

**Illinois Wesleyan University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Nancy Sultan**

---

May, 1994

## Oh Bitter Exile!: Toward a Greek View of Xenitia

Nancy Sultan, *Illinois Wesleyan University*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/nancy\\_sultan/7/](https://works.bepress.com/nancy_sultan/7/)

# OH BITTER EXILE!: Examining the Greek View of *Xenitiá*

By Nancy Sultan

"The bread of *xenitiá* s bitter!  
Its water is muddy, its bed is hard...  
*Xenitiá*, you thief! You steal all the young men;  
Evil witch, you enchant with your money;  
Always, without sympathy,  
You separate mothers and children.  
Virgin Mary! Stop this *xenitiá*!  
Let no mother weep over separations,  
Let all the children go home."

Popular Song

To avoid leaving Ithaca for war against Troy, the ancient Greek hero Odysseus feigns madness: he yokes together an ass and an ox and plows a field, sowing the furrows with salt. When a cunning envoy of Agamemnon takes Telemachos, Odysseus' infant son, and places him in the path of the plow, Odysseus avoids the child and his ruse is uncovered. Forced at last to join the expedition, the Homeric hero embarks on his twenty-year journey, the story of which has been retold in traditional Greek song and poetry for millennia. Odysseus is one of many male Greek wanderer figures who travel into *xenitiá*.

As part of my Harvard PhD dissertation on the wandering exile in Greek poetry and songs, I began examining the concept of *xenitiá* 'foreign lands' in Greece through four millennia. That task led me on a journey through every type of poetic medium from Homer and Greek tragedy to *dêmotiká tragoûdia*, popular song (*Claií, rembétika*), and modern poetry. I spent many hours in the smoky ethnic bars of Cambridge, Massachusetts listening to Greek musicians and watching audience reactions to different kinds of music. From all of my exposure I have a strong sense that *xenitid* is perceived by many as unavoidable and perhaps inevitable; my Greek friends in America tell me that little has changed regarding the attitude toward *xenitiá* since the days of Homer: it was, is, and always will be bitter.

*Xeniteménoi* are souls who are dependent on unknown people (*xénoi*) for hospitality in a land that is not their own. This concept is found as far back as ancient Greek myth, when travelers were protected by Zeus, and were therefore entitled to certain kind acts of hospitality that included shelter, food, and parting gifts, even before being asked to reveal their identity. It was a traditional belief that by treating strangers hospitably, the host may win Zeus' favor. On the other hand, if a stranger was a god in disguise, harsh treatment might bring disaster. The notion that good hosts receive divine blessings is also strong in modern Greek tradition: "By giving to God's creatures the family also wins its spiritual salvation [...] ...the family who turns its back on the stranger, turning its back on one of the rare chances to give freely and without reserve, in a sense turns its back on the kingdom of heaven, and finds the sources of prosperity withered at the root" (J. du Boulay, *Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village*).

In many cases, however, a host will want something in return for hospitality, and a guest might overstay his/her welcome. If good treatment was expected to be forthcoming from either guest or host, there would not be so many poetic expressions of fear and loathing of *xenitiá*. In Greek culture it seems very clear that what is taught from the beginning is not that one should expect this guest-host relationship to hold firm in *xenitiá*, but rather, that one should assume that it will break down. The traveler should expect the worst treatment in a foreign land, not the best. This is made clear in poetic discourse from Homer to the present. Note the following excerpt from a modern Euboian song, part of a collection of *demotiká tragoûdia* on *xenitiá* put together by Guy Saunier in 1983:

*Xénoi* are washing my clothes, *xénoi* are washing my suit,  
they wash them once, they wash them twice, they wash them  
three and five times  
After the fifth time washing, they throw them in the street:  
—Take your clothes, my *xénos*, take your suit.

Saunier 1983

Acts of *xénia* are not always what they seem, and a stranger's welcome can turn wicked. There exists a critical opposition between "foreign," *xénos*, and what can be called "one's own," *dikós* that manifests itself in both modern and ancient Greek heroic song and poetry that deals with the pain of *xenitiá*. These songs highlight and enhance the opposition of home and homelessness. When a house and land are left empty, they traditionally become vulnerable to the overgrowth of weeds and briars, which render them barren, as Margaret Alexiou has observed in the Greek ballad "The Dead Brother." In many folk and popular songs, *xenitiá* causes sterility and death: consider the imagery in this popular song from Apeiranthos, Naxos, in which the singer addresses a rosemary plant:

Wretched rosemary, not one watered you  
No one gave you a drink, so I returned and found you dry.  
Even as you were about to bloom, they left you to wilt.  
I left you with a trusted friend, but that one left you to dry out.  
I was gone for two years, and the rosemary was thirsty  
And you made a pact with the jasmine "let's wilt together."  
(from the LP *Skopoí kai Tragoûdia tês Apeíranthou*,  
Athens, 1984)

*Xenitiá* disrupts the cycle of life at home; absence is tragic—it creates an atmosphere of death for the one who leaves as well as for the one left behind. Even the closest personal bonds cannot always remain reliably stable through space and time, and this causes great anxiety.

What causes this state of *xenitiá*? What drives the traveler to leave home? Is it the search for a better education? A job? A better life? As a popular song says, "*xenitiá* enchants with its money." Those who leave believe that a better life awaits them in a foreign land, and they often state without reservation that as soon as their fortunes are made, they will return. The complication arises in the fact that families do not want this separation, for the fear of losing a family member abroad is very great. Many times, for one reason or another, the traveler fails to return. The departure is often viewed as a course of action which families see as a drastic measure when all other possibilities for gain in their own village have been exhausted.

