OPEN ACCESS Article

# Back to the Greeks for a murder story: Colm Toíbín's *House of Names*

**Dana Badulescu**
Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Iasi, Romania
dana.badulescu@uaic.ro

**Abstract:** This study examines how contemporary Irish writer Colm Tóibín revisits, reimagines, and rewrites Greek tragedy in his novel *House of Names* (2017), and shows how he creates a new representation of Clytemnestra. By drawing upon the old tradition of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, Tóibín turns his novel into the echo chamber of a rich tradition of cultural mythology of murderous women: "Lilith, Adam's first wife from Hebrew lore, dangerous and defiant; Medea, vengeful and jealous; the Maenads from Ancient Greece, frenzied and senseless; or Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, greedy, ambitious and mad" (Walker and Gill 1). I argue that Tóibín portrays a Clytemnestra who rises above the trauma of being tricked by her ambitious husband, Agamemnon, into bringing her daughter Iphigenia to slaughter. Before being a murderess, Clytemnestra is a victim of Agamemnon's abusive and deceitful act. Unlike most killers in literature, both male and female, who kill in a rage, she carefully plans her exemplary killing for calculated effect. While examining the ins and outs of Clytemnestra's contorted psychology, this study also explores its impact upon the reader by testing how Aristotle's concept of 'catharsis' was transferred from Greek tragedy into the novel and how the paraphernalia (gods, divine intervention, hubris) of the old genre were transformed to suit the new genre.

***Keywords:*** *transgression; representation; Colm Toíbín*, House of Names; *Clytemnestra.*



*University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series*
https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/
Volume 16 | Issue 1 | 2026 |

EDITURA UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN BUCUREȘTI
BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.16.1.10
ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)
© The Author(s) 2026

Published by Bucharest University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

## Introduction: Toíbín giving Clytemnestra's representation a twist

Colm Toíbín's *House of Names* (2017) draws on the House of Atreus myths and the plays written by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Crime is at the core of all these ancient Greek tragedies. In *The Oresteia,* two murders occur: Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon, and their son Orestes murders Clytemnestra in a matricidal act of revenge. In Sophocles' play, Clytemnestra's murder of her husband, Agamemnon, haunts both Electra's and Orestes' minds. Euripides focuses his tragedy on Iphigenia's resistance to being sacrificed and Clytemnestra's resistance to her husband's decision to sacrifice their daughter. Of the three Greek playwrights, Euripides treated Clytemnestra most sympathetically. As Cantillo Lucuara argues, in both *Electra* and *Iphigenia at Aulis,* Euripides shows that her vengeance is just and her character remarkably strong, while Agamemnon is responsible for the whole chain of tragic events. Cantillo Lucara sees in Euripides's Clytemnestra a "potential" of psychological cast that Toíbín used and further developed in "his own modernisation of the myth" ("Clytemnestra Returns" 49).

Toíbín reshapes and twists these murder plots, which in ancient Greek mythology resulted from a curse afflicting the House of Atreus, hence the title *House of Names*. While the ancient Greeks believed in divine intervention and in heroes being punished by the gods for their hubris, the twenty-first-century writer discards anything that bears the mark of divine mediation and focuses instead on the characters' psychology. Therefore, *House of Names* may be read through Gérard Genette's concept of intertextuality, which he defines as "a relationship of copresence between two texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence of one text within another" (*Palimpsests* 2). Indeed, the ancient Greek plays appear in Toíbín's novel, but within Genette's broader scheme of transtextuality, another type of transformation fits better: "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1). Set in ancient Greece, the novel stays close to the classic. Instead, it adds a new layer to the old one, with the two layers intertwining. Having delved into the hypotext, Toíbín unites his own hypertext to it through the grafting method described by Genette to account for hypertextuality (5-7), and the outcome is a twenty-first century rewriting of an ancient story of murderous violence and horror.

