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Linking Centre and Periphery: Nymphs and Their Cultic Space in Euripides, *Electra* 803–843

1 “Nature deities” and Their Relation to Cultic Space

Historians of ancient Greek religion usually consider nymphs as being part of the general category of “nature deities”. This category includes both “cosmic” deities, such as Selene, Helios, and Okeanos, and “personifications” of natural features of the local landscape, such as river gods and nymphs.¹ Gods more generally linked to wild spaces, such as Pan, who is a well-known companion of nymphs, are also counted among the “nature deities”.² Nymphs are usually thought to show specific competences concerning “wild spaces” (mountains, woods, springs) and especially the fertility of “untamed nature”.³ Scholars who maintain this view underline that nymphs’ cults are almost exclusively located outside the city, in mountain caves, groves, or near springs, i.e. spaces that are distinct from the urban centre of the *polis*, though there is also evidence of urban cults.⁴ This argument has two main implications: while these feminine deities are considered as having nothing or little to do with the political dimension, they are at the same time invoked by “marginal” members of society, such as women and shepherds, who are deeply concerned by fertility issues, be they related to a human community or flocks. So, in this perspective, nymphs are not only “nature deities” but also “popular deities” that are worshipped in particular by country people, living far from the refined urban civilisation, as Martin Persson Nilsson has argued in his influential book *Greek Popular Religion*.⁵ Yet whether such a polarising division adequately reflects ancient Greek thinking about their pantheon requires further investigation. As the following brief overview on nymphs as “nature deities” will show, this category is clearly based on spatial criteria, and more specifically on the idea that “urban spaces” and “wild spaces” are distinct in ancient Greek thought.

1 Larson 2007.

2 On Pan, see Borgeaud 1979 and Aston 2011, 109–119.

3 Nilsson 1961, 14–15; Larson 2001, e.g. 5, 212 and 2007, 57.

4 Nilsson 1961, 14. There are some nymphs’ cults located within the urban space, not to mention the single and anonymous “nymph” worshipped on the acropolis of Athens (Dalmon 2011). Nymphs are attested, for example, in Athens, at the springs Empedo and Kallirhoe (Larson 2001, 126–27), as well as in Megara (Pausanias 1, 40, 1).

5 Nilsson 1961, 14–17.

The dichotomy between “urban spaces” and “wild spaces” is usually understood as part of a larger, universal opposition, that of nature vs. culture.⁶ Between 1960 and 1970, this interpretive construct emerged as an important trend in classical studies, under the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism: scholars such as Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne and, more famously, Pierre Vidal-Naquet focused on the cultural representations of *eschatiai* – the wild regions at the borders of urban territory – understanding them as a space antithetic to the city and its institutions.⁷ The grounds on which this pair of opposite concepts are based have been deeply questioned by the work of anthropologists such as Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.⁸ Although these scholars hold very different views on the subject, both have suggested that the opposition “nature vs. culture”, far from being universal, is a product of Western thought and history and cannot be applied to cultures where humans and non-humans (whether they are gods, animals, plants, or parts of a landscape) are thought to exist on a continuum rather than being ontologically different from each other.

Moreover, the category of “nature deities” may appear quite outdated from a historiographical perspective, as this notion played an important role in the first attempts by classicists such as Ludwig Preller, Friedrich Max Müller, and Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher to give a global interpretation of ancient polytheisms in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁹ In their view, all polytheistic deities are “nature deities”, i.e. personifications of natural elements (rain, thunder, earth, etc.), created by ancient peoples to explain natural phenomena. In light of this framework, therefore, the concept of “nature deities” can be considered as a means to express the difference between polytheistic gods, who have a perceptible “body”, and the transcendent and immaterial “god” of monotheism. Roughly in the same decades, anthropologists Edward Burnett Tylor and Wilhelm Mannhardt recognised in “nature deities” the survival of primitive religious thought (which they called “animism”) in Greek and Roman religion.¹⁰ Although this explanation is now rejected, and nobody would claim that all ancient Greek gods are nothing but personified natural elements, it seems that the above-mentioned “nature deities” are still considered an exception and form a group with peculiar characteristics, such as being seen as embodiments of specific elements of a landscape.¹¹

More recently, Jennifer Larson has tried, within the framework of cognitive studies of religion, to provide a new understanding of the peculiarities of “nature

⁶ Larson 2007, 58–59.

