LOOKING AT SOME STRIKING **TRANSFORMATIONS OF CLYTEMNESTRA** IN GREECE AND FRANCE

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Abstract: The role of Clytemnestra was shaped by ancient authors as that of a traitor, casting an unmistakably negative image upon her character. By the twentieth century, however, Clytemnestra had undergone a significant evolution from the deceitful, immoral, and scheming figure of the Middle Ages to the passive female archetype of the Renaissance and Classical periods. From the twentieth century onward, playwrights have approached the ancient heroine in a markedly more sympathetic light. In French theatre, Marguerite Yourcenar, in her emblematic stage drama *Clytemnestra or Crime*, reclaims the myth of the Atreidae to disparage the societal conventions that constrain women to prescribed roles, while simultaneously unmasking the traditional hero through the demystification of Agamemnon. In Modern Greek theatre, Andreas Staikos, through a systematic engagement with ancient dramaturgical elements and a unique mode of textual reception, portrays a Clytemnestra who oscillates within a repetitive pattern, continually transforming and regressing between mythic archetype and personal narrative. Lastly, in *Letter to Orestes*, Iakovos Kambanellis explores the allegorical dimensions of Clytemnestra's character. Despite the play's adherence to a recognizably conservative framework, it subtly critiques the constructed culpability associated with the social roles of both genders. These three adaptations ultimately redeem Clytemnestra, thus elevating her from a symbol of eternal condemnation to one of complex vindication.

Keywords: Clytemnestra, Yourcenar, Staikos, Kambanellis, reception.

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Introduction

The intertextual dialogue among texts creates a new semantic environment, in which meaning is reshaped (Siaflekis, 1989, pp. 15-19). Mikhail Bakhtin observed that such interrelations generate a hybrid communicative framework (Bakchtin, 1990, pp. 257-326). This study focuses on the metamorphoses of Clytemnestra's (Cf. Komar, 2003; De Martino et al., 2017) archetype from antiquity to the present. The malign image of the "traitress" in ancient literature gives way to a more complex, though still morally ambiguous, figure in the Middle Ages, and then to a passive woman in the Renaissance and Neoclassical periods. By the twentieth century, modern dramatists revisit the character with renewed empathy and insight, presenting her as a misunderstood figure.

Yourcenar, in her emblematic poetic drama *Clytemnestra or Crime*, adopts a distinctly feminine perspective on the myth of the Atreidae, deploying it to critique oppressive societal norms through the demystification of Agamemnon (Cf. Ieranò, 2014, pp. 57-79). The play dismantles the idealised masculine persona that society imposes, highlighting the confinement of women within those structures. Furthermore, in Modern Greek theatre, Staikos methodically appropriates the

ancient dramatic tradition, crafting a Clytemnestra caught in an existential and performative cycle. The character repeatedly transforms as she oscillates between myth and personal trauma, trapped in a liminal space that blurs historical, psychological, and theatrical boundaries. On the other hand, Kambanellis, in *Letter to Orestes* (Cf. Pavlou, 2017, pp. 283-297; Kosmopoulou, 2021, pp. 2-17), constructs a dramaturgical monologue that highlights the allegorical complexity of Clytemnestra. The play challenges traditional readings by granting her a voice of personal and historical testimony. In doing so, it questions the guilt imposed by gender roles and reflects the broader socio-cultural evolution of myth in the modern world.

Together, these adaptations reframe the archetype of Clytemnestra not as an icon of transgression but as a symbol of transformation. They illuminate the intertextual continuum through which myth survives, evolves, and resonates anew in each era. Within this continuum, the modern playwright becomes both creator and reader, thus forging a new interpretative framework in which ancient voices are once again heard, albeit refracted through contemporary sensibilities.