## Giving Clytemnestra a voice in the first lines

Early book reviews highlight the novel's gripping opening: "Clytemnestra's chilling first lines, following her murder of Agamemnon," and those first lines "drip with *sang-froid*: 'I have been acquainted with the smell of death. The sickly, sugary smell that wafted in the wind towards the rooms in this palace'" (McAlpin n. pg.). McAlpin implicitly reads Toíbín's book in terms of hypertextuality when he notices that "he has borrowed the main characters – Agamemnon, his wife Clytemnestra, and their three children, Iphigenia, Electra, and Orestes – from the ancient Greeks, and re-animated their tragedies with intimate sagas of suffering you didn't hear from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides" (idem). Genette's metaphor of grafting implies a transformation, or in McAlpin's terms a "re-animation" that treats literature as a living body sprouting new shoots, i.e. new texts that continue to give vitality to a larger natural (in this case cultural and literary) body or

even a whole cultural and literary ecosystem.

By opening the novel with Clytemnestra's soliloquy and naming its first part after her, Toíbín sets the scene for her agency as a character whose voice is not just heard but foregrounded. The very first line is also a masterful use of English, the new robe with which the hypertext regales the reader. If ancient Greek is a language of old rituals and superstitions,[1] Toíbín's modern English is an alliterative language that translates the extremely intense state of mind of a female character travelling through ages with a burden of guilt and with blood on her hands, who is finally given a voice. At the same time, there is an incantatory cadence to these lines that transcends time:

> Maybe the smell 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; 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. (Toíbín 11)

Like the smell, Clytemnestra's laid-down thoughts linger. There is no rush; the tempo is slow and repetitive, and the narrative unfurls slowly. The imagery is synesthetically rich, having travelled from remote ages and cultures. The entire first part of the book, "Clytemnestra," is told in her voice and seen through her eyes: the smell lingers not only in the palace rooms but also in the lines of the first page, impregnating the character's body. Then the smell is followed by a hunger and taste for death:

> We are all hungry now. Food merely whets our appetite, it sharpens our teeth; meat makes us ravenous for more meat, as death is ravenous for more death. Murder makes us ravenous, fills the soul with satisfaction that is fierce and then luscious enough to create a taste for further satisfaction. (Toíbín 11)

Food and the ravenous appetite for meat have very well-calculated cannibalistic connotations meant to take Clytemnestra's vengeful murder to a level of character empowerment the author had in mind for her. She is not an impulsive killer, but a clever, scheming murderess who revels in the whole process of killing Agamemnon: planning it, accomplishing it, and then enjoying the aftermath. There could be nothing more effective than the analogy between Clytemnestra's carnivorous appetite and her satisfaction of having slashed her husband's flesh. She indulges in both with equal pleasure, or rather, one

[1] *Agamemnon*, the first play in Aeschylus's trilogy, opens with the Watchman's prayer to the gods; *The Choephori*, the second play in the trilogy, begins with Orestes invoking Hermes, "Lord of the shades and patron of the realm," followed by his plea to Zeus to grant him permission to take vengeance (*The Oresteia*); *Eumenides*, the third play in the trilogy, opens with a prophetess's prayer to Themis, Phoebus (i. e. Apollo), Pallas, Poseidon and Zeus. In Euripides's *Electra*, Agamemnon's daughter delivers her speech saying that she "will manifest to all the gods/Aegisthus' insolence"; *Orestes* opens with Electra's "terrible to tell" story of the curse upon the House of Atreus; Agamemnon begins his opening speech in *Iphigenia at Aulis* by tracing Clytemnestra's genealogy from Leda, her mother, whose actual father was Zeus, who assaulted Leda in the guise of a swan.

pleasure leads her to the next. She does not literally consume Agamemnon's flesh, but her appetite for meat is triggered and entertained by the very act of using a knife to accomplish the manslaughter. This first part is full of violent imagery that expresses Clytemnestra's violent state of mind, her revolt and rage: "a knife piercing the soft flesh under the ear, with intimacy and precision, and then moving across the throat"; "they had cropped her [Iphigenia's] hair with haste and carelessness; one of the women managed to cut into the skin around my daughter's skull with a rusty blade, and when Iphigenia began her curse, that is when they tied an old cloth around her mouth so that her words could not be heard" (Toíbín 6-7). The freshness of this imagery, despite the old age of its cultural and literary sources, lies in Toíbín's deft associations of words, calculation of sound effects and syntactic rhythm, but it also comes from a long tradition of violence in literature: *The Iliad*, *Beowulf*, *The Aeneid,* the Greek tragedies, Shakespeare, Shelley, Melville, Poe, Hawthorne, Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and, closer to our times, Paul Lynch's dark and violent world.

