

## Orestes' Tragic *Nostos*: A Proposed Homecoming-Lexicon in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Beyond

Many scholars, including Frame (1978; 2009), have analyzed and explored the theme of homecoming, or *nostos*, in Greek epic, especially in the *Odyssey*. Bonifazi (2009) deftly builds upon Frame's work and further explores the lexical range of *nostos* and its relatives. However, this theme of homecoming is also quite present in tragedy, but it necessarily has different parameters and demands. Although the typical epic homecoming was a *nostos*, I argue that different terminology is required to describe homecoming in tragedy. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is an excellent example for study, for the distinctions between epic and tragedy, already blurry, become even hazier. I intend to highlight and explore not only such instances of homecoming-language in the *Oresteia*, but also to present comparanda from the other tragedians.

Homecoming is an overarching and important theme throughout the *Oresteia*. Agamemnon returns home and meets his doom in his eponymous tragedy, and Orestes later returns home in the *Choephoroi* to avenge his father. Much of the plot of the *Choephoroi* concerns Orestes' homecoming. For Agamemnon, homecoming involves his death, but for Orestes, homecoming involves not his own death, but those of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, deaths serving as just recompense for his father's murder.

Aeschylus' reliance upon the traditional epic terminology of *nostos* and its relatives in the most epic of the trilogy, the *Agamemnon*, attests to the blurring of epic and tragedy. Such terms for homecoming only occur five times in the whole *Oresteia*, however, and only in the *Agamemnon*. Given the relative rarity of these traditional Homeric terms, Aeschylus uses alternate terminology elsewhere to refer to homecoming. I argue that Aeschylus, along with the other tragedians, often uses more general verbs such as ἦκω and ἐλθεῖν, usually with directional prepositions, to indicate homecoming or return.

The verb ἦκω is also paired with κατέρχομαι, for example, very early in the *Choephoroi*. Orestes states, “For I have come to this land and I am returning” (ἦκω γὰρ ἐς γῆν τήνδε καὶ κατέρχομαι, *Ch.* 3). With the latter verb, Orestes presents himself as a returning exile, from either Athens or Phocis. Both Winnington-Ingram (1983) and Griffith (1999) argue that κατέρχομαι is a technical term for returning from exile. This sense occurs three times in the *Oresteia*, and the related form κάτειμι occurs in this sense once in the *Agamemnon*. Aristophanes, in the *Frogs*, famously parodied Aeschylus’ pleonastic usage of ἦκω and κατέρχομαι (*Ch.* 3) to refer to Orestes’ return home (*Ran.* 1165). “Euripides” then unambiguously links κατελθεῖν to homecoming with οἴκαδε (*Ran.* 1167). Aeschylus also uses other words which generally mean “to go,” but also imply “to return,” such as βλώσκω, in the *Oresteia*. Aeschylus also uses ἐλθεῖν δεῦρο to refer to Electra’s desire for Orestes to return (*Ch.* 138-39). When Orestes is acquitted in the *Eumenides*, he states that he will leave the Areopagus and return home (νῦν ἄπειμι πρὸς δόμους, *Eum.* 764).

Other tragedians also touch upon homecoming. Sophocles’ Oedipus plays all involve variations on homecoming, expressed generally in non-epic terms similar to those in the *Oresteia*. In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus forbids his son Polyneices from returning home in epic terms (μήτε νοστήσαί, *OC* 1386). However, Sophocles uses βλώσκω to describe Antigone and Ismene’s uncertainty about their own homecoming after Oedipus’ death (μολούμεθ’ ἐς δόμους, *OC* 1747). In the *Antigone*, Polyneices returns to Thebes as an exile (*Ant.* 200), using κατέρχομαι. Earlier in mythical time, Oedipus worries about returning home as a patricide with similar language (κατελθεῖν, *OC* 601).

Sophocles’ *Ajax* deals not only with the desire for a safe return home, but also with lost homecomings, and arguably, Ajax’s discovery of a new home in Hades. His wife Tecmessa

reports that Ajax's mother always prays for her son to return home alive (ζῶντα πρὸς δόμους μολεῖν, *S. Aj.* 509), but Kyriakou (2011) argues that Ajax has no desire to return home from Troy. Unlike the other tragedians, however, Euripides' corpus contains 34 instances of the word νόστος. Like Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon*, many of Euripides' references to homecoming have a decidedly epic flavor.

I intend to propose an alternative lexicon for describing tragic homecomings, starting with Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and then citing examples from other tragedians. Since most of the tragedians rarely use the homecoming-language of epic, yet still treat the theme of homecoming, analyzing these alternative words will hopefully allow a better understanding of how homecoming functions in tragedy.

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