The Mythological Archetype of Clytemnestra through the Ages

The mythological nucleus of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Cf. Sommerstein, 2012 pp. 25-38; Zeitlin, 1978, pp. 149-184; Winninghton-Ingram, 1948, pp. 130-147; cf. Conacher, 1987) echoes the reconfiguration of a much older myth, one likely traceable to Homeric epic and Attic oral traditions (Lesky, 1983, pp. 247-248). Aeschylus closely follows the traditional archetype of Clytemnestra, not only in terms of her characterisation but also in her actions and underlying motivations (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon,* 2015, pp. 79-82, ll. 1319-1347). His tripartite structure – murder, vengeance, and trial – derives from Homer, who portrays Clytemnestra as a scorned wife (Homer, *Ilias*, 2015, A 112-116, p. 8), whose motive for murder lies in the sacrifice of Iphigenia rather than in adulterous betrayal.

Aeschylus reinterprets this mythic material in light of his own historical and sociopolitical context, forging new symbols and patterns while sustaining a dynamic dialogue with inherited motifs (Papadopoulos, 1999, p. 243). Clytemnestra is depicted as a *gunaika androboulon*, a "woman with a man's mind", one who transgresses gender norms by usurping male prerogatives. In the patriarchal ethos of the fifth century BCE, vengeance was considered a strictly masculine pursuit, and Clytemnestra's enactment of such retribution renders her, in every sense, a "lesser" being, that is, a moral outlier (Mosse, 1983, pp. 48-58). Her self-justification, her extramarital sexuality, and her commanding public rhetoric mark her as distinct from her female contemporaries. She vacillates

between male and female behavioural codes, thereby forming a complex figure of dual identity (McCLure, 1999, p. 88). She becomes the archetypal black widow of myth, a true "spider-woman", whose twisted persuasion welcomes Agamemnon with divine honours, only to ensnare him (Synodinou, 2015, p. 435; Taplin, 2005, pp. 56 – 63). The act of murder reveals her chilling detachment, as all pretences collapse. As a "woman with an androgynous will", she decides, acts, and bears the consequences, triumphing over her victim and shunning her resultant infamy (Synodinou, 2015, p. 435). The murder chamber – her bedroom, and, by extension, the city itself – becomes a space of entrapment, shared by both her and her lover (Kosmopoulou, 2017, p. 128).

Not all tragedians regarded Clytemnestra with sympathy. Yet each addressed her mythic persona; for tragedy in the fifth century BCE functioned as a moral institution: it shaped civic values, proposed ethical paradigms, and prepared citizens for their roles within society. The polis regarded theatre as a *koinon agathon* ("a public good") and its archetypes exemplified sacrifice for the collective or destruction by personal vendetta. Clytemnestra (Markantonatos, 2022, pp. 16-17), as a symbol of resentment and its disastrous consequences, thus served as a negative model. The famous line "O mother - not mother!", spoken by Electra in Sophocles' *Electra*, captures the essence of his Clytemnestra: a woman deeply resented by her daughter, who identified completely with the memory of her father. Sophocles' Clytemnestra is portrayed as cold, unrepentant, and devoid of maternal affection. She acknowledges her deed but remains haughty and intransigent, attempting to rationalise her actions within a legalistic framework (Cf. Koulandrou, 2018, p. 64).

Euripides, by contrast, offers a different portrayal. His Clytemnestra appears self-centred and unsympathetic. She pleads with Agamemnon to spare Iphigenia but infuriates him through her arguments. Her selfish detachment is evident in her inability to empathise with her daughter's imminent death. Later, she openly threatens Agamemnon, signifying her growing sense of agency under duress. In Euripides, the once-submissive wife becomes a reluctant rebel (Synodinou, 1985, pp. 55-56), provoked into action by tragic circumstance. By the twentieth century, the mythic narrative is once again upended. Modern authors, among them Kazantzakis, Ritsos, Sikelianos, and Elytis, revive[1] ancient tragic themes to reflect upon their own historical moment (Pefanis, 2005, p. 63, 75; Blesios, 2021, pp. 437-453). They do not merely imitate; they transform. The classical myth serves as a lens through which they interpret contemporary existential and political crises. Elytis,

1 For ancient tragedy revival, vd. further G. Ieranò, *La tragedia greca: origini, storia, rinascite*, Salerno Editrice Rome, 2010.

for instance, reimagines Clytemnestra as a metaphor for evil, betrayal, tyranny (even dictatorship!), thus adapting the ancient archetype to critique the condition of modern times(Cf. Koutrianou, 2002, p. 213).