## Tóibín's Clytemnestra in the line of murderous women

As Walker and Jill notice, Toíbín's Clytemnestra descends from an old line of murderous women: "Lilith, Adam's first wife from Hebrew lore, dangerous and defiant; Medea, vengeful and jealous; the Maenads from Ancient Greece, frenzied and senseless; or Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, greedy, ambitious and mad" ("Women Who Kill" 1). To these figures, others may be added without exhausting the catalogue: Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles; Steinbeck's Cathy Ames; closer to our times, Shirley Jackson's Merricat; Stephen King's Annie Wilkes; Natsuo Kirino's Yayoi; Atwood's convicted murderess Grace Marks. Each of the characters enumerated here is a representation of women who kill as more deviant than men who commit the same act. Quoting Weatherby, Blanche and Jones (2008), Walker and Gill argue that women who kill are regarded as "doubly deviant" ("Women Who Kill" 1) and approach the "cultural mythology" and representation of these women as ways of othering them. This cultural impulse to cast them in an ostracised position stems from their "unnatural" will and power, which are perceived as transgressive. That is exactly the power position Toíbín gives Clytemnestra, turning her from a voiceless female character in the Greek tragedy into a woman who voices her agency and power in his novel. By "borrowing" her character from the Greeks, he grafts a powerful heroine onto the old one, giving us a new representation of an old archetype.

However, Toíbín's narrative, in which Clytemnestra's voice is most resonant, dramatises her progression from the powerless and vulnerable victim, beguiled by Agamemnon to bring Iphigenia to the place where she is sacrificed, deprived of any power to oppose his decision, to the woman who gains not just power but also a voice. As Clair Wills argues in his review of the book, "This is a world in which power is synonymous with those who police the right to speak openly, in edicts and injunctions" ("After Atreus" n. pg.). Since literature is an "as if" scenario, Toíbín challenges his contemporary readers with a figure that has travelled from powerlessness to power, and with a test of their reaction to the violence and horror performed by a woman whose mind is full of them. If the Greek audience found it cathartic, have contemporary readers kept that alertness? We shall dwell

on catharsis in one of the following sections.

## Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's victim: disempowerment and vulnerability

When she arrives at the place where Agamemnon plans to sacrifice Iphigenia, Clytemnestra is met affectionately by Agamemnon, and so she has great expectations that the alleged wedding plans will put an end to the curse:

> This will be the end of our troubles, I thought. Achilles has been sent to us to end what began before I was born, before my husband was born. Some venom in our blood, in all our blood. Old crimes and desires for vengeance. Old murders and memories of murder. Old wars and old treacheries. Old savagery, old attacks, times when men behaved like wolves. It will end now as this man marries my daughter, I thought. (Toíbín 31)

Nevertheless, it is too late and only in retrospect that she realizes her expectations were false. To silence her, when she begins to understand that the plan was a sham, Clytemnestra is treated with brutality:

> I was dragged away as well, but in the opposite direction, away from the place of sacrifice. When I was out of sight, out of earshot, I was kicked and beaten. /.../ I was trapped; even the urgent sounds I made seemed trapped. I was half buried underground as my daughter died alone. (Toíbín 58-59)

## Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's murderess: from disempowerment to empowerment

Clytemnestra's being tricked, then forced into submission, silenced, trapped, and disempowered act as triggers of her vengeance:

> His doom was set in stone when he sent us word that before the battles began he wished to assist at the wedding of one of his daughters, that he wanted around him an aura of love and regeneration to strengthen him and fill his followers with joy before they set out to kill and conquer. (Toíbín 23-4)

In her interior monologue, Clytemnestra pits the positive forces of "love and regeneration," which she implies are feminine, and the "joy" they bring against the ruthless, essentially masculine pursuits of killing and conquering. Unlike the characters in ancient Greek tragedies, Clytemnestra has human agency and power. She takes the responsibility of her actions in awareness of the gods' indifference:

> I am praying to no gods. 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, and those words will be filled with regret for what has been lost. I will make sounds like prayers, but prayers that have no source and no destination, not

even a human one, since my daughter is dead and cannot hear.

