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# The House of Atreus in Cyberspace: Transmediality of Classical Materials

**Abstract:** One of the seminal battles in the establishment of gender hierarchies in the West takes place in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. In the trilogy Klytemnestra defends Mother Right and blood relationships against Father Right and the privileging of legal relationships established in the founding of the Law Court of Athens. Klytemnestra kills her husband, Agamemnon, upon his return from the Trojan War in vengeance for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Klytemnestra is killed in turn by her son Orestes in revenge for her murder of Agamemnon. Orestes is finally acquitted of her murder by Athena's newly established court in Athens. This act creates a gender hierarchy that favors the male and legal rights over the female and blood rights. At the same time, Aeschylus has the female furies literally driven underground to become benevolent females in the service of the state. All of these characters from the House of Atreus resurface on the World Wide Web in the late 20th century. My paper examines what revisions take place in the reincarnation of the House of Atreus in cyberspace. I investigate shifts in values and changes in gender and other hierarchies created by moving the House of Atreus to the Internet.

**Keywords:** Classical tragedy, internet, gender, Atreus, Electra, *Avengers*, Greek and Nordic mythology

One of the seminal battles in the establishment of gender hierarchies in western culture takes place in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. In the trilogy Klytemnestra defends older matriarchal rights and blood relationships against rising patriarchal rights and the privileging of legal relationships established in the founding of the Law Court of Athens during Orestes trial. Klytemnestra kills her husband, Agamemnon, upon his return from the Trojan War in vengeance for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Klytemnestra is killed in turn by her son Orestes in revenge for her murder of Agamemnon. Orestes is finally acquitted of her murder by Athena's newly established court in Athens. This act creates a gender hierarchy that favors the male and legal rights over the female and blood rights. At the same time, Aeschylus has the female furies literally driven underground to become benevolent females in the service of the state.

The importance of this gender conflict as well as the self-devouring family dynamics of the House of Atreus makes it a crucial narrative to reincorporate into our cultural understanding over the millennia. The story has reappeared in count-

less novels, plays and poems over the centuries, as well as films and comic books, and more recently it has emerged on the World Wide Web in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. My paper examines what revisions take place in the reincarnation of the House of Atreus in cyberspace. I will investigate what shifts in values and what changes in gender hierarchies take place by moving the House of Atreus to the Internet.

Myriad web sites adopted the names of various members of the House of Atreus—including: *Electra.com*, *Iphigenia.com*, and *Orestes.com*. *Agamemnon.com* is *Agamemnon Film*, owned by Charlton Heston and his son Fraser. By 2021, however, all these domain names were unused and for sale with the exception of the Charlton and Fraser Heston site. Interestingly, *Agamemnon*, the dominant patriarchal figure of the family, survives in cyberspace.

But let me look back at some of these sites. *Orestes'* website gives some indication of the attraction his name still holds even though his story has been obscured. *Orestes.com* was the homepage for a Finnish media agency that designs websites.<sup>1</sup> When I asked the webmaster, Tapio Nissilä, how he chose the name *Orestes*, he responded (in an email of 7/23/99) that the name was chosen more or less “randomly.” The Finnish company needed an “international” name (i.e., not identifiably Finnish) and *Orestes* “sounded attractive.” *Orestes* name still holds cultural weight, even though the Finnish group was clearly unaware of his actual story. Once I inquired, the company researched *Orestes'* story and actually changed the domain name to “*Identia.com*”. Mr. Nissilä expressed the hope that “our name is not any kind of offence to you or any other person interested in ancient mythology” (email 7/23/99). Since the website began with a handsome, well-dressed young man who looked as though he was in charge of a business, I thought it would be appropriate for a late twentieth-century *Orestes*—a new kind of economic king for a rising group of young entrepreneurs in a stock market gone wild at the end of the millennium. I regretted that I had inadvertently removed a classical figure from cyberspace.

The males from the House of Atreus, *Agamemnon* and his son *Orestes*, thus land on the internet in eponymous websites that maintain their masculine appeal — either as contemporary macho screen figures like Charlton Heston (famous for playing other patriarchs like *Ben Hur* and *Moses*) or as young entrepreneurs. The avenging and vengeful mother *Klytemnestra* is the only one in the immediate family to lack a website of her own in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Apparently an axe-swinging fe-

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<sup>1</sup> I first discussed this website in Komar 2003, 156–57.

