Vilnius University Press

Contents lists available at Vilnius University Press

Literatūra
2025, vol. 67(4), pp. 43–56

ISSN 0258-0802 eISSN 1648-1143
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15388/Litera.2025.67.4.4

Rewriting the Myth: Costanza Casati's *Clytemnestra*

Dina Eiduka
University of Latvia
E-mail: Dina.Eiduka@lu.lv
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7050-7814

Abstract. The rewriting of ancient myths has a deep historical tradition, as authors from antiquity to the modern era have reimagined mythical narratives to reflect their worldviews. Historically, these retellings often bore a masculine perspective, shaped by the authors' gender and cultural context. The emergence of second-wave feminism in the twentieth century, however, marked a transformative shift, with women authors reclaiming mythic narratives to illuminate female experiences and challenge patriarchal constructs. This paper examines the evolving portrayal of Clytemnestra, a figure rooted in Homeric epics as the unfaithful wife and husband's murderer but later reimagined through reception as a grieving mother destroyed by male ambition. Through the lens of matricentric feminism, this paper analyses the construction of Clytemnestra's character in antiquity and its reception in Costanza Casati's 2023 novel *Clytemnestra*, exploring how her depiction of Clytemnestra reconstructs the character's identity for the twenty-first century audiences, with particular focus placed on her role as a mother.
Keywords: Clytemnestra, classical reception, myth rewriting, matrifocal narrative, matricentric feminism.

Mito perrašymas: Costanzos Casati „Klitemnestra"

Santrauka. Senųjų mitų perrašymas turi gilias istorines tradicijas, nes autoriai nuo Antikos iki šių dienų permąstydavo mitinius pasakojimus, susiedami juos su savo pasaulėžiūra. Istoriškai šiuose atpasakojimuose dažnai vyravo vyriškoji perspektyva, kurią formavo autorių lytis ir kultūrinis kontekstas. Antrosios feminizmo bangos iškilimas XX a. žymėjo transformacinį poslinkį, kai moterys autorės susigrąžino mitinius pasakojimus, kad nušviestų moterų patirtį ir mestų iššūkį patriarchalinėms interpretacijoms. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamas besikeičiantis Klitemnestros, Homero epuose pristatomos kaip neištikimos žmonos ir vyro žudikės, vaizdavimas, kuris vėlesnėse mito iteracijose įtraukia ir sielvartaujančios motinos bei moters, sunaikintos vyriškų ambicijų, reikšminius kodus. Straipsnyje per matricentrinio feminizmo prieigą analizuojamas Klitemnestros personažo konstravimas Antikoje ir jo recepcija Costanzos Casati 2023 m. išleistame romane „Klitemnestra". Tiriama, kaip Klitemnestros vaizdavimas, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant motinos vaidmeniui, atkuria mitinę personažo tapatybę XXI a. skaitytojams.
Reikšminiai žodžiai: Klitemnestra, klasikinė recepcija, mito perrašymas, matrifokalinis pasakojimas, matricentrinis feminizmas.

Acknowledgments. The research is financed by the Recovery and Resilience Facility project 'Internal and External Consolidation of the University of Latvia' (No. 5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/007).

Received: 15/11/2024. **Accepted:** 01/07/2025

Introduction

The twenty-first century's literary landscape has seen a surge in the rewriting of ancient myths, with notable contributions from authors such as Margaret Atwood, Madeline Miller, Pat Barker, and Natalie Haynes, among others. This trend reflects a growing momentum in reimagining classical narratives, yet the roots of this current trend can be traced back to the rise of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. One of the era's influential figures, Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), significantly shaped this movement with her pivotal works. Her book *Of Woman Born* (1976) remains foundational to motherhood studies, while her essay *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* (1972) called for a profound re-examination of canonical and mythological texts. Rich urged writers to retell these narratives, recognizing their capacity to reshape the stories that formed our cultural heritage (Rich, 1972, pp.18-30).

Rich's call to "re-vision" was widely embraced, particularly by feminist writers, who responded with transformative works that challenged traditional narratives and expanded the possibilities of storytelling. Also classical scholars started to address the question of motherhood in classical antiquity, shifting the perspective from fathers and sons to wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers (Keith et al., 2020, p.3). Myths, often perceived as immutable truths, were revealed to be dynamic, open to reinterpretation and reinvention. As Liedeke Plate argues in her article *Remembering Future; or Whatever Happened to Re-Vision?* (2008):

> *Rich's call for re-vision, in the sense of retelling the stories that make up our common cultural heritage from the perspective of post-colonialism, feminism, and gender and queer studies, has transformed not only our understanding of the past but also our understanding of how we came to such understanding.* (Plate, 2008, p.389)

Building on Adrienne Rich's legacy and the subsequent theoretical and literary discourse that reevaluates marginalized voices – including the voice of mothers[1] – this article examines how the concept of motherhood is re-evaluated in a twenty-first century novel through the character of Clytemnestra and how it aligns with the principles of matricentric feminism, which centres on the role of the woman as a mother and adopts a matrifocal perspective on the subject of study. Analysing literary works through this lens allows for the exploration of themes such as the representation of maternal experience, distinguishing between motherhood (as a socially and historically constructed institution) and mothering (as a practice). Additionally, it explores the distinctions between the roles of wife and mother, emphasizing the mother's significance in a child's life, and addresses issues such as mother-daughter relationships, maternal lineage, and matrophobia[2], among others.[3]

---

[1] For a broader insight on the subject of the mother's voice in literature see e.g. Wahlström Henriksson H., Williams A., Falgren M., eds., 2023. *Narratives of motherhood and mothering in fiction and life writing*; Podnieks E. and O'Reilly A., eds., 2010. *Textual mothers/maternal texts: motherhood in contemporary women's literatures*.

