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DANGLING VIRGINS: MYTH, RITUAL AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT GREECE

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1. In Diogenes Laertius's lives of the philosophers (Diog. Laert. 6, 52),¹ we come across an unusual anecdote: one day, Diogenes the Cynic, while strolling among the olive groves, saw several hanged maidens swinging from the branches of the trees. At this sight, he exclaimed: "If only all trees bore such fruit!" Is this a case of particularly acute misogyny? Perhaps. But, beyond the initial impression, what is most surprising about the episode is not Diogenes' hatred of women. In a society, such as that of the Greeks, which completely excluded women from social, cultural, and political life, feared them and scorned them, misogyny not infrequently reached levels of particular intensity.² It is sufficient to turn to one famous example among many: Hippolytus's invective against woman in Euripides' tragedy of the same name (*Hipp.* 616 sq.):

"Oh Zeus, whatever possessed you to put an ambiguous misfortune amongst men by bringing women to the light of day? If you really wanted to sow the race of mortals, why did it have to be born of women? How much better it would be if men could buy the seed of sons by paying for it with gold, iron, or bronze in your temples and could live free, without women in their houses. . ."

I could give further examples and they would confirm that Hippolytus's opinion of women was anything but singular (see Cantarella 1981:35). What is most surprising in Diogenes' anecdote is not the philosopher's misogyny, but something else: his complete

1. All citations of classical works follow the format of the Oxford Classical Dictionary. These works are not listed in the References at the end of this essay.

2. For a general view of women's condition in ancient Greece, see Pomeroy (1975), Boulding (1975:244), Shaps (1979), Lefkowitz (1981), Lefkowitz and Fant (1982), Cantarella (1981).

lack of wonder at seeing several girls hanging from a tree.³ Indeed, Diogenes Laertius's story creates the impression that for a Greek it was quite normal to see hanged women swinging from trees along the road. And what if this impression contained some element of truth? What if, in some way, the anecdote had a basis in reality?

2. The frequency of female hangings in Greek texts is, in effect, such as to make legitimate this hypothesis, that is, that the link between girls and the *brochos* — the mortal noose — might not be occasional, fortuitous, or merely accidental; that between girls and *brochos* in Greece there might be a constant, consolidated, almost institutional link. Numerous considerations support this idea.

The *brochos*, the noose that swings one in the air, is, in effect, the privileged instrument of female death.⁴ In the Homeric poems, the noose is the instrument with which Epicaste (Jocasta's Homeric name) kills herself after having discovered the horror of her incestuous marriage (*Od.* 11, 269). In Sophocles' tragedy, Antigone uses the noose to kill herself. By hanging, she escapes the tyrant Creon's sentence which condemned her to being buried alive (*Ant.* 1204). In a series of myths, female suicides by hanging are *aitia*, that is, they explain religious rites, the structure of which is uniform throughout the Greek territory.

Which myths? Let me start with a Laconian rite. In Caryae a feast was celebrated in Artemis's honor in which dancing choruses of Spartan virgins took part (Paus. 3, 10, 7). The feast celebrated an event: "cum luderent virgines, meditatus ruinam omnis chorus in arborem nucis fugit, et in ramo eius pependit" (Schol. Stat. *Theb.* 4, 225). The event celebrated was as follows. While dancing, the maidens who made up the chorus had been frightened by a menace. To escape it, they hanged themselves from a walnut tree and, as the text proceeds to narrate, were reborn in the form of fruit hanging from the branches.

It is not difficult to imagine the nature of the menace. The frequency of rape in Greek myths leaves little room for doubt. But we are interested in something else, the fact that the rite celebrated a hanging of virgins which, in this particular instance, had been a collective hanging.

Let me move on to a second example. Plutarch describes a feast celebrated in Delphi, called Charila (*Quaest. Graec.* XII, 293 E). The myth that explained this ceremony tells of Charila, a little orphan who, in times of great need, had gone, along with a crowd, to petition the king for food. But the king, in repulsing the crowd, had kicked the child. And, poor as she was, the proud child hanged

3. See Brelich (1969:444, n. 2).

4. See King (1983), Loraux (1984a and 1984b).

herself by her belt. After this, the hardships of the city became so aggravated that the oracle was called upon, and declared that Charila's death must be expiated. Thus we have the rite in question. Every eight years, a feast was celebrated in Delphi in which the "king," after having distributed cereal among the people, kicked a doll representing Charila. The doll was then carried in procession up to the place where Charila had hanged herself and it was buried in the earth with a noose around its neck.⁵

