

Tragic Bodies: On the Body Politics of Retelling in Colm Tóibín's *House of Names*

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This paper argues that Colm Tóibín's body politics in *House of Names* (2017), a retelling of the fall of the house of Atreus, is indissociable from the notions of character, agency, and genre. By virtue of the interaction between the Greek hypotext and its contemporary retelling, this novel forces us to consider the body through and beyond the historicist paradigm to understand how contemporary writers pick up on bodies that have existed on the page for centuries. Drawing on recent character studies, I show how protagonicity and agency are independent and mobile principles that shift throughout the text. Both rely on assumptions about embodiment: characters need to emerge as bodies to become semiotically meaningful, and their agency depends on an embodied capacity for action. This disjunction applies, however differently, to both female and male characters, especially Clytemnestra and Orestes. Focusing on the latter, I then suggest that the novel reframes and subverts the *Bildungsroman* as a thrust towards social integration and "coming-into-manhood" (i.e. growing into fully realised gendered selves). In turn, this failure raises questions regarding explicitly feminist retellings and historical fiction. The novel's body politics rejects presentist readings of its sources and instead crafts a web of tensions that reflects on current gender theories. In doing so, Tóibín engages in a fruitful trans(literary-)historical dialogue with classical texts on the topic of gender and the body, which sheds light on a novel and an aspect of his oeuvre that are yet to receive sustained critical inquiry.