<sup>2</sup> While *Klytemnestra's* daughters, *Electra* and *Iphigenia*, each have a “.com” address as does her son, *Orestes*, *Klytemnestra* herself lacks an electronic address in the 1990s. When I checked in De-

male persona who kills husband and king is one that neither men nor women care to immortalize in cyberspace. While Orestes' murder of his mother evidently did not blacken his name in the website arena, Klytemnestra's murder of her husband clearly did. The gender hierarchies established in their original story seemed to persist.

Although Klytemnestra dominated narrative texts and stage performances in the 1980s, the cultural scene – and cyberspace – both favor her daughters in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> The move from the 1980s to 1990s marks a shift in interest for women revisionist writers in particular from Klytemnestra and her founding battle for female rights against a rising patriarchal order to her daughters, Electra and Iphigenia – both of whom defend the very patriarchal order that Klytemnestra battled against. Her daughters, Elektra and Iphigenia, do (or rather did)<sup>4</sup> have their own eponymous sites. The sites I will discuss here have since vanished along with the millennium and the domain names are for sale.

To provide some brief classical context for Klytemnestra's offspring, Electra and Iphigenia are the daughters of Agamemnon and Klytemnestra and sisters of Orestes. Iphigenia is sacrificed by Agamemnon when the Greek fleet that he commands is becalmed on the way to Troy.<sup>5</sup> Klytemnestra will later slay Agamemnon on his return from Troy in retribution for her daughter's murder.<sup>6</sup> After killing her husband, Klytemnestra treats her daughter Electra badly. Electra bewails her fate and waits for the return of Orestes to seek her own vengeance for their father's death. She and Orestes plot to kill their mother, and Orestes carries out the deed.<sup>7</sup> Both Iphigenia, by accepting the sacrifice of her life for the good of the Greeks, and Electra, by avenging her father and the patriarchal order at the

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ember of 2004, both Clytemnestra.com and Klytemnestra.com were still available. I checked again in March, 2022, and the domain name "Clytemnestra.com" is for sale for \$2000. "Klytemnestra.com" produced a threatening message about hackers and privacy. Although Klytemnestra does not have her own ".com" address, one of the most fascinating and confusing revisions of her story, entitled "The People versus Clytemnestra," can be visited at [http://members.tripod.com/NWO\\_2/index.html](http://members.tripod.com/NWO_2/index.html) (last accessed 10/02/2025). For an analysis of this website, see Komar 2003, 161–67.

3 See Komar 2003. The study focuses on the battle between Mother Right and the newly arising patriarchal law as depicted in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and replayed by a number of contemporary women writers in the 1980s.

4 The past tense here is due to the fluid nature of the world wide web on which websites appear and disappear over time. Many can still be accessed via "The Wayback Machine" site that archives old webpages.

5 See Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (c405 BC).

6 See Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (458 BC) for Klytemnestra's, Electra's and Orestes' actions.

7 See Euripides' *Electra* (413 BC) and Sophocles' *Electra* (414? BC) for two different interpretations of these events.

cost of her mother's life, support the rising patriarchal system that their mother fought.

Perhaps the most fitting "re-inscription" of Electra as the millennium came to a close was electronic.<sup>8</sup> Of all of Klytemnestra's progeny, Electra, the rebel daughter who stands up for (male) right and for her betrayed father, who breaks free of her mother's domination in order to mourn her father and find a life of her own seemed most attractive in the late 1990s. Given Elektra's popularity, Klytemnestra was still seen as the betraying and murderous wife, the destructive woman. But Elektra elicited passionate sympathy, admired for her determination and loyalty. This kind of admiration – generated partly by the revival of Electra on Broadway<sup>9</sup> – made Electra a recognizable and positive icon, whose name was sufficiently well known to merit being used for a website.<sup>10</sup> Electra conquered the internet by having a virtual empire built in her name as the millennium closed.