These reinterpretations do not aim to dismiss the ancient narrative but to confront it anew, to find in its mythic resonances a timeless human condition. As modern authors reimagine Clytemnestra, they preserve her mythic lineage while endowing her with contemporary significance. In doing so, they transform her from a static emblem of treachery into a dynamic emblem of resistance, introspection, and, at times, justification.

Clytemnestra in the *Fires* by Margeurite Yourcenar

Marguerite Yourcenar draws inspiration from the mythic archetype of Clytemnestra and, through an intertextual reworking of her story, reconceives the murder of Agamemnon not as an act of political vengeance but as a crime of passion. Her Clytemnestra is no longer a power-hungry usurper but a woman confronting the ravages of time, rejection (Yourcenar, 1974, pp. 181-185; Smith, 1993, p. 16) and emotional desolation. Haunted by the erosion of youth, she is driven to murder not by premeditated malice, but by a desperate impulse to preserve her dignity and secure her fading desirability. Even in the moment of strangulation, she oscillates between a thirst for revenge and a plaintive yearning for love, seeking not dominance but recognition and emotional intimacy (Yourcenar, 1974, pp. 181-185).

In Yourcenar's retelling, Clytemnestra is a heroine trapped by the expectations of others (Cf. further P. Kalogeropoulou, 2018, p. 217). Standing before a silent, unseen court of justice, she delivers her monologue as an *apologia pro vita sua*, attempting to justify her actions and take stock of her life. She speaks not with bombast but with the self-awareness of a woman who has lived under the weight of roles imposed upon her. The dramatic form of monologue becomes a confessional space (judicial, introspective, and performative), where Clytemnestra testifies not only as a character, but as a symbol of womanhood writ large.

Yourcenar's *Clytemnestra or Crime* thus transposes the myth of the Atreidae into modern psychological and social registers. It strips the mythic figures of their ancient grandeur and places them within the realm of emotional verisimilitude (Pefanis, 2009, pp. 217-234). Unlike the Aeschylean heroine, who regards Agamemnon with indifference, Yourcenar's Clytemnestra is in love with him. An intertextual dialogue arises from this contrast: the ancient figure commits murder as an act of political reprisal and defiance, while her modern counterpart seeks connection with a man who no longer sees her. The contemporary Clytemnestra

becomes a surrogate for every woman who has suffered humiliation and oppression, that is, every woman who, deep within, has contemplated revenge as a means of reclaiming lost selfhood (Yourcenar, 1974, p. 177).

This Clytemnestra does not seek to destroy but to be seen. Her plea is existential, not ideological. Her marriage to Agamemnon was not a choice freely made, and the subjugation she endured compelled her to suppress her own desires and aspirations in favour of conforming to the expectations of patriarchal honour. Agamemnon's militaristic ambitions made her feel abandoned, and his return with a pregnant concubine shatters her psychological balance. Her emotional disintegration is slow but inexorable, culminating in a violent act intended less as punishment than as a cry for acknowledgement.

In the prolonged absence of her husband, the burden of household and political responsibility fell upon her, prompting an internal shift wherein she gradually assumed masculine roles (Smith, 1993, pp. 16). Yet her adoption of masculine traits never fully aligns her with the Aeschylean "man-souled" (Sivetidou, 2013, p. 130) woman; rather, she remains fundamentally driven by affective needs. Her actions are not inspired by power-lust but by the hope of reclaiming intimacy. Even her attempts to awaken Agamemnon's jealousy through her relationship with Aegisthus reveal a longing to rediscover her femininity. Her betrayal is deeply entwined with maternal impulses (Cf. Pefanis, 2009, pp. 217-234); she does not simply seduce, but nurtures. In this light, Yourcenar's Clytemnestra is not the cold manipulator of tradition but a woman whose motherhood lies dormant within her erotic desire.

The extramarital affair does not supplant her love for her husband; rather, it accentuates her desperation. She humiliates herself in a futile attempt to provoke Agamemnon's desire, hoping to regain her feminine pride (Yourcenar, 1974, pp. 178-179). The murder becomes an act of existential despair, an effort to compel recognition, to discover whether she was ever more than a possession in his eyes. It is a crime born not of cruelty but of abandonment and scorn, distinct from the calculated murders of traditional mythology. After the act, no catharsis follows: Agamemnon's ghost haunts her, and she realises that not even her own death would offer redemption. A vicious cycle is thus perpetuated, endless, infernal.

