* (2018)**

*House of Names* is a novel written by the Irish novelist Colm Tóibín. Tóibín has achieved an established reputation as a playwright and novelist over the last two decades thanks to his various works that deal with themes related to family relationships and the experience of uprooting, and nostalgia (Medda 199).

This novel is a contemporary adaptation of Aeschylus' trilogy of plays, the *Oresteia*. Through the novelisation of this and other ancient tragedies—like Sophocles' and Euripides' dealing with the same myth—, Tóibín tells the story of the murder of Agamemnon, the revenge of his children Electra and Orestes and finally the matricide committed by Orestes. The novel is structured around three different first-person narrators—Clytemnestra, Orestes, and Electra—that transmit a more complex image of these mythical characters. As we will see, Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra, long regarded as one of Greek mythology's greatest villains, is presented as a loving and suffering mother rather than a cold-hearted murderess. On the other hand, the story of his imprisonment, escape, and exile is told by Orestes himself, who is not the dutiful warrior and son of the sources. As for Electra, she is described as almost a carbon-copy of Clytemnestra in her plotting to take revenge on her mother.

### 2.1 **Blending Mythical Sources**

Predominantly, *House of Names* follows the chronology of Aeschylus' work but also includes references to other authors such as Sophocles and Euripides—i.e. Iphigenia's speech before she is sacrificed is taken from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*—, who are also present throughout the text (Medda 201). Nevertheless, Tóibín also includes his own original changes such as adding new plotlines—for example, the story about Orestes—, while on the other hand, he eliminates certain elements of the source plays. This is particularly notable in the case of the characters. To begin with, he introduces changes in the secondary characters: Orestes companion Pylades has been eliminated and his role is somewhat substituted by a new character, Leander—possibly a reference

to the myth of *Hero and Leander*<sup>2</sup>. Aegisthus' characterisation is also more precise, with Tóibín representing him as a shrewd political strategist. Thirdly, new characters are added such as Mitros and Ianthe. Finally, Clytemnestra, Elektra and Orestes, who in the original trilogy hardly had a personality aside from the role they play in the murder and avenging of Agamemnon, gain their own traits and motivations external to the son of Atreus.

Indeed, in the accounts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, Clytemnestra is always secondary to other events, such as the murder of Agamemnon and Orestes' revenge. In other words, she is only important because of her function and we get to know her through other characters' accounts. In these, she is described a cold and calculating woman who by getting a lover and murdering Agamemnon, shows no respect for her husband—and hence legal owner. This results in her upsetting the gender power dynamics of the ancient Greek household, whose official guardians are the eldest males, that is to say, Agamemnon and later Orestes (The British Museum). In other words, she is presented much like the archetypical *femme fatale*<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, in Tóibín's novel, Clytemnestra is able to express herself in her own voice. Yet, her opening of the novel with a description of a pile of dead bodies is reminiscent of her popular reception as a cold-blooded murderess:

I have been acquainted with the smell of death. The sickly, sugary smell that wafted in the wind towards the rooms in this palace. It is easy now for me to feel peaceful and content. [...] Maybe the smell has entered my body and been welcomed there like an old friend come to visit. The smell of fear and panic. [...] It is my constant companion; it 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 3)

However, as the story progresses Clytemnestra's narrations bring the readers back to the motivation for her crime: the murder of her daughter Iphigenia. The book explores the character's anguish at knowing that her daughter will be murdered, her attempts at

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<sup>2</sup> "Hero, virgin priestess of Aphrodite at Sestos, was seen at a festival by Leander of Abydos; they fell in love, and he swam the Hellespont at night to visit her [...] One stormy night [...] Leander was drowned; Hero, seeing his body, drowned herself likewise" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Hero and Leander").

<sup>3</sup>"a seductive woman who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations" (Merriam-Webster).

saving her and the punishment Agamemnon subjects her to for daring to rebel. After three days trapped in a hole, Clytemnestra emerges as a much more sympathetic character:

I was half buried underground as my daughter died alone. I never saw her body and I did not hear her cries or call out to her. But others told me of her cry. And those last high sounds she made, I now believe, in all their helplessness and fear, as they became shrieks, as they pierced the ears of the crowd assembled, will be remembered for ever. Nothing else. [...] And in that time 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 33-36)

In short, in Tóibín's interpretation, Clytemnestra is an ordinary woman, whose reason to resort to crime is not her evil nature, but her love for her child. What is more, she is not presented as completely remorseless, for she comes to understand that she will never find any consolation for Iphigenia's death, no matter how many times she murders Agamemnon in her mind. However, in the end, her fate does not diverge from the original sources, and in many senses, it is even worse. While in the original plays, she was positioned more or less at the same level as Aegisthus, her final status after Agamemnon is murdered, is one of subjugation, as ultimately, she has changed one oppressor for another. So, as a matter of fact, the tragic elements only in her story are not Agamemnon's murder and the way her children are forced to kill her: her own life is a tragedy: she sees her daughter die, despite her best efforts to find freedom she only changes one oppressive man for another, only to be finally murdered by her children.

