

Out of Argos. Dramatic Landscapes and Kinship Strategies in Euripides' *Electra*

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Abstract Euripides' *Electra* is characterised by a decentralisation of the scenic focus. In this paper, we will analyse from a historical-anthropological perspective one of the 'centrifugal' images that distinguish the play, that is the killing of Aegisthus during the sacrifice to the Nymphs. The spaces involved can be associated to the domestic prerogatives once belonging to Agamemnon and the status of young aristocrat which Orestes is entitled to by birth. This process is triggered by the 'setting' of the scene in a specific dramatic landscape, the one in which Aegisthus' sacrifice takes place.

Keywords Greek tragedy, Euripides, *Electra*, Kinship, Landscape, Identity, Greek religion.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Kinship Strategies. – 3 Fabricating a Hero Through Landscape. – 4 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

The myth regarding Orestes' return to Argos presents itself, in the different versions found in the tragic *corpus*, as the story of Orestes' process of identity construction and his territorial reinstatement. In most versions, the central dramaturgic position occupied by the pal-



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ace of the Atreids plays a fundamental role, both as seat of power and as heart of the οἶκος.¹

Euripides' *Electra*, however, presents what we may call a 'centrifugal' tendency: the whole action is moved out of Argos. This distance from the πόλις - and from literary tradition - constitutes a significant dramaturgic variation which has a strong impact both on the creation of mental spaces and on the representation of the characters' identities. In this paper, we will focus on the killing of Aegisthus during the sacrifice to the Nymphs. By setting the murder scene in a space which does not recall the genealogical succession of violent acts committed by the Tantalids,² Euripides invites his audience, and us, to understand the avenger's actions using a different network of mental associations.

2 Kinship Strategies

Firstly, we shall break down the process through which Orestes' identity is construed before his revenge takes place. By isolating the single steps that lead Orestes from being a reject of the house (πάρεργ[ον] [...] δόμων, l. 63) to being the victorious son of a victorious father (ὦ καλλίνικε, πατὴρ ἐκ νικηφόρου | γεγώς, ll. 880-1),³ we will highlight the importance of the play's centrifugal tendency. Indeed, Orestes' characterisation takes place entirely outside Argos, away from the palace of the Atreids. This aspect has led several scholars to interpret the play as the representation of Orestes' failure in the process of regaining his prerogatives.⁴ We shall instead see how the imagery exploited by Euripides construes a positive process, albeit one alternative to tradition.

The first step of this process consists in Orestes' visit to his father's tomb, with the consequent offering of a lock of his hair and an animal sacrifice.⁵ Through an image already attested in epic, Euripides associates Orestes' first declaration of vengeance⁶ to the funerary practices of Homeric warriors.⁷

¹ Orestes is successfully reinstated in his ancestors' palace in Aesch. *Eum.* 747-66; Soph. *El.* 1508-10; Eur. *IT* 980-6, *Or.* 1653-65.

² Cf. Aesch. *Ch.* 1065-77.

³ The text of Euripides' *Electra* is reproduced from Diggle 1981.

⁴ Cf. Arnott 1981; Distilo 2017.

⁵ Eur. *El.* 90-3.

⁶ Eur. *El.* 87-9.

⁷ Cf. e.g. the offering of κόμμαι on Patroclus' funeral pyre in *Il.* 23.43-6, 135-6.

Whilst in the Aeschylean *Libation Bearers* such an association contributes directly to Electra's recognition of Orestes,⁸ the centrifugal tendency of *Electra* makes it a necessary, albeit insufficient, starting point. The position of Agamemnon's tomb, which is both outside the scenic space and away from the royal palace,⁹ makes it impossible for Electra to recognise her brother's supposedly heroic identity in the ritual actions he has performed. In fact, not only is it impossible for Electra to see the signs of sacrifice near the tomb, but – if we decide to defend the transmitted text – she refuses to believe that Orestes has arrived at their father's tomb without then entering the city of Argos merely for fear of Aegisthus.¹⁰

This discrepancy between Electra's expectation and Orestes' actions, who states in the prologue to be hiding from Aegisthus (λαθῶν τυράννουσ οἱ κρατοῦσι τῆσδε γῆς. | καὶ τειχέων μὲν ἐντὸς οὐ βαίνω πόδα, ll. 93-4), should not be understood as a sign of a narrative incoherence and thus a possible sign of interpolation.¹¹ On the contrary, this discrepancy serves to underline the markedness of Euripides' version. It therefore invites us to explore whether a narrative paradigm shift entails a connotative paradigm shift.

