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DIRT AND DESIRE: ESSAY ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF FEMALE POLLUTION IN ANTIQUITY

Touches

touching / contact

Ancient Greeks

rituals

Civilization is a function of boundaries

lacking control of or confounding boundaries

greater in degree and kind

pollution

crises of contact

woman is a mobile unit

As members of human society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another–whether the touch is physical, moral, emotional or imaginary. Contact is crisis. As the anthropologists say, "Every touch is a modified blow."[1] The difficulty presented by any instance of contact is that of violating a fixed boundary, transgressing a closed category where one does not belong. The ancient Greeks seem to have been even more sensitive than we are to such transgressions and to the crucial importance of boundaries, both personal and extrapersonal, as guarantors of human order. Their society developed a complex cultural apparatus, including rituals like supplication, hospitality and gift exchange, which historians and anthropologists are only recently coming to understand as mechanisms for defining and securing the boundaries of everything in the habitable world. Civilization is a function of boundaries.

In such a society, individuals who are regarded as specially lacking in control of their own boundaries, or as possessing special talents and opportunities for confounding the boundaries of others, evoke fear and controlling action from the rest of society. Women are so regarded in ancient Greek society, along with suppliants, strangers, guests and other intruders. But the threat which women pose is not only greater in degree than that presented by other transgressors of boundaries, it is different in kind. "Let a man not clean his skin in water that a woman has washed in. For a hard penalty follows on that for a long time," Hesiod advises.[2] When we focus upon Greek attitudes to and treatment of the female, we see anxiety about boundaries from a particular perspective–that of hygiene, physical and moral. Considerations of pollution, which do not noticeably predominate in other social rituals like gift exchange or supplication, assert themselves when the crises of contact involve relations between male and female. In order to answer the question "Why?" we have to look surprisingly deep beneath the skin of rituals and individuals both.

Why?

Female transgression begins in social fact. Woman is a mobile unit, as a man is not, in a society that practices patrilocal marriage (which Greek society is generally agreed to have done). From birth the male citizen has a fixed place in house and city, but the female moves. At

marriage a wife is taken not just (and perhaps not at all) into her husband's heart but into his house. This transgression is necessary (to legitimate continuation of the house), dangerous (insofar as the house incorporates a serious and permanent crisis of contact) and creates the context for illicit varieties of female movement, for example, that of the adulteress out of her husband's house, with attendant damage to male property and reputation. The social fact of female mobility presented Greek society with a set of tactical and moral problems that it never quite solved but which it sought to clarify, during the archaic and classical periods, by recourse to pollution beliefs and the code of conduct governing *miasmata* (defilements) in general.[3] To isolate and insulate the female, from society and from itself, was demonstrably the strategy informing many of the notions, conventions and rituals that surrounded female life in the ancient world. I will examine this strategy for its logic and its practice by asking, first, what the ancients meant by "dirt" and why they disliked it; second, what they did with their dirt and their dislike. It will not be possible, for the most part, to distinguish physical from metaphysical, nor concept from cause. But if we look closely at the dilemma posed by female dirt, we will begin to see the outlines of an ideology of powerful effect. It determined the design not only of the ancient wedding ceremony but also of one of the most famous of the poems of Sappho. We will address these in turn. First let us consider the logic of female pollution.

Logics

Physiologically and psychologically women are wet. Hippokrates differentiates male from female as follows:

> The female flourishes more in an environment of water, from things cold and wet and soft, whether food or drink or activities. The male flourishes more in an environment of fire, from dry, hot foods and mode of life.[4]

Aristotle makes a similar distinction and suggests that this difference may arise from the inclination of the fetus of a male embryo to lean to the right, a female to the left, given that "the right side of the body is hotter than the left."[5] But Aristotle goes on to characterize wetness further in terms illuminating for our discussion of women. He tells us that the wet is that which is not bounded by any boundary of its own but can readily be bounded, while the dry is that which is already bounded by a boundary of its own but can with difficulty be bounded.[6] On this reasoning it becomes possible to differentiate woman from man not only as wet from dry but as

unbounded vs. bounded

content vs. form

polluted vs. pure

the unbounded from the bounded, as content from form, as polluted from pure. We will see in due course that these qualities are closely and necessarily related to one another.