Described in a *Time digital* article as a "hip women's site,"<sup>11</sup> The Electra.com of the late 1990s began (at least in the week when I first visited the site in March 1999) quite unintentionally ironically with a 1950s-vintage drawing of a mother hugging her baby daughter next to the quotation, "Your Mom wanted the best for you, don't you deserve it?" with the name Electra in bold and highlighted beneath the quotation. The authors of this site are clearly not troubled by (or appa-

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8 One wonders if the aural proximity of Electra's name to "electric" or "electronic" contributes to its choice as a title for Electra.com. I attempted several times to contact both Gerry Laybourne and the webmaster for Electra.com to get more information on the choice of names for the site, but I got no response.

9 Frank McGuinness's adaptation of Sophocles' *Electra* under the direction of David Leveaux ran quite successfully on Broadway (at the Ethey Barrymore Theater) in December 1998, was extended for several months, and was nominated for several Tony Awards. In the 1990s, the House of Atreus revived in several areas of the country and in varied artistic media. Garrett Fisher's opera *Agamemnon* played in Seattle's Nippon Kan Theater in June of 1998. Euripides' *Orestes* was revived in April and May of 1998 at the Franklin College Theater in Indiana. Ellen McLaughlin staged *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* at New York's Classic Stage Company in 1995, and Ruth Margraff presented an opera, *The Elektra Fugues* in New York's HERE Theater in 1997, and later played in Culver City, California in 1999. *The Greeks*, an adaptation by Kenneth Cavander based on Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles and commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare in 1980, ran in Los Angeles in a six-hour production in September 1999.

10 There was a film entitled *Elektra* in 2005 with Jennifer Garner as lead character. This film seems, however, to have no real connection with Greek Elektra story. Garner plays a superhero assassin motivated partly by her mother's killing. So there appears to be little consciousness of the classical Elektra involved. The film was an economic and critical failure.

11 Hamilton 1999. *Time digital* is a printed magazine with an accompanying website ([www.time-digital.com](http://www.time-digital.com)), distributed by *Time* magazine and featuring technical and internet materials. Its subtitle was "Your Guide to Personal Technology."

rently aware of) the classical legends that attend Electra and her “Mom.” The site is practically oriented, flanking the vision of a loving mom with an ad for online health insurance. The site does, however, capture some of the ancient Electra’s intensity and focus. In a section entitled “Simplify Your Life,” the site suggests that “Electra helps you *define what’s important* and weed out the rest.”<sup>12</sup> This ability was certainly one evidenced by the ancient Electra, whose single-minded focus on her mother’s destruction became legendary.

While she does indeed present a strong and successful female character, the ancient Electra is a much more troubled figure than her late twentieth-century counterpart. The end of the last millennium managed to remove Electra’s trauma-inducing mother, Klytemnestra, entirely in favor of a more unproblematically loving “mom.” Electra becomes the image of the strong and accomplished woman; the fact that she works entirely in the service of the male order in the classical texts has disappeared in the website along with her desire to execute mom. In short, despite her interactive mode, this 1999 Electra has become rather one-dimensional. Both Klytemnestra and her rebellious daughter Electra have been tamed and domesticated here, as have the other forces at work in Greek tragedy. Fate and the manipulative gods have been replaced by astrological forecasts. Apollo, Athena, and the curse of the House of Atreus have been replaced by our daily astrological chart. This website implies that our fates concern small personal events that do not often rise to the public and political power generated by the classical Klytemnestra or Electra. As the last millennium came to an end, women (at least as defined by this website) seem to have “cocooned” at home.<sup>13</sup>

This website implies that a viable family unit has been reestablished without Aeschylus’s battle to the death between matriarchal rights and father’s law. Interestingly, the Electra.com website does not mention the father at all. He has been displaced and replaced by a loyalty to the mother. In fact, the whole Electra.com world becomes a female domain. Men are mentioned only as potential dates or mates. But this women’s world has contracted drastically from that in which the ancient Electra operated. Issues of power, politics, struggles for dominance, and most crucially, the conflict between home and public arena are all airbrushed out of this reassuring picture. As the millennium drew to a close, the world of the classical Klytemnestra and Electra contracted back into the home. The Furies are tamed by helpful psychiatric hints, women learn to be well-adjusted wives and mothers who can hold down a job and tend the family simultaneously. The shrill,

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<sup>12</sup> All of my quotations here are taken from the Electra.com website of March 20, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> See Komar 2016 for an extended discussion.

critical, female voices of feminists of the 1970s and 1980s became cheerier and more optimistic in the late 1990s—largely by constricting women’s field of vision.