The second step takes place at the beginning of the first episode. At l. 220, Orestes grabs Electra who, fearing the stranger may want to hurt her,¹² warns him not to touch what he ought not touch.¹³ Orestes replies that there is no person who could touch her in a more legitimate manner (οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅτου θίγοιμι' ἄν ἐνδικώτερον, l. 224).

The adjective ἐνδικος – and its corresponding adverb ἐνδικῶς – is a poetic word found primarily in the tragic *corpus*. The term can mean both 'in which there is justice', i.e. 'just', and, especially in Aeschylus, 'which has legal claim', so 'entitled/authorised'.¹⁴ Evidence for this second meaning is not, however, limited to Aeschylus and can also be found within our play at line 1096: here Electra closes her ῥῆσις against Clytaemestra by stating that if the killing of Agamem-

⁸ Aesch. *Ch.* 225-36.

⁹ Cf. Eur. *El.* 94, 288-9, 509.

¹⁰ Eur. *El.* 524-6. These lines belong to a wider section (518-44) which has been suspected of interpolation since Mau (1877), cf. Fraenkel 1950, 3: 821-6. West (1980, 17-22) defends 524-6 whilst suggesting that 520-3 and 527-44 are almost certainly interpolated, albeit Euripidean. Cropp (1988, 137-8) considers the whole passage authentic due to lack of any strong textual evidence for a possible interpolator. More recently, the lines have been defended by Roisman, Luschnig (2011, 164-5). Cf. Distilo 2012, 1: 234-8.

¹¹ Cf. Eur. *El.* 336-8, a section whose authenticity is not, to our knowledge, questioned: here Electra expresses similar expectations regarding her brother.

¹² Eur. *El.* 215-19.

¹³ Eur. *El.* 221-3.

¹⁴ Cf. Aesch. *Sept.* 673, *Suppl.* 590-1. Cf. Eduard Fraenkel's discussion on ἐνδικός at Aesch. *Ag.* 996 in Fraenkel 1950, 2: 448-9. More recently, cf. Medda 2017, 3: 112.

non was 'just', the murder of Clytaemestra is 'legally entitled' (εἰ γὰρ δίκαι' ἐκείνα, καὶ τὰδ' ἔνδικα). There is no reason why the variation between δίκαιος and ἔνδικος should be ignored. Indeed, this line concludes a speech dense with legal terminology and brings a conclusion to her previous statement:

if a murder shall in turn request a murder having sentenced it, then Orestes and I shall slay you avenging our father. (εἰ δ' ἀμείψεται | φόνον δικάζων φόνος, ἀποκτενῶ σ' ἐγὼ | καὶ παῖς Ὀρέστης πατρὶ τιμωρούμενοι, ll. 1093-5).

The linking idea between these lines and 1096 is that the murder of Clytaemestra is not only 'just', but 'legally entitled' because sentenced as compensation for Agamemnon's murder.¹⁵ Thus, we may suppose that ἔνδικώτερον is used to express legal entitlement rather than moral rightfulness.¹⁶

Moreover, the actors' words and movements work in two directions which result complementary to our interpretation of ἔνδικώτερον. On the one hand, these lines reflect a common Athenian perspective on gender politics: physical contact between free women and men who were not close of kin was discouraged, if not prohibited. This aspect of Athenian daily life often emerges in Euripides¹⁷ and should be linked to the general reclusion of women in domestic spaces: access to these spaces was granted only to very close male relatives.¹⁸ This cultural horizon emerges again in the play when Electra's supposed husband, seeing her speak with two young strangers in front of his own house, stresses the inconvenience of the situation (ll. 343-4).