Contrary to Clytemnestra, Electra is given more of a voice in the original plays—although in spite of being the main character of both Euripides' and Sophocles' *Electra*, she has no personality aside from her obsession with avenging her father. Instead, in Tóibín's novel Electra has a bigger role. For instance, she is appointed regent while Clytemnestra, Iphigenia and Orestes are away, thus marking from the beginning a certain separation from the rest of the family. On their return, she is suspicious of her mother and engages in a sort of cold war with her, while trying her strategies at the same time. This results in Electra showing two different faces. On the one hand, we can see that she is a dutiful daughter who, still believing that her mother is the one to blame



for the death of her sister Iphigenia—“She [Electra] developed a habit of repeating the same lines to me [Clytemnestra], the same accusations. ‘You let her be sacrificed. You came back without her.’” (Tóibín 39)—she continues listening to her advice and doing what her mother asks and orders her to—“When Electra came, I signalled to her not to speak of what had occurred in her brother’s presence. [...] She left me and my son in peace” (Tóibín 44)—, spending time with her—“Some days I [Electra] walk with her” (Tóibín 141)—giving her space when she needs it, and after her father's death, even knowing that her mother had something to do with it, she remains with her as if nothing had happened, while she visits her father's and sister's grave day after day, like a good daughter: “My mother and I often spoke of Orestes and where he might be. I knew that relations between her and Aegisthus were difficult so I took my meals alone and went each day to the grave and returned with my father’s spirit close to me” (Tóibín 155). On the other hand, we have a scheming Electra, almost on the same level as Clytemnestra. Later in the novel, we get to see how the good daughter's behaviour was just a mask to hide behind as she plotted revenge against her mother for her father's murder: “I would join them in the game of innocence for as long as I needed to. I would assist my mother in her role as someone who had known grief and was now almost foolish, distracted, and harmless. We would play the parts together [...] when the time was right, have my mother murdered” (Tóibín 162-163). She spends years planning revenge against her mother on her own—since she believes Orestes is dead and cannot help her—, recruiting soldiers to become her own spies, hatching different plans about how to attack in the future, and even considers marrying someone powerful so that she can later use her husband's army against her mother and Aegisthus, just like her mother allied herself with Aegisthus to defeat Agamemnon:

It struck me then that such a husband would set me free. [...] We would be careful at first, I thought. He could advise my mother and Aegisthus. And slowly he would begin to see how poisonous they both were, how they stank of blood, and how necessary it was for both my mother and her lover to be sent to a place where they could cause no further damage.

(Tóibín 170)

Thus, Tóibín chooses to present an Electra closer to Clytemnestra’s personality. Gradually, and despite herself, Electra becomes more and more like her mother to the

point that, when Orestes is reluctant to kill Clytemnestra, she manipulates him so that he commits the murder. She even convinces him to marry Ianche, who is already pregnant as a result of rape, without Orestes knowing. By the end of the novel, Electra reproduces the same state her mother was in: the facto ruler of Mycenae, arguably freer than her counterpart in the original sources, yet in reality heavily dependent on Aegisthus, thus opening the question to whether the story will repeat itself.

On the other hand, Orestes is arguably the main character of the novel, as most of the chapters are focalized on him. In the original sources, the picture painted of Orestes is ambivalent: Sophocles and Aeschylus present him along with Electra as a dutiful grown-up son willing to commit matricide to avenge his father; while Euripides introduces a more doubtful Orestes, who is reluctant to murder Clytemnestra and has to be pushed into it by his sister. In contrast, the Orestes in *House of Names* first appears as a child in Aulis, the site where his older sister is murdered. Upon Orestes and Clytemnestra's return to Mycenae and the ascendance of Aegisthus, Orestes is not sent away to protect him as in the original plays. Instead, he is kidnapped by Aegisthus' men and imprisoned without his mother's consent. In his escape, he collaborates with his friends Leander and Mitros, who will be his companions until he grows up. During this time, Orestes lives in a secluded hut with his friends and establishes a romantic relationship with Leander. However, once Mitros passes away, Orestes leaves the safe haven that is the hut to return to Mycenae. Rather than presenting himself to murder Clytemnestra right away, Orestes spends some time with her and Aegisthus, pondering whether to follow Electra's plans and kill his mother or send her to live away from all of them. Eventually, he succumbs to the words of Electra. After the deed is done, Orestes is not chased by the Erinyes/Eumenides as in the original plays, but he is nevertheless in great agony: on the one hand, he cannot continue his relationship with Leander and on the other, because his inability to cope with the remorse of killing his mother leads him to see her ghost, just like in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. In short, Tóibín recreates the tragedy of Orestes but does not depend on external elements like the gods to explain the character's anguish: all of Orestes' pain comes from remorse, thus making the character more realistic.

Ultimately, while Tóibín's Clytemnestra and Electra have more personality than those of the ancient sources, their stories are barely altered. On the contrary, the

character of Orestes has a completely new history, one that is not found in the ancient plays, which is why the next section will deal only with him and why this section has not delved as much into his character.

## 2.2 Classical Masculinities in Orestes' Perceptions

Orestes is popularly known as the prodigal son that returned from exile to avenge his father—although in some versions like Euripides', he is not particularly convinced by the idea—only to end up punished for his matricide by the Erinyes, the underworld deities of vengeance. Tóibín's version of the character largely deviates from the ancient texts, by dwelling on the boy's exile and changing his personality. His characterisation of the hero is in many ways closer to Euripides', as his Orestes is full of doubt and prefers to let other people make the decisions that he should be making himself.

