Weaving the Veil: An Investigation of Thanatology and Hellenic Women; From Troy to Thebes and the Rise of Rome

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This paper explores the intricate relationship between Hellenic women and death as reflected in cultural practices, trends, and perceptions. An examination of historical texts, artifacts, and modern scholarship reveals that a woman's connection to death directly correlated to the amount of power and respect she held within her community.

Keywords: Hellenes; women; death; funerals; power; culture

Introduction

The veil, a length of fine cloth, had many uses in ancient Hellenic society. It was used to protect the ἀρετή (arete - virtue) of the wearer, as a vehicle of expression, to conceal or indicate separation, and to signify liminality. For men, the primary purpose of a veil was as concealment in the case of impaired honor. However, the veil was intrinsically tied to women, who were its primary wearers and weavers.[1] It signified women's existence as creatures of "concealment, deceit, and the occult (frequently figured in women's relation to the production of textiles)."[2] In many cultures, the veil also symbolizes the thin, permeable barrier between life and death.

The veil, as it relates to death and Hellenic women, implies a close relationship between the two; one through which, I argue, Hellenic women could find empowerment and respect. To investigate this idea, in what follows, I analyze primary sources *The Odyssey, Antigone,* and *The Aeneid*, as well as other scholars' works.

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[1] D. L. Cairns, "The Meaning of the Veil in Ancient Greek Culture," in Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *Women's Dress in the Ancient Greek World* (Swansea, Wales: Classical Press of Wales, 2002).
[2] Cairns, "Veil," 11.

Ἀρετή

The shroud is a length of cloth used to veil the bodies of the deceased before burial.[3] In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus's wife, Penelope, weaves a burial shroud for his father, Laertes, in order to delay the advances of her suitors. She justifies this by claiming that the other women would shame her if she allowed her aged father-in-law to die without a shroud to cover him.[4] This explanation must have been reasonable within Hellenic culture or else Penelope's deception would not have lasted for three years, only ending when a maid admitted to the suitors that, each night, Penelope would unravel all of the progress she had made.[5] Through this ruse, Penelope was able to retain her own agency for a significant period of time.

This connection between the veil and the shroud is further perpetuated by the ancient ties between marriage and death. This relationship is most strongly seen in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the first of the three Theban plays. While the play emphasizes a bride's status as replaceable to a man, it also highlights the cultural importance of a woman becoming a bride. The idea of Creon killing his son's bride is agreeable because another can be easily attained.[6] However, Antigone -- a virgin maiden -- is referred to as the bride of Death and said to be going to her marriage on the way to her tomb, which is additionally referred to as her bridal chamber.[7] After his suicide, Haemon and Antigone are also considered to be married in death.[8]

Historically, a woman's burial made reference to her marriage, with both virgins and married women being buried in bridal attire. For the maiden this evoked the wedding she was never able to celebrate, and for the married woman her wedding would be commemorated.

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[3] Cairns, "Veil," 4.
[4] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles. (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 96.
[5] Homer, *Odyssey*, 96.
[6] Sophocles, "Antigone," *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles. (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 93.
[7] Sophocles, "Antigone," 101-105.
[8] Sophocles, "Antigone," 123.

Musical lamentations could evoke wedding songs, and in one, a dying girl likens death to the bridegroom who takes her away from her family, bearing gifts.[9] This analogy may also have manifested in the sacrifice of a maiden as the bride for a deceased man, as referenced by the myth of Polyxena and Achilles.[10] This connection between death and marriage has even lasted to modern times, with some modern Greek lamentations containing an analogy between the two rites.[11]

The importance of marriage for a Hellenic woman is emphasized by this lasting cultural correlation between her wedding and her death. Yet, occasionally, a woman's marriage may invite death for herself or others. Helen's marriage to Paris led to countless deaths on both sides of the war, even after the fall of Troy. Clytemnestra's betrayal of her marriage led to the murder of Agamenmnon, and later, herself.[12] Penelope's devotion to her marriage led to the deaths of the many young men who sought her hand, during a battle which is referred to as the "blood wedding."[13] Antigone's death resulted in that of her fiancé, Haemon,[14] and Aeneas' marriage to Dido[15] set her downfall in motion, which Virgil also attributes to the later conflicts between Carthage and Rome.[16] While this outcome to a marriage was never desirable, the power or virtue of a woman, indicated by the control she held over the lives of men, would often lead to a rise in her social status.

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[9] Mario Erasmo, *Death: Antiquity and its Legacy.* (New York, New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2012), 21.
[10] Erasmo, *Death*, 22.
[11] Erasmo, *Death*, 20-21.
[12] Homer, *Odyssey,* 115-11.
[13] Homer, *Odyssey,* 86.
[14] Sophocles, "Antigone," 122-123.
[15] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. David West. (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 74. The status of this marriage is contested, as there was no contract involved and Aeneas insists that they were never married at all. It is most likely that the two simply had a sexual relationship.
[16] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 87.