woman as formless content

The image of woman as a formless content is one made explicit in the philosophers. Plato compares the matter of creation to a mother, describing it as a "receptacle" or "reservoir" which is "shapeless, viewless, all-receiving" and which "takes its form and activation from whatever shapes enter it."[7] Aristotle accords to the male in the act of procreation the role of active agent, contributing "motion" and "formation" while the female provides the "raw material," as when a bed (the child) is made by a carpenter (the father) out of wood (the mother). Man determines the form, woman contributes the matter. We might note also that the so-called Pythagorean Table of Oppositions, cited by Aristotle, aligns "boundary" or "limit" on the same side as "masculine": over against "the unbounded" and "feminine" on the other side.[8]

Pythagorean Table of Oppositions

myth is a logic too

The assumptions about women that underlie the views of Plato, Aristotle and the Pythagoreans can be traced to the earliest legends of the Greeks. Myth is a logic too. In myth, woman's boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable. Her power to control them is inadequate, her concern for them unreliable. Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. The women of mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity. Io turns into a heifer, Kallisto becomes a bear, Medusa sprouts snakes from her head and Skylla yelping dogs from her waist, the Sirens and the Sphinx accumulate unmatching bestial parts, while Daphne passes into leaf and Pasiphaë into a mechanical cow. The Graiai are three old women who make themselves repellent by sharing one human form amongst them, passing an eye and a tooth back and forth as needed. Salmakis is a nymph who merges her form with that of her lover to produce a bisexual monster named after him, Hermaphroditos. The Hydra generates heads as fast as they can be chopped off. The Amazons (lacking a breast) owe their fearsomeness to the zeal with which they adapt personal form—their own.

metamorphoses

the women of mythology regularly lose their form

heifer

bear

yelping dogs

adaptation

notorious adaptors

At the same time, the women of myth are notorious adaptors of the forms and boundaries of others. They repeatedly open containers which they are told not to open (e.g., Pandora, the daughters of Kekrops, Danaë) or destroy something placed in a container in their keeping (as Althaia does the psyche of Meleagros). They prove unreliable as containers themselves: both Zeus and Apollo find it necessary to snatch offspring out of a mother's womb and internalize it for safekeeping (as Zeus takes Dionysos from Semele, Apollo rescues Asklepios from Koronis), while Kronos swallows his children alive as soon as they emerge from Rhea.[9] Even more distressing are the numerous women of myth who submit masculine form to direct and violent reform. Skylla clips a vital lock from her father's head, Agave beheads her son with her bare hands, Medea pulls the plug on Talos, Kybele unmans Attis with an axe. Mythical women frequently violate masculinity by enveloping male form in a fatal formlessness, as Euripides' Klytemnestra encloses Agamemnon in a "garment that has no boundaries"; as Sophokles' Deianira covers Herakles in a

"vapor of death" that eats the form of his flesh; as Pindar's Nephele entraps Ixion in the delusion of her own body:

> He lay with a cloud—sweet lie![10]

love

Love is the principal motivation in these stories for women's flight from form or tampering with boundaries. Indeed, the goddess of love, Aphrodite herself, is said to have been born from the earliest recorded revision contrived for manly form by any mythical Greek woman, the castration of Ouranos. To the typical crime of women Greek myth assigns a stereotypical punishment in the legend of the daughters of Danaos: here are forty-nine brides who murder their bridegrooms on their wedding night and are therefore condemned to spend eternity in the underworld gathering water in a sieve or leaky jar.[11] The sieve is a utensil that we will encounter more than once in our investigation of female symbology; for the present, it is enough to say that the sieve of the Danaids sums up in a single hellish image all that is problematic in the relation between women and boundaries.[12]

There is, then, a mythological groundwork of assumptions, also operative in the arguments of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and which can be related to historical behavior, that regards women as formless creatures who cannot or do not or will not maintain their own boundaries and who are awfully adept at confounding the boundaries of others. When we begin to look for the etiology of this conception, we encounter, I believe, a deep and abiding mistrust of "the wet" in virtue of its ability to transform and deform.