A third example: in Thessaly, in Melitaea, a tyrant by the name of Tartarus sent his soldiers to capture maidens and bring them back to the palace where he would rape them. One Virgin, Aspalis, managed to escape the outrage by hanging herself before the arrival of the soldiers. To avenge her death, her brother Astigite then dressed up as a woman and, in his sister's place, was brought before the tyrant whom he killed. The people now proclaimed Astigite king and searched for Aspalis's body so that it could be buried. Upon reaching the scene of the suicide they failed to find the maiden's body. It had mysteriously disappeared and, in its place, a new body had appeared which was called *Aspalis Aimelete Hekaerge*. This event was celebrated every year in Melitaea by a rite in which the virgins of the village killed a goat and hanged it, as Aspalis had hanged herself (Ant. Lib., *Met.* 13; Nilsson 1967:235; Brelich 1969:444).

I can give still further examples. In Athens, a feast called *chytroi* (the pots) was celebrated every year with the cooking of a special food called *panspermia* (*FGrH* 115 F 347a). What interests us here is another phase of the celebration during which the maidens sat on swings. Here, too, a myth explains the reason for the rite. After Orestes avenged his father Agamemnon by killing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, Erigone, their daughter, swore her parents' revenge. She followed Orestes to Athens in the hope of punishing him, but when Orestes was acquitted, she became distraught and hanged herself.⁶

Yet here, too, the maiden's suicide had ill-omened consequences: Athenian maidens, in imitation of Erigone, killed themselves en masse, thus endangering the future of the city which was left almost entirely without marriageable women. When the oracle was, as usual, called upon, a single answer was given: to avoid Athens's demise, swings had to be built so that girls could rock on them (*Hyg. Fab.* 130). Why? I shall return to this point later; for now let me just say

5. On the feast, with different interpretations, see Usener (1875:182), Jeanmaire (1939: 407 sq.), Nilsson (1967:460), Brelich (1969:428, 443), Gernet (1968:231).

6. *Et. M.* 42, 3 (*aïora*). See also Hesych. *aletis*; *Hyg. Fab.* 122; Paus. 2, 18, 6–7; *FGrH* 239 A 25. According to another version of the myth, Erigone was the daughter of an Athenian citizen named Icarus, and hanged herself when she discovered that her father has been killed: see Apollod. *Bibl.* 3, 14, 7; *Hyg. Fab.* 130; *Ael. V.H.* 7, 28.

that swings symbolized both death by hanging (see also Festus 212 L), and were considered capable of producing magic effects, thus exorcizing the ill effects produced by hanging (Serv. *ad Georg.* II, 389).

3. The noose was not only the privileged instrument of female suicide, but also, very often, that with which women were killed.

Let me begin here with a Rhodian legend told by Pausanias. Helen, in exile from Sparta after the death of Menelaus, asked her friend Polyxo for assistance. But Polyxo, whose husband had been killed in the Trojan War, decided to use the occasion for her revenge: she made her slaves dress up as Erinyes and sent them to hang Helen (Paus. 3, 19, 6). Even more interesting than the Rhodian legend, which tells of a hanging for revenge, are those texts which refer to hangings as punishment.

Upon his return to Ithaca, Ulysses kills Penelope's suitors and those dependents of the house who have been unfaithful to him. But he chooses different deaths for men and women. Melanthius, the unfaithful goatherd, is killed by a sort of primitive crucifixion (*Od.* 22, 187–193), while the maidservants are hanged: "Like doves and turtle-doves caught in a net, their heads were in a row and around each one's neck was a *brochos*, so they died in the saddest way. And with their feet they kicked the air: but briefly, not for long" (*Od.* 22, 465–473).

Besides hanging women, making them swing in the air for some time, though not necessarily until death, was a form of punishment mentioned in Greek texts. "Do you remember when you hung high . . . and you hung in the air amongst the clouds?" Zeus asks his wife Hera in the *Iliad*, to remind her what happened to her when she was disobedient, and to warn her what will happen if she continues being disrespectful towards her husband (*Il.* 15, 18–21).

4. But why did Greek women, alive or dead, hanged or on swings, seem destined to dangle in empty space? Although it is not conclusive evidence for the Greek world, an observation concerning hanging in Rome may be pertinent.

