

Agamemnon's Daughters in the Twenty-First Century

The terrifying women of Greek tragedy act to accomplish their own destructive ends. Clytemnestra, Medea, Phaedra and others are all adult women, and while confined by the strictures of a woman's place in the Greek household, there is still an equality of age between them and their husbands, which to some degree balances the gender inequality. They typically use their status as adult wives to entrap their husbands and act out their revenges upon them and on the society that has trapped them as women. Daughters, however, must struggle doubly under the constraints both of gender and of age inequality: finding any agency at all is twice as hard for them. The paradigm of this impotence must surely be Iphigenia, handed over as an object to be sacrificed so that the winds will blow in the right direction once more and her father can retain his authority over the Greek army. Her sister Electra fares little better, confined in the palace with her mother and her mother's lover, essentially trapped until her brother Orestes can come home, and it is hardly a happy ending once he does.

The stories of these trapped two daughters fascinated the tragedians – what can you say when you essentially cannot act? – and they have continued to fascinate writers down to the present day. Two 21st-century novels, Barry Unsworth's *The Songs of the Kings* (2002) and Colm Tóibín's *The House of Names* (2017) imagine the lives of Iphigenia and Electra in retellings inspired by a mixture of Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides, mingling classical motifs and poetic description with a highly contemporary sensibility. One of the pleasures of all such retellings for professional classicists (as perhaps for the original audiences of tragedy) is balancing the recognition of sources with appreciation of what the author has done to make them new in some way, whether by

including new characters, new episodes in their lives, or new motivations for actions that are in some sense unalterable: Iphigenia has a specific role to play in the story of the Trojan War, whether it is she who is slaughtered at Aulis or a supernatural deer is substituted at the last moment. Thus Unsworth's men of the Greek army are recognizably those of the *Iliad* – clever Odysseus, aged Nestor, and so on – but Odysseus is now far colder and more Machiavellian than in any ancient portrayal, while Nestor is actually senile. So too, his Iphigenia is recognizably Euripides' Iphigenia from *Iphigenia in Aulis*, but she is filled out as a character and given intriguing relationships with a potential suitor and a foreign slave-girl. Tóibín significantly alters his Greek sources and offers much invented material, especially in his account of Orestes' exile from Mycenae, while his Electra is partly the mournful, father-obsessed figure of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* but as the book progresses, she turns into a steelier character altogether, reminiscent of her terrifying mother.

This paper will discuss the portrayals of Iphigenia and Electra in these novels and explore the ways in which Unsworth and Tóibín manipulate their mythical material. Both writers offer significant critique of the assumptions about women and daughters that permeate the old stories, and Tóibín's Greece is a place where the gods no longer have power over human lives, yet ultimately, the conditions of the myth prevail and their daughters are seen to have little more agency than their ancient originals, making the stories of these brutalized young women perhaps all the more tragic as they repeat the old patterns yet again.

Bibliography

Barry Unsworth, *The Songs of the Kings* (Hamish Hamilton, 2002)

Colm Tóibín, *The House of Names* (Scribner, 2017)