Figure 1. *Marble funerary statues of a maiden and a little girl* ca. 320 B.C.E. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Greek and Roman Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254508.)

Leading up to a Hellenic woman's marriage, the respect she received was heavily influenced by her participation in ritual activities. The older girl depicted in this fourth century grave monument wears the traditional mantle of a *kanephoros*, a maiden chosen to be the basket bearer during a festival. Representing the ideal maiden, selection for this role was the highest honor an unmarried woman could achieve, reflecting her physical and moral perfection.[17] Only one *kanephoros* was necessary per festival, although historical records suggest that more may have been selected in special circumstances as a display of extravagance.[18] As such, this honor was only bestowed upon a select few girls, and could influence their social standings for years afterwards.[19] As public festivities were often the only time when Hellenic women were seen by the public, the *kanephoros* may have also served as an object of desire, meant to represent all of the available maidens for their potential suitors. Fathers would adorn their *kanephoros* daughters before sending them to the acropolis, and Hellenic tales describe men falling in love with the maidens during festivals.[20]

The *kanephoros* ensured a favorable outcome to a sacrifice by guaranteeing the purity of the sacrificial paraphernalia. She led the ritual procession to the sacrificial altar while carrying on her head a *kanoun* basket filled with barley or firstfruits, fillets, and a knife. These instruments would be used to perform the sacrifice of creatures such as cattle,[21] goats, or pigs. *Thalloi*, or olive-branch bearers, led the animals behind the maiden,[22] and she was provided with metic (free non-citizen) girls as her attendants,[23] a role which the younger girl in this monument may have

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[17] Linda Jones Roccos, "The Kanephoros and Her Festival Mantle in Greek Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 99, 4(1995): 642-644.
[18] Robert Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 224.
[19] Roccos, "Kanephoros," 643.
[20] Parker, *Polytheism*, 225-226.
[21] Roccos, "Kanephoros," 642-643.
[22] John Oakley, "At the Sanctuary," *A Guide to Scenes of Daily Life on Athenian Vases* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 115-116.
[23] Parker, *Polytheism*, 170.

played. Thus, it was a connection to death, mediated by public ritual, which granted young Hellenic women the greatest possible respect and esteem, while furthering the connection between death and marriage by increasing her prospects.

Expression

In Sophocles' play, Antigone never reaches her wedding day, although she has procured two husbands, Hades and Haemon, in her death. Instead, similarly to the *kanephoros*, she achieves her power through an intimate connection to death.

Antigone has long been analyzed by philosophers, including Judith Butler in her book, *Antigone's Claim*, but these theorists reduce Antigone's story to a psychoanalytic continuation of the Oedipus myth. They argue that Antigone's love towards her brother, Polynices, is rooted in an incestuous desire paralleling that of their parents.[24] I disagree with this theory, as Antigone herself makes it clear that she acts out of a sense of justice and familial devotion. Justice is said by Antigone to be a chthonic god,[25] implying the importance of death and the related rites, and later states that "Death longs for the same rites for all."[26] Antigone and her sister, Ismene, are the only members of their family left alive at the beginning of the play.[27] After her death sentence, Antigone laments the fact that no family is left alive to mourn for her as she did for them, and expresses that she would never have risked her life in this way for a husband or child as non-familial relationships are replaceable.[28]

The importance of burial is stressed in *The Aeneid* when it is discovered that the unburied dead are unable to cross the River Styx. Not only would Creon's law have robbed Polynices'

[24] Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 6.
[25] Sophocles, "Antigone," 82.
[26] Sophocles, "Antigone," 85.
[27] Sophocles, "Antigone," 62.
[28] Sophocles, "Antigone," 104-105.

body of its dignity, but it would also have sentenced his shade to wait a hundred years before being allowed entry into Hades.[29] In effect, not receiving a burial inflicts a second death upon the deceased, which explains the intense pain which Antigone felt at the idea of leaving her brother unburied.[30] It is also likely that, as she had buried each other member of her family with the exception of Ismene, Antigone would have felt a sense of incompletion by allowing her last brother to go unburied. She said to Ismene, "I gave myself to death, long ago, so I might serve the dead," indicating her devotion to her family members in their deaths.[31]

As a virgin devoted to the justice of Hades, Antigone emphasized the importance of funerary customs at every level of Hellenic culture. The people of Thebes agreed with her insistence on burying Polynices,[32] and the whirlwind of sand which aided her signified the approval of the gods.[33] Through her actions, she took control of her fate, the fate of her family, and the fate of the Thebian government. In this way, *Antigone* is also a tale of female empowerment. Antigone found enough power in her defiance of the state that she was referred to as a man,[34] a significant label in a time and place where women were subservient to men. Her death, which ultimately occured at her own hand, led not only to the death of Creon's son, Haemon, but also his wife, Eurydice.[35] Antigone had effectively turned all of Thebes against its new king.