I know as no one else knows that the gods are distant, they have other concerns. (Toíbín 10-11)

## Clytemnestra's transgressions

In the late fourteenth century, *transgression* meant "disobedience to God's law, sin," particularly that relating to Adam and the Fall, coming directly from the late Latin transgressionem (nominative transgressio), "a transgression of the law," and, in classical Latin, "a going over, a going across."

Clytemnestra has not always been the terrible figure the three Greek playwrights portray. In Homer's *Odyssey,* she is "a puppet of her lover Aegysthus, an irrational creature, an unfaithful wife, an adulterous perversion" (Cantillo Lucuara 48). Clytemnestra starts her career as the very incarnation of a devious murderess in Pindar's *Pythian* XI, and thereon she "takes centre stage as a ferocious and fearsome villain" who, in Aeschylus's play, oversteps "gender norms, masculinising her behaviour, assuming manly duties of blood revenge and displaying the monstrous threat of feminine rule" (Cantillo Lucuara 49). In fact, Aeschylus goes so far as to vilify Clytemnestra, suggesting she is prototypical of "the perversion of society and culture on all levels" (Wolfe 702).

Read through the lens of anthropological studies, Clytemnestra's character appears as the representation of a myth created to establish the status quo of ancient Greek society. Thus, tracing the study of matriarchy, anthropologist Joan Bamberger shows that the sources used for it in the nineteenth century were "mainly poetic" and the evolution was from a stage of "gynocracy" towards "the 'divine father principle,' but not before mother right had clearly put its stamp on a state religion" ("The Myth of Matriarchy" 263; 264). Bamberger concludes her argument by stating that in these myths, women "represent chaos and misrule through trickery and unbridled sexuality," and "to free her, we need to destroy the myth" (280) that resulted from the collective anxiety in patriarchal societies of being under the total control of women. Along the same line of argument, Froma Zeitlin sees Clytemnestra as the emblematic representation of the scheming woman ("Playing the Other" 117).

Toíbín leaps to the call to debunk the myth. In *House of Names*, Clytemnestra's disobedience to the laws of the gods is triggered by her loss of faith and trust in them. The realization is sudden, and it completely changes her behaviour and attitude, first from submissiveness to awareness:

It struck me for a second that this was what the gods did with us – they distracted us with mock conflicts, with the shout of life, they distracted us also with images of harmony, beauty, love as they watched distantly, dispassionately, waiting for the moment when it ended, when exhaustion set in. (Toíbín 39)

She becomes aware of the antinomy of her inherited belief in the divine protection and the truth of her existential situation that the gods do not care: "if they had been watching

over us as they were meant to be, they would take pity and quickly change the wind over the sea" (Toíbín 48). This crucial realization prompts Clytemnestra to form her transgressive thoughts before she acts, and those thoughts permeate the first part of the book. Once disbelief is triggered, Clytemnestra's questioning mind takes it further and she suspiciously wonders "if Agamemnon and the men around him really cared about the gods, if they really believed that a hidden power beyond their power was holding the troops in a spell that no mortal power could manage to cast" (Toíbín 55). In this state of suspicion, her attention sharpens, and listening to the men chanting "with repetitions and strange inversions" (56), her faith totally collapses, her transcendental connections are severed, and she sees the cruel reality in its material grossness. She is disenchanted:

> I closed my eyes and listened. I could smell the blood of the animals as it began to sour and there were vultures in the sky, so it was all death, and then the single sound of the chant followed by the rippling, rising sound of the chant being repeated by those who followed the gods most closely and then a sudden mass sound directed towards the sky as thousands of men responded with one voice. (Toíbín 56-57)