[2] "Matrophobia" is seen as a fear of becoming one's mother. For term "matrophobia" see Rich, A., 1976, pp. 235-237.

[3] For detailed definition and scope of "Matricentric Feminism" see e.g. O'Reilly, 2020, pp. 51-60; O'Reilly, 2016.

This article focuses particularly on the mythical character of Clytemnestra, the daughter of Tyndareus and sister of Helen, who is one of the central female figures in Greek mythology. In the best known (Aeschylus') version[4], she is married to Agamemnon, who sacrifices their daughter Iphigenia to appease Artemis before the Trojan War. During his absence, Clytemnestra takes his cousin Aegisthus as her lover and, upon Agamemnon's return, murders him. In response, her son Orestes, urged by Apollo and aided by his sister Electra, kills her to avenge their father and later stands trial for matricide.

The figure of Clytemnestra has long attracted scholarly attention, particularly in discussions of gender dynamics within *Oresteia*. For instance, Reginald Pepys Winnington-Ingram (1948) highlights that Clytemnestra's hatred toward Agamemnon is not solely rooted in Iphigenia's sacrifice, her love for Aegisthus, or her husband's infidelity, but also in her envy of Agamemnon's very status as a man. A foundational work in the study of women in antiquity, Sarah B. Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (1975), examines Clytemnestra's portrayal in ancient texts, noting that in Homer's *Odyssey*, her betrayal is not treated as an isolated act but rather projected onto all women, symbolizing the far-reaching consequences of female disobedience and infidelity (Pomeroy, 1975, pp. 21–22). Pomeroy further discusses the disruption of gender roles in *Oresteia*, particularly through the pairing of Clytemnestra as a masculine woman and Aegisthus as a feminine man—an inversion that is ultimately deemed unacceptable and resolved in *Eumenides*, where the patriarchal order is restored. Forma I. Zeitlin (1978) expands this interpretation, asserting that Clytemnestra represents a threat to patriarchal society by transgressing gender norms and embodying a "monstrous androgyne" whose elimination is necessary to reestablish male-dominated order. Later studies have continued to explore Clytemnestra's androgynous nature as well as reception-related aspects.[5] Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz (2008) emphasizes Aeschylus' depiction of Clytemnestra as the architect of Agamemnon's murder, arguing that while in Homer this act was a straightforward political matter, tragedy turns it into a complex ethical dilemma and the trilogy can thus be interpreted as Orestes' initiation into adulthood, transforming him into a Perseus-like figure, as suggested by the chorus. More recent study of Joanna Pypłacz (2022) offers a different perspective by examining Apollo's infamous speech in *Eumenides* alongside Orestes' nurse Cilissa's speech in *Libation Bearers*, emphasizing that *Oresteia* should

[4] Although the version presented in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 BCE) is the most well-known, it is important to note that the initial portrayal of Clytemnestra in literature is found in Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 8th century BCE). In Homeric epic, the depiction of Clytemnestra is limited to a narrow fragment of the myth—specifically, the murder of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra serves as a warning against disloyalty and disruption of patriarchal norms, embodying the fear of female autonomy and agency. Clytemnestra is presented as a moral antithesis to Odysseus's wife Penelope, who embodies virtue, loyalty, and the ideal model of female behaviour in patriarchal society, earning praise and admiration. Clytemnestra's motivations and actions are reduced to her relationship with Aegisthus, further underscoring her role as a symbol of danger to male authority and societal stability. Notably, compared to later receptions, Homer's text makes no mention of Iphigenia's sacrifice or matricide, maintaining the elevated tone of the epic and focusing its narrative on the relationship between husband and wife (Wolfe, 2009, p.696).

[5] Helene P. Foley (2001), for instance, compares Aeschylus' and Euripides' depictions of Clytemnestra, while Edith Hall (2006) examines her reception diachronically, arguing that Aeschylus' Clytemnestra remained largely silent for over two millennia, only to reemerge in the late nineteenth century; prior to this, she was predominantly portrayed in line with Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and Seneca's *Agamemnon* as an alluring yet unstable adulteress.

not be analysed in isolated fragments, and arguing that the trilogy conveys a nuanced vision of motherhood that extends beyond mere biological parenthood, redefining it as a multifaceted role encompassing caregiver, protector, and companion.

Continuing the theme of motherhood while examining its diachronic development, this article offers a comparative perspective on Clytemnestra's portrayal, exploring its continuity and transformation within the tradition of myth rewriting in the twenty-first century, focusing on recent literature on this topic – Costanza Casati's novel *Clytemnestra* (2023). This research examines how Casati reconfigures Clytemnestra's motivations, constructing a matrifocal narrative[6] that foregrounds her maternal experiences and enriches the literary interpretation of her character.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

In the first part of Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*, titled *Agamemnon*, the portrayal of Clytemnestra is far more nuanced than in Homer. Aeschylus presents a character who challenges the privileged position of men in society and the traditional division of power between genders, a theme that resonates not only in her interactions but also in the lives of her children.