In commenting on the death of Queen Amata, who hanged herself, Servius recounts that when the king Tarquinius Superbus had the sewers built those who had been forced to do this work, which was considered vile, hanged themselves. Tarquinius then ordered the cadavers to be crucified (Serv. *ad Aen.* XII, 603). While clearly unreliable on a historical level, the story is nonetheless significant, because of the explanation Servius gives of Tarquinius's gesture. The king had the hanged cadavers crucified to punish them for killing themselves by an *informe* – that is infamous – death.⁷

7. On this episode see Voisin (1979:422).

That the Romans considered hanging infamous is confirmed by other authors and in particular by Livy, who, in commenting on the death of Quintus Flavius Flaccus, writes that he died the most disgraceful death imaginable because he hanged himself (Liv. 42, 28). But why was hanging oneself so unbecoming? Pacatus, a fourth century writer, proposes an explanation. Death by hanging, Pacatus writes, is *inusta femineae mortis infamia*: it is a feminine death, unworthy of a man. A man, in fact, must kill himself with a sword (*Pan. Theod.* 28, 4). The link between woman and the noose was therefore perceived by the Romans as well.

But let me return to Greece. What are, in this culture, the reasons for such a close, continuous, almost obsessive relationship between hanging and the female sex?

5. I believe that to understand this it is necessary to recall the rites of initiation and, more particularly, the so-called rites of passage characteristic of societies organized according to divisions of the population by age groups.⁸ It is well known that in these societies the passage of an individual from one age group to the next is accompanied by a series of rites which, beyond the sometimes relevant local variants, present common characteristics: the person undergoing initiation must, in order to pass into the next age group, symbolically die as far as the previous group is concerned and be reborn into the new group after a period of segregation, or isolation, during which he or she lives apart from the community and often outside the rules of civic life.⁹

The symbolism is clear. The rite of passage (specifically, in this case, the passage from the pre-pubertal to the pubertal age) signifies the death of the adolescent and the birth of an adult: in the case of male initiation, a man capable of fighting, and, in the case of female initiation, a woman capable of marrying and having children. The existence of rites of passage in Greece, intuited by scholars such as Jeanmaire, Brelich, Gernet and Burkert, has been confirmed by recent studies, which, from a different perspective and with reference to different cultural areas, have identified the characteristics of some of these rites.¹⁰

The hypothesis that in Greece, before the birth of the city states, societies were organized according to age groups is now accepted by most scholars, as is the idea that many religious ceremonies of the classical age retained the concept of the ancient rites of passage. I will limit myself to one example, which is in itself famous, the

8. See Van Gennep (1909), Eliade (1958), Brelich (1961 and 1969), Gluckman (1962).

9. For a list of different types of segregation, see Brelich (1969:29).

10. For the Dorian area see Calame (1977 and 1982). For the Attic zone see Lincoln (1979 and 1981).

ceremony known as *Thesmophoria*. Every year in Athens the story of Persephone, also called Kore, the maiden, was re-enacted in celebration. According to the story, one day while picking flowers, Persephone was abducted by Hades, the king of the underworld who had fallen in love with her and took her to the underground. Demeter, Kore's mother, managed to obtain her release from Zeus. Thanks to her mother's intervention, Persephone was able to see the light of day again (*Hymn. Hom. Dem.*).¹¹

It is difficult not to notice the similarity between the myth of Persephone and the typical scheme of the rites of passage. Nor can one not be tempted to interpret the abduction as symbolic death, the months passed with Hades as a period of segregation, and her return to earth as a resurrection. Furthermore, it is impossible not to notice the analogy between this myth and the myths examined above.

Let me return briefly to these, in the light of what has been said. At Caryae, the virgins hanging from the tree are reborn in the form of walnuts. In Thessaly, in place of the hanged Aspalis's body, a new body appears which is honored as if it were hers although it is not. In both cases, then, a death and a resurrection: but a resurrection in a new and different form, which clearly symbolizes the change in the girl's status, her new social place.

Only the myth of Charila may, at first sight, not correspond to this schema. Charila is not resurrected. But the feast that celebrates her story, at Delphi, is connected with another feast, Herois. Plutarch, briefly explaining the significance of this feast, notes its mysticism, which was, he says, known to the Thyiades. It emerged from the representation of the return (*anagog*) of Semele (Plut., *Quaest. Graec.* XII, 293 C–E). Two very short, but nevertheless highly significant, remarks by Plutarch give the important role played by the same Thyiades during the Charila feast. (They were the ones who carried the Charila-puppet in procession to its burial.) The connection between the two feasts is then seen to be very likely, and once the connection is established, the character of the two Delphian feasts very clearly shows the structure of a rite of passage, characterized (like the Kore story) by a *kathodos* (descent, e.g., the puppet burial in Charila) followed from an *anodos* (ascent, e.g., the return of Semele in Herois).¹²