⁷ Vernant 1996, Detienne 1979, Vidal-Naquet 1998. For a more critical point of view, see de Polignac 2011, Ma 2013, Baumer 2017.

⁸ Descola 2005 and 2011, Viveiros de Castro 2012 and 2014.

⁹ Konaris 2016, 1–129.

¹⁰ Hunt 2016, 53–54, Fabiano 2021.

¹¹ Larson 2007, 56.

deities” in ancient Greek religion, updating the classical notion of “animism”. Larson uses Scott Atran’s concept of folk biology to explain why in mythology nymphs are particularly connected to trees, and Pascal Boyer’s discussion of the “minimally counterintuitive concepts” to clarify how a tree can be conceptualised at the same time as a tree and as a nymph.¹² In her view, nymphs are part of the reflective, “mythological” beliefs generated by the (not always conscious) intuitive idea that springs, trees etc. are sentient beings (i.e. “granted with mind”, from the perspective of cognitive science of religion). In her approach, however, intuitive thinking (i.e. trees are sentient beings) and mythological beliefs (i.e. nymphs inhabit trees and they can be harmed if a mortal cuts down the tree) are an inseparable unit and do not represent two consecutive stages of religious development, as they did for Edward Burnett Tylor.

It should further be noted that “animistic views” of “nature deities”, whether ancient or modern, also emphasise the particular relationship between these gods and the space they inhabit. However, these cognitive theories do not take into consideration the opposition between centre and periphery which is so characteristic of nymphs’ cultic spaces.¹³ Rather, such views focus on the importance of the consubstantiality of natural elements (perceptible to the senses) and invisible divine agency (not perceptible to the senses) in the construction of polytheistic deities. In doing so, these approaches point out another distinctive feature of this category, which is the fact that “nature deities” have a divine body that is perceptible and deeply rooted in local space. The logical consequence of this perspective is that the agency of these deities is limited to the cultic space where they are supposed to live, that is the ‘wild space’ outside the *polis*.

As this brief synopsis of current theories on nymphs as “nature deities” has demonstrated, the spatial dimension is essential in defining this category. The relationship between “nature deities” and the rest of the pantheon is most commonly understood as a sharp opposition between a centre within the *polis* occupied by the Olympian gods and a periphery, populated by the “lower classes” and inhabited by “nature deities”, who are in some way “embedded” in the local landscape and, therefore, assumed to be in charge of the “good functioning” of natural elements and wild spaces. The present article aims to reassess this established scholarly notion to better understand the role of the nymphs within the spatial dynamics of Greek religion. I would like to argue that these goddesses – far from being deities “of nature” and “of the margins”, cut off from the political space of the *polis* and physically located at the borders of the territory – play an important role in linking

¹² Larson 2019.

¹³ However, it should be noted that urban cults of the nymphs are sometimes attested, for ex. in Athens, where a single and anonymous nymph is honoured since the archaic period in a precinct in the south part of the Acropolis (Larson 2001, 112), and in the island of Thasos, where nymphs are depicted in a famous relief carved in the so-called ‘*theoroi* passage’ (Larson 2001, 170–171).

centre and periphery. In this context, I also suggest that the relationship between centre and margins in Greek religion should not be understood as a clear contrast based on the ‘nature vs. culture’ dichotomy, but as a more subtle and dynamic association.