Clytemnestra is depicted as a woman with a man's heart—a characterization that builds on binary oppositions within a single figure (Kittelä, 2009, p.125). This reversal is further emphasized by Clytemnestra's lover, Aegisthus, who assumes a passive, feminized role, thereby blurring the boundaries of normative gender identity within their relationship (Rabinowitz, 2008, p.101). Clytemnestra is both a mother and a skilled rhetorician, capable of persuasion and manipulation. Yet she is also unrelenting and ruthless, merging the archetype of a loving mother with that of a monstrous avenger (Kittelä, 2009, p.128).

Aeschylus constructs the narrative around the theme of vengeance, with Clytemnestra's actions rooted in unresolved trauma—the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia, carried out by her husband and the child's father, Agamemnon. Taking control into her own hands, Clytemnestra brutally and unexpectedly kills Agamemnon, avenging her daughter's death. However, her actions are met with condemnation from those around her, as her defiance and agency disrupt societal norms:

> *νῦν μὲν δικάζεις ἐκ πόλεως φυγὴν ἐμοὶ*
> *καὶ μῖσος ἀστῶν δημόθρους τ' ἔχειν ἀράς,*
> *οὐδὲν τότ' ἀνδρὶ τῷδ' ἐναντίον φέρων:*
> *ὃς οὐ προτιμῶν, ὡσπερεὶ βοτοῦ μόρον,*
> *μήλων φλεόντων εὐπόκοις νομεύμασιν,*
> *ἔθυσεν αὑτοῦ παῖδα, φιλτάτην ἐμοὶ*
> *ὠδῖν', ἐπῳδὸν Θρῃκίων ἀημάτων.*
> (Aesch. Ag. 1412-1418)

[6] For the definition of matrifocal narrative see esp.: O'Reilly, Bizzini, 2009, pp.10-11; Podnieks, O'Reilly, 2010, p. 3; O'Reilly, 2020, pp. 53-54.

Now you pass judgment on me of exile from the city
and declare that the citizens' hate and the people's curse shall be mine,
though then you raised no opposition to this man,
who holding it of no special account, as though it were the death of a beast,
where sheep in their fleecy flocks abound,
sacrificed his own child, a travail
most dear to me, to charm the winds to Thrace?
(Transl. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones)

Clytemnestra's motivation for revenge is rooted in the fact that Agamemnon sacrificed her daughter like an animal, thus blurring the distinction between human and animal (Dodson-Robinson, 2019, p.15).[7] This act undermines not only the natural order but also the existing legal and moral framework. Clytemnestra's actions are deemed wrong and condemnable, not only because she avenges her daughter, thereby rejecting her husband's authority, but also because she defies societal moral norms. By openly transgressing these norms and displaying overt arrogance and a desire for power, she becomes a figure of reproach. Her behaviour would have been condemned even if she were a man, highlighting the severity of her perceived transgressions within the context of her time (Kittelä, 2009, p.127). While Clytemnestra is portrayed as a monstrous woman who murders her husband, the Greek army – under Agamemnon's command – is likewise depicted as a destructive, beast-like force, preying on the helpless, as seen in the image of the pregnant hare torn apart by eagles and in the depiction of a savage, bloodthirsty horde leaping over Troy's walls in a frenzy of violence (*Ag*. 115–20; 823–28) (Foley, 1981, p.146).

Aeschylus also emphasizes another facet of Clytemnestra's character – jealousy. She is deeply envious of the fact that her husband has cheated on her with other women during the Trojan War, even bringing one of them, the concubine Cassandra, back home – an act that insults Clytemnestra's status as his legitimate wife (Zeitlin, 1978, p.156; Foley, 1981, p.146). In a sense, Clytemnestra's killing of Cassandra serves as a form of balance – just as Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia, Clytemnestra sacrifices Cassandra (Kittelä, 2009, p.129).

In the continuation of the trilogy, the tragedy *Libation Bearers*, the revenge of Electra and Orestes is depicted. As Helene P. Foley points out, Clytemnestra embodies the greatest threat to the cultural system, as her act of vengeance severs her from her remaining children, thus calling into question her role as a mother (Foley, 2001, p.201). When Orestes desires to kill Clytemnestra, in a desperate attempt to gain an emotional advantage over Orestes, she bares her breasts, seeking to remind him not of her as an enemy, but as a mother. This act evokes memories of the nurturing bond between mother and child, recalling the intimate image of an infant drawing life-sustaining milk from the mother's

[7] While several studies have examined sacrificial rituals and, further, the substitution of animals for human victims — either as symbolic mechanisms to maintain or restore social order (see Neumann, 1998), or as regional Greek practices intended to appease Artemis' deadly wrath and avert general threats to the community, as well as more specific, personal dangers such as death in childbirth (see Faraone, 2003) — such substitution is absent in Aeschylus' treatment of the myth. His version emphasizes the primordial brutality of the event, in which Iphigenia is sacrificed like an animal, and stands in stark contrast to the more civilized rendering found in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, where she is ultimately replaced by a deer.

breast (O'Neill, 1998, p.218): "ἐπίσχες, ὦ παῖ, τόνδε δ᾽ αἴδεσαι, τέκνον, / μαστόν, πρὸς ᾧ σὺ πολλὰ δὴ βρίζων ἅμα / οὔλοισιν ἐξήμελξας εὐτραφὲς γάλα" (Aesch. *Lib*. 896-98).[8] Rabinowitz highlights that at this moment Clytemnestra is stripped of her authority and can only defend herself by invoking her maternal body, baring her breasts in a desperate plea – an argument undermined by the nurse Cilissa, who claims to have been Orestes' true caregiver (Rabinowitz, 2008, p.105).