On the other hand, the image of a man who takes a young girl by the hand recalls the iconographic motif known as the χεῖρ ἐπὶ καρπού.¹⁹ This gesture is found on vascular representations of wedding rituals and is a symbolic representation of the bride's passage from her earlier κύριος (often her father) to a new κύριος, i.e. the husband. The symbolic power underlying this image is the same mental association we find behind the ἐγγύη, word with which the Athenians expressed the legal agreement between a young girl's κύριος and her future husband

¹⁵ For further analysis of this interpretation, cf. Distilo 2012, 2: 541-4.

¹⁶ For the occurrence of this use in Euripides, one may also look at *Andr.* 920 or *Ion* 1316.

¹⁷ Cf. *Her.* 474-7, *Andr.* 595-60, 876-7, *HF* 527, *Or.* 108, *IA* 831-6.

¹⁸ Cf. the paradoxically, and ideologically, reversed model attributed to Egyptian society in Hdt. 2.35. The seclusion of women may have been reinforced in urban Athens after the Periclean law on citizenship of 451/0. The obligation of proving one's ἀστός pedigree both through father and mother enforced a stronger social control on ἀσταῖ women correlated to an increased perception of bastardy as a political threat to the community. On this point, cf. Ogden 1996; Silver 2018.

¹⁹ Lissarague 1990, 189. Cf. e.g. the Attic pyxis ARV² 924, 33, dated 470-60 ca.

which precedes the wedding rituals.²⁰ The word supposedly derives from the use of placing in one's hand a contractual token of guarantee to ritually enforce the positive outcome of an exchange between two parts.²¹ It is also worth mentioning that the verb ἐγχειρίζειν (place/receive in one's hand) is found in the oratory *corpus* to describe the organisation of the wedding of daughters or sisters.²²

By declaring that he is touching Electra ἐνδικώτερον, Orestes employs symbolic vocabulary and performs actions which confirm his awareness of his own legal 'authority' over his sister.

Access to this authority plays a key role in the construction of Orestes' identity and is also a central element of the third step of the process we are analysing. At l. 259, Electra tells Orestes how the man to whom Aegisthus has given her in marriage has still not lain with her because he believes that Aegisthus is not the girl's real κύριος. The hero deduces from this that the αὐτουργός fears that Orestes might carry out legal action against him.²³ According to the Athenian norms on hereditary succession regulated by the ἀγχιστεία system, after the death of the father guardianship passed to the brother by both parents, if there was one.²⁴ Aegisthus would find himself far off in the line of succession: not only would he come after Orestes, but he would find himself after Menelaus and Pylades.²⁵ By usurping this right, Aegisthus is acting 'illegally' and therefore exposes Electra's supposed husband to the risk of having to pay a fine (ἐκτέισι δίκην, l. 260)²⁶ to the legitimate κύριος.

The fourth step in Orestes process takes place in the second episode, when he returns on stage. As he approaches his sister, still pretending to be a messenger, he addresses her using her name (Ἠλέκτρα, l. 553). This detail is significant. In tragedy, messengers normally address female characters using either generic terms such as γυναῖκα or πότνια or employing more complex patronymic or andronymic formulae.²⁷ Women's first names are normally used only by close relatives. This poetic trend echoes a cultural pattern. On the basis of several passages from the *corpus* of Attic oratory, it has

²⁰ Discussion on the Athenian ἐγγύη, its nature and correlation to marriage, is vast. For a recent discussion, cf. Gherchanoc 2012, 32-4 and 107-8; Silver 2018, 29-33.

²¹ Cf. Gernet 1968, 175-260, especially 252-5.

²² Cf. Dem. 30.21.

²³ Eur. *El.* 258-60.

²⁴ Dem. 46.18. Cf. Humphreys 2018, 1: 95-106 on guardianship.

²⁵ According to a tradition followed by Euripides (*IT* 918), Pylades is the son of Strophius by a sister of Agamemnon and Menelaus.

²⁶ For this meaning of ἐκτείνειν δίκην, cf. Hdt. 9.94; Thuc. 5.49; Is. 10.15.

²⁷ Cf. how the Old Man and the Messenger address Electra and the Chorus of Argive women within this play: Eur. *El.* 487-8, 761.

been suggested that using a woman's first name in court or in public was a way to suggest her bad reputation.²⁸ It certainly wasn't a behaviour one would expect from a stranger.