For it is the consensus of Greek thought that the soundest condition for a human being is dryness, provided it is not excessive dryness. "A dry soul is wisest and best," Heraklitos asserts. Mature men in a sound and unafflicted condition are dry—for example, Zeus, whose efficiently functioning mind is characterized as "dry lungs" by Homer. Wetness of mind is an intellectually deficient condition; so Aristophanes speaks of a man's need to "dry his mind" if he wants to "say anything smart," while Heraklitos ascribes to a "wet psyche" the inability of a drunk to find his way home. The dry state of mental alertness can be undermined in various ways. Diogenes of Apollonia proposed in the fifth century that the conscious element in man consists of air and that an individual's intelligence depends on the dryness of this air:

> Understanding is the work of the pure and dry air. For moisture hinders intelligence, wherefore in sleep and in drunkenness and in surfeit, understanding is diminished.[13]

The assault of emotion is also regarded by ancient authors as an endangering wetness. Emotion is a liquid or liquefying substance that pours into a person and dissolves him. Fear is "wet" in

Archilochos and causes Anakreon to "drizzle." Anxiety "falls in drops" within the minds of a Greek tragic chorus. Envy melts the eyes and heart of the envious in a Hellenistic epigram.[14] Of all the emotions, by far the most devastating are those of erotic desire, for love combines a liquescent effect with fiery heat: the lover who is not melted away by Eros is likely to be burned to a crisp. Thus desire is variously said to melt, flood, soften, loosen, boil, broil, roast, drown and disintegrate the lover who is his victim.[15] Men pride themselves on being able to resist such assaults on their physiological and psychological boundaries. A fragment of Sophokles instructs us, "The chest of a good man does not soften." Ancient medical theory endorses the view that dryness is best and is a masculine prerogative. According to Hippokrates, the maturity of the male physique is achieved when the element of fire within "steadies itself" and the body "no longer trembles with growth" but rather attains and keeps its proper dry form.[16]

Wantons

This condition of dry stability is never attained by the female physique, which presumably remains cold and wet all its life[17] and so more subject than the male to liquefying assaults upon body and mind, especially those of emotion. That the female is softer than the male and much more easily moved to tears, pity, jealousy, despondency, fear, rash impulses and sexual desire is a *communis opinio* of ancient literature, voiced by such widely differing temperaments as Aristotle, Empedokles and Semonides of Amorgos.[18] Throughout these sources, greatest attention is given to the emotions of love. Women are assumed to be markedly more open to erotic desire than men and sexually insatiable once aroused. A long tradition concerning female lechery derives from this assumption, of which a few examples may be mentioned. Aeschylus warns against the "blazing eye" of a woman who has once "tasted man" and deprecates female license as "ready to dare anything" for love. Sophokles observes that even women who have sworn to avoid the pain of childbirth cannot resist sexual desire. The lust of women is a frequent joke in Aristophanes. Alkiphron characterizes female sexual voracity as a "Charybdis," warning another man that his *hetaira* will swallow him whole. Both Hippokrates and Plato promote the theory of the "wandering womb," an explanation of feminine hysteria which is posited upon women's uncontrollable longing for sex. Aristotle takes female depravity for granted as a consequence of feminine weakness and a reason for marrying girls off not later than the age of eighteen.[19] In the Greek historians, whenever mention is made of a society or state of affairs managed by women, it is assumed that such situations would feature total female promiscuity. For example, Philo of Byblos, accounting for traditions of matrilinear descent in antiquity, explains: "They traced their descent on the mother's side because women at that time had intercourse casually with any man

they ran into." Philo takes it for granted that, unrestrained by an alternate system, women would incline to complete wantonness.[20]

What is the connection between wantonness and wetness? First, their moisture and malleability make women more vulnerable to the onslaughts of erotic desire upon psychic form. Second, female wetness gives women a weapon, which men do not possess, against the excessive heat and dryness that may accompany desire. Hippokrates maintains that the parching heat of the Dog Days (late July) is beneficial for those "phlegmatic by nature," a class which includes "women and watery men," but it causes the generality of men to "wither right up." Aristotle pursues this matter in an erotic direction; he asks, "Why are men less capable of sexual intercourse in summer but women more so?" and answers:

> Because hot natures collapse in summer by excess of heat, while cold ones flourish. Now a man is hot and dry but a woman is cold and moist. So the power of a man is diminished at that time but a woman's power flourishes because it is balanced by its contrary.[21]

We find in poetry too this concern for the withering effect of the Dog Days upon masculine physique. Alkaios of Lesbos, a lyric poet of the seventh century B.C., represents the time of the rising of Sirios as a season of blistering heat which parches men to incapacity while encouraging the license of women to flourish.[22] As the poem shifts from weather to physiology, it becomes clear that the focus of masculine concern (and perhaps resentment) is not a summer heatwave but the unwitherable appetite and capacity of the female sex:

> Wet your lungs with wine for the star is coming round.
> The season is harsh, all things thirst beneath the heat.
> From the leaves the cricket sends sweet noise,
> pouring down from its wings
> one shrill song after another,
> when in blazing summer ...
> the artichoke blooms. And now is the time
> when women are at their most polluted
> but men are delicate, for the Dog Star
> parches head and knees....