The third tragedy in the *Oresteia* trilogy is *Eumenides* – Orestes' trial. Notably, this is the first courtroom drama in Western culture, and in it, Orestes is put on trial for matricide – the murder of his mother. More importantly, he is acquitted. His defender is the god Apollo, who argues that matricide is not as grave a crime, justifying it with the following reasoning:

> *οὔκ ἔστι μήτηρ ἡ κεκλημένου τέκνου*
> *τοκεύς, τροφὸς δὲ κύματος νεοσπόρου.*
> *τίκτει δ᾽ ὁ θρῴσκων, ἡ δ᾽ ἄπερ ξένῳ ξένη*
> *ἔσωσεν ἔρνος, οἷσι μὴ βλάψῃ θεός.*
> *τεκμήριον δὲ τοῦδέ σοι δείξω λόγου.*
> *πατὴρ μὲν ἂν γένοιτ᾽ ἄνευ μητρός: πέλας*
> *μάρτυς πάρεστι παῖς Ὀλυμπίου Διός,*
> *οὐδ᾽ ἐν σκότοισι νηδύος τεθραμμένη,*
> *ἀλλ᾽ οἷον ἔρνος οὔτις ἂν τέκοι θεός.*
> (Aesch. Eum. 658-66)

> *She who is called the child's mother is not*
> *its begetter, but the nurse of the newly sown conception.*
> *The begetter is the male, and she as a stranger for a stranger*
> *preserves the offspring, if no god blights its birth;*
> *and I shall offer you a proof of what I say.*
> *There can be a father without a mother; near at hand*
> *is the witness, the child of Olympian Zeus*
> *and she was not nurtured in the darkness of the womb,*
> *but is such an offspring as no goddess might bear.*
> (Transl. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones)

Apollo bases his argument on the figure of Athena, asserting that a child can exist without a mother, since Athena was not nourished in the darkness of the womb. No goddess could give birth to such a child – she is the daughter of her father, Zeus.[9] By justifying the matricide, Apollo thus strips Clytemnestra of her role as a mother and denies her reproductive rights as a woman.[10]

---

[8] "Hold, my son, and have respect, my child, for this breast, at which many a time in slumber have you sucked with your gums the milk that nourished you!" (Transl. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones).

[9] As emphasized by Simone de Beauvoir, a woman's fertility in mythology is perceived merely as a passive trait: she is the earth, and the man is the seed. As Beauvoir writes, "grain grows and multiplies through Demeter's care, but the origin of the grain and its verity lie in Zeus" (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 164).

[10] This argument has sparked widespread debate, with scholars often expressing sharply opposing views on its significance in the society of Aeschylus' time. I will just mention two examples here – Rabinowitz indicates that

This theme from the *Oresteia* trilogy was further developed by other tragedians, such as Sophocles in his tragedy *Electra* (419–415 BCE) and Euripides in his tragedies *Electra* (c. 418 BCE) and *Iphigenia in Aulis* (c. 406 BCE). Later authors, such as Ovid and Seneca, focus more on themes of jealousy and adultery, completely omitting the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice.

The examined fragments of ancient texts suggest that the depiction of Clytemnestra in antiquity reinforces the view that a woman's role is primarily in the domestic sphere, while power and decision-making within the family are solely the domain of men. A woman's main role is to be a wife, with the duty to bear children for her husband and manage the household. In considering the family and its values in the ancient Greek world, a key observation made by Vernant seems important, as it highlights the woman's passive status in relation to men and the ideological perception of society, which defines a woman's value primarily through her role as a childbearer and provider of offspring:

> *The fact is that for the Greeks marriage is a form of ploughing, with the woman as the furrow and the husband as the labourer. If the wife does not, in and through marriage, become cultivated, cereal-producing land she will not be able to produce valuable and welcome fruits – that is legitimate children in whom the father can recognize the seed that he himself sowed as he ploughed the furrow.* (Vernant, 1994, p. xv)

Costanza Casati's *Clytemnestra*

Costanza Casati (born 1995) is an Italian author whose work focuses on reinterpreting ancient myths through a contemporary lens. Born in Texas and raised in a village in Northern Italy, she studied Ancient Greek language and literature in one of Italy's most rigorous academic programs.[11] She later earned an MA in Writing from the University of Warwick, UK. *Clytemnestra* (2023) is her debut novel, and it has been widely recognized, selling into 20 territories worldwide. It won the Goldsboro Books Glass Bell Award and was shortlisted for the Historical Writers Association Debut Crown Award, establishing Casati as a significant voice in contemporary mythological retellings (Penguin Books, n.d.).

Casati draws inspiration for her novel from Aeschylus' depiction of Clytemnestra, driven by her refusal to accept the injustices directed at this character. Casati's *Clytemnestra* reimagines the infamous queen of Greek mythology as a complex and resilient figure. Beginning with her childhood in Sparta, where she is trained like a warrior[12] and shares

this argument reflects Pythagorean beliefs of the time, reinforcing ideological assumptions about motherhood (2008, p.106); by contrast, Hall challenges this reading, asserting that such views were not universally accepted in Athenian society, as reflected in their marriage laws, which permitted unions between half-siblings with different mothers but prohibited those who shared the same mother due to concerns of incest (2010, p. 222).

[11] Liceo Classico B. Zucchi (Monza, Italy), one of the oldest schools in Lombardy, is a prestigious secondary institution specializing in classical studies.