Thus, Orestes' reintegration passes through a progressive reappropriation of the domestic prerogatives once belonging to Agamemnon. More specifically, Orestes gradually takes upon himself the role of Electra's κύριος, demonstrating his right to touch her, to ask for repayment for a marriage which he hasn't authorised and to call her by her own name. Euripides indulges on the dynamics related to the transmission of roles within the οἶκος, as the relationship between Orestes and Agamemnon's old παιδαγωγός testifies. The bond between Agamemnon and the latter is, in a certain sense, genealogically transmitted to his son. The man who had once reared Agamemnon is the same man who saved Orestes as a child²⁹ and who now, after revealing Orestes' identity to Electra, guides him – not only metaphorically, but literally –³⁰ along the path he must follow to regain control over his estate and defeat Aegisthus the usurper.

There is also another important element of centrifugal tendency in the construction of Orestes' identity. When the hero enters the scenic space with Pylades during the second episode, Electra announces his entrance saying that they are coming "with a swift foot" (οἶδ' ἐκ δόμων βαίνουσι λαιψηρῶι ποδί, l. 549). Let's analyse this point. The syntagm λαιψηρῶι ποδί allows for a series of possible intra- and intertextual associations. The image evokes the well-known Iliadic epithet for Achilles used by the Chorus during the first stasimon (κοῦφον ἄλμα ποδῶν Ἀχιλλῆ, l. 439, and ταχύπορον πόδα, l. 451).³¹

To understand the comparison with Achilles, we must analyse the context. The first episode ended with a discussion on the qualities that characterise men who are εὐγενεῖς: for Orestes, these are company (ὀμιλία, l. 384) and behaviour (ἦθη, l. 385). The stasimon that follows is then mainly dedicated to the appraisal of Achilles. He is a young warrior brought up by a paternal figure (ἔνθα πατήρ | ἵππότης τρέφεν, ll. 448-9), serving under Agamemnon's authority³² as a light for the whole of Greece (Ἑλλάδι φῶς, l. 449) who receives his weapons from the Nereids in a rural place named after the Nymphs (Νυμφαίας σκοπιάς, l. 447).

28 Cf. Thuc. 2.45.2; Dem. 40.6, 45.27. Cf. also Schaps 1977 and Faraguna 2014, 174.

29 Eur. *El.* 555-6.

30 Eur. *El.* 664-5, 669-70.

31 Cf. *Il.* 22.24. There has been much discussion on the first stasimon and critics generally agree that the ode holds up the epic world to the present of tragic performance, cf. Kubo 1967, 15-31 and Cropp 1988, 127-9 with further references.

32 Eur. *El.* 448-51, 479-81.

Various scholars have already observed that the passage from the first episode to the first stasimon establishes a connection between the figures of Orestes and Achilles.³³ The Achilles of the first stasimon embodies, in his *ὀμιλία* and his *ἦθη*, the ideals of *εὐγένεια* exposed by Orestes earlier on. One could say that Achilles plays a paradigmatic role: when Orestes re-enters the scenic space, his movements recall those of Achilles (the swift foot) and are associated to the recognition of *εὐγένεια*.³⁴

In the other plays in which Orestes is the main character, the role here attributed to Achilles is often given to Pelops, young warrior skilled in chariot racing.³⁵ The distance from the royal palace seems to imply a distance from Orestes heroic models within his own *γένος*. Not only is Pelops not mentioned for what concerns his agonistic warrior skills, but he is also never mentioned as an ancestor of any of the characters, thus confirming the play's tendency (centrifugal to tradition) to not explore the Tantalid genealogy.

At the end of the second episode, Orestes sets off to murder Aegisthus during a sacrifice to the Nymphs, in a setting which is distant from the royal palace in Argos and from all its traditional genealogical associations. Nevertheless, the place towards which he moves remains a space in which he must become *άνήρ* (*πρὸς τὰδ' ἄνδρα γίγνεσθαί σε χρή*, l. 693), thus fulfilling an identity which follows, as we have seen, a double path: new *κύριος* of the *οἶκος* of Agamemnon the father and young warrior at the service of Agamemnon the king.