To turn to the male members of the House of Atreus, I found that Orestes.com is still available. But the founding name of Atreus produced more interesting discoveries. When I searched “Atreus,” as a domain name, I discovered that it is still quite popular although almost entirely detached from any of its classical connections. Atreusglobal.com is a cloud solutions firm based in Indonesia, Singapore, and the UK; Atreusfitnesscancun is an exercise site in Mexico; Atreus.de is a management firm in Germany, and Atreus.technomancy is a keyboard design company in the US. In addition, a number of ships, an entertainment company and a race-horse are all named Atreus. The appeal of a classical name, the meaning of which is from the Greek ἀ-, “no” and τρέω “tremein”, “tremble”, thus implying “fearless,” seems to overshadow the fact that Atreus served up his brother’s sons in a stew after taking over the kingdom, thus continuing the saga of the self-devouring House of Atreus, as well as generations of intra-family incest and murder.

But perhaps the most interesting re-embodiment of Atreus on the internet is not in a domain name, but rather in a video game entitled “God of War” (fig. 1). The game was developed by Sony Interactive Entertainment and released for the PlayStation 4 in April 2018. This eighth installment of the “God of War” series defies geography and history to merge a fictional ancient Scandinavia and adapted Norse mythology with the Greek mythology of earlier installments. Atreus in this version is the son of Kratos, Greek god of war and a personification of strength, and a female Norse giant.

At the end of this installment, Atreus recalls that his mother called him Loki, a trickster god of Norse mythology. This consolidation of a ruthless and deceiving character from Ancient Greece and a shape-shifting, destructive deceiver from Norse mythology may be particularly apt as a hero figure in the age of the Trump administration.

This description reveals that Norse and Greek mythologies are thoroughly confounded or consolidated in this game. We can read this gesture either as confusion on the part of the game developers or more seriously as a metaphor for current political culture, or perhaps, on a more hopeful note, as an attempt to reconcile and marry two ancient traditions and create a multicultural vision. In any case, this game was the most successful of its series and gave birth to a prequel comic book, a novelization and a sequel scheduled for release in 2022.

The character of Loki also becomes a protagonist in his own right when Disney produces a six-part television series starring Tom Hiddleston as Loki. In the Marvel Comics series, Loki, God of Mischief, begins as a villain, but by the time the Disney television series *Loki* aired in 2021, the character becomes a more complex anti-



**Fig. 1:** Atreus and his father Kratos, from the Play Station 4 video game *God of War*. © Sony Santa Monica.

hero. He is also part of the *Thor* series of films and the larger *Avenger* film series. In these films, Thor and Loki are brothers.

The transmedia journey into comic books and film calls up a transition that is familiar in our current cultural scene. The material of the classical myths is moving across media from classical tragedy to contemporary theater and novels to digital material, graphic novels, and comics. The impulse to reinvent these classical figures as contemporary superheroes (Wonder Woman, Superman, the Flash...) is also evident in the *Avengers* and *Justice League* series of films. The need to create superhuman beings to save humanity from itself is a strong one, which requires the metamorphosis of some clearly destructive characters from Greek mythology (Atreus, Agamemnon, Kratos) into better versions of themselves who develop a desire to defend rather than destroy humanity. But it runs the risk of aggrandizing the ruthless, deceptive, and cruel as the foundation of heroic and redemptive characters.

This impulse to (mis)use classical material as a metaphor for contemporary issues is also evident in another reincarnation of the House of Atreus discoverable on the world wide web. *The House of Atreus: Abortion as a Human Rights Issue* (Praeger, 1999), a book by James F. Bohan. Bohan uses the tragically destructive relationship between parents and children in the House of Atreus as a metaphor for abortion and the abuse of children. This is an interesting take on the original material of the myth that sidesteps the issue of gender conflict and is blind to the issue of male versus female superiority or equality entirely. The issue of patriar-



chal versus matriarchal rights at the heart of the *Oresteia* becomes rather a defense of the unborn. But perhaps this is indicative of our current political situation in which women's rights are again in question in the United States and globally.