[12] Sarah B. Pomeroy (1975) provides an overview of Spartan women's education and social roles, noting their involvement not only in traditional female activities such as weaving and childbearing, but also in music, household management, and child-rearing. She particularly emphasizes their physical training and equal access to nutrition compared to boys — elements framed within the broader societal expectation of producing strong offspring. Pomeroy also observes that, as Spartan men were frequently away at war and women were expected to bear children, the

a close bond with Helen, the novel traces her tragic journey through loss and oppression. Forced into marriage with Agamemnon after the murder of her first husband and child, Clytemnestra endures years of suffering, culminating in the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. This betrayal fuels her desire for vengeance, leading her to rule Mycenae with strength and cunning during Agamemnon's absence and form a strategic alliance with Aegisthus. Upon Agamemnon's return, she seizes control by killing him, asserting her independence but also igniting conflict with her children, particularly Electra and Orestes. The ending aligns with the plot of Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon*, leaving unresolved the question of Clytemnestra's future.

The novel's plot naturally splits into two parts, reflecting Clytemnestra's changing circumstances. The first part takes place in Sparta, characterized by her strong bonds with her siblings, especially her sister Helen. During this period, Clytemnestra's personality matures, shaped by her family and the surrounding environment. The second phase begins with Agamemnon's entry into her life, marking a shift in her residence and the trajectory of her story.

Casati's novel aligns with the principles of matricentric feminism, emphasizing the mother's significance in a child's life. During the Spartan period, a central figure in Clytemnestra's life is her mother, Leda[13]. To the Spartans, Leda is an exotic outsider, once a huntress before becoming Tyndareus' wife: "Leda was a huntress, skilled with the axe and bow, and she worshipped the mountain goddess Rhea" (Casati, 2023, p.10). For young Clytemnestra, Leda is a role model whom she aspires to emulate.

As Clytemnestra approaches marriageable age, her perception of her mother begins to change. She starts questioning the role of a wife within the family and notices aspects of Leda's life that had previously escaped her attention. For instance, she becomes aware of Leda's quiet submission to her father's authority, which contrasts with Clytemnestra's own beliefs, prompting her to doubt and distance herself from certain aspects of her mother's life. Clytemnestra observes a duality in Leda's character, noting that her mother's best version emerges when Tyndareus is absent: "She sees that her mother can be two different people, and that the best version appears when her father isn't around" (Casati, 2023, p.40).

As the novel progresses, Leda's image deteriorates, both figuratively and literally – she becomes an alcoholic. Initially depicted as a strong woman, Leda's gradual degradation reflects the impact of Tyndareus' dominance and societal expectations that cast her as a passive wife. This trajectory affirms the notion that women are strong as mothers but weakened in the role of wives.[14]

biological father did not necessarily have to be the husband; consequently, adultery was not condemned as severely as in other Greek societies (pp. 35–42). However, a more critical assessment of the sources and a nuanced discussion of the historical reliability of these claims is offered by Ellen G. Millender (2017, pp. 500–524).

[13] According to the most well-known version of the myth, Leda, queen of Sparta and wife of King Tyndareus, was seduced or raped by Zeus, who approached her in the form of a swan. On the same night, she also lay with her husband. As a result, she gave birth — either by laying eggs or naturally — to children of both divine and mortal parentage: Helen (later of Troy), Clytemnestra, Castor, and Pollux (Polydeuces), although ancient sources vary regarding the exact parentage of each child.

[14] For insights into the distinctions between the roles of wife and mother, particularly in the context of matricentric feminism, see, for example, O'Reilly, 2016, pp. 37-39.

Significantly, Leda's portrayal comes almost entirely from Clytemnestra's perspective, creating a new layer of complexity. Speaking for the mother, as observed by feminist theorists, inherently grants her voice but simultaneously silences and marginalizes her, as her identity becomes filtered through the daughter's narrative (Heffernan, 2023, p.117). This narrative choice underscores the tension between empowering the maternal voice and the constraints of second-hand storytelling.

In shaping Clytemnestra's character, her father, Tyndareus, plays an equally crucial role. Despite being a girl, she identifies with both her mother and her father. The harsh Spartan environment, characterized by physical combat and punishment for both boys and girls, significantly influences Clytemnestra's worldview. In Sparta, she learns that conflicts must be resolved through physical force. For example, when her sisters, Helen and Timandra, are wronged, Clytemnestra physically retaliates by beating the offenders. Her actions and beliefs align more closely with a masculine perspective, rejecting the gender norms upheld by society and continually challenging boundaries. She participates in activities traditionally reserved for boys. For instance, "Clytemnestra once shaved her head, like a boy, and went to the gymnasium with them hoping to prepare for a hunt" (Casati, 2023, p. 4). This defiance of traditional gender roles is a consistent thread in her character development, reflecting a refusal to conform to the expectations placed on her as a woman.

During her childhood, Clytemnestra views her father, Tyndareus, with admiration and awe. She is captivated by her father and the male world – not only because of his hierarchical position as king, making her his princess, but also in a psychological sense. As Miriam Johnson (1988) has defined, this reflects a form of psychological incest, where the father dominates the daughter's world, and she sees him as a king. This dynamic demonstrates male dominance in heterosexual relationships. The only figure capable of showing the daughter that a woman can achieve independence from this kingly authority is the mother. Thus, for daughters to gain independence, they must also construct their identity as daughters of strong mothers (O'Reilly, 2016, p.37).