Tóibín's novel explores Orestes' character from an early age and shows the relationship he had with Agamemnon. As traditional for the first-born son, Agamemnon is eager for Orestes to become a man and a warrior who will replace him on the throne of Mycenae in the future: “Bring Orestes with you. He is old enough now to savour the sight of soldiers in the days before a battle” (Tóibín 12). As such, when he receives him and the rest of their family on the camp in Aulis, Agamemnon presents Orestes with “a sword and light body armour made for him so that he would look like a warrior.” (Tóibín 15). Even at just eight years of age, Orestes “had grown beyond his father's dreams.” (Tóibín 14). This seems to be a joyful time for Orestes too, as he is described playing with his father: “They both came in, all bright-eyed and boisterous” (Tóibín 20). However, it is also a somewhat traumatic time, as without anyone knowing, Orestes witnesses the sacrificial death of his sister:

None of them knew that I saw her dying, and I heard her voice and I heard my mother screaming and saw her being dragged away.' [...] Her hands and her feet were tied. And then I heard her voice and my mother's. They put something over their mouths to stop them shouting. [...] Then they put a blindfold on her. And then another man who was beside my father moved slowly towards her with a knife in his hand. And the cloth around her mouth fell away and she started to scream. The sound was like an animal. She fell over and they took her body away.

(Tóibín 135-136)

Despite this, Orestes continues to appreciate his father, although it is unclear if this is due to the fact that his youth prevents him from understanding the gravity of what has occurred. Nevertheless, while he is fighting at Troy, Orestes practices with his sword and on the day of Agamemnon's arrival, he is anxious and happy. In a poignant scene that helps humanize Agamemnon, the author describes him as “laughing as Orestes approached. He took out his own sword and began to joust with his son, shouting to his followers to come and help him overcome this famous warrior” (Tóibín 57).

Right after Clytemenestra assassinates Agamemnon, Orestes is kidnapped by Aegisthus, who in this version has a much more active role than in some of the ancient plays. Together with other children from the city, Orestes is taken away to a dark prison, at the mercy of Aegisthus' brutal overseers. On their way there, Orestes sees his captors abuse and kill a family, further adding to the trauma. Even once in the hideout, instead of establishing bonds with other captive children, Orestes has to endure them selling him to the guards, who lash at least one of their prisoners daily. However, he does manage to make two friends, Leander and Mitros, with whom he escapes from imprisonment. During their escape, Orestes is shown to lack initiative, letting himself be swayed by Leander who takes on the mantle of the leader. Together, they find out a house where Orestes commits his first bloody act: being attacked by dogs, he takes it upon himself to smash their heads but only after one of them has bitten Leander. With their wounded friend, Mitros and Orestes find out that the house belongs to an old woman who has been abandoned by all her relatives and show remorse for causing her pain: “Orestes believed that if the woman had more dogs, then she would not have lamented the dead ones with such intensity [...] As Mitros began to vomit, Orestes felt the urge also” (Tóibín 107). Eventually, through Leander's intervention, she decides to take in the three fugitives in exchange for their protection: “‘We're not leaving.’ [...] ‘Not until she dies or until she wants us to go. That's what I promised her.’” (Tóibín 110-111). Their lives in that house by the sea begin violently, as Orestes is forced to attack a man that was threatening Leander in a rather gruesome way: “pushing his thumbs as fiercely as he could into the man's eyes” (Tóibín 117). He also murders one of the men who played with him as a child, thus symbolically ending his own infancy.

From that point on, Orestes establishes a bond with Leander, whom he tends to turn to for orders and for whom he seems to feel a certain attraction: “He could not stop

looking at Leander as he moved shirtless in the small room” (Tóibín 121). In time, this relationship turns into a romantic one. Much of the actions become blurred, as Orestes’ narration does not dwell too much on their sexual encounters. This may be a reflection of their self-consciousness, as their relationship would not have been socially sanctioned. Perhaps this is why they keep it a secret from their friend Mitros and the woman. Nevertheless, their bond deepens with time and their reliance on each other becomes evident, as they develop strategies to be in contact, even during the few moments they are not together: “Leander and Orestes learned to whistle so that even if they were apart, they could hear each other” (Tóibín 124). The scenes where Leander and Orestes are together are intimate and show the teenagers engaging in brief moments of vulnerability that are abruptly broken by the need to return to and fit into society, as represented by their return to the house they share with Mitros and the old woman:

As they sat there together, Orestes lay back and leaned his head against Leander’s chest as Leander put his arms around him and held him. Orestes knew when that happened to say nothing, and think of nothing either, merely wait until the sun dipped into the sea, when Leander would relax his arms and nudge Orestes out of the way and stand up and stretch and they would walk back together to the house.

(Tóibín 125).

This scene shows the asymmetry of the relationship, as Leander has more power over Orestes than the other way around. As Medda notes, Orestes grows into an adult without knowing about his father’s destiny: Leander keeps Agamemnon’s murder a secret and decides to reveal only that Agamemnon is dead, without saying by whose hand and under what circumstances (211). According to Medda, this is why the young Atride does not develop as in ancient myths, namely, he holds no desire to avenge his father (211). Indeed, despite the fond memories of his father, when Leander finally reveals that Agamemnon has been killed, Orestes barely reacts:

‘Your mother is waiting for you, and Electra too,’ Leander said.

‘But not my father?’

‘Your father is dead.’

‘Who killed him?’

Leander did not reply for a moment and then, holding Orestes closer, he whispered: 'It is enough that he is dead.'

'My sister Iphigenia is dead too,' Orestes said.

(Tóibín 134-135)

In this reaction Orestes shows to be desensitised to the concept of death and his mention of Iphigenia's murder hints that it may be because he witnessed her death. Nevertheless, he will go on to commit matricide. In part, Orestes' assassination of Clytemnestra is eased by the fact that he has grown apart from her. What is more, in general, Orestes has a tendency to inaction, only showing agency when he has no other option, as shown in his choice to murder the guards only when Leander's life is in danger. This is why the decision to return to Mycenae is not taken by him, but by a combination of Leander and events outside his control: when the old woman and Mitros die, it is Leander that convinces him to return.