3 Fabricating a Hero Through Landscape

The identity construction of any tragic character entails an act of contextualisation which specifies their aesthetic and their actions. To spark this process, tragedy employs a synthesis of spatial and religious elements, thus creating what we may call a 'dramatic landscape'.³⁶ This tool can help us recognise crossed references to: a

³³ On the analogies between Orestes and Achilles, cf. Zeitlin 1970 and Kraus 1992, 157-63.

³⁴ Eur. *El* 550-1.

³⁵ Cf. Aesch. *Ch.* 503; Soph. *El.* 10, 502-7; Eur. *IT* 1-3, 807, 823-6, *Or.* 971-3.

³⁶ The notion of dramatic landscape is inspired by F. de Polignac and J. Scheid's notion of religious landscape (on *paysage religieux*, cf. Scheid, Polignac de 2010, 481-95), identifying landscape in archaic and classical Greece as an intersection between spatial dimension, human perception, and religious practices. Landscape is a material dimension pre-existing our knowledge and whose components can be described in a variety of culturally determined perspectives (Descola 2005). On different theoretical approaches, cf. Lenclud 1995, 3-19; Roger 1997, 26-30. On religious connotations of spaces, cf. Corbin 2001, 7-54 and Berque 2008, 11-20. For ancient Greece and the perception of sacred landscapes, cf. Guettel Cole 2004, 30-56; Brulé 2012.

specific spatial frame, the divine powers associated to it, and actions performed in that spatial frame, be it inside or outside the scene.

Aegisthus' sacrifice is out of the spectators' visual range and is verbally reported by a messenger. By depriving the audience of the possibility of seeing (θεωρεῖν) the poet produces a highly symbolic landscape, which the public can decode by relying on their own experience in conceptualising sacred spaces and religious practices.³⁷

We shall de-construct the narrative of the sacrifice to observe the interactions of the components we have isolated.

First of all, we notice that the verbally reported space coincides with the Argive χώρα and not with a political space (ἀγρῶν πέλας τῶνδ' ἵπποφορβίων ἔπι, l. 623). Historically, the dwelling areas of the Nymphs are often far from the city and morphologically characterised by karst caves hosting spring waters and untouched nature.³⁸ Accordingly, the landscape in which Aegisthus is moving is an "irrigated meadow" (l. 777).

The cultic frame of the characters' movements is a religious feast (ἔροτις), connected to specific prescriptions and gestures.³⁹ Tragedy is not the mirror of authentic cult realities, so we will need to observe how the poet represents actions and objects involved in the ceremony. We should also take note of the recipient of the rite: the Nymphs (l. 625), perceived as living and possessing the place.

The dramatic landscape of the passage is thus formed by the interactions of three axes (extra-urban space - sacrificial actions - Nymphs), but this spatial and religious dimension is more of a contextual location than a real place. The fictional aspect of dramatic landscape allows us to realise its role as a system of notions deeply rooted in fifth-century Athenian thought. The positional character of this tragic space, tailored to host the sacrifice to the Nymphs, shows important intersections with the correct dynamics of the οἶκος and with the literary inflections of Orestes' identity.

The Nymphs' landscape is introduced by the role it plays in the religious celebration. Orestes gathers information on Aegisthus' intentions to offer a sacrifice, picturing the birth of a new male heir in Argos, whose nurturing is to be favoured by the goddesses (τροφεία παίδων ἢ πρὸ μέλλοντος τόκου; l. 626). This was a common reason for sacrificing to the Nymphs, and appears among the preliminary rituals (προτέλεια) for propitiating and sanctioning birth. These kinds of rites have a private and domestic nature and their purpose is to

37 On 'vision' without 'seeing', cf. Meineck 2018, 52-78.

38 Cf. Ustinova 2009, 13-52, Fabiano 2013, 165-95 with further bibliography.

39 On Greek ἔροταί, cf. Calame 1992, 29-54; Parker 2005, 159-65. On religious festivals in Euripidean tragedy, cf. Taddei 2020, 17-56.

grant the prosecution of the γένος via a legitimate procreation.⁴⁰ So, the association between the Nymphs' sphere of action and the ritual performance echoes the familial and 'genetic' instances which feature broadly throughout the whole tragedy.