I shall now return to the girls rocking on swings during the feast celebrating Erigone. Balancing on a swing, in Greece, far from being just a girl's game, was also a rite. The scene painted on the Berlin vase nr. 2589 (*ARV*² 1131, 7; Deubner, 18; Nilsson, 37, 2), one

11. On the Thesmophoria see Lincoln (1972 and 1981), Chirassi Colombo (1979).

12. See Jeanmaire (1939:408).

of the best known swing-paintings of Greek art, is anything but insignificant from our perspective.

a) Under the image of the girl on the swing are three letters ΑΛΗ; these are the first three letters of the name Aletis, the vagabond, Erigone's nickname and also the name of the song that the girls used to sing during the feast (Ath., 14, 618 e; Pollux 4, 55; Hesych., s.v. *aletis*).¹³

b) Far from being a simple piece of wood, the swing is a throne, complete with wooden legs and covered with a drapery.

c) Last but not least, the girl is pushed by a satyr. The symbolic value of the rite is easily perceived: swings are connected with sexual intercourse.

But death by hanging — as I have already noted — is also connected with sexual intercourse.¹⁴ Among the diseases that can affect virgins, the *Corpus Hippocraticus* lists a type of epilepsy, characterized by its very peculiar consequences: the propensity of sick virgins to commit suicide by hanging themselves. Luckily, according to the text, recovery from such an ailment is very easy. Since it is caused by sexual abstinency (or more precisely by the refusal of the virgin to be married), the disease disappears upon marriage (*Corp. Hipp.*, VIII, 464–471).

Let me now come back to the connection established by Pausanias between the swing and death by hanging. In describing a painting by Polignotus, representing Phaedra on a swing grasping a rope on each side, Pausanias comments that Phaedra's attitude "though quite gracefully drawn, makes us infer the manner of her death" (Paus., 10, 29, 3).

What if, finally, we connect the sequence "swing—hanging—sexual intercourse" with the initiation rites, specifically with the feminine rite of passage from the prepubertal to the pubertal age?

To conclude so far:

a) During those rites, a virgin had to disappear and a *viripotens* woman had to take her place.

b) During the feast in honor of Erigone, in whose structure we recognized the schema of a rite of passage, girls rocked on swings.

c) The swing symbolized both sexual intercourse (the event that transforms a girl into a woman) and hanging, the type of death we met in the various initiation myths we discussed.

Let me add that Aletis, Erigone's nickname and the name of the song in her honor means "the vagabond," a name evoking a person detached from her usual milieu, cut off from the community. And let us recall, finally, that the symbolic death of initiation is accompanied, and sometimes represented, by a period of isolation: is there

13. Daremberg and Saglio, s.v. *aïora*.

14. See Lefkowitz (1981:12), Campese-Manuli-Sissa (1983:149), King (1983:109).

anything more separate, more isolated than a person on a swing, raised above the earth, suspended in mid air?

Are we entitled, on these grounds, to suggest that swinging was a pattern of ritual death during the female rites of passage from the prepubertal to the pubertal age? I believe we are. As Picard already showed (1928:47), swinging was a fertility rite from oldest antiquity; thanks to its several meanings, rocking on a swing helped girls to leave virginity behind and emerge as women fit for reproduction.

6. Once established, the relation between swinging—hanging and the feminine symbolic death of initiation may suggest a further consideration. Both in hanging and in rocking on a swing, women are detached from the ground, separated from earth. But since oldest antiquity, the Western imagination has closely connected women with the earth.

As far as Greek fantasy is concerned, Hesiod tells us that Zeus, enraged with Prometheus, decided to send among the mortals Pandora, the first woman, in order to chastize them. Beautiful, appearing like a chaste virgin, possessing grace and skill in female endeavors, Pandora had nonetheless the “soul of a dog and a deceiving character,” was “full of lies and deceitful words.” She was for men, clearly, nothing but a “*dolos amechanos*,” an inescapable trap, an evil which was all the more serious because all the more attractive (*kalon kakon*: Hes., *Op.* 59 sq.).¹⁵ And how was Pandora made? Of earth (*Op.* 61). Thus it was the earth, the material out of which women had been created, with which the female sex was identified: the earth, which before becoming a *patria* was “mother earth,”¹⁶ a fruit-bearing mother, like women. And women’s role in Greek culture and society shows very clearly how strong this identification was.