Back in Mycenae, Orestes is caught up in the middle of the cold war between Clytemnestra and Electra: on the one hand, his mother is trying to attract him to her side while on the other, Electra reveals that it was their mother who killed their father and should be murdered for her crimes. Orestes himself is hesitant to commit to either of them, showing once again that he has a hard time making up his mind. It is only when Leander's family is killed that Orestes lets himself be convinced:

Now he did not wonder. Now it was clear to him. His mother had ordered the killings, just as she had ordered the kidnappings, just as she had wielded the knife that killed his father. He watched her with cold anger.

(Tóibín 219)

Yet even then, Orestes is not sure that he wants to kill her and proposes to capture and send her away from Mycenae, somewhere where she cannot harm anyone (Tóibín 222). But Electra's need to do away with her mother brings her to manipulate Orestes into seeing matricide as the only solution. This is yet another instance in which Orestes is unable to make a decision on his own. In fact, though it is he who is to kill their mother, it is Electra that plans how the deed should be accomplished:

You will behave normally. Three guards will follow you, but as you approach the steps, two will overcome the third and then they will withdraw. It will be done quietly. Do not look too closely. Do not draw attention to it. The knife you will use will be under the loose stone on the third step as you walk down.

(Tóibín 221)

Electra sets a list of steps and like an obedient child, Orestes follows them. Just like when he followed Leander's orders in the past, Orestes can only fulfil his supposed duty thanks to Electra's plotting. The one decision he makes out of his own free will is his relationship with Leander and perhaps, his brief defence of Clytemnestra. However, because of his need to please others, Orestes cannot put his foot down and prefers to leave his fate in the hands of others.

After the death of Clytemnestra and the capture of Aegisthus, Orestes presumably becomes king. However, it is Electra and Leander that take the real control of the palace in a partnership that parallels that of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, while Orestes simply becomes a figurehead (Medda 213). In fact, Orestes reaps no benefit from his crime. First, it could be argued that his life remains under threat as not only is Aegisthus not killed, but Electra also talks to him. Furthermore, though no Erinyes follow him in this version of the myth, Orestes is shown to be somewhat haunted by his actions, as Clytemnestra's ghost haunts him (Tóibín 259). Additionally, he is unable to continue his relationship with Leander, who has become detached from him and is more focused on politics:

He felt that Leander, having found out how near they were to being released when they escaped, did not want those years to be discussed. They would be consigned to oblivion, Orestes thought. [...] He was the only one who would remember.

(Tóibín 245)

However, Orestes cannot forget the years they spent together and the need to remain connected to him persists. This may explain why when he is married to Leander's sister, Ianthe, and finds out she has become pregnant as a result of rape at the hands of his mother's soldiers, Orestes neither denounces her nor forfeits the marriage as would be his right. Instead, he agrees to raise the child as his own. Though a natural people-pleaser, it is unclear why Orestes decides to withstand what at the time would have been

seen as a humiliation. It is possible that his relationship with Ianthe works as a sort of surrogate relationship with her brother Leander, or that the raising of Ianthe's child fulfils some sort of desire in him of forming a family with Leander's blood. In any case, it remains undeniable that his fate is disagreeable and nevertheless, because of his gentle nature, Orestes resolves to keep his feelings in and follow other people's designs, one last time.

Ultimately, Orestes is both disappointing and convenient for his family. On the one hand, he fails to live up to the standards that society in general and his father, in particular, have for him. Yet on the other hand, his need to please and his tendency to inaction are extremely convenient for the people around him, like Electra, Leander and even Clytemnestra, who can easily sway him in their favour in a way that would have been impossible, had he turned out to be the warrior king that Agamemnon wanted.

### **3. Incestuous Daughterly Affections: The Myth of the House of Atreus in Jennifer Saint's *Elektra* (2022)**

*Elektra* is a novel written by the British author Jennifer Saint. Like *House of Names*, this novel is also a contemporary adaptation of Aeschylus' play the *Oresteia*, where Elektra reframes the Trojan War as a narrative made up of the contrasting viewpoints of three women: Clytemnestra, the wife of the Greek king Agamemnon, Cassandra the prophetess, and Elektra, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's daughter.

Although the three women appear to have little in common on paper, Saint's retelling shows how their lives actually intersect and intertwine in meaningful ways as each strives to carve out her own path in a society where women are frequently denied the opportunity to exercise their agency or have their own voices (Baugher).

#### **3.1 Exploring Mythical Women in the Ancient Sources**

As previously established, while *Elektra* is based on ancient sources surrounding to the House of Atreus, Saint also includes her original ideas such as adding new plotlines and scenarios and completely changing the personality of most of its protagonists. For instance, she includes the wider background of Agamemnon's murder, the Trojan war, which leads her to introduce both Troy and Mycenae as settings. Regarding the characters, she shifts the focus from the famous ancient heroes, their murders and



repercussions, to the three main women that commonly feature in the murder of Agamemnon: his wife Clytemnestra; Cassandra, the cursed princess of Troy, and Elektra.