As Clytemnestra matures and prepares for the roles of wife and queen, she increasingly rejects the passive position traditionally assigned to women in her society. She begins to question the dynamics of her parents' relationship, ultimately rejecting it as a model for her own life. During this transformative period, a new figure emerges as her role model: her grandmother.

Observing her grandmother, Clytemnestra realizes that alternative life paths are possible. This extraordinary woman, Gorgophone – daughter of Perseus and Andromeda, and mother to Tyndareus—is a queen who defied the norms of her time by marrying twice, outliving both husbands, and recognizing the potential for rulership in her granddaughters: "Ambition, courage, distrust. You will be queens soon enough, and that is what you need if you want to outlive the men who'll wish to be rid of you" (Casati, 2023, pp.18–19).

When an unfamiliar foreigner, Tantalus, visits her father, Clytemnestra begins to understand what love means. She is given the freedom to choose her husband, and after marrying Tantalus, she bears his child. She realizes that soon she will have to leave Sparta,

her family, and her familiar surroundings to follow her husband to his kingdom. At that moment, Clytemnestra recognizes that her child's life will be vastly different from her own, and in a positive way. Tantalus, with his stories about his kingdom, has broadened her perspective on the world, and she begins to see that other possibilities for life exist—a life without constant violence: "[…] her baby won't have to be beaten to learn, to be whipped if he disobeys" (*ibid*., pp.136–137).

In the first part of the novel, Casati develops the idea of sisterhood, portraying Clytemnestra and Helen as loving sisters bound by close ties. The sisters live together in one room and share everything. Sisterhood in mythology, as argued by Lewis, is typically free from conflict or competitiveness, in contrast to brotherly relationships; instead, sisterly bonds often serve as substitutes for female friendships (Lewis, 2011, pp. 453-454). Clytemnestra often cares for her sister Helen, as she is physically and mentally stronger, and thus takes on a protective role. This bond begins to shift when Clytemnestra becomes involved with Tantalus, marking a physical separation – she moves into his bedroom, while Helen stays behind: "She and Helen were each other's world back then. But nothing can ever stay the same" (Casati, 2023, p.71). At first, they are still close, but soon Clytemnestra will have to leave entirely. This portrayal highlights both Clytemnestra's transformation from a girl to a woman and her shifting priorities – while her sister is important to her, she chooses her husband and child. During her time in Sparta, Clytemnestra undergoes a change in roles, evolving from daughter and sister to wife and mother.

Clytemnestra's story highlights how patriarchal power operates under the guise of political necessity, stripping women of true agency. Despite the perceived freedom of Spartan women, their autonomy is ultimately conditional and subordinate to male ambition. When Agamemnon and Menelaus arrive in Sparta, they form an alliance with Tyndareus, leading to the murder of Tantalus and Clytemnestra's firstborn son. This act, justified by Tyndareus as a necessary step toward securing a prestigious political bond, reflects the brutal logic of male dominance: "That is how life is. The weak have to die, so that the rest may survive" (*ibid*., p.174). Though Tyndareus finds the killing of his grandchild unnecessary, he does not oppose to it, revealing his passive complicity in a system that prioritizes power over justice. Agamemnon's ruthless nature is further emphasized by his willingness to eliminate any obstacles to secure Clytemnestra as his wife. This moment marks a turning point for Clytemnestra, severing her emotional ties with her parents, whom she can never forgive for their inaction.

Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's marriage exemplifies the patriarchal notion that a woman's body becomes her husband's property upon marriage, reinforcing male control through both sexual and reproductive means. Agamemnon's desire for intimacy with Clytemnestra functions not as an expression of love but as an assertion of dominance, often exerted through physical coercion. This dynamic aligns with Adrienne Rich's concept of patriarchal institution of motherhood. Motherhood then is an experience of "powerless responsibility" – mothers do not make the rules, they simply enforce them in accordance with the values of the dominant culture (O'Reilly, 2016, p.24). This patriarchal motherhood ensures women's primary role as caregivers, binding them to child-rearing

and limiting their agency. In this framework, Clytemnestra's pregnancies not only secure Agamemnon's heirs but also confine her to a maternal role, diverting her focus from her lost autonomy and past life. Thus, her experience reflects the way patriarchal motherhood operates as both a mechanism of control and a means of erasing female independence:

> *She thinks of her children—Iphigenia, Electra, Orestes, Chrysothemis—each of them a root that keeps her steady. [..] Agamemnon can't take this from her. She has carried them in her womb, nursed them, watched over them at night, their breath in her ear, their little hands fitting in hers. She has clutched her children one by one, shielded them until they have grown, and in return they have given her her life back.*(Casati, 2023, p.192)

The novel's message thus supports the idea that being a mother is the central role in the lives of those women who are mothers, challenging patriarchal expectations that assign the primary role of women to that of a wife. However, the narrative does not present motherhood as a function of patriarchal or heteronormative structures. Rather, it reframes maternal experience as a source of individual power and agency that exists independently of the institution of marriage and beyond the control of the husband. In Clytemnestra's case, motherhood becomes an act of self-definition: through her children she reclaims ownership of her body, emotions, and destiny, transforming what patriarchy views as a domestic duty into a form of resistance and moral autonomy.