I shall limit myself to one example. Women, in Athens, could not inherit the paternal estate. If an Athenian citizen died leaving only a female heir, the daughter, called *epicleros*, had to transmit the paternal estate to a male: obviously, one born of her. To avoid any alien blood in this male, the law states that the *epicleros*, must marry her closest relative, as a rule, her paternal uncle, and that, if she is already married, she is to be taken from her husband and assigned to the function that the city ascribes to her: that of producing “fruit” for her family.¹⁷

The identification between woman and fruit-bearing material was not, in fact, limited to the Greek world. Even though they did not “mythologize” it, the Romans also had this idea clearly in mind.

15. See Loraux (1981).

16. On the connection women-earth see Bachofen (1948).

17. See Schaps (1979:25).

Thus in the Republic, the Roman jurists debated this issue: must a female slave's children be considered "fruit"?

The problem arose for a precise reason. According to the law, fruit belonged to the owner of the mother-object. But when the mother-object was held in usufruct, it belonged to the usufructuary. Now a slave could also be held in usufruct, and in that case her fruit, that is her children, would have to belong to the usufructuary. But this fruit was too precious for the class of slave owners to accept the risk of losing it without putting up a fight. That is why in the Republican age the jurists began debating the issue;¹⁸ until that time, nobody had ever doubted that the slave's children were fruits.

But let me go back to the subject I started with: the dangling virgins. In addition to the symbolic value of a fertility rite, could swinging have the further meaning suggested by the identification of women and earth? Was perhaps this identification and the fact that swinging, like hanging, separated women from the earth, the reason why hanging was a kind of death particularly appropriate for the female sex?

In effect, it is difficult to imagine a better way to symbolize the death of a woman than by separating her from the earth. But even apart from this additional suggestion, what I discussed before seems to me sufficient to propose a hypothesis: the noose was not a type of death that women chose by chance, without reason. By hanging themselves (and by being hanged) women reproduced in the city an archaic, pre-city image which — while at this point deprived of its original meaning — remained in the memory of the Greeks. The link between women and the noose, which is so frequent in literature and in iconography, is founded on a quasi-institutional link.

7. But what happened when precivic society was replaced by a political one? What happened with the birth of the city-state?

With the new organizational model, a new way of classifying individuals came into being. In the pre-city societies, age groups were divided by sex: what placed an individual in a specific group was first of all — even before his or her age — his or her sex. Thus, the fundamental dichotomy between bodies was male/female.

With the advent of the city, things changed. At the basis of city organization a new and different dichotomy was imposed: that between free and slave. Freedom and slavery became the poles of a new opposition which, in the terms of the Roman jurists, soon became the new *summa divisio personarum* (Gai., *Inst.* 1, 19). Now

18. During the second century B.C. the problem was discussed by the jurist Brutus, whose opinion is expressed in Justinian's *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (*Digesta* 7, 1, 68 pr.); the echo of the discussion was still living in the second century A.D. (*Digesta* 22, 1, 28 pr.).

an individual's life patterns were inexorably determined and differentiated according to whether one was free or a slave.

The old dichotomy was thus replaced by a new one, which means that a natural criterion was replaced by a legal and artificial one. But the Greeks did not perceive the latter as such. The Greek city, as one can infer from Aristotle's works, perceived the difference between free and slave as being equally natural to the sexual one. A slave is "different" from a free man, Aristotle explains, because he is without *logos*, that is without reason, without power of deliberation (*Pol.* 1245 b). This made the slave "naturally" different from the free person and therefore justified the slave's subjection, rendered it inevitable, and made him an "object" and not a "subject" of law.

This is too well known to dwell upon, however. Suffice it to say that the opposition between free and slave was not, historically, the first basic dichotomy of Greek organization. It came into being with the city and, with the solidification of the city, took the place of the male/female opposition which, in the precivic age, far from being merely a biological distinction, had been one of the cornerstones (or rather the first cornerstone) of social organization.

Several traces of this primitive fundamental dichotomy still survived, in some form, in the culture of the Greek city-states. In grafting its structures on to the old tribal structures at the moment of its birth, the city respected its ancestors' rites and symbols, not only by reproducing them in civic festivals (as in the celebration of Charila at Delphi or the feast of Chytroi at Athens), but also by transferring the memory of the ancient female "death" of initiation into a real and tangible practice, a lethal choice which put women in their place, where it was right for them to be, even when leaving life. Deprived of its symbolic value, separated from the social and religious context which had produced it, hanging continued to be, in fact and in social evaluation, a characteristically female death. The sign of female nature and of its difference continued to determine not only the lives of women, their social and legal status, but also their road to death.

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