In order to show how, in ancient thought, the actions and powers of nymphs are perceived in relation to a spatial dimension, this article will refer to a specific text, a passage from Euripides’ *Electra* which describes a sacrifice to the nymphs, performed by Aegisthus outside the city of Argos with the help of a stranger who in reality is Orestes in disguise (v. 803–843). As we shall see, the victim’s entrails indicate the nymphs’ hostility towards Aegisthus and their benevolent disposition toward Orestes, who later succeeds in killing the usurper of his father’s throne at the very same altar where the sacrifice is held. The relationship of nymphs to space can be observed at two points in the ritual: first, during the invocations of both ritual agents to the nymphs (v. 805–810) and second, during the reading of the victim’s entrails (v. 826–833). I will argue that, in both cases, the nymphs show specific competences as guardians of the territory: by controlling the borders of Argos and by granting access to the political centre of the city, i.e. the royal palace. This brief passage, therefore, suggests that nymphs are not only concerned with wild spaces, ‘nature’, and fertility, but that they can also play an important role in connecting the centre and the margins in the context of a fight for political power.

2 For the Sake of the Children

The sacrifice scene in Euripides’ *Electra* is not performed on stage but is told to Electra by a messenger sent from Orestes. Agamemnon’s son has reached the place where the sacrifice for the nymphs is held and has been invited by Aegisthus to take part in the ritual. The entrails’ reading shows Aegisthus that danger is approaching, which soon comes true as Orestes kills the usurper and is acclaimed as king by Aegisthus’ guards. The rite constitutes the central element of one of the most crucial moments in this tragedy, when Orestes seems quite close to obtaining the sovereignty of Argos, after murdering Aegisthus but before killing his mother and consequently being banished. The sacrifice scene is therefore the last, precarious, moment of balance between Orestes and the gods.

The occasion for the sacrifice celebrated by Aegisthus is not given, but Orestes offers two hypotheses (v. 626): according to the first hypothesis, Aegisthus’ sacrifice is intended to invoke the goddesses’ protection for the imminent delivery of a child born from the relationship between the usurper and Clytemnestra; according to the second hypothesis, the sacrifice aims to thank the goddesses because the children already born to the royal couple have reached adulthood. In the latter case, the use of the word *tropheia* – the literal meaning of which is “wet nurse salary” – clearly

specifies the kourotrophic domain as one in which the nymphs have agency.¹⁴ So, both of Orestes' hypotheses hint at well-known competences ascribed to nymphs, who protect children and lead them safely to their coming of age.¹⁵

Specific characteristics of the sacrificial victim offered by Aegisthus point to the same direction: the usurper chooses a calf (*moschos*), an animal hardly attested as a victim, neither in literary nor epigraphic sources.¹⁶ Its young age would likely be considered an appropriate reflection of the equally young age of Aegisthus' children if, that is, the sacrifice was indeed celebrated to ask for the goddesses' benevolence towards them. Moreover, as far as it is possible to infer from the lexicon used by Euripides, this kind of victim was highly valued in sacrificial practice: the verb employed in this passage – *bouthutein* – is repeatedly used in Euripides' tragedies to refer to sumptuous sacrifices celebrated by wealthy citizens, as opposed to rites performed by the poor.¹⁷ To sum up, Aegisthus' sacrifice to the nymphs aims at showing the social status of the usurper and very possibly concerns his descendants, whose presence in the royal palace replaces that of Agamemnon's children, who were banished from their rightful home. At the same time, as we shall see, Orestes solicits the nymphs' help for essentially the same reason: in fact, as Florence Dupont has convincingly argued,¹⁸ he presents himself as a young *ephebos* who is trying to accomplish his passage to adulthood by recovering his father's throne. Orestes' liminal position matches Electra's condition, which is that of a failed *nymphe* – married but without a child – who does not accomplish the task of continuing Agamemnon's lineage. In fact, the maternity of Electra is only evoked when the Argive princess lies to her mother, telling her that she has just given birth to a child, to lure Clytemnestra into her house and kill her. To sum up: throughout the play, nymphs are expected to intervene in human affairs in order to establish or restore a legitimate lineage ruling over Argos.