To enhance the communicative force of the Nymphs' dramatic landscape, we can investigate the practices and offerings dedicated to them in an Attic context - the one within which the drama is produced. In fact, an animal sacrifice is one of several possible ways to honour the Nymphs, but not the most recurrent.⁴¹ The Attic caves of Vari and Keratsini show sets of small offerings, votive statuettes and artifacts, ceramics, and sacrificial remains of small-sized animals. During the fifth century, there was a consistent propagation of cult practices in grottos and caves strongly associated with the Nymphs, and involving Hermes, Pan, or Apollo, to whom animal victims were more commonly offered.⁴² The θυσία of a large-sized animal, described in detail by our passage, is thus intended to convey an image of ritual bloodshed, reinforced by the term βουσφαγεῖν (l. 627), which has more to do with Aegisthus's destiny, than with the bovine. It is not by chance that Orestes will strike his enemy by the altar, like a sacrificial victim.⁴³

In addition to the unusual offering to the Nymphs, *Electra* develops the cultic context in another direction, reshaping the morphology of ritual space.

After having engaged the "Thessalian strangers" (Orestes and Pylades) as participants to the feast, Aegisthus invites them to go inside, using the expression ἀλλ' ἴωμεν ἐς δόμους (literally: 'let's go to the house').⁴⁴ Soon after, we notice the term οἴκοι (l. 790), employed to point out the area of the sacrificial action, followed by στέγη (l. 802). These textual references help the public to mentally build a location endowed with an interior space where the killing takes place. This detail appears anomalous compared to the general tendency to per-

⁴⁰ Ballentine 1904, 77-119, still useful on the associations between the goddesses and water springs. On the relationships with other divine powers, Borgeaud 1979, 47-73. See also the pantheon found in the cave of Pantakles in Pharsalos (*SEG* 1.247). The presence of Apollo is well attested in the cave of Pan and the Nymphs situated in the area called Makrai, on the northern slope of the Athenian Acropolis (Eur. *Ion* 491-502).

⁴¹ Attica is where most of the information on the Nymphs' cults has been recovered. See Larson 2001, 226-35 and Sporn 2013, 202-16. On the Vari cave, Laferrière 2019, 185-216.

⁴² In *Od.* 14: 420-35, Eumaeus offers a boar to the Nymphs and Hermes. Nymphs' caves can host a stone altar for sacrificing sheep and goats, but the act of βουσφαγεῖν, implying the treatment of a large animal, is less frequent. For a survey of typical cave offerings, Spathi 2013, 395-415.

⁴³ On Aegisthus' sacrifice, Mirto 1980, 298-325, Henrichs 2012, 180-94.

⁴⁴ Eur. *El.* 787. Cropp (1988, 155) prefers the generic 'courtyard'. Denniston (1939, 147) thought it was a real τέμενος, but none of these interpretations seem to give value to the actual sense of the terms δόμος, οἶκος, στέγη.

form a *θυσία* in exterior areas, on external altars, so that the smoke and smell of the meat could reach the gods.⁴⁵

The ritual landscape presents itself as a combination of natural and anthropised elements. Indeed, the mention of a 'house' in the Nymphs' meadow has a strong symbolic significance in a drama whose thematic heart is the polarity between different οἴκοι - the isolated one Electra is forced to live in and the palace of Argos. Therefore, the designation of the sacrificial space as a δόμος bears a degree of polyvalence: in an intra-dramatic perspective, the presence of a δόμος recalls the spatial core of the Atreid legend, the palace of Argos. Hence, this can be also thought of as parallel to the killing of Clytaemestra, staged inside Electra's hut.⁴⁶ In an extra-dramatic perspective, Euripides' intention to endow the landscape of the Nymphs with a δόμος must be stressed, because it shows a rare - if not unknown - conformation of these cult spaces.

We can add this 'anomaly' to the previous choice of presenting Aegisthus' sacrifice as one involving a large animal. Probably, both are innovations to what was widespread experience in religious and sacrificial practices. The public could be aware of these variations relying on their own experience of sacrifice-doers and of theatrical spectators. To this regard, a link with the reality of religious practice is given by the mention of λουτροφόροι and χέρνιψ (l. 794), tools which were commonly used in the preliminary lustrations during the Nymphs' cults.