Firstly, as aforementioned, Clytemnestra appears in the accounts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, but is mainly represented as a flat character, practically the image of the scorned wife. On the contrary, Saint manages to make Clytemnestra one of the most complex characters, telling her story in a way that makes the reader feel sympathy towards her. Unlike in the original sources, where we only know Clytemnestra during her marriage years, in this novel she is introduced in her youth when she was still living in Sparta with her family. This is where she met Agamemnon for the first time and felt a sort of attraction for him: “my eye was caught by the dark-haired brother, whose surly gaze stayed fixed upon the stone tiles. Agamemnon” (Saint 7-10). Shortly after meeting Agamemnon, they talk about the conquest of Mycenae and Clytemnestra urges Agamemnon to show mercy to his cousin Aegisthus:

‘You want to be merciful,’ he said. ‘You’re a woman. But war is the business of men.’

I bristled at that. ‘You have Sparta,’ I said. ‘You’ll take Mycenae. [...] You have a chance to unite so many kingdoms together behind you. The power will belong to you – so how could one boy be a threat, however vengeful he grows up to be? What could he do to you? With so many at your command, surely you could be the greatest of all the Greeks.’

That caught his attention. ‘An interesting point,’ he mused. ‘The greatest of all the Greeks. Thank you, Clytemnestra.’

(Saint 17-18)

In this passage, we can see interpret Clytemnestra as manipulative, for she knows how to convince a man she barely knows to let the boy live. After marrying Agamemnon, the girl’s vision of her husband, changes: she sees he prefers to be remembered as a god rather than worrying about his family. In the end, Agamemnon’s killing of their daughter Iphigenia puts an end to the little respect that Clytemnestra had for him, and her personality changes radically, from being a loving woman who cared for her children to a cold and inaccessible person who in her grief, only thinks of taking

revenge on her husband (Saint 103-104). Just like in the original sources, Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon and Cassandra, with Aegisthus' collaboration. But by the end of the novel, her story seems to diverge: tired of the position she now has in Mycenae, Clytemnestra resolves to leave for Sparta, so that her daughter can be happy without her. However, before she manages to escape, Clytemnestra is murdered by her son Orestes, who is persuaded by both Pylades and Elektra. In a tragic twist, Elektra is incapable of understanding her mother's motives: to prevent her two surviving daughters, from suffering the same fate as Iphigenia.

On the other hand, unlike Clytemnestra, Cassandra barely features in the original plays and for that matter, in ancient sources in general: a captive of the Trojan war, cursed to never be believed despite her prophetic gifts, she is eventually murdered by the wife of his captor (Leahy 144). Ultimately, Cassandra is essentially a prop, collateral damage in Agamemnon's story. In contrast, Saint's version gains depth by becoming a focalizer: the reader sees her youth in Troy, and her admiration for her mother's prophetic gifts, which brings her to become a priestess of Apollo, only to be cursed by him when she does not consent to lie with him. Through this narrative, Saint adds another twist to Cassandra's tragedy: the dramatism of her curse to become a prophetess that no one will believe, is worsened by the fact that being a prophetess was her dream. Cassandra is gradually shunned by her family and lives in misery. Yet her tragedy is far from finished. When the infamous horse enters the city, Cassandra warns her people of the devastation she sees coming, but gods and fate conspire so that she is not believed. Even when she decides to take matters into her own hands and burn the horse, she is prevented from doing so, thus denying her any possibility of agency. Her tragedy continues as she ends up being raped in the same temple where she had been cursed by Apollo, precisely for not allowing her own rape. In the end, the Cassandra that reaches Mycenae has been reduced to barely more than an object, a slave. Knowing that no happiness awaits her as long as she lives because of her curse—"But I cannot hope for the future, for I know what it is to become" (Saint 229)—, she silently begs Clytemnestra to end her life:

Do not make me live on here, I implore her silently. Do not condemn me to a life among strangers. I have lived an outcast in my own family; do not make me one here in

a place where I am nothing but a conquered enemy, forced to live out years of futile yearning for a world that is lost forever.

(Saint 248)

Thus ending the tragedy of Cassandra of Troy.

The last protagonist of this novel is Elektra. In ancient sources—Aeschylus’ Oresteia trilogy, *Electra* by Euripides and *Electra* by Sophocles—she plays a largely secondary role, simply being in charge of convincing her brother Orestes to commit matricide. However, Saint focuses more on her development from a child into a furious girl, and then into a resentful young woman. Saint describes how Elektra was Agamemnon’s favourite daughter and how they had a very special loyalty to her father: “‘You’ll bring more glory to the House of Atreus, my daughter.’ [...] I believed what he said” (Saint 1). That loyalty forces her to confront her mother and does not let her see that she is mistaken in thinking that Agamemnon is some sort of saviour betrayed by his wife. As the story progresses, Elektra becomes cold and distant; she is consumed by her own anger and has one single focus: to avenge her father and make him proud by bringing ‘glory’ to the House of Atreus. At a certain point Elektra affirms that “the gods had a purpose for the House of Atreus” (Saint 150). In a sense, this is true, because ultimately, the story of the House of Atreus is a cautionary tale about how not to offend the gods. In the end, Elektra’s encouragement to kill Clytemnestra, the divine punishment that falls over Orestes and the expelling of the siblings from Mycenae, is a continuation of the familial curse:

The House of Atreus carried a curse. [...] The history of the family was full of brutal murder, adultery, monstrous ambition and rather more cannibalism than one would expect. [...] Menelaus and Agamemnon were sons of Atreus, whose brother, Thyestes, had murdered him for the throne and cast them out. [...] That was the crime for which their family had been cursed by the gods generations before: the crime of Tantalus.

(Saint 20-26).