Clytemnestra's disenchantment leads her to a new question related to how a mortal should know what to do if the gods are indifferent, followed by a logical answer: that from now on she will be the only one to decide what to do, and the last stage of her transgression, which is her resolution to kill Agamemnon: "I would consult no oracle or priest. I would pray to no one. I would plot alone in silence. I would be ready" (Toíbín 62). If, in classical Greek tragedy, Clytemnestra is a villainous, transgressive criminal, in Toíbín's novel her transgressions make her human. Her decision to kill Agamemnon results not only from her wounded ego but also from her new cognition. In her transgressive acts, Clytemnestra may look even monstrous. She closely fits Cohen's definition of the monster as "an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other" (*Monster Theory* ix). Questioning each of the features in Cohen's portrayal of the monster to test whether Clytemnestra fits them, there is no doubt that she is different from the feminine prototype of her times: as a wife, she is by far the opposite of submissiveness and fidelity, although she simulates both to achieve her plans; as a mother, she is not a paragon of tenderness and protection because her mind is set on plans of revenge and murder; thus, she breaks the category she is supposed to represent in her culture, and that places her in the category of the Other, in which she proves her resistance to its norms.

## Clytemnestra's deviousness: silence, whispers and shadows

A woman who takes a lover and plots to kill her husband with his aid is probably more than doubly devious in the patriarchal society to which Clytemnestra belongs. Her silence, necessary to keep the plot secret, is accompanied by slyness. When Agamemnon returns from battle, Clytemnestra looks at him "as if he were a god and I [she] was too humble even to be in his presence" (Toíbín 99). Like a patient spider weaving its cobweb in silence, Clytemnestra plots the murders without a word, and when she does speak, she whispers. The palace is an eerie place where silence reigns both before and after Agamemnon returns

to be killed. If there are sounds, those are uttered in a low voice, in secrecy, and there are also a lot of rumours.

Liliane Papin's argument that "there is no one-to-one correspondence between words and what we experience" ("This is not a Universe" 1256) may serve as a proviso for a hermeneutic approach to Clytemnestra's silence, which is not just a form of secrecy, but also a symptom of the inadequacy of the words offered to her by language. Hence her verbal restraint and resistance to using language. The situation in which she finds herself as a mother and wife is extreme: Agamemnon, her husband, sacrifices their daughter Iphigenia heedless of the suffering and trauma his cruel act causes her. What words can express it? And how can words come to her afterwards? In the novel, silence permeates the setting almost like an entity that can be felt but not heard or seen. The atmosphere of the palace is impregnated with silence.

The effect of this ghost of sound is intensified by that of the ghosts of presence that haunt it. In every form and sense, the place is haunted: shadows fill it. Using shadows as a recurrent trope, Toíbín reveals a Clytemnestra who confronts the dark side of her personality in the Jungian sense, or her unconscious in the Freudian sense. Indeed, the book mostly consists of her thoughts: Clytemnestra speaks little to others and much to herself. She also hears voices and whispers that are either detached from bodies or attached to bodies she mistakes for ghosts. In the last pages of the first part, "the palace remained a house of shadows" (Toíbín 109). In the first pages of the last but one part, also named after her, Clytemnestra is now a shadow, i.e., a ghost haunting the palace corridors, thinking that "there will come a time when the shadows fold on me [her]" (359). When names won't come, she says to her ghost self that she "will lure them into the shadows when the time is right" (360). In this liminal state in which she finds herself after being killed by Orestes, she knows that she "must fade," that "the fading will be gradual" until she realises that "this must be what shadow is like, or aftermath. Some lines or shapes that must have made sense at one time, or may still make sense, but seem random now" (361). She knows that Agamemnon and Iphigenia are dead, that "they have become pure shade" (363). The words she knew "are sleeping", but "sometimes they turn in the night" (363). The words gain almost a physical presence, and she personifies them, but then silence descends again. The last word she utters, in a whisper, as she withdraws "into the shadows," is "Orestes" (364). Several pages later, in the last part, Clytemnestra's ghost meets Orestes in the corridor and tells him that "there is no one," also referring to him as "no one," "and then, as her image began to fade, as the shadows grew around her, it seemed to him that she had some fierce and sudden intimation of what had happened, how she had died" (363). Together with Aegisthus, Clytemnestra plots two murders: killing Agamemnon and Cassandra in the same secrecy. She carefully stages her husband's execution and describes it like a play, with all its funereal choreography. She is adamant that she should kill him with her own hands:

> I had planned to wait until his bathing was over and he sought towels to dry himself, but I knew now not to hesitate. I waited for that second when his back was turned. I had the netted robe on a hook on the wall. When he had one foot in the bath, I came behind him and pulled the net around him and tightened it as though I were seeking to protect him. The knife was secreted within my robes.