What makes this attitude toward *xenitiá* even more complex is that the institution of marriage,

which is supposed to signify security through the establishment of a home and thereby stand in opposition to *xenitiá*, is rather another example of it! In his Paris PhD dissertation (1968), Guy Saunier wrote that "marriage is *xenitiá*, in-laws are *xénoi*, and the bride is given in marriage *sta xéna*." For women in Greek societies that are virilocal, marriage is a striking engagement of a dangerous guest/host relationship. In many wedding songs the husband is perceived as a *xénos* who takes his wife away from her mother and family, only to suffer bitterly at the hands of an evil mother-in-law, as in the following:

"Hide me, mother, hide me, lest the *xénos* take me."  
—Why should I hide you, my eyes, you who belong to the *xénos*?  
You wear the clothes of the *xénos*, the rings of the *xénos*,  
Because even you are his, and the *xénos* shall take you."  
N. Politis 1931

The same is true for men who marry within uxorilocal social systems, as in the wedding song addressed to the groom's mother:

She will separate you from your son, from your dear one  
He shall have you as mother no more, nor shall you have your son.  
G. Saunier 1968 (Thrace)

Thus we see the difficulty of speaking in definitive terms about the notion *xenitiá* as "exile." Is there a state of belonging, even at home? It takes a period of adjustment before the husband and wife feel comfortable in their new condition and have created their own home and family. Marriage is a perplexing state, embodying in it all the opposing concepts of *dikós*, *phílos*, *xénos*. Once the house is established, it becomes an aegis for the family. As Renée Hirschon has observed among Asia Minor 'refugees' in Kokkinia, the *drómos* 'the road' has negative connotations, while *to spíti* 'the house' is treated like a sanctuary (*Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe* 1989). People "of the road" are considered impure and of ill-repute. This same sentiment is found in Homer, for example, in the *Odyssey* when the Phaiakians set Odysseus' possessions away from the road so that some highwayman would not ravage them.

If a wife's task is to use incoming money to furnish the home with beautiful things, to insure that the children are well-fed and well-educated, and to see to it that the couple's later years are comfortable, it is commonly perceived that *xenitiá* is the place where opportunities abound for obtaining resources to accomplish these desires. All too often, however, the quest for *kalá* commonly brings disaster for the family, as this lament from Thrace reveals:

Cursed *xenitiá*, with your thousand good things,  
where the young go to live abroad and all the *palliktiria*  
Even my son went abroad, my married son.  
Sunday he was married, Monday morning he set out  
and he left his betrothed, dressed like a bride,  
with a golden ornament on her head, with yellow-red hair  
and nails.  
The young man got sick and fell deathly ill.  
He does not have his girl to see him, or his mother to weep  
for him,  
He does not have his betrothed to stand him upright.

They brought him quince and grapes and a crisp apple  
—I do not want quince and grapes or a crisp apple  
In only want my girl's knees and the embrace of my mother,  
and the hands of my betrothed when I fall down to die.

Saunier 1983 (Thrace)

This song expresses the strong negative feelings and fears surrounding *xenitiá*. Though there are many good things (*kalá*) to be had there, the price is high. The young male leaves his girl "dressed like a bride," as if the ritual of marriage has been frozen in the act, and is yet to be consummated; the dying man has no children to carry on his name. Strangers offer the dying man fruits that are symbols of courtship and marriage rituals, but he declines, showing fidelity and faithfulness to the women who will take on the responsibility for him. He needs his kinswomen, especially mother and wife, to make him secure and whole. The presence of the bride is of special importance to the dying man, for he depends on her hands to prepare his body for a proper burial. Death in *xenitiá* also means not having *dikoí* nearby for comfort and care—burial might have to be foreign ground, which denies the family access to the body.

When someone dies abroad, someone at home often accepts blame for the death; a girlfriend who lost her brother once told me, "my father never forgave himself for encouraging Ioannis to go away to Germany (where he was hit by a car and killed); he blames himself." Ironically, however, the return from *xenitiá* is perceived to be as dangerous as the departure, as Loring Danforth has shown:

"...Thanasis' mother begged him repeatedly to come back to Greece to see his family. Living abroad for so long was almost like being dead. Finally Thanasis relented and returned to Greece (only to be drafted immediately into the army and killed shortly thereafter when his army truck rolled over)...When Thanasis finally returned home, when his mother finally saw him after so many years, he had been dead for several days."

(*Death Rituals of Rural Greece*)

*Xenitiá* is often blamed for both the loss of life and lineage. Perhaps this is why it is considered lucky to have a relative, especially a female relative, in a foreign land whose duty it is to shelter the traveler. In the traditional song "The Dead Brother," for example, Kostandinos urges his reluctant mother to marry his sister *sta xéna* 'in foreign parts' so that he will have relatives to stay with when he himself travels abroad:

—Give her, mother, give Arete to a foreign husband,  
And when I travel in foreign lands, when I go abroad,  
I shall have comfort, I shall have lodging.

G. Ioannou 1983 (Thrace)

In order to establish who is a *dikós* and who is a *xénos*, the language of song and poetry has developed distinct modes of discourse that are designed to separate "one's own" from that which is "other," using for example, scenes of recognition and tests of faithfulness and honor.

Do those who travel *sta xenitiá* return home permanently? "My body may be in Boston, but my soul is forever in Rethymnon," mused a *bouzoûki* player one night as we visited in a Cambridge

cafe, his Cretan accent heavy and lilting, puffs of smoke ringing his head.

*Nancy Sultan is Assistant Professor of Humanities and Classical Studies at Illinois Wesleyan University. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Harvard University and has taught at Harvard, Stanford University, the University of Minnesota and Northern Illinois University. The recipient of numerous grants, fellowships and awards, she has published extensively and specializes in oral poetics, classical mythology and folklore, ethnomusicology and modern Greek folklore.*