One word here calls for particular attention. Editors of Alkaios generally caution us that we cannot know exactly what the poet means by μιαρώτατα: "most polluted." Translators are inclined to reduce the word to a term of nonspecific abuse like "abominable" or "accursed." To

judge from the rest of his poetry, however, Alkaios' vocabulary of abuse is anything but nonspecific; he is one of the most outspoken blame poets of the archaic period. Moreover, a powerful clue to his meaning can be read from a few verses of the Boeotian poet Hesiod. For Alkaios has clearly modelled his own poem on a well-known section of Hesiod's *Works and Days*.[23] In almost identical terms Hesiod describes a midsummer scene where artichokes bloom, crickets pour forth song after song, goats are rich and fat, wine is perfect. Then he adds:

> ... And women are at their most lecherous (μαχλόταται) while men are completely enfeebled.

Both poets agree on the physics of the situation: men are parched to impotence by the heat; women seem somehow to thrive in it, encouraged to burgeon as wantonly as flora and fauna. In another passage Hesiod states this case more openly (in the midst of giving advice on how to choose a wife):

> For a man wins no better prize than a good
> woman, and none more chilling than a bad one–
> always hunting something to devour.
> And no matter how strong he is,
> she roasts her man without fire,
> and hands him over to a raw old age.[24]

Hesiod here abandons metaphors of weather and identifies the withering factor as female sexual power itself. The voracious woman, by her unending demands, "roasts her man" in the unquenchable fire of her appetite, drains his manly strength and delivers him to the "raw old age" of premature impotence.[25] We find a similar complaint in the Alexandrian poet Palladas:

> Woman is the wrath of Zeus, a gift given in place of fire
> cruel countergift!
> or she burns a man with cares and withers him up
> and brings old age on youth too soon.[26]

And the archaic poet Archilochos summarizes the female threat in two iambic verses:

> She came carrying water in one hand
> the tricky-minded female, and fire in the other.[27]

fear of female sexuality

These Greek poets find sexuality in women a fearsome thing.[28] It threatens the very essence of a man's manliness and its foundations are cosmic. United by a vital liquidity with the elemental world, woman is able to tap the inexhaustible reservoirs of nature's procreative power. Man, meanwhile, holds himself fiercely and thoughtfully apart from this world of plants, animals and female wantonness—doubly estranged from it, by his inherent dryness of form and by the masculine virtue of self-control (σωφροσύνη)[29] with which he maintains form. The unfailing moisture and sexual drive of woman, then, is part of a larger conceptual schema, whereby the female is assimilated to the world of raw nature and femininity insistently identified with the wild. "Woman is one great bestiality!" Menander says. Ancient classical culture was neither the first nor the last to subscribe to this notion; what is important for our purpose is to see where the notion led. The words of a later author, the second-century sophist Aelian, give some indication. In his treatise *On the Nature of Animals* Aelian concludes his discussion of poisonous vipers by telling us that the asp is the most poisonous of all. Then he adds, "But a wild animal even more polluted [σωφροσύνη] than an asp is the woman who dabbles in poisons."[30] The force of Aelian's designation "more polluted" here clearly depends on collapsing the categories of female and animal.