The method with which Antigone took her own life, as well, is significant: in the darkest recesses of her "bridal chamber" tomb, she fashioned a noose and hung herself using her veil.[36]

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[29] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 124.
[30] Sophocles, "Antigone," 82.
[31] Sophocles, "Antigone," 88.
[32] Sophocles, "Antigone," 95.
[33] Sophocles, "Antigone," 80.
[34] Sophocles, "Antigone," 83.
[35] Sophocles, "Antigone," 125-126.
[36] Sophocles, "Antigone," 122.

Separation

The Aeneid's Dido of Carthage was a powerful queen in her own right; and yet, the manipulation of gods and men was her undoing. Her story as told by Virgil is one of a woman's defilement, her loss of agency resulting in a slow descent into madness for which she, herself, was blamed. Dido's infatuation with Aeneas, influenced by Venus and Cupid[37] and enabled by Juno,[38] led to such intense pain at his departure that she commited suicide. Her devotion to her late husband, Sychaeus, was strong enough that she did not initially intend to pursue Aeneas,[39] and her perceived betrayal became a source of intense regret after her heartbreak.[40] She had rejected the African chiefs, including Iarbus, and her country was beset on all sides after the Trojans' departure.[41] Even her death itself was drawn out, difficult, and agonizing.[42]

Virgil drew heavily from the historic Dido, the Phoenecian Elissa: sister to King Pygmalion, co-heir to the Tyrian throne, and founder of Carthage. Upon Pygmalion's murder of her husband, Acerbas, priest of Hercules, Elissa fled for Libya with her supporters and Acerbas' wealth. The Libyans allowed her to found her city, but King Hiarbus soon demanded her hand in marriage. Faced with the option of an undesired marriage or risking the safety of her people, Elissa devised a plan similar to that of Virgil's Dido. After a period of lamentation, Elissa built a funeral pyre upon which she made offerings to Acerbas, as if asking for his favor for her new marriage. However, she then ascended the pyre with a sword, and took her own life.[43]

Katherine Simons, in her dissertation on death and the female body in classical literature, argues that Dido's death was due to her gender transgressions as a female ruler and her sexual

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[37] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 22-23.
[38] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 74.
[39] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 69-70.
[40] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 85.
[41] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 70.
[42] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 88-89.
[43] Justinus, Marcus Junianus, "Book XVIII," *Philippic History*, trans. John Selby Watson. (London: n.p., 1853.), 4-6.

deviance in her desire for Aeneas, and that she acted as a scapegoat for the crimes of Helen and Juno.[44] While Simons' analysis may describe Virgil's literary use of Elissa's story, the aspects of truth share a different story: Dido-Elissa, a Mediterranean queen, in order to maintain her own autonomy as a woman, ended her life. Not only did she choose death, by her own hand and on her own terms, over submission to an undesirable marriage, but she also held her own funeral in the process.

The empowerment found by Dido-Elissa in her death is in stark contrast to the role played by Trojan women during the funeral of Anchises in the next chapter. While the men conducted rituals and held funeral games,[45] the women were to stay far away by the ships and weep in Anchises' honor.[46] This lamentation was performative, as the women themselves stated that their tears were for the regret that "Greek hands did not drag us off to our deaths in war under the walls of our native city."[47] These women would have preferred to die in their homeland rather than lose their (limited) autonomy by surviving its destruction. The women took their role seriously, however, as Beroe was said to experience great anxiety over being the only one not to pay her "due honor" to Anchises.[48] Additionally, it was only when the women were not there to grieve Palinurus that the men themselves lamented for their fallen comrade,[49] indicating the importance of the weeping typically performed by women while further proving the lack of necessity in their participation.

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[44] Katherine De Boer Simons, "Death and the Female Body in Homer, Vergil, and Ovid." (Unpublished Dissertation, 2016), 94-95. https://doi.org/10.17615/gtas-5g53
[45] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 92-106.
[46] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 106.
[47] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 107.
[48] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 107.
[49] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 120.