So, Saint proposes, Elektra has indeed become the glory to the House of Atreus, for she is fulfilling its divine purpose by adding another link to the chain that forms the cautionary tale that is the curse: do not deceive your guests, do not break promises, do not murder your brother, do not murder your husband, do not murder your mother.

It is important to mention that Elektra, being the protagonist of this novel, occupies a greater part of the novel with her narration and thus offers much more material to discuss than other narrators, such as Clytemnestra and Cassandra. That is why the following section will only deal with her, her relationships and her actions during the novel.

### **3.2 An 'Unnatural' Woman in Elektra's Experiences**

In popular reception, Elektra has been represented as a somewhat unnatural and deceitful woman who 'kills' her feminine part by inducing her brother to murder their mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Saint's depiction is influenced by such perceptions, particularly those popularized by psychoanalysis, as she presents an Elektra that, in her admiration for and obsession with her father, reaches a point of absolute lack of empathy for the situation of her mother, her sister and even Cassandra, and is consumed by her need to avenge Agamemnon.

In Saint's book, Elektra's identity is marked by her father as it is him that named him: "He named me for the sun: fiery and incandescent. He'd told me that when I was a little girl: that I was the light of our family" (Saint 1). In other words, he defined her role in the family while simultaneously separating her from her sister, who was named by her mother (Saint 47). What is more, Elektra is described as being pampered especially by Agamemnon because she was a sickly child. This contrasts with Agamemnon's popular reception as a cold and heartless warrior and father. In fact, Saint manages to humanize him through Elektra's memories:

I know that some people will say he [Agammenon] never loved his children, that he couldn't have done, given what he did. But I remember the feel of his arms around me and the steady beat of his heart against my ear, and I know there will never be a safer place in this world for me than that.

(Saint 2)

This special treatment results in love and admiration for her father, to the point that "she worshipped him" (Saint 82). This is why she manages to excuse his murder of Iphigenia: "If the gods told you that you must do something, you had no choice. [...] It isn't his fault" (Saint 108-109). Historically, Agamemnon comes from a line of men who offend the gods: Tantalus who tried to cheat them into committing cannibalism;

Pelops, who broke an oath and was cursed for it; and Atreus, who murdered his nephew and fed him to his own brother. This is why Elektra's characterisation of her father is so shocking: not only does she show him as a pious man but she also seeks to separate him from the many cursed members of the house of Atreus. In particular, she opposes him to the first member of his line, Tantalus, who murdered his son to challenge the gods while Agamemnon committed the same crime.

Elektra's perception of her father as a good man who loved her especially explains why she seeks to not only excuse his crimes, but also to seek his favour: "My appearance hasn't mattered for years, but Agamemnon will see me for the first time since I was a little girl. I want him to be proud of me." (Saint 220). Even after his death, she seeks to make him proud, even to the point of determining her marriage expectations: "Marriage to a man who is nothing like Agamemnon. My body revolts against the thought" (Saint 272). This hint at a kind of love that goes far beyond filial loyalty and is dangerously close to incestuous is reminiscent of the Elektra complex, introduced by Jung which "refers to the phenomenon of the little girl's attraction to her father and hostility toward her mother, whom she now sees as her rival" (Scott 8). This hostility parallels Elektra's conflict with Clytemnestra after the former's murder of Agamemnon. Elektra suffering from such a disorder would explain why she is jealous and resents Cassandra, who was raped and enslaved after the sack of her city because her kidnaper was Elektra's beloved father. In her admiration, Elektra even wishes "to change places with a slave who had nothing except the thing I wanted most of all in the world. My father's arms around her" (Saint 161). Her adoration for Agamemnon turns her to misogynistic thoughts as her envy of Cassandra's situation brings her to dismiss the suffering that comes from being enslaved by the man who has destroyed her city and killed her entire family.

Her thoughts on the fall of Troy are not focused on the people that died or the riches it may bring to her home. She simply thinks: "Troy has fallen. My father is coming home" (Saint 3). Such desires to be reunited with her beloved father may explain why the writer portrays Elektra's experience inside the castle when Agamemnon's murder is committed. In fact, she becomes aware of Clytemnestra's plot before it happens and pointlessly seeks to avoid it: "There's nothing I can do but hope that he hears me, hope she doesn't somehow manage to cut him down outside the palace

before he even gets inside” (Saint 238). Agamemnon's assassination brings Elektra's life to a standstill. Since her birth she has lived trying to fulfil his expectations to “bring more glory to the House of Atreus” (Saint 1). But with him gone and not having learnt how to lead an existence separate enough from her idol's expectations, Elektra is left crushed under “the weight of my misery.” (Saint 307). She has been waiting for years for the return of her father and in the end, she has not been able to see him; he was taken from her before she could see him. Now she only has the memory of her father left and the thirst for revenge against the mother that robbed her of him.

Nevertheless, the need to fulfil said expectations remains. Not knowing how to, her instincts first turn her to rebel against her murderous mother by marrying her best friend, Georgios, a boy from a low-class family. But such a disadvantageous marriage under her station is just the beginning:

I know if I say yes, I can leave this palace, I can get away from Clytemnestra, but still stay close enough to watch her, close enough to count down the years until Orestes returns. [...] ‘Yes,’ I say. ‘We will marry. It will thwart any plans Aegisthus might have.’