Clytemnestra's maternal peace is shattered when Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia, as advised by the seer, in order to gain the gods' favour for the journey to Troy. Sara Ruddick's concept of maternal practice is characterized by three core demands – preservation, growth, and social acceptance (Ruddick, 1989, p.17). In this context, Clytemnestra is denied the opportunity to fulfil the fundamental tenet of this maternal practice – protection. The sacrifice of her daughter plunges her into deep mourning, and she withdraws from her other children. At this moment, her maternal role is effectively taken over by the servant Aileen. As a result, Clytemnestra is relieved from the immediate duties of motherhood and is able to focus on ruling in her husband's absence during the Trojan War.

However, even as she mourns, Clytemnestra begins to plot her revenge against her greatest enemy – her husband. The novel portrays how Clytemnestra has no time to grieve Iphigenia's death because she must attend to the practical matters in Mycenae, where any sign of weakness could be exploited by others seeking to seize power. In ruling Mycenae, Clytemnestra, as a woman in a traditionally male-dominated role, is constantly required to prove her worth. Her leadership and authority are under continual scrutiny, highlighting the difficulties women face when they occupy power structures traditionally reserved for men. This underscores her transformation into a more politically astute and vengeful figure, as she navigates the complexities of ruling while mourning the loss of her daughter.

During this period, when Agamemnon is away for an extended time and Clytemnestra rules Mycenae, a rift develops between her and Electra. Casati's portrayal of Electra notably diverges from the more commonly known versions of the myth: Electra is depicted as fundamentally different from Clytemnestra – in both character and worldview – making reconciliation impossible and resulting in their alienation. Unlike

traditional narratives, where Electra's actions are often driven by revenge or loyalty to her father, here the prolonged absence of Agamemnon leads Electra to idealize him, having been separated from him for ten years, while she feels neglected by her mother. This absence complicates Electra's understanding of Clytemnestra's motivations, especially since Electra herself has no children and thus struggles to empathize with her mother's perspective. Consequently, Casati's version challenges the conventional mythic portrayal by emphasizing emotional distance and contrasting perspectives, rather than themes of familial unity or vengeance. In Casati's retelling, the death of Agamemnon is not sudden or unexpected; it is a protracted struggle in which Clytemnestra proves to be stronger and faster than her husband, ultimately killing him. It serves as a culmination of Clytemnestra's overall struggle throughout the novel—a journey marked by numerous battles and personal losses. Yet in this final confrontation, she not only achieves tangible dominance over the most brutal of men, but also secures a symbolic victory as a woman and as a mother who triumphs over her oppressor. The novel concludes with Clytemnestra having avenged her children and taken control, planning to rule Mycenae alongside her ally Aegisthus. However, looming over her victory is the desire for revenge from her children, Electra and Orestes, who seek to avenge their father's death. While this revenge is not explicitly carried out in the novel, its seeds are sown, and the spectre of retribution hangs over Clytemnestra's reign, marking the cyclical nature of violence and vengeance within the family.

Conclusion

Although Casati's novel is not unique in its rehabilitation of Clytemnestra as a mother, its significance lies in its alignment with broader trends in the reception of ancient myths (Hall, 2006, p.55). These trends reflect a contemporary focus on exploring Clytemnestra's role as a mother, developing her motivations through this perspective, and emphasizing an evolving cultural interest in this dimension of her character.

In Casati's portrayal, motherhood becomes the central driving force for Clytemnestra's actions. Her primary goal shifts to avenging her murdered children, challenging the traditional portrayal of her motivations in ancient literature, where she is often reduced to a vengeful wife consumed by themes of betrayal and infidelity. Casati instead emphasizes Clytemnestra as a woman and mother, whose desire for revenge is deeply rooted in her maternal identity and the injustices she endures as a woman in a patriarchal system. Revenge, in this context, becomes a means of empowerment and autonomy, allowing her to reclaim agency and resist male dominance.

From the perspective of matricentric feminism, Casati highlights Clytemnestra as a *feminist mother*, one who consistently challenges male privilege and the structures that oppress her (O'Reilly, 2016, p.108). Her actions are reframed not merely as those of a scorned wife or an angry mother but as a feminist critique of the systemic powerlessness imposed on women. In this way, Clytemnestra's journey transcends personal revenge, becoming emblematic of broader resistance against patriarchal oppression.

Casati's nuanced exploration of Clytemnestra's maternal voice showcases her transformation from a young girl into a mother, revealing the traumatic aspects of her maternal experience. Motherhood is not portrayed as a static or predictable journey but as a dynamic and deeply personal process. The loss of her children, her drive for revenge, and her estrangement from her surviving offspring – particularly Electra – create a complex and multifaceted depiction of her maternal identity.

Casati further contextualizes Clytemnestra's development within her family environment, particularly the dynamics between her parents. Observing these relationships shapes her understanding of power, loyalty, and autonomy, influencing her own role as a mother and ruler. The harsh environment in which she lives and the losses she endures profoundly distort her maternal love, shifting it from nurturing affection to a relentless determination to protect her remaining children. When she perceives Agamemnon as the ultimate threat to her children's safety, her motivations solidify around eliminating him to prevent further harm.

By placing emphasis on expanding Clytemnestra's role as a mother, Casati reframes her actions and decisions through a matrifocal lens. This reinterpretation enriches the myth, portraying Clytemnestra as a complex and empowered maternal figure whose motivations challenge traditional gender roles and patriarchal narratives. Her story becomes one of resilience, resistance, and a profound critique of the systems that seek to control and silence women.

References

Aeschylus, 1926. *Agamemnon.* Edited by H. W. Smyth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Aeschylus, 1979. *Agamemnon.* Translated by H. Lloyd-Jones. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd.