The intentional construction of an *ad hoc* spatial dimension produces an amplification of the notion of οἶκος, which constantly lingers in the background of the narrative, despite the setting being far from the house in Argos. The effectiveness of these references becomes tangible thanks to the association between the 'domestic' morphology of sacrificial space and the divine powers involved in the background, who grant the prosecution of the household.

Having observed the morphology of spaces and the qualities of the divine powers involved in this dramatic landscape, we can turn to the agents performing inside this fictional frame. Orestes and Pylades are disguised as Thessalians and pretend to be headed to the Alpheios river, to Olympian Zeus' sanctuary (ll. 781-2).

This new characterisation has geographic facets, which further outline the imaginary landscape Euripides is gradually pushing out of Argos.

⁴⁵ We must remember that we are dealing with a literary account of a ritual action which does not represent a source for understanding real sacrificial action. Cf. Di Donato 2010.

⁴⁶ On Electra's house, cf. Medda 2013, 44-67. On the notion of polyvalence (*polyvalence des images*), cf. Gernet 2004, 48-9.

By defining himself Thessalian, Orestes gains the ability to act in accordance with his new ethnonym. A name describes, but at the same time builds the object it refers to.⁴⁷ Being a Thessalian gives Orestes a special skill in the use of daggers, allowing him to strike Aegisthus behind his back. Thessalians were known throughout Greece for their mastery in handling blades, as Aegisthus himself ironically states.⁴⁸ Many sources inform us that this feature was often stigmatised as dangerous and unreliable. Demosthenes (*Ol.* 1.22) will say: "Thessalians are treacherous by nature, now like in the past",⁴⁹ giving for granted a reputation Euripides refers to in *Phoenician Women* (ll. 1407-9), mentioning a "Thessalian feint" used by Eteocles to kill Polynices. Moreover, Herodotus numbered the Thessalians among the most committed helpers of the Persians.⁵⁰

These treacherous military skills are mirrored by Orestes, who is thus entitled to ask for a Thessalian dagger rather than a Doric one: Φθιάδ' ἀντὶ Δωρικῆς | οἷσει τις ἡμῖν κοπίδ (ll. 835-7). Significantly, the knife that will kill the enemy is connotated by its provenance and is purposely chosen to perform the vengeance.

Textual references to distant geographical areas operate as identity providers for the characters. As a matter of fact, it is the religious landscape the contenders are into to decide who is going to live or die. Aegisthus prays to the Nymphs that Orestes may never return to reclaim his throne; Orestes silently pronounces an 'anti-prayer' in order to take back his father's prerogatives (λαβεῖν πατρῷα δώματ', l. 810).⁵¹ Indeed, of the two prayers only Orestes' can be approved by the goddesses. This is possible, on one side, because Orestes' *status* actually coincides with that of the rightful owner of the household. On the other side, the spatial positioning of the characters is reacting with the competences of the goddesses in the domain of genetic identity, thus ensuring victory to the legitimate son of Agamemnon.

We can now explore one last, geographical and thematic *ouverture*. As we already said, Orestes' character in the *Electra* shows strong similitudes with the epic features of Achilles.⁵²

The skills achieved by Orestes thanks to his Thessalian identity activate connections with epic heroic models. The dagger of Phthia, preferred to the Doric one, recalls Achilles' Thessalian origins which had been alluded to in the first stasimon. The description of Achilles' shield with the Gorgon (l. 460) foresees Orestes' entrance with

⁴⁷ Cf. Bonnet, Pironti 2021, 12. Cf. also Belayche, Brulé et al. 2005.

⁴⁸ Eur. *El.* 779-82, 814-18.

⁴⁹ Translation by the authors.

⁵⁰ Hdt. 7.6.2, 108, 130.

⁵¹ Eur. *El.* 805-12.

⁵² Eur. *El.* 482-6.