> I saw him trying to struggle and call out. But because of the robe, he could not move and his voice could not be heard. I caught his hair and pulled his head back. I showed him the knife, pointing it first towards his eyes until he flinched, before I stabbed him in the neck just beneath the ear, moving aside to avoid the jet of spurting blood, and then, pushing the blade further into his neck, I began to drag it slowly across his throat, slicing deep into him as blood flowed in easy, gurgling waves down his chest and into the water of the bath. And then he fell. It was done. (Toíbín 101-2)

It is this act of murder that brings about the weirdness of silence and ghostly presences, but in the aftermath of Clytemnestra being murdered by her son Orestes, it is not order that is restored. By toppling his mother's gynocracy, which had toppled his father's phallocracy, Orestes restores no sense of justice or order. Following a tradition of using silence to signal the inadequacy of language to express the richness of experience, Toíbín deploys silence as "the most impressive element that complements, enhances and even sublimates the meaning" (Sultan 682). However, silence is not the only technique that creates the sense of incommunicable grief and "the feeling of emptiness" (Rieger 1) that Clytemnestra is plagued with. There is also absence, and there are shadows that, as William Sharpe subtly remarks, in contrast to presence and substance, have "an array of extended meanings that take shadows right at the heart of artistic representation" ("Look Elsewhere" 5).

## (Whose) *hubris*?

J. A. Cuddon explains that *hubris*, meaning "wanton insolence" in Greek, "eventually brings about downfall and nemesis," and gives the examples of "Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Clytemnestra in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy" (*A Dictionary of Literary Terms* 342). Following a cause-and-effect logic, Aristotle, who defined *hubris* in his *Rhetoric*, related it to shame. However, Toíbín's Clytemnestra never shows any sign of shame. From the first lines to the last, she is determined and courageous, pursuing her murderous plans without flinching and enjoying their results. The Greeks saw this as an affront to the gods. To avoid offending them, humans must acknowledge the gods' supremacy, but Clytemnestra's experience leads her to deny their role and high status. In Toíbín's novel, Clytemnestra goes against the grain of a culture in which gods not only exist but must also be pleased. She does not deny their existence, since she sees that Greek society holds them in high regard, but she refuses to acknowledge their role, status, and involvement in human affairs. Therefore, giving her agency, courage, and voice, Toíbín grafts an iconoclastic Clytemnestra who defies the gods of her culture and tradition. Does an iconoclast commit an act of hubris, or does the ancient Greek concept need to be redefined to fit her act in Toíbín's novel? Clytemnestra walks away from Agamemnon and his men "with dignity and proud scorn" (Toíbín 52), but since it is directed at men rather than gods, is that attitude *hubris*?

Could it not be Agamemnon's *hubris*? Clytemnestra is struck and taken aback when she sees "the power in him, the power of the leader prepared for battle, his mind on strategy, decisions. Agamemnon, with his men, was an image of pure will" (28). With his absolute power and "pure will," does he not situate himself above the gods? Is it not his *hubris*?

## Whose *hamartia*?

Aristotle introduced the term in his *Poetics,* and conceived it in close relation to *hubris*. In Baldick's view, *hamartia* is the transgression that causes the protagonist's downfall (*Oxford Dictionary* 117). In Greek tragedy, the protagonist's flaw is elusive, but it is always "an excess of virtue, such as an extreme probity or zeal for perfection" (*Britannica* n. pg.). Are not Agamemnon's ambition to change the wind and win the battle, his "pure will" and superb power, signs of that excess and zeal to attain a perfection that a human is not meant to attain? Achilles, drawn into Agamemnon's hoax without being told or warned, explains to Clytemnestra that he tried to tell Iphigenia's father that sacrificing their daughter after trapping her in a false promise of marriage was wrong and unfair. Indifferent to Achilles's efforts to dissuade him, Agamemnon is determined to proceed anyway.