3 Home Sweet Home

Based on this analysis, we can also infer that the close relationship between the sacrifice to the nymphs and Aegisthus' concern for his family lineage is instrumental in determining where the ritual should be held. The sacrifice takes place on a plot of land which belongs to Aegisthus and is located at the borders of the territory

¹⁴ *LSJ* s.v. τροφεῖα, τό.

¹⁵ Larson 2001, 5, 30 *passim*, Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, 106–108.

¹⁶ Georgoudi 1988. The *moschos* is attested twice in the corpus of 'sacred Greek laws' *LSCG* 77 = *CGRN* 82, D I. 38 γαῖαν μόσχον (ritual regulation of the Labyades, Delphi, 450–435 B.C.); *LSCG* 177 = *CGRN* 96, I. 26 (ritual regulation of Heracles Diomedenteios).

¹⁷ Euripides, fr. 327, ll. 2–7 Kannicht (= *Danae* fr. 12 Jouan – van Looy).

¹⁸ Dupont 2001, 140–143.

of Argos (v. 636), not far from Electra's home, the remoteness of which the once princess complains much about. Aegisthus' land is described as a rich aristocratic domain, where the usurper breeds his horses and has cultivated fields and an orchard (*kepos*, v. 623, 776–779). It is not clear where exactly in Aegisthus' countryside residence the sacrifice takes place. However, both Aegisthus repeatedly inviting Orestes to “enter [his] home” (v. 787, 790) and the mention of a roof under which Aegisthus' servants are preparing sacrificial objects (v. 802), imply the presence of some kind of house next to the orchard. This house and its domain are not an Euripidean invention but a location already found in the *Odyssey*, a text that represents one of the most evident literary models for *Electra*:¹⁹ in the fourth book, Menelaus tells Telemachus about Agamemnon's final days, making an implicit comparison between Odysseus' son and Orestes, who are both in need of recovering their father's throne (*Odyssey* 4, 512–537).²⁰ In his version, Menelaus mentions Aegisthus' domain at the margins of the territory of Argos, where the cultivated fields surrounding the *polis* give way to wild spaces (v. 517–518, *agrou ep'eschatien*). This place previously belonged to Thyestes, and its marginal location, far away from the urban centre, is in obvious contrast with the royal palace in Argos, from where Atreus' lineage exercises its power. Some other verses in the *Odyssey* attest that this is where Aegisthus takes Clytemnestra during Agamemnon's absence and where he kills the king soon after the latter arrives back in Argos.²¹ By mentioning this house, Euripides intentionally evokes the Odyssean version of Agamemnon's return to Argos and identifies the place where the sacrifice to the nymphs takes place with the ancestral home of Aegisthus and his father Thyestes.

The choice of this particular place for the sacrifice, especially if considered together with the reason given for the celebration and the specific kind of victim used, shows that the central issue of this rite is Aegisthus' concern for his descendants as well as the attempt to ensure their access to the political power he usurped. In this context, it is highly significant that Aegisthus looks for the nymphs' favour near his father's house and not in the royal palace, where he lives with Clytemnestra and their offspring. The reason behind his choice is that the latter place is connected to Atreus' banished descendants, i.e. Orestes and Electra, and therefore not appropriate for a rite celebrated to benefit Aegisthus' children. So, it is possible to infer that the nymphs who inhabit the marginal space of Thyestes' domain are invoked both because of their connection with Aegisthus' lineage and because of their kourotrophic competences in a ritual that also claims the royal status of the officiant through the choice of a sumptuous victim, the calf.

¹⁹ Lange 2002, 59–101.

²⁰ The parallel is also explicit in Athena's words (*Odyssey* 1, 298–302).

²¹ *Odyssey* 4, 521–537.