doubly estranged nature and the wild

Menander

Aelian

"more polluted" / women as beasts

Beasts

female wildness

The notion of female wildness, current in Greek thinking from prehistoric right through classical times, is a coin with two sides. The presexual female appears in literature as an untamed animal who prefers, given a choice, to live the wild life of Artemis, roaming the woods undomesticated and unloving of men. She is called "rather wild" or "unbroken" or "unused by the bull" and is characterized as a fawn, a heifer, a filly, a snake, a gazelle, an unfledged bird, a swelling bean, a ripening apple. The sexually initiated woman, on the other hand, unless she enjoys the benefits of masculine supervision, soon proceeds from licentiousness to bestialization. The mature and sexually active female is thus referred to as a bitch, an ass, a weasel, a brood mare and a wild sow pawing to be loosed. The word *hippos* (horse) is a well-known Greek idiom for "lecherous woman." Aristotle explains why: "In eagerness for sexual intercourse, of all female animals the mare comes first, next the cow. Mares become horse-mad and the term derived from this one animal is applied by way of abuse to women who are inordinate in their sexual desires."[31]

Artemis

hippos / horse as lecherous woman

Aristotle

More than idiomatic consequences follow, however, from classifying woman with the wilderness. We are told that Themistokles once yoked four prostitutes to a chariot and drove them into the marketplace.[32] It is by the way we classify one another that we shape our moral expectations, of one another and of ourselves. The Greek female was expected to be no more in

command of herself or her impulses than a bitch in heat.[33] This conviction was given early expression in the legislation of Solon, which restricted the walks, feasts, trousseaux, mourning, food, drink and sexual activity of women, and also later by the institution of the *gynaikonomoi* (supervisors of women), special magistrates appointed to maintain feminine "decency" or "good order."[34] Solon's legislation is but one well-publicized example of a complex array of restrictions on the movements and attire and actions of woman, on the spaces and gestures and garments within which she lived. A similar resolve informs all these restrictions: since woman does not bound herself, she must *be bounded*. The celebrated Greek virtue of self-control (*sophrosyne*) has to be defined differently for men and for women, Aristotle maintains. Masculine *sophrosyne* is rational self-control and resistance to excess, but for the woman *sophrosyne* means obedience and consists in submitting herself to the control of others.[35]

In her natural state, then, woman demands the attention of culture to impose those boundaries, physical and metaphysical, that will guarantee her virtue against transgression and digression. Xenophon describes the women's quarters of a typical fifth-century house as "set off from the men's quarters by a bolted door so that nothing could be carried off from inside which should not be carried off and so that the male servants might not beget children without our knowledge."[36] Xenophon's terms are ambiguous. He does not tell us on which side the bolted door was bolted: the pregnability of female boundaries presents male culture with a problem that has more than two sides. Woman is subject not only to incursion from without but to leakage from within and, for this reason, her very presence may pose a threat to the integrity of the house of which she is a part and the city that encompasses it. For this reason, Athenian law forbade a husband who had caught his wife in adultery to continue living in the same house with her. For this reason, women guilty of adultery were debarred by law from the public sacrifices. And this exclusion was necessary, Demosthenes explains, "in order that there not be pollutions nor sacrileges in holy places."[37] In order to see exactly what Demosthenes means by "pollutions" here, we have to take seriously the topography of sacred and profane. Adulteresses pose a spatial threat to the public hygiene of his city. Their dirt is something they carry with them like a contagion. Which brings us to the question "What is dirt?"

Dirts

"Dirt" may be defined as "matter out of place." The poached egg on your plate at breakfast is not dirt; the poached egg on the floor of the Reading Room of the British Museum is. Dirt is matter that has crossed a boundary it ought not to have crossed. Dirt confounds categories and mixes up form. Robert Parker's study of *miasma* emphasizes that this word has in Greek the basic sense

supervisors of women

sophrosyne Aristotle

Xenophone

incursion from without / leakage from within

pollutions or sacrileges in holy places

Demosthenes

topography of sacred and profane

a spatial threat to the public hygiene

What is dirt?

dirts / pollution / contamination / pouvoirness

"matter out of place"

poached eggs

Robert Parker, miasma (miasma)

"defilement" or "impairment of a thing's integrity."[38] But dirt is not passive. Mary Douglas calls pollution "a particular class of dangers which are not powers vested in humans but which can be released by human action."[39] Women, then, are pollutable, polluted and polluting in several ways at once. They are anomalous members of the human class, being, as Aristotle puts it, imperfect men. They are as individuals comparatively formless themselves, without firm control of personal boundaries. They are, as social entities, units of danger, moving across boundaries of family and house, in marriage, prostitution, or adultery. They are, as psychological entities, unstable compounds of deceit and desire, prone to leakage.