Could the murder of his mother be Orestes's *hamartia,* a cruel act for which he pays by being marginalized after he commits the deed? Could it be Clytemnestra's, who blames herself for not being vigilant enough to see the intentions behind her husband's cunning plan to sacrifice Iphigenia, then for not having given enough of her time and affection to Electra after killing her father, for not having told her "that her father was not the brave man she still believed him to be, but rather a weasel" (Toíbín 68), and eventually for being under Aegisthus's power when he decided to send Orestes away after the murders had taken place?

## Catharsis

Aristotle stated that tragedy "should succeed 'in arousing pity and fear in such a way as to accomplish a catharsis of such emotions'" (qtd. in Baldick 35). Against Plato, who feared tragedy's disruptive Dionysian force, Aristotle defended its cleansing power. Both Baldick and Quinn argue that it is not clear whether catharsis refers to the audience's experience or "to the action of the play itself, the purification or cleansing required to atone for prior guilt" (Quinn 69) or "the protagonist's guilt that is purged, rather than the audience's feeling of terror" (Baldick 35).

This knot can never be untied. However, when judging Clytemnestra, the focus of this analysis, one sees no signs of atonement in her, dead or alive, in terms of catharsis. She stands assured in her conviction that Agamemnon deserves retribution as she plans it, carries it out, and later reflects on it. Her only regret is not connecting with Electra and Orestes after the deed. When she becomes a shadow, like her husband and her daughter Iphigenia, her mind is set on Orestes, without meaning him any harm. For readers, Tóibín's novel offers another side of the story through Clytemnestra's intense, revealing point of view.

## Greek tragedy transformed

Harold Bloom thinks that the *House of Names* is Tóibín's *apophrades*: "The relationship to the dead must be 'revisionary' and 'great poets (like Eliot) reverse the apophrades through 'positive' as opposed to devastating apophrades" (*The Anxiety of Influence* 140-2).

Tóibín let his own "house of fiction" (Henry James's metaphor) open to the dead masters Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in *House of Names*. By doing so, he grafted his own Clytemnestra onto the old one, giving her both a voice and agency, which the ancient Greek character lacked. However, the power she gains through agency and voice is tenuous and elusive. Tóibín's Clytemnestra is, above all, very human: she suffers, she loves, she hates, she takes revenge, she looks within her own mind, and she falls victim. Her development as a character shows that the line of demarcation between victim and victimiser is very thin. Aristotle's old concepts might need redefining when applied to her.

*House of Names* is a novel written for more than one character, with Clytemnestra, not the plot, in the foreground, which aligns with Aristotle's argument about tragedy in *Poetics*. By referencing and transforming tragedy, House of Names becomes a psychological novel. As Clair Wills states in his review, "Tóibín is not so much interested in the motives behind this series of executions and reprisals as in the way each of the participants explains their actions to themselves" ("After Atreus" n. pg.).

## Conclusions

*House of Names* is Tóibín's *apophrades* and revisitation of Greek tragedy, with Clytemnestra as its central figure. Tóibín's character is an illustration of "blurred boundaries between victimisation and offending behaviour" (Walker and Gill 2), and her actions are driven by pain. She is a psychologically complex figure undergoing trauma and tormented by dark thoughts. Although she is transgressive, her murderous acts are probably not a gesture of *hubris* in the ancient Greek sense. However, she is plagued by guilt and error, a form of *hamartia.* In patriarchal parlance, Clytemnestra is an illustration of deviousness: a woman taking a lover with whom she plots the murder of her husband and accomplishing it herself in *sang-froid*. At the same time, she challenges the label of deviousness by reflecting on her deeds for the rest of her life. Whether *House of Names* is cathartic for the audience and/or for the protagonist(s) is a matter of perception and debate. One thing is certain: by revisiting tragedy, Tóibín also transformed it to suit the novel's newer genre.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

*Dana Badulescu* *https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4363-2654*

## Works Cited:

Aeschylus. *Oresteia*. Translated by E. D. A. Morshead. Retrieved from https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks07/0700021h.html. Accessed 24 October 2026.

Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Translated by S. H. Butcher. Retrieved from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm. Accessed 24 October 2026.
Aristotle. *Rhetoric.* Translated by W. Rhys Roberts. Pennsylvania State University, 2010.
Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford UPress, 2001.
Bamberger, Jane. "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society" in Rosaldo & Lamphere. *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Stanford UPress, 1974: 263-80.
Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford University Press, 1997.
*Britannica*. Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com. Accessed 24 October 2026.
Cantillo Lucuara, Mayron Estefan. "Clytemnestra Returns: A Philosophical Inquiry into Her Moral Identity in Colm Toíbín's *House of Names*" in *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 42, 2019: 48-58. Google scholar
Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (ed.). *Monster Theory: Reading Culture.* U of Minnesota P, 1996.
Cuddon, J.A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Fifth Edition. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
Euripides. *Electra*. Edited by Stephen A. Nimis and Edgar Evan Hayes. Translated by Ian Johnston. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/19609749/Euripides_Electra_A_Dual_Language_Edition.
Euripides. *Orestes*. Translated by E. P. Coleridge. Retrieved from The Internet Classics Archive | Orestes by Euripides. Accessed 24 October 2026.
Euripides. *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Retrieved from https://sacred-texts.com/cla/eurip/iphi_aul.htm. Accessed 24 October 2026.
Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*. Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska Press, 1997.
Jung, C. G. *The Portable Jung.* Edited, with an introduction by Joseph Campbell. London: Penguin Books, 1976.
Quinn, Edward. *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*. Second edition. New York: Facts on File, 2006.
McAlpin, Heller. "House of Names is a Violent Page-Turner, and a Surprising Departure", *NPR*, May 10, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2017/05/10/527629908/house-of-names-is-a-violent-page-turner-and-a-surprising-departure. Accessed 24 October 2026.
Papin, Liliane. "This Is Not a Universe: Metaphor, Language, and Representation" in *PMLA*, 107.5, 1992: 1253–65. https://doi.org/10.2307/462878
Plato. *Laws*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Retrieved from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1750/1750-h/1750-h.html. Accessed 24 October 2026.
Rieger, Rita. "The Writing of Silence, Absence, and Ineffability. An Introduction to *Texts with no Words: the Communication of Speechlessness*" in *PhiN-Beiheft* 15, 2018: 1-11. Google scholar
Sharpe, William. "Look Elsewhere": Literal Foreshadows in English Literature" in *Miranda: Revue Pluridisciplinaire du Monde Anglophone.* 8, 2013: 1-18. https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.3467
Sophocles. *Electra*. Translated by R. C. Jebb. Retrieved from https://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/electra.html. Accessed 24 October 2026.

Sultan, Sabbar S. "Silence and Its Discontents in Literature" in *Dirasat*: Human and Social Sciences, 34.3, 2007: 680-96. Google scholar
Tóibín, Colm. *House of Names*, London: Picador, 2017.
Walker, Samantha & Aisha K. Gill, "Women Who Kill: Examining female homicide through the lens of honour and shame" in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 75, 2019, Article 102247: 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2019.102247
Wills, Clair. "After Atreus" in *Literary Review,* May 2017. Retrieved from https://literaryreview.co.uk/after-atreus. Accessed 24 October 2026.
Wolfe, Rachel M. E. "Woman, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess: An Exploration of the Mythic Character of Clytemnestra in All Her Forms" in *Women's Studies,* 38.6, 2009: 692-719. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870903021554
Zeitlin, Froma. "Playing the Other: Theatre, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama" in Laura S. McLure (ed.). *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World*, Blackwell Publishers, 2002: 63-94.

## Notes on Contributor(s)

**Dana Badulescu** is Professor at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania. She teaches modernist and postmodernist British and American literature, literary theory and critical thinking, transculturalism, poetics, and translations. Since 2010, her research has focused on migrancy, hybridity, transnationalism, and transculturalism.

**Citation**: Badulescu, D. Back to the Greeks for a murder story: Colm Toíbín's *House of Names*. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 16(1), 2026: 154-166. https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.16.1.10

**Received:** August 1, 2026 | **Accepted:** October 27, 2026 | **Published:** October 29, 2026