When we compare the ancient and modern figures, a key divergence emerges in the sphere of personal redemption. The ancient Clytemnestra is a chthonic avenger, unrepentant and defiant. The modern Clytemnestra likewise lacks remorse, but her stance is not one of ideological resistance. She submits to her fate as a victim of emotional subjugation, rather than a transgressor of cosmic order. Both women are defiant in their own ways, but while the Aeschylean heroine confronts the norms of her time head-on, the Yourcenarian one remains ensnared

in gendered stereotypes. The ancient audience of Athens, as citizens of the polis, were required to pass judgment on Clytemnestra's fate; the contemporary viewer, by contrast, becomes a silent juror in an emotional and psychological trial. Where the former weighed civic order against familial vengeance, the latter is invited to explore the intimate wounds of a woman stripped of voice and agency.

Clytemnestra in Staikos' *Clytemnestra?*

Clytemnestra?, the first theatrical work by Andreas Staikos, was written in 1974-1975 and draws its initial impulse from Sophocles' *Electra*. This experimental drama stands out for its linguistic inventiveness and distinctive theatricality. Staikos deconstructs the ancient material and reconstructs it into a meta-theatrical exercise, a dramatic rehearsal in which the tragic characters of Electra and Clytemnestra, here portrayed as contemporary actresses, engage in a fragmented, self-reflective confrontation. The scene is set in an undefined, rudimentary theatrical space: a row of empty chairs, a trunk, and a couch. These bare elements become the setting for a rehearsal-as-drama (Ziropoulou, 2015, p. 242), where the two exhausted heroines, itinerant performers without a permanent theatrical home, carry their symbolic and physical baggage.

Within this minimalistic stage, the actresses rehearse extended excerpts from Sophocles' *Electra*, interspersed with lyrical interjections and confrontational dialogue. These textual segments function both as citation and transformation, as the play's language continually shifts between registers (*i.e.* tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce), each evoking different epochs and theatrical conventions. The resulting oscillation underscores the instability not only of genre but of character identity. The two women are caught in an emotional and rhetorical duel, which increasingly centres on their shared history and their conflicting perceptions of love and guilt.

The thematic core of the play is love (Bakonikola-Georgopoulou, 2000, p. 152-157; Tzoumaka, 2001, pp. 355-362) – its absence, distortion, and fatal consequences. Electra, unloved and isolated, begs Clytemnestra to kill her, while Clytemnestra proclaims that love itself is an illusion, reducible to "suffering" and "mud". Both confess to having loved the same man, Aegisthus, who thus becomes a catalyst for their mutual betrayal. Their shared lover binds them in sin (Staikos, 2001, pp. 138-139), but also in theatrical performance. Through the lens of rehearsal, the boundaries between role and reality collapse; myth becomes biography, and vice versa.

Although the dramatic structure lacks linear action in the traditional sense, it is precisely this fragmentation that allows Staikos to explore the dynamics

of transformation. The drama unfolds through stylistic modulation, rhetorical interchange, and constant textual play (Staikos, 2001, pp. 134-135; Cf. further Ziropoulou, 2015, pp. 243-244). His Clytemnestra is not a stable entity but a figure caught in an infernal cycle of repetition and disguise. She moves fluidly between the mythic and the personal, continually morphing in response to the performative space and the textual material. The result is a theatre of endless metamorphosis, of a self in flux.

