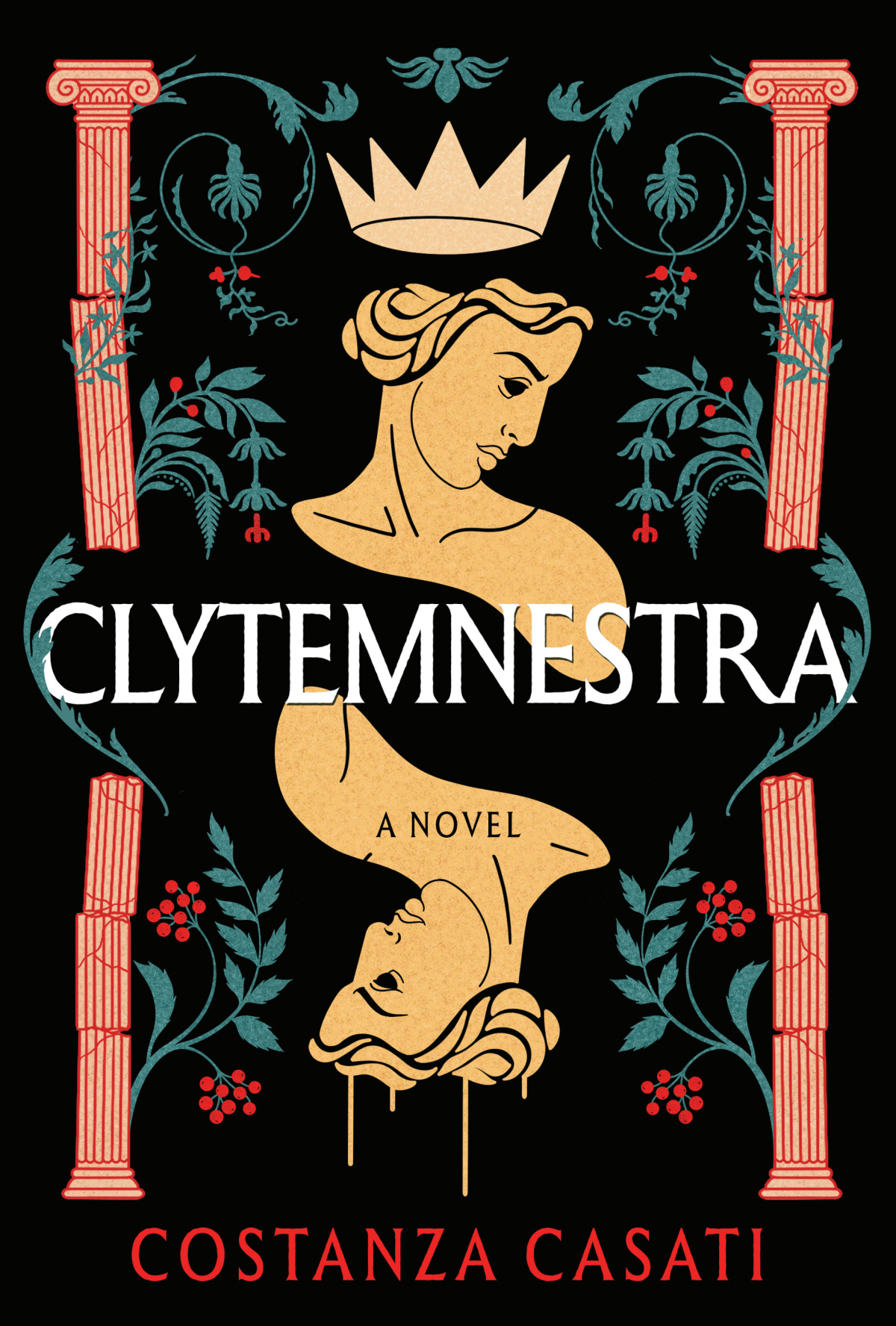

CLYTEMNESTRA
A NOVEL
COSTANZA CASATI

Reading Group Guide



1. At the start of the novel, Clytemnestra intervenes in a fight involving her sister, Helen. When told that she must let people win their own battles, she thinks to herself, "What if the loser is your loved one?" How does this mentality guide Clytemnestra throughout her life?