(Roman) Liminality

This exclusion of women from funeral ceremonies is also in contrast to the importance of their participation in Hellenic culture. If Thetis' role in the funeral of Achilles[50] represented a dramatized Hellenic funeral, then women were traditionally in charge of these events. Combined with the other funeral rites depicted in *The Odyssey*, we can summarize that the typical Hellenic funeral would have been thus: wash, anoint, and dress the body; lay the body out for viewing and lamentation; wrap the body in a burial shroud; and host the funeral games. This is in line with the Hellenic funerals described by archaeological evidence, which additionally included a funeral procession, primitive embalming, offerings and sacrifices, and a feast.[51] Historical evidence also supports this series of events and the significant role played by women. Women were, traditionally, the ones who prepared the corpse for viewing. Women performed rites for the deceased, closed their eyes, and conducted ritual mourning and lamentation, and could pour libations in graveside rituals.[52]

As implied by the funeral of Anchises, the importance of women in funerary practices was significantly diminished by the Romans. Many of these duties were performed by men instead,[53] with funeral professionals such as undertakers, morticians, and cremators offering aid. Part of the role of these professionals was to mediate between the living and the dead, in order to protect the living from the "pollution" of the corpse.[54] Women likely still prepared the corpse for viewing, but even this work could be completed with the help of a funeral professional.[55] Women were effectively excluded from the funeral process altogether by its professionalization and the belief that the corpse was, in some way, tainted.

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[50] Homer, *Odyssey*, 470-471.
[51] Rowan Tackitt, "Burial in Mycenae." (Unpublished Manuscript, 2021), 3-4.
[52] Erasmo, "Death," 14-17.
[53] Erasmo, "Death," 18.
[54] Erasmo, "Death," 7.
[55] Erasmo, "Death," 18.

This transition closely parallels the history of the United States funeral industry. Prior to the Victorian era, American women, much like Hellenic women, were in charge of the funeral as an extension of their household duties. For a man to prepare a body was nearly unthinkable. Yet in the 1830s, men began to create jobs for themselves as undertakers, setting in motion the transformation of death into a professional field. A cultural shift occurred simultaneously which turned the death of the natural life cycle into a benevolent phenomenon to be sentimentalized and treated artistically. Soon afterwards, the Civil War created a demand for embalming, alongside another cultural movement to separate mortality from life and to depict death as simply a "final slumber." This led to a preference for a "life-like" corpse, which, combined with the popularity of Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession[56] and the American cult of individuality,[57] created the funeral industry that America has known for the last 150 years.

This exclusion of women from the funeral industry is directly related to the medicalized, capitalistic, artificial state it is in today, as well as the death denial so prevalent in modern American society. This conclusion is supported by the fact that, as women have re-entered the workforce and the funeral industry, they have brought with them a movement dubbed "Death Positivity." Officially founded by mortician Caitlin Doughty in 2011, it is an ideology which promotes just that: a positive view of death, and a reconnection to the natural life cycle. These women are returning death to the home, and bodies to the earth. Of course, men have also been a part of this movement, which was developed from the ideas of anthropologist Ernest Becker in his book, *The Denial of Death*. However, this ideology has proven overwhelmingly popular

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[56] Rowan Tackitt, "The Death Positive Funeral Industry." (Unpublished Manuscript, 2021), 4-5.
[57] Shannon Lee Dawdy, "Zombies and a Decaying American Ontology." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 32, 1(n.d.): 20. https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12226.

amongst women, who are at the forefront of thanatological work and make up 60% of mortuary students in America.[58]

An integral concept for the Death Positivity movement is that of *memento-mori*, the Greco-Roman idea that the lives of the living can be improved through reminders of their own mortality.[59] This concept also found popularity in the Neoclassical and Victorian periods of Europe, during which the funerary practices of antiquity were revived.[60] Many of these practices were outlawed by the Romans,[61] just as similar practices have been effectively outlawed by American funeral culture. Anthropologist Shannon Lee Dawdy argues that "for most the twentieth century, the American funeral industry had built itself on a promise of zombie prevention."[62] She theorizes that American culture, while having previously revered the corpse as an individual, is now undergoing a shift towards viewing the body as a sacred community of organisms. This shift is analogized with the image of a decomposing zombie mob, and is referred to by Dawdy as a "Zombie Oriented Ontology," or ZOO.[63]

While a system had been built to deny mourning and community,[64] these are now being embraced by a new ontology of death. Women in patriarchal societies have often been expected to cultivate community, and are doing just so through their resurrection of Hellenic values. The modern Death Positivity movement, founded through feminism, both mirrors and draws direct inspiration from woman-centered Hellenistic funeral culture. Men wove a veil between life and death; women, like Penelope, will be the ones to unravel it.

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[58] Tackitt, "Death Positive", 2-5.
[59] Tackitt, "Death Positive", 1.
[60] Erasmo, "Death," 31.
[61] Erasmo, "Death," 59.
[62] Dawdy, "Zombies," 20.
[63] Dawdy, "Zombies," 22-23.
[64] Dawdy, "Zombies," 20-21.

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