What distinguishes Staikos' treatment from more overtly revisionist dramatists of the twentieth century is his subtlety. He does not offer a radical feminist reinterpretation, nor does he idealise or vilify Clytemnestra. Instead, he subjects the archetype to a theatrical *jeu d'esprit*, an improvisatory dance of meanings, voices, and masks. The ancient text becomes a tool of improvisation rather than a fixed script; the myth of the Atreidae serves less as narrative foundation than as thematic scaffolding. Electra is not rewritten so much as re-performed, re-imagined without the closure of a definitive version. Staikos avoids psychologising his heroines in the traditional sense. Rather than treat them as fully fleshed-out characters, he presents them as theatrical constructs, that is, figures who are always on the brink of becoming, never complete. In doing so, he emphasises the fluidity (Tsatsoulis, 2007, pp. 100-112) of identity and the impossibility of essentialising characters. The drama thus stages not a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense, but a meditation on theatricality itself (Bakonikola-Georgopoulou, 2001, p. 11-19; Samara, 1999, pp. 224-231). Delirium alternates with stillness, performance with authenticity, myth with parody. The tragic form is hollowed out and reanimated as a game, indeed a paradoxical theatre of reality.

Staikos' work is shaped by the broader European theatrical movements of the 1970s, particularly the metatheatrical experiments associated with postmodernism. His dramaturgy is deeply influenced by his mentor, Antoine Vitez, who famously directed *Electra* three times during this same period (Varopoulou, 1992, pp. 9-12). Echoes of Vitez's theatrical philosophy, especially the notion of "open text" and interpretative multiplicity, resonate throughout *Clytemnestra?*. Moreover, Staikos transforms the tragic material into farce, employing Aegisthus as an object of mutual erotic entanglement. In this scenario, Clytemnestra becomes a parody of the seductress delighting in flouting moral codes and testing the limits of theatrical convention. Scenes of violence are rendered absurd, subverting expectations and transforming moral dilemmas into performative standoffs. The dramatic tension does not arise from the plot's progression, but from the dialectical confrontation between two female voices, each seeking validation, each entrapped by fate, and each transgressing traditional boundaries.

Ultimately, *Clytemnestra?* offers neither exoneration nor condemnation. It reframes the myth within a theatre of play, wherein myth is re-performed rather than retold. Clytemnestra emerges not as a heroine or villain but as a theatrical effect – real and false in equal measure, as she would be in life and on stage. Staikos' Clytemnestra is thus a palimpsest: a character both ancient and modern, archetypal and ephemeral, caught in the perpetual rehearsal of selfhood.

Clytemnestra in Kambanellis' *Letter to Orestes*.

Iakovos Kambanellis' *Letter to Orestes* is a modern monodrama that exemplifies the techniques of metatheatre (Grammatas, 2006, p. 57). That is, a self-referential play in which theatre reflects upon itself, often presenting plays-within-plays or dramatising theatrical processes. In this work, Clytemnestra's voice is reclaimed through the epistolary form, as she writes to her estranged son, who is both physically distant and emotionally remote. This reimagining of the myth offers a deeply personal reinterpretation of a story repeated countless times and filtered through the ideological frameworks of each historical period. In Kambanellis' version, Clytemnestra is not merely a tragic figure from the past, but a woman speaking directly to her son in a final attempt at reconciliation and truth-telling.

The monologue operates on two levels: it is simultaneously a confession and a defence. Clytemnestra recounts her version of events not only to prevent Electra from committing matricide but also to summon her son back to her side before she dies (Kambanellis, 2011, pp. 108-110). Her narrative begins with an involuntary marriage to a dynastic husband, a figure of patriarchal power who reduces her to reproductive utility. Their relationship is defined by domination and emotional alienation. Agamemnon, obsessed with securing a male heir, ignores his daughters and brutalises his wife. Electra, unloved and undervalued from birth, despises her mother for killing her father, but also for giving birth to her as a girl, thereby dooming her to a life of disregard. In Kambanellis' radical reinterpretation, Agamemnon's obsession with lineage culminates in a shocking act: the rape of Clytemnestra in order to produce Orestes, who is then raised in the austere mould of militaristic masculinity. This reframing casts Clytemnestra not as a power-hungry adulteress but as a victim of systemic violence and sexual domination. Her letter does not seek to excuse the murder but to contextualise it (Ladogianni, 2011, p. 413; Pouchner, Athens, 2018, p. 252). She demands to be heard on her own terms, within a moral and emotional framework that transcends the binary judgments of classical tragedy.