2. Clytemnestra and the rest of the girls in Sparta are trained to fight as children. How does this warrior mentality guide her throughout the novel? How does this set her apart from other heroines you have read before?

3. The murder of Clytemnestra's first husband, Tantalus, and her baby is not told from the perspective of Clytemnestra herself. How did you read this change in perspective? What did it add to the narrative?

4. Clytemnestra and Helen's relationship is tested many times, yet there is always love between them. How might you describe the evolution of their relationship? How does the theme of forgiveness play a role between the two?

5. Describe Clytemnestra's relationship with her father. How did his betrayal make you feel, and how does it shape Clytemnestra?

6. The story of Clytemnestra and her family is foreshadowed by an inescapable prophecy. Did the priestess's vision play out the way you though it would? What roles did prophecies and religion have in this world?

7. This story does not have obvious good characters and bad characters; all of them make decisions that are morally questionable. Were there specific moments that made you think differently about any of the characters? Were there some you found unforgiveable?

8. Why do you think Odysseus allowed for Clytemnestra's daughter to be sacrificed?

9. How did you feel about Clytemnestra's final act against Agamemnon? In the end, were her actions warranted? Who do you believe is ultimately to blame?

10. Vengeance is a common theme that courses throughout the story. How does vengeance play a role in all the characters' lives, especially Clytemnestra's?

11. Clytemnestra has been portrayed by history as an evil queen. How does the author question that role? Do you think Clytemnestra is truly evil?

12. Are you familiar with any of the myths that are presented in this novel? Were they told differently than you remember?

A Conversation with the Author



Of all the women in Greek mythology, why Clytemnestra? What drew you to her story?

I fell in love with this extraordinary character more than ten years ago. In the ancient texts, she is fierce, clever, powerful, and unbending, unlike any other heroine I'd read before. The most fascinating thing about her in the ancient sources is that she is feared and respected for the power she holds in Mycenae. I thought, here is a woman who commands a city as her husband is away, who makes him pay for all the wrong he has done to her, and who doesn't let the men around her belittle her. I felt the need to explore her story.

Her backstory was also incredibly fascinating with all the myths surrounding her. Clytemnestra grows up in Sparta, where women, compared to other Greek cities of the time, were much freer, so she is taught to hunt and fight just like the men around her. And then she is connected to some of the most fascinating characters from the myth: she is sister to Helen, cousin of Penelope, wife of Agamemnon, lover to Aegisthus, daughter of Leda. She might have been called an "adulteress," "bad wife," and "murderess" for centuries, but I believe that once people get to know her whole story, they can't help falling in love with her.

How much research did you have to do to weave these myths together? What was the writing process like?

I was already familiar with the myths, having read and studied *The*

Iliad, *The Odyssey*, and the Oresteia when I was younger, as well as many other plays such as Euripides's *Electra* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*, for instance. Before writing the novel, I went back and reread them all, especially Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, where Clytemnestra is the main character, despite the title. The fascinating thing about these myths is that there are so many different versions of them: for example, Clytemnestra's brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, in *The Odyssey* are both sons of Tyndareus, but in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, they are sons of Zeus. So before writing the story, I had to choose how to deal with these different versions and also how to weave them together in a way that felt both true to the sources but also fresh and surprising.

I also did a lot of research that focused on details of everyday life: How did the characters wash? What did they eat? How was the *gynaeceum* structured? And the gymnasium? However, the most important part of my research was what I call "cultural," namely the way in which ancient people (in this case, Greeks in the age of heroes) thought and behaved. How did they experience grief? Were vengeance and justice the same thing for them? I then wove those elements into the narrative as seamlessly as I could, in a way that would be also understandable for a contemporary reader.