In sum, the female body, the female psyche, the female social life and the female moral life are penetrable, porous, mutable and subject to defilement all the time. So when Aelian labels a woman "a wild animal more polluted than an asp," he goes on to explain that "an asp destroys with its poison but a woman has only to touch her victim to kill it." The female touch is a deadly crisis: her pollution leaks out at the slightest contact. A house or a society that did not take adequate measures to contain the leakage of its women could be said to be sailing the sea of life in a Melian boat, according to ancient proverbial wisdom. The expression "Melian boat," connoting a proverbially leaky vessel, first arose in connection with a certain Hippotes who was designated to found a colony for the Melians. But the Melian men refused to sail with him. "They made excuses, some saying that their boats were leaking, others that their wives were unwell, and so they stayed home. Hippotes then laid a curse on them: that they should never find a boat that was water-tight, and that they should be ruled by women forever."[40] Hippotes' curse is one aimed at the very fabric and common sense of Melian life. Woman out of control is the danger, a boat filled with holes is its image. Hippotes is condemning Melian civilization to chaos.

Leaks

We find this same metaphor, deployed from the feminine point of view, in a poem of Sappho's, apparently composed during her exile in Sicily, in which she characterizes the chaos of everyday life in exile as "leakage" and represents it as an emergency for female boundaries:

(a) ... for my mother [used to say that]
in her youth, if someone had her hair tied round
with a purple band
this was a great ornament indeed.
But the girl with hair yellower
than a flame ...

[suitable for] crowns
of richblooming flowers....
Now just recently

from Sardis a brightcolored headbinder ...
... [cities]...

(b) For you, Kleis,

I have no idea where I can get
a brightcolored headbinder.
But as for the Mytilenean one....

...

I had ...
brightcolored ...

these things of the Kleanaktidai ...
exile ... [city]
memories:

... terribly leaked away....[41]

loss of memory; grief

memories

... terribly leaked away....

exile

Damaged though the text is, we can see it is a poem about matter out of place, a lament from exile. Sappho regrets the loss of her city and of the order of life she had known there as something "terribly leaked away," in the final verse of the fragment. But throughout the earlier verses that loss is symbolized as absence of female headbinder. This item of apparel, which Sappho wishes to obtain for her daughter, Kleis, is evidently unavailable in Sicily, although in the good old days in Mytilene, Sappho's mother used to talk about proper techniques for binding the hair and would presumably have seen to it that Kleis got what a girl needs. Exile entails the frustration of such needs and a dislocation of the style of life that depends on them.

kosmos, "ornament; good order"

Sappho uses the word κόσμος (in verse 3 of the Greek text) to designate this misplaced style of life and the headbinder that represents it. *Kosmos*, here translated "ornament," implies in Greek all kinds of "good order," from the arrangement of planets in the sky to the style with which an individual wears her hat. In the language of politics, *kosmos* means the constitution or good

political kosmos
kosmos of the universe

government of a city. In the language of cosmology, *kosmos* means the entire, perfect, ordered universe. According to one ancient cosmology, cosmos was first assembled out of chaos, when Zeus threw a veil over the head of the goddess of the underworld, Chthonie, and married her. So Pherekydes tells us and he goes on to describe the veil, on which were embroidered earth, ocean and the houses of ocean—that is to say, the contours of the civilized world. Once veiled by her bridegroom, the dark and formless chthonic goddess was transformed and renamed Ge, goddess of the visible world, decorous and productive wife of Zeus.[42]

Zeus marries Chthonie; a veil over her head

earth, ocean, and the houses of ocean

Pherekydes

I call attention to the cosmology of Pherekydes because it concerns the wedding of Zeus. Ancient wedding ceremonies are one place where the theory of female pollution and the practice of pollution control can be seen to converge. Pherekydes introduces us directly, as Sappho did obliquely, to the vestiary code that regulates female decency in the ancient world and informs the sacred symbolism of the marriage rite. The head is its focus. Headgear is crucial to female honor, an index of sexual purity and civilized status.[43] No decent woman is seen in public without her headdress; only children, prostitutes and maenads run about unveiled. The most common Greek word for female headgear is *kredemnon*, whose symbolic force can be read from its threefold usage. Properly signifying a woman's headbinder, *kredemnon* is also used to mean "battlements of a city" and "stopper of a bottle."[44] It is plain what these three have in common. A corked bottle, a fortified city, a veiled woman, are vessels whose contents are sealed against dirt and loss. To put the lid on certifies purity.