The dramatic power of the piece lies in its deviation from ancient norms. Unlike the monologues of ancient tragedy, which are bounded by dramatic

logic (Diamantakou-Agathou, 2010, p. 58; Kambanellis, 2011, p. 25) and immediate dialogue, Kambanellis' Clytemnestra addresses an absent figure, her son, thus creating a monologue that functions as both introspective soliloquy and emotional invocation. The ancient tragic monologue, delivered within a communal space of ritual and performance, is here replaced by an intimate, introspective communication between mother and child. From the late twentieth century onwards, a theatrical tendency to isolate mythic archetypes emerged, detaching them from their original multi-character dramas, and reframing them as protagonists in self-contained monologues. These hypertextual or intertextual reinterpretations allow modern authors to project contemporary concerns onto ancient frameworks.

The setting of *Letter to Orestes* is deceptively modest: a space resembling a rehearsal room, sparsely furnished and theatrically undefined. Yet it is also a profoundly interior space, reflective of Clytemnestra's psychological state. She appears on stage as a modern woman, sipping coffee and smoking a cigarette, before gradually assuming the mythic persona she has inherited. Though her external appearance belongs to the present, her speech is imbued with the gravitas of myth. Kambanellis carefully maintains the aura of ancient tradition while reimagining it in a contemporary light. His Clytemnestra is a tragic figure in a modern sense: not because of hubris or divine punishment, but because of the inescapable roles and expectations society imposes upon women. Her "real self" never fully coincides with the archetype she must inhabit. Nonetheless, she bears the weight of that archetype and its fatal legacy. Her moral downfall is evident, yet Kambanellis compels the audience to see in her not a villain, but a human being shaped (and scarred) by history.

Symbolically, Clytemnestra's act of killing Agamemnon is not only an act of personal revenge, but a metaphorical rejection of a militaristic, imperialistic, and patriarchal order. The fallen king becomes the embodiment of oppressive structures. In contrast, Aegisthus, whom she chooses not only as a lover but as a political alternative, is cast as a gentle, idealistic figure representing a more peaceful, egalitarian way of life. Her alliance with him expresses both a desire for survival and a yearning for a different model of human relationship (Cf. Misopolinou, 2015, p. 230).

Closing remarks

The myth of Clytemnestra, as revisited in twentieth-century and contemporary theatre, reveals a profound shift in the understanding of tragic archetypes. The narrative framework of myth undergoes transformation, becoming an imitative

and reflective context through which modern playwrights engage with perennial human concerns. As we observe the trajectory of Greek dramatic tradition, we see certain mythic figures continually re-emerge, not in identical form, but transformed by the moral and ideological pressures of each new age. Modern Greek dramaturgy, and European theatre more broadly, has returned repeatedly to the figure of Clytemnestra, not only because she is a symbol of betrayal and revenge, but because she embodies the transgressive woman, a figure who challenges, subverts, and ultimately redefines the social and moral order. From the time of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to the modern reinterpretations by Yourcenar, Staikos, and Kambanellis, the myth of Clytemnestra has been a barometer of cultural change.

In Aeschylus, she is the fatal "spider-woman" who usurps masculine power, an agent of cosmic disruption. In Yourcenar, she becomes a woman driven to violence by emotional degradation, yet still longing for connection and dignity. In Staikos, she is a theatrical construct, fluid, performative, caught in an endless interplay between myth and modernity. And in Kambanellis, she is a tragic mother reclaiming her narrative through the intimacy of a final letter to her son. Yourcenar's Clytemnestra loves her husband even in death, despite the humiliation he inflicted upon her. She is unrepentant, but not unfeeling. Staikos' Clytemnestra is carnally playful and ensnared in a ceaseless performative struggle with Electra over a shared lover. Kambanellis' Clytemnestra, by contrast, confesses her crime not before a court, but in a private appeal to her child, an attempt to reveal her wounded femininity and reclaim her maternal identity.

All three reimaginings converge on a common goal: to humanise the archetype without negating its mythical force. The figure of Clytemnestra is thus not dissolved by modern reinterpretation, but deepened. She emerges as assertive, independent, and emancipated, yet still tethered to the original matrix of myth from which she arose. Ultimately, she remains the first woman in Western literature to adopt male agency and to seek vengeance in a world governed by patriarchal codes.

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