Aegisthus' head, generating a grip between a past of heroic slayings and a less glorious victory, i.e. a treacherous murder.⁵³ Whatever sympathy the audience could have for Orestes, we can still uncover a positive context behind his action. The final section of the play shows a wide repertoire of images linked to victorious coronation in Olympic contests, shortly after Aegisthus' death. Orestes had declared that he reached Argos precisely to win such a crown (ἦκω 'πὶ τόνδε στέφανον, l. 614). After the murder, a new series of apostrophes appears: καλλίνικος (ll. 865, 880-1) connecting Orestes and Agamemnon in heroic achievements. Moreover, there are many images of the hero's victorious coronation: στέψω κρᾶτα (l. 872), δέξαι ἀναδήματα, (l. 883), στέφανον ἐξ ἐμῆς χερῶς | δέχου, (ll. 886-7). The Chorus will finally state that the killing of Aegisthus was greater than the contests "on the banks of the Alpheios" – that is to say at Olympia: νικᾷ στεφανοφόρα κρείσσω τῶν παρ' Ἀλφειοῦ ρεέθροις τελέσας | κασίγνητος σέθεν (ll. 862-4).

In this group of references, we can detect a 'spatial turn',⁵⁴ especially since the two false Thessalians maintained to be directed to the Alpheios to offer a sacrifice in the precinct of Zeus. Such an expansion of the geographical horizon of the play prepares its conclusion: the definitive exit of Orestes from Argos and the foundation of the city of Orestheion, near the enclose of Zeus Lykaios, placed – remarkably – on the riverside of Alpheios (ll. 1273-5). The place and its foundation have nothing more to do with the crowns of Olympia, but are connected with a different cult centre, situated on Mt. Lykaeus.⁵⁵

Therefore, we notice how Euripides stresses his choice of distancing Orestes from Argos. Not only will Orestes have to reach Athens to obtain absolution (ll. 1254-5): he will never return to his ancestral home, thus bringing the discourse on the Pelopids and their ventures as far away as possible from Argolis.⁵⁶

However, the consequence is not a pathetic exile, but a substantial rehabilitation of the dignity of Agamemnon's children, thanks to the transition from a complete liminality in the Argive territory to a more solid position abroad. Exemplary are the words of the Diosk-

⁵³ In Aesch. *Ch.* 831-7 Orestes is compared to Perseus, the Gorgon slayer (cf. Garvie 1986, 273). On the Gorgon image in *Electra*, cf. O'Brien 1964, 13-39.

⁵⁴ For a general theory of the 'spatial turn', cf. Warf, Arias 2009.

⁵⁵ The precinct and altar of Lykaios show traces of sacrificial activities from the seventh century and hosted panhellenic celebrations. Cf. Jost 1985, 241-70 and 2002, 183-6. On the sanctuary's material aspects, cf. Mylonas 1943, 122-33. On Olympian religious setting, cf. Scott 2010.

⁵⁶ Euripides' *Electra* contains allusions to Apollo Lykeios in Argos, a divine ally of Orestes in the vengeance. It is possible, as Saïd (1993, 183) suggests, that this aspect of Zeus overlapped with Argive Apollo, in order to completely separate the hero from the divine power supposed to be his guide.

ouroi on Orestes and Electra's future, who will respectively become an οἰκιστής and a wife to Pylades. The only, unbearable retaliation will be leaving Argos for good.

4 Conclusions

The aim of our analysis was to enhance the consequences of the spatial and thematic loss of polarity of the Argive royal house. We have tried to underline how the notion of οἶκος remains central, even when the drama entirely overshadows the Argive οἶκος. Thus, we have pointed out how the voluntary act of distancing the tragic narrative from the palace allows Euripides to elude the theme of genealogical transmission of guilt, which widely characterises the myth of the Atréids. On the other hand, the poet highlights new aspects of the legend, whose originality emerges in the characterisation of the hero.

The emphasis on the spatial dimension of the sacrifice is essential in an inquiry on identity, since it allows us to detect a positive shift in the construction of Orestes' character, even though this process is moved out of Argos. The details on his Thessalian origin must be read in this direction: although Orestes seems to acquire the treacherous skills attributed to Thessalian warriors, they are merely instrumental for the effectiveness of the vengeful act, and the paradigmatic role of Achilles, heightened by the same spatial references, gives him the positive features of a young ἄριστος in front of the Athenian audience.

Therefore, *Electra's* Orestes emerges as a problematic character, distanced from the audience's horizon of expectation, but nevertheless endowed with culturally positive aspects.

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