(Saint 272)

Just like Clytemnestra plotted to have Agamemnon punished, Elektra begins to toy with the idea of avenging her father. A marriage to Georgios is, in her view, a way to “keep Agamemnon's memory alive, and one day I'll bring our family back to greatness.” (Saint 285). Elektra convinces herself that she must murder Clytemnestra and Aegisthus because it “is the only way I can truly honour my father” (Saint 272), thus showing the extent to which Agamemnon continues to have a hold on her actions. Namely, it is her love of her father that ultimately brings her to hate and plot to kill her mother, for he “will not rest whilst his killers live” (Saint 313).

While in her infancy Elektra showed a predilection for her father, she is also shown to appreciate her mother's caretaking: “Her hands were on my face, smoothing my hair back, her touch soft and gentle as she settled me into the soft cushions.” (Saint 55). She also felt a certain degree of admiration, particularly for her beauty: “I couldn't imagine there was anyone prettier than my mother in the world” (Saint 75). After Agamemnon's departure and the death of her sister Iphigenia, Clytemnestra ceased to be

the doting mother Elektra knew, to become a ghost that haunted the castle (Saint 109). Elektra remembers that she became increasingly neglecting, and noticed her absence, especially during her illnesses: “Where was our mother? Why didn’t she come to bathe my forehead and sit by my bed again?” (Saint 109). As Clytemnestra stopped smiling and telling them stories, Elektra’s affection for her gradually withered away (Saint 109-110). One of the events that marks this shift is her dependence on and later affair with Aegisthus, Agamemnon's cousin and his greatest enemy. Elektra sees this as a betrayal of her father and openly condemns her, saying that when Agamemnon comes back, Clytemnestra will not deserve his mercy as “She wasn’t forced by Aegisthus. What she’s done, she’s done of her own free will” (Saint 217). However, her condemnation does not seem to stem just from her adoration of Agamemnon, but also from a certain jealousy of Aegisthus, who has achieved what she could not: bring her mother out of her chambers and make her laugh again:

I saw them, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, walking together around the palace grounds.[...] Both of them were smiling. I felt cold, despite the warm sunshine. She hadn’t laughed with me for so long. I’d forgotten what it sounded like. [...] I didn’t know how it could be, but somehow, this felt worse.

(Saint 136)

All these feelings make it all the easier for her mind to turn to murder to avenge Agamemnon. Her first step is to send Orestes away with the purpose of saving him from Aegisthus. However, this strategy has the extra benefit of making Orestes grow up detached from their mother so that when the time comes to kill her, he may not be burdened by emotional attachment. Showing no attempt to understand Clytemnestra’s motives, Elektra even hints at the superiority of her own revenge compared to hers: “Clytemnestra brooded here for ten years, but Orestes will be a man sooner than that” (Saint 262). She bides her time, visiting her father’s grave every day while he waits for Orestes’ return. As the years pass, Elektra gradually becomes a resentful adult woman consumed with revenge against her mother. From her point of view, Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon is a barrier that has been broken, thus opening the gates for any possible action she may take against her own mother, no matter how despicable in the eyes of society: “But now she has done the unimaginable. Now there are no boundaries to hold us back” (Saint 264). However, Clytemnestra’s narration hints that Elektra’s

love for Agamemnon prevents her from seeing the danger she was in: she feared that one day Agamemnon would need to sacrifice another of her children for his own benefit and so, she tries to “make her see that what I have done, I did for her” (Saint 276). But blinded by rage, she will not listen to reason and the rift between mother and daughter remains permanent: “Elektra is too fiery, too full of anger. I had thought that once Agamemnon was dead, I could make her understand, but it has driven her further from me” (Saint 281).

Eventually, Orestes comes back to Mycenae and just as Elektra planned, revenge is in his mind. Nevertheless, he shows some hesitation if not at avenging their father, at the consequences it may have for the siblings. In contrast, Elektra does not care about the consequences: she makes no plans to seek purification for their murders as it is customary. While she claims her crime to be a righteous one, her attitude is destructive and vindictive: “I have nothing to comfort me, nothing at all except the tiny spark of revenge I must nurture in my breast until the time comes when I can let it rage and burn everything I loathe to ashes” (Saint 263). It is noteworthy that she even shows no regard for her brother’s safety, as her first thought is that “It’s all I’ve dreamed of, the only thing that has sustained me since my father died – and at last it’s happening” (Saint 308). In her own words, “You can only fear if you have something to lose, and I have nothing” (Saint 322). Indeed, Elektra is aware that the Erinyes will haunt whoever commits matricide and perhaps because of that, he manipulates Orestes to overcome his own doubts: “Orestes has always trusted me. I told him what the world was, year ago, and he’s never had reason to doubt me. If I tell him, if I set this in motion, it will happen” (Saint 316). When finally, Clytemnestra is murdered, Elektra does not try to protect her brother from the Erinyes, nor does she show remorse or pity for her mother. She simply feels relief because “It’s over, at last, it is over” (Saint 334).

In the end, it can be seen how Elektra, despite her worship for her father, fails in many ways to become what he might have expected from her. In fact, she ends up looking more like Clytemnestra. Like her, she plots her revenge for years and in the process becomes cold, distant, and controlling. In the same way, Clytemnestra became obsessed with avenging Iphigenia’s murder, Elektra too follows her own sense of justice to the point of matricide becoming herself an ‘unnatural’ woman.



#### 4. Conclusion

As per their own admission, both Tóibín's and Saint's works depart from the same original sources, namely the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. However, while they share the crucial plot points and characters, they give place to radically different interpretations of the myth of the House of Atreus.