Clytemnestra is an immensely complicated character. What was it like to write about her? What did you feel was most important when portraying her?

I've always felt a great empathy for her. To me, she wasn't so complicated to write because she is guided by values that are strong and clear—loyalty, courage, vengeance, and the need to do the thing that is right. In her motivations, she is straightforward as a character. Then, she is obviously a complex woman and a character who is constantly evolving as the events in the narrative shape her and make her more ruthless and vengeful. To me, the most important thing when portraying her was writing a heroine who took part in the action, who dominated every exchange and dynamic. A woman who, despite doing plenty of right and wrong, readers can root for right until the very end.

There are many hard topics in this novel, specifically violence against women and the need for revenge. How difficult was it to write about these themes? What about having to write characters that were morally corrupt?

Clytemnestra's tale is extremely brutal—a child sacrificed to the gods, a husband and baby murdered—so I needed to write scenes that reflected that brutality. I believe that if you include violent scenes in a book, it needs to be for a reason, and those scenes were purposeful for the narrative: the tragedies that happen to Clytemnestra make her the queen she eventually becomes.

This is also a world that lauded violence: fights and wars are how heroes are made, so I couldn't shy away from it. It was essential for me that these scenes were raw and brutal but also showed a perspective that we don't see often: fights from a woman's eyes.

As for writing characters that are morally corrupt, I love novels that bring to the fore people who are capable of both generous, heroic acts but also horrible things. Every character has its wounds and secrets, its motivations for doing the things they do, and I love exploring that. That is the beauty of the myth too: it offers heroines who are morally ambiguous—see Phaedra or Medea, for example—but still unforgettable.

You retell a famous Greek character through a feminist perspective. Why do you believe this new lens is important?

Having a woman at the center of the narrative and at the center of the action—a woman who has been hated and vilified for centuries—is incredibly important because it proves that women's stories can be as epic as the ones of the men.

In the ancient texts, from epic poems like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to plays like *Agamemnon*, there are incredibly intriguing heroines, but most of the time, they are not given the space and love they deserve. They are either relegated to the margins, see Circe in *The Odyssey* or Helen in *The Iliad*, or seen as misogynist archetypes: ruthless schemers, scandalous adulteresses, vengeful murderesses. Retelling their stories through this new lens allows us to go back to these myths with a fresh perspective and show that women can be as powerful, as complex, as layered as the men.

Ancient myths are often resonant to every society throughout history. Did you find any connections between the Greek myths you were rewriting and our current world now?

Absolutely. Clytemnestra to me has always been a very modern character, a woman who refuses to know her place and, because of that, is hated and vilified by the men around her.

Clytemnestra, like Helen and other women from my novel, has always been the embodiment of men's fears around female power and sexuality. In *The Odyssey*, Clytemnestra is called "treacherous," "deadly," and "bestial," and Helen in *Agamemnon* is an "angel of war, angel of agony, lighting men to death." As I was writing the book, I wanted to show these characters in a more multifaceted way, peeling away all the sexist stereotypes that have been attributed to them.

I was also aware that I was tackling some themes we're not completely comfortable with as a society, such as female ambition and female rage. But I believe that exploring these topics in a book set in the past raises important questions: on our perception of women's pain, our distrust in women's ambition and power, our judgment on women's sexuality.

What do you hope readers get from this story?

I hope that readers will fall in love with these timeless myths and stories (if they don't love them already) and, most of all, with these extraordinary female characters. *Clytemnestra* can be a challenging book for all the reasons we mentioned—violence, vengeance, betrayal—but I believe that challenging reads are thought-provoking and, in that sense, can have a positive impact on us, pushing us to reflect and empathize more.

What are you reading these days?

I love reading across different genres. Books that I've loved and recommended recently are Jenny Tinghui Zhang's *Four Treasures of the Sky*, Miranda Cowley Heller's *The Paper Palace*, and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*.