4 The Nymphs of the Rocks

Before killing the calf, both Aegisthus and Orestes address an invocation to the goddesses: the usurper, the major actor of this rite, speaks clearly and loudly to attract divine favour to his family and to avert dangers coming from his enemies; at the same time, Orestes, who is in disguise, whispers a silent prayer to recover his father's throne. This verbal interaction between the two men and the goddesses is highly significant in understanding the spatial dynamics of the nymphs' cult.

To substantiate this interpretation, it is useful to study the verses which describe this double invocation to the nymphs carefully, as reported by the messenger to Electra (v. 803–810):

Then your mother's husband took barley grains and cast them at the altar, saying as he did so: "You nymphs of the rock, may I and my wife, Tyndareus' daughter, who is at home, live to offer many such sacrifices while we enjoy our present good fortune, but may my enemies" – he meant you and Orestes – "fare badly". But my master prayed inaudibly for the opposite, that he should get back his father's house.²²

In my reading of this passage, the double reference to the "house" is the most important element of both invocations, that of Aegisthus (v. 806 *kat'οikous*) and that of Orestes (v. 810 *domata*). In both cases, this expression refers to the royal palace in Argos, but with significant differences: on the one hand, Aegisthus' prayer uses the term *oikos* in a periphrastic expression that designates Clytemnestra (v. 806 *ten kat'οikous Tundarida damart'emen*). Of course, at first reading, this choice of words could simply allude to the fact that Clytemnestra is at home when Aegisthus celebrates the sacrifice. In fact, another passage in the tragedy states that she is planning to join her husband for the banquet following the rite (v. 1132–1134). However, a different interpretation of these lines is possible: the placement of *kat'οikous*, inserted in an attributive position between the words "my" and "wife", suggests that the relationship with Clytemnestra represents the means through which Aegisthus has obtained access to the royal palace and consequently power over Argos. Therefore, she is not only the accomplice who participated in Agamemnon's murder but also the tangible symbol of Aegisthus' royal status. This is why, in Euripides' *Electra*, Aegisthus does not take Clytemnestra with him to his ancestral home (as the Odyssean version attests and which would be normal practice in Greek culture) but remains in her house, the royal palace. In some respects, Aegisthus' situation can be compared to that of Menelaus in Sparta, because Agamemnon's brother also assumes power by marrying Tyndareus' daughter and subsequently stays in her home

²² λαβὼν δὲ προχύτας μητρὸς εὐνέτης σέθεν / ἔβαλλε βωμούς, τοιάδ' ἐννέπων ἔπη / Νύμφαι πετραῖαι, πολλάκις με βουθυτεῖν / καὶ τὴν κατ'οἴκους Τυνδαρίδα δάμαρτ' ἐμήν / πρᾶσσοντας ὥς νῦν, τοὺς δ'έμοις ἐχθροὺς κακῶς – / λέγων Ὀρέστην καὶ σέ. Δεσπότης δ'έμὸς / τάναντί' ἤρχετ', οὐ γεγωνίσκων λόγους, / λαβεῖν πατρῷα δώματ' (translation by David Kovacs).

instead of taking her to Argos. When Helen is abducted by Paris, it is not only Menelaus' honour that has been offended, it is the symbol of the legitimacy of his reign that has been stolen.

On the other hand, the 'house' is also the central element of Orestes' invocation (v. 810): for Agamemnon's child, coming back to 'his father's house' would mean resuming his rightful position in society and finally succeeding to the throne.

Ultimately, both Aegisthus and Orestes ask the nymphs to grant them access to the real centre of the tragedy, the royal palace, i.e. also to support them as the lawful kings of Argos. This request is not disconnected from the kourotrophic competences of the deities: if by celebrating the sacrifice in his ancestral home, Aegisthus aims at directing the nymphs' benevolence towards his children, then by alluding to the royal palace in his prayer, the usurper seems to ask the goddesses to install his children – and not Electra and Orestes – in Agamemnon's house. At the same time, Orestes, asking to reenter his father's house and assume his rightful place in society, aims at obtaining the nymphs' protection by presenting himself as his father's legitimate heir. Legitimacy is at the very centre of both prayers and falls within the nymphs' sphere of competence: by protecting a family's children, the goddesses also ensure the continuity of a particular lineage in relation to a certain place.