Interestingly, there has been a flurry of superheroes in film in the last few years. Marvel has produced four *Thor* films so far with another in the works. This is matched by four *Avengers* films from 2012–2019. These films combine our current cultural need for superheroes with our current fascination with and dependence on technology. Mythology and the tech world merge in characters like Iron Man or the Black Panther, both of whom appear in the *Avengers: Infinity War* to do battle with the destroyer Thanos (from Thanatos the Greek god who personified death). The film also creates an ethnic, racial, and interspecies collaboration (including the plant-based character Groot). This merging of Greek classical, Nordic mythic, female and male superheroes, and multispecies characters with advanced technology may be the most positive vision of a future world presented in media. These series imply that, while the human struggle to survive and to understand cultures remains a battle, cooperation – and technology – may yet save us all.

These contemporary films, computer games and the websites for Atreus, Electra and Orestes make us pause to reconsider their modern fates enwrapped in a new “net.” The internet takes us into new cultural territory in which not just the House of Atreus but the concepts of “high culture” and “founding moments” themselves are dialogized, atomized, and recast in a venue in which pop icons merge with their classical counterparts. We embark upon a new, more iconoclastic sense of “culture” and “authority.”

Revealingly, however, even the fleeting presence of Orestes, Agamemnon, and Electra on the World Wide Web with .com addresses indicates that the contemporary technological revolution is taking our founding cultural myths along with it into a new era as the *Avenger* comic books and films also attest. This interaction of ancient founding myths and absolutely contemporary media and technology indicates that culture continues to operate in an evolutionary mode—even if a radical one. While new cyber games appear, “high culture” infiltrates the web matrix to keep alive the narrative explorations of our most crucial cultural tensions. The political and cultural power struggle between men and women and among differing cultures and species remains embedded in the subtexts of websites, computer games and films that invoke classical characters and myths.

A second type of cultural incorporation in cyberspace is embodied in Electra.com. In this case only an echo of any ancient story remains—and that a faint one. Electra has metamorphosed into a later self who does participate in power and does share the kingdom. Her ancient self is no longer recognizable except as the powerfully focused and ambitious young woman who succeeds in enacting her will despite all obstacles. Electra becomes a vaguely positive invocation of the fe-



male with the details of her classical origins lost to view. Her homophonic relationship to electricity—and the etymological resonances of meteoric qualities and production of energy by friction—help Electra to gain footing in a new cultural arena that remains largely unaware of her heritage. This lack of genealogy may make sites like *Electra.com* more available for forging new female selves not staked to a traumatic past. Or such sites may indicate that contemporary young women remain unaware of the gender power struggles that shaped the western tradition—or are unconcerned with such “ancient history.”

The merging of genders, species, races, and cultures in the *Avenger* films may take us in a new cultural direction in which these factors are all secondary to simple human survival. Our current confrontation of climate change, pandemics, or nuclear devastation, underline the need for global cooperation if humanity is to survive. And popular media (film, comic books, websites) may be one effective strategy for promoting this idea. The fact that it incorporates ancient mythologies as well as advanced technology implies that the founding myths may still provide essential explorations of the underlying threats to our continued existence.

Orestes inclusion in cyberspace represents a third kind of relationship of “high culture” and founding cultural models to the contemporary technological revolution. Orestes’ name was used as a .com label without any real awareness of his cultural past. Once aware of Orestes’ story, however, his .com webmasters changed the name of their site. Having eliminated Orestes’ perplexing persona, *Idenia* declares its mission to be “to carry our client’s identity to the new medias.”<sup>14</sup> Orestes’ identity is replaced by that of the client (depicted dominantly as male), the consumer of technology. It is telling that Orestes still makes people so uncomfortable that knowing his story makes him too problematic to be used as any kind of logo figure. The difficulty of making Orestes’ murder of his mother palatable to western culture seems to remain insurmountable even on the internet.

Following the House of Atreus from its beginning in ancient Greece into Cyberspace and beyond allows us to begin to explore the complex interaction of “high culture” as embodied in founding texts such as the *Oresteia* and the new technology and power economies that shape western culture. This journey demands that we reconsider many of our founding cultural moments—particularly those that have to do with fundamental gender and power tensions such as those played out in the conflicts of the House of Atreus. The further embodiment of classical Greek and Nordic traditions in film and cyberspace suggests that we need to explore strategies for using technology in ways that take us beyond gender, race, species, and geography in order simply to survive.

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14 Quoted from the *Idenia.com* website on June 30, 2000.

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