Aeschylus, 1926. *Eumenides.* Edited by H. W. Smyth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Aeschylus, 1926. *Libation bearers.* Edited by H. W. Smyth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Aeschylus, 1979. *The Eumenides (The kindly ones).* Translated by H. Lloyd-Jones. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd.

Aeschylus, 1979. *The libation bearers (The Choephoroe).* Translated by H. Lloyd-Jones. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd.

Beauvoir, S. de, 1956. *The second sex.* English transl. by H. M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape.

Casati, C., 2023. *Clytemnestra*. London: Penguin.

Dodson-Robinson, E., 2019. *Revenge, agency, and identity from European drama to Asian film: agents of vengeance.* Boston: Brill.

Faraone, C. A., 2003. Playing the bear and the fawn for Artemis: female initiation or substitute sacrifice? In: D. B. Dodd and C. A. Faraone, eds. *Initiation in ancient Greek rituals and narratives. New critical perspectives.* London, New York: Routledge, pp. 43–68.

Foley, H. P., 2001. *Female acts in Greek tragedy.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Foley, H. P., 1981. The conception of women in Athenian drama. In: H. P. Foley, ed. *Reflections of women in antiquity.* London & New York: Routledge, pp. 127–168.

Hall, E., 2010. *Greek tragedy: suffering under the sun*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hall, E., 2006. Aeschylus' Clytemnestra versus her Senecan tradition. In: F. Macintosh, P. Michelakis, E. Hall and O. Taplin, eds. *Agamemnon in performance 458 bc to ad 2004.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 53–75.

Heffernan, V., 2023. The (m)other's voice: representations of motherhood in contemporary Swiss writing by women. In: H. Wahlström Henriksson, A. Williams and M. Falgren, eds. *Narratives of motherhood and*

mothering in fiction and life writing. Switzerland, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 115–134. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17211-3_7

Homer, 1919. *The Odyssey*. Translated by A. T. Murray. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Johnson, M., 1988. *Strong mothers, weak wives: The search for gender equality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Keith, A., McAuley, M. and Sharrok, A., 2020. Introduction. In: A. Sharrok and A. Keith, eds. *Maternal conceptions in classical literature and philosophy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 3–25.

Kittelä, S. I., 2009. The queen ancient and modern: Aeschylus' Clytemnestra. *New Voices in Classical Reception studies*, (4), pp. 123–143.

Lewis, S., 2011. Women and myth. In: K. Dowden and N. Livingstone, eds. *A companion to Greek mythology.* Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 443–458.

Neumann, G., 1998. Iphigenia: sacrifice and ritual in drama. *The World of Music*, 40(1), pp. 101–117.

Millander, E. G., 2018. Spartan women. In: A. Powell, ed. *A companion of Sparta.* Hoboker, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 500–524.

O'Neill, K., 1998. Aeschylus, Homer, and the serpent at the breast. *Phoenix*, 52(3/4), pp. 216–229.

O'Reilly, A. and Bizzini, S. C., 2009. Introduction. In: A. O'Reilly and S. C. Bizzini, eds. *From the personal to the political. Towards a new theory of maternal narrative.* Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, pp. 9–31.

O'Reilly, A., 2020. Matricentric feminism. A feminism for mothers. In: L. O'Brien Hallstein, A. O'Reilly and M. Vanndenbeld Giles, eds. *The Routledge companion to motherhood.* London and New York: Routledge, pp. 51–60.

O'Reilly, A., 2016. *Matricentric feminism.* Bradford: Demeter Press.

Penguin Books. (n.d.). *Costanza Casati*. Penguin Books UK. https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/288834/costanza-casati [Accessed 28 March 2025].

Plate, L., 2008. Remembering the future; or, whatever happened to re-vision? *Signs*, 33(2), pp. 389–411. https://doi.org/10.1086/521054

Podnieks, E. and O'Reilly, A., 2010. Introduction. In: E. Podnieks and A. O'Reilly, eds. *Textual mothers/maternal texts: motherhood in contemporary women's literatures*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, pp. 1–27.

Pomeroy, S. B., 1975. *Goddesses, whores, wives, and slaves. Women in classical antiquity.* New York: Shocken Books.

Pypłacz, J., 2022. All about my mother… Cilissa, Apollo and the unity of the Oresteia. *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, 17(4), pp. 241–253. https://doi.org/10.4467/20843933ST.22.020.17186

Rabinowitz, N. S., 2008. *Greek tragedy.* Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Rich, A., 1986. *Of woman born. Motherhood as experience and institution.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Rich, A., 1972. When we dead awaken writing as re-vision. *College English*, 34(1), pp. 18–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/375215

Ruddick, S., 1989. *Maternal thinking: toward a politics of peace.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Vernant, J. P., 1994. Introduction. In: M. Detienne. *The gardens of Adonis. Spices in Greek mythology.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. vii–xli.

Winnington-Ingram, R. P., 1948. Clytemnestra and the vote of Athena. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 68, pp. 130–147. https://doi.org/10.2307/626303

Wolfe, R. M. R., 2009. Woman, tyrant, mother, murderess: an exploration of the mythic character of Clytemnestra in all her forms. *Women's Studies*, 38(6), pp. 692–719. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870903021554

Zeitlin, F. I., 1978. The dynamics of misogyny: myth and mythmaking in the Oresteia. *Arethusa*, 11(1/2), pp. 149–184.