It is significant that at the very moment when Aegisthus and Orestes invoke the goddesses to have their permission to enter the centre of Argos, i.e. the royal palace, the nymphs are qualified with an epiclesis referring to their position at the periphery (*petraiai* "of the rock"): it seems quite likely that this adjective refers either to nymphs who inhabit the mountains surrounding Electra's and Aegisthus' house (v. 805) or to some rock spring.²³ So, while the nymphs' location is marginal, the goddesses are not unrelated to the political centre of the territory. Quite the opposite: they seem to have the power to grant access to this centre from their peripheral position. This epithet, therefore, suggests that there is no radical opposition between centre and periphery, urban and wild spaces; rather, the marginal space inhabited by nymphs is fully integrated into the political sphere.

5 Gatekeepers of Argos

The role of nymphs in linking centre and periphery is also evident from Aegisthus' reading of the victim's entrails after the killing. The usurper recognises at first sight some anomalies in the internal organs of the calf: on the one hand, a lobe (v. 827

²³ A nymph named *Petraie* is known from Hesiod, *Theogony* 357, and Pausanias (9, 34, 4) mentions a water spring named *Petra* ("the rock") situated next to the cave where the Nymphs Leibeithriades were worshipped.

lobos) of the liver is missing; on the other hand, the “door” (v. 828 *pulai*) and the “receptacles” (*dochai*) near the gallbladder (presumably the portal vein and biliary vessels) have an ominous aspect because they bear the signs of an exterior attack (*kakas prosbolas*). For Aegisthus, these peculiar features of the entrails reveal that there is some kind of trap waiting for him before his door (v. 832 *dolon thuraion*), and consequently that the danger is coming from his worst enemy, Orestes, who is ready to wage war against the usurper’s home (v. 833 *polemios emois domois*). This detail is of great importance for understanding the spatial dimension of the nymphs’ sphere of competence, because the reading of the calf’s entrails is based on a parallel between the liver, which is represented as a closed space undergoing an attack from the exterior, and the royal palace, which is threatened by Orestes, who is trying to recover his father’s house.

The common element between the liver and the royal palace is the presence of a “door”, which is the main symbolic feature of both spaces and marks the boundary between the exterior and the interior. These “doors” under attack are mentioned twice in the text, the first time as *pulai* (of the liver, v. 828), the second time as *thura* (of the royal palace, v. 832). This *variatio* in the terms employed for the doors presents striking similarities with the double mention of the house (*domois, oikos*) in the invocations to the nymphs, noted earlier. Both passages show that the real concern behind the sacrifice is access to the political centre of the *polis*, which is a new acquisition for Aegisthus and something to win back for Orestes. Moreover, the recurring presence of door images in the reading of the liver makes it possible to presume that the role of the nymphs is that of “doorkeepers” of the Argive territory, a function particularly suited to their marginal position. Considered from this perspective, one may wonder whether some archaeological monuments, such as the representation of nymphs in the Thasian “*Theoroi* passage” (a monumental passage giving access to the ancient *agora* with lists of the names of the Thasian magistrates inscribed on its walls), could hint at the nymphs’ function as guardians of the city.²⁴ This interpretation further supports the idea that the nymphs, from their peripheral position, can grant access to the political space symbolised by the royal palace in Argos. Actually, they are invoked to decide whose descendants – Aegisthus’ or Agamemnon’s – should inhabit this place and rule over Argos. Their sphere of competence, therefore, does not only concern the protection of children but also the grounding of a specific family lineage in a certain place – in this case, the royal palace, which consequently involves the acquisition of the political power over the *polis*.