This is a result of the choices made regarding the focalizers and narrators. In Tóibín's case, while he also recounts Clytemnestra's and Electra's points of view most of his novel focuses on Orestes. This decision was motivated by the lack of information in the original sources regarding the years Orestes spent away from his house (Costello-Sullivan 4). Tóibín uses this time to explore themes of unattainable sexuality regarding both Orestes homosexual desires and Electra's ambiguous sexuality (Costello-Sullivan 5). Thus, he focuses on his perceptions of events experienced by the House of Atreus, from the murder of Iphigenia to the matricide of Clytemnestra, with special attention paid to Orestes' growth from a naïve child to a manipulable adult. In the case of Saint, she focalizes on the three main female characters, Elektra, Clytemnestra and Cassandra, the first being the most prominent one. This choice is motivated by a desire to transmit the stories of mythological women, "whose voices and anger deserve to be heard" (Milas). According to Saint, these women's stories have been told from the points of view of men, thus rendering their feelings and experiences invisible and hidden under these very men's experiences (Milas). Her focus on these women's experiences leads her to widen the scope of the ancient plays by recounting Clytemnestra's youth, as well as Cassandra's experiences in Troy before she comes to Mycenae. However, her narration pays special attention to Elektra and focuses on her almost incestuous admiration for her father which leads her to hate and eventually provoke her mother's death at the hands of Orestes. As a result of the two authors' choice of main focalizers, the reader is given different versions of the children of Agamemnon and the myth itself.

On the one hand, the character of Orestes shifts in prominence and personality. In Tóibín's narration, we can appreciate an extremely nuanced Orestes since most of the novel is devoted to introducing additional events and relationships in his life. Tóibín's version of Orestes lets other people make decisions for him and allows himself to be manipulated by both Electra and Leander and lives his life the way other people want him to live it. This means that, to Agamemnon's hypothetical disappointment, Orestes

grows up as a non-normative man, since he does not become the strong, brave warrior that Agamemnon encouraged in his childhood, but an easily swayed man that not only shows no initiative to fulfil what socially would be his duty—to avenge Agamemnon and become the new head of their house—but also fails to maintain gender hierarchies as he lets Elektra rule in all but name and does not care that she and Ianthe have manipulated him into marrying an already pregnant Ianthe. Perhaps most noteworthy, in the convergence of these social and gender failures, Orestes shows an unacceptable desire to be with Leander well into adulthood that clashes with his social duty to continue his father's lineage. In contrast, Saint's Orestes is barely relevant to the events narrated, as he disappears at the beginning of the book and reappears right at the end only to murder his mother. Nevertheless, he is shown to be more of the warrior that Agamemnon and society might have expected. It is noticeable that like Tóibín's, this Orestes hesitates to contemplate the impending matricide but does so for completely different reasons: Tóibín presents him as unwilling to murder his own mother for a father that he barely remembers, while the doubts in Saint's version stem from Orestes' fear of being chased by the Erinyes—these are quite easily dispelled because not avenging his father would be the greatest offence to the gods than matricide, as communicated to him by the Oracle. In short, Tóibín's Orestes is a man that upsets social, gender and sexual rules while Saint's is modelled after the time's ideas surrounding ideal manhood.

On the other hand, the representations of Elektra/Electra are much closer to each other. Tóibín's choices of main focalizer result in him devoting less time to characterizing Electra. As a result, she is shown as a cold and calculating woman, waiting for her time to come so she can kill her mother and avenge her father, but we are almost never given an insight into the nuances that lead her to prefer her father to her mother. Ironically, this Electra is modelled much after Clytemnestra. Like her, she makes her revenge the focus of her life and to achieve it she takes unsavoury decisions, such as staying with her mother to keep an eye on her. In comparison, Saint's Elektra is a deeply passionate woman with an admiration for her father that borders incest. Unlike Tóibín's, this Elektra openly despises Clytemnestra and it is this hate that guides her in her search for revenge, which means that her decisions are not necessarily the ones that would make her quest more fruitful. For instance, she is so unwilling to submit to Clytemnestra that she decides to marry a farmer so she can be away from her, thus

losing any possible insight into the intrigues inside the royal house. Additionally, while Tóibín's Electra makes up contingency plans in case Orestes does not return and she has to use some other method to end her mother's life, Saint's Elektra's revenge is completely dependent on Orestes. This is ultimate because Elektra does not wish to become the unnatural woman that Clytemenestra became when she murdered and overthrew her husband. Nevertheless and contrary to these desires, this Elektra too grows to resemble her murderous mother: she is a non-normative woman that is neither submissive nor peaceful, but as plotting and as murderous as Clytemnestra. In this way, she completely disappoints whatever Agamemnon's hopes might have had for him to be a respectable and obedient woman.

In conclusion, all the versions of these characters differ from each other to different extents but the main focalizers have one thing in common: they both disappoint their father's expectations for their children. In Tóibín's version, Orestes fails to become the upstanding and powerful general Agamemnon raised him to become and instead ends up as a weak-willed man that prefers a pastoral life with his male lover to ruling Mycenae and engendering children. In Saint's version, Elektra may have brought honour to the House of Atreus just like Agamemnon expected, but not in the way he would have liked: rather than being demure and fulfilling, Elektra schemes and manipulates her way to murder Clytemenestra, thus becoming as much as an unnatural woman as she is. In this way, Orestes and Elektra contribute to further the curse of the House of Atreus: just like Tantalus and Pelops upset social norms with their cannibalism and broken promises, Orestes and Elektra break social taboos by becoming non-normative representations of their gender.

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