²⁴ For a recent discussion of this monument, see Graham 2000, 306–311.

6 Conclusion

The sacrifice scene in Euripides' *Electra* provides a valuable source for redefining the significance of the cult of the nymphs' marginal location in relation to both the urban space and the political sphere. This text, although representing the goddesses in their usual habitat – a *kepos* far from the city walls –, illustrates that their location in a marginal space does not necessarily mean that their powers are limited to wild areas and concern only the fertility of nature and women. In this specific context, nymphs play the role of “local deities” who preside over the integration of individuals and families in a territory: while Aegisthus asks for the installation of his children in the royal palace, Orestes looks for the goddesses' help to be reintegrated in his father's house.

The depiction of nymphs in *Electra* is not the only ancient source pointing in this direction: Irad Malkin's reading of their role in the *Odyssey* draws a similar picture, following Papadopoulou-Belmehdi's interpretation.²⁵ In books 13–17, Odysseus' return to Ithaka is mediated by nymphs, who help the hero reintegrate into his homeland after a long absence: the goddesses are the first Odysseus addresses in ritual once he is back in Ithaka; they protect the treasure given by Alkinoos to Odysseus in their sacred cave near the port (13, 356–360); with Hermes, they take part in the hospitality meal offered by Eumeus in the woods where he herds the royal pig livestock (14, 434–436); the goddesses are also worshipped near the fountain built by the eponymous heroes of Ithaka (Ithakos, Neritos, and Poliktor) just before the doors of the *polis*, the place where Odysseus first encounters Melanthius, the goat herder who is loyal to the suitors (17, 204–214). In all these instances, the nymphs act to protect Odysseus' return and help him settle again where he belongs, i.e. the royal palace of Ithaka.

Based on these parallels, it is worth asking whether the sphere of competence of the nymphs could be broader than the label “nature deities” suggests. The text passages discussed here reveal another aspect of the nymphs' activities, scarcely noticed by modern scholarship, namely their role as “local deities”, deeply grounded in a specific territory in the same way the natural elements are. It is also because of this strong relation to particular and significant places that nymphs appear to be primarily involved in the integration of foreigners into a territory or in the reintegration of individuals who have been far away from home for too long into a society.

The power of rooting individuals in a certain place could also be connected to the name of the goddesses (*nympha* means “bride”) and to their presence in wedding rituals,²⁶ as has recently been suggested by Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge:²⁷ in ancient

²⁵ Papadopoulou-Belmehdi 1994, 95–110, Malkin 2001.

²⁶ Ballantine 1904, 97–106; Dalmon 2011.

²⁷ Pirenne Delforge 2020.

Greece, the central element of the marriage ritual sequence is the *nymphagogia*, i.e. the procession that leads the bride from her father's house to the groom's house. It is very important to note that in this context great emphasis is put on doors, both in iconographical sources (where the groom's mother is often shown waiting for the bride at the door with torches in her hands) as well as in texts (attesting that guests sing loudly all night in front of the door of the bridal chamber).²⁸ The Greek *nymphē* is, therefore, a figure of displacement, passage, and movement, who must settle in a new space, where she is expected to continue her husband's family lineage by giving birth to new descendants, a very important role also in colonisation narratives such as the foundation of Cyrene.²⁹ All these elements seem to be present in the sacrifice episode in *Electra*, because the goddesses are invoked both by Orestes and Aegisthus as "doorkeepers" of Argos' territory precisely to anchor their family lineage in the royal palace. Therefore, although being placed by Greek religion at the margins of a territory, nymphs play an active role indeed in linking centre and periphery.

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²⁸ Vérilhac/Vial 1998, 321–326. I would like to thank Corinne Bonnet for this suggestion.

²⁹ Calame 2011, 158–163. On this theme see also Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, 112–116.

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