marriage as pollution control

kredemnon: headbinder; battlements of a city; stopper of a bottle

Lids

ritual

Putting the lid on female purity was the chief concern and ritual point of the ancient wedding ceremony.[45] So in the cosmology of Pherekydes, Zeus marries the goddess of the underworld by bestowing upon her a cosmic map of her own proper boundaries. So also, in the Athenian legend of the invention of marriage by Kekrops, we see masculine clarity and control imposed on a chaos of female promiscuity.[46] For we are told that Kekrops "found men and women having intercourse at random, so that no son could tell who his father was, no father who was his son." Kekrops accordingly devised the institution of marriage, to put an end to sexual license and clarify the lines of patrilineal descent; for this service he came to be regarded as a culture hero, who led the Athenians "out of savagery into civilization."[47] So too, in historical time, we find Plutarch describing the Boeotian wedding ceremony in these terms:

putting the lid on female purity

Pherekydes

Kekrops

Plutarch

Boeotian wedding ceremony

> After veiling the bride they put on her head a crown of asparagus, for this plant yields the sweetest fruit from the harshest thorns and so may the bride, if properly managed, provide a

civilized and sweet contribution to her husband's life despite her original roughness and sourness.[48]

The ancient wedding ritual undertook, systematically, to redeem woman from her original roughness and sourness and to purify her of chaos by means of certain very specific ceremonies aimed at the dramatization and reinforcement of female boundaries. So we find in the marriage rite much emphasis on doorways, thresholds, lintels, exits, entrances and the whole ceremonial apparatus whereby the bride is relocated from her father's house to her husband's house, from maidenhood to married status. The wedding so conceived, as a rite of passage between households, has been the subject of much study by historians, anthropologists and others. But I think we can better articulate the meaning of this rite if we pay attention not so much to the boundaries of houses as to the boundaries of the bride herself and insist upon one special moment in the ceremony—the climax of the whole proceeding, the moment when pollution danger is most acute and ritual counterstrategy most outspoken.

The ancient wedding begins in the house of the bride's father, with preliminary rites carried out by the bride, including a formal farewell to her girlhood and nuptial bath. After the bath she is dressed in wedding attire and veiled in a veil that must cover her face. Sacrifices are offered to the divinities of marriage (Zeus Teleios, Hera Teleia, Aphrodite, Artemis, Peitho) and then a feast is spread where all the wedding guests share with the bride her last meal in her father's house. During this feast the women all sit together on a special couch on the right side of the doorway, facing the men who sit together on the left of the door. At some point in the feasting, a child wearing a crown of thorns goes among the guests offering bread from a sieve and repeating the formula "I have fled evil, I have found what is better."[49] This action, which prefigures the climax of the ceremony, deserves attention. The verbal formula is one known to us from the mystery rituals where it was uttered by the initiate after his lustration, symbolizing a final separating out of evil from good. In the nuptial context these words signify, so Zenobios tells us, that "the bridal couple are to thrust off their former wild ways and find a civilized living."[50] The thorny and savage bride, then, is about to be salvaged for civilization by the nuptial function. And that redeeming function is represented in the relation between leaky vessel (the sieve in which bread is carried) and the good gift of bread itself which ritual calls forth from the leaky vessel. It is important to note that throughout the feasting and the distribution of bread the bride remains very strictly veiled, for it is not until the end of all these events that the climax of the ceremony occurs: this is the moment when the bride rises or turns in her place and, facing her bridegroom and the men of his household across the room, takes off her veil.

A red-figure loutrophoros in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts depicts this moment in the wedding.[51] Here we see the bride facing her bridegroom, who watches her intently as she lifts the

veil from her head, assisted by a female attendant (*nympheutria*) standing behind her.[52] This action, called the *anakalypteria* (unveiling), gives its name to the whole first stage of the ceremony. It signifies official consecration of the marriage so that, from this moment, the bride is considered to *be married*.[53] The elaborate gifts given by the bridegroom to the bride at this stage of the wedding were called *ta anakalypteria*, "unveiling gifts"; but they had an alternate name, *ta diaparthenia* (virginity gifts) and were so called, Pollux tells us, because they were regarded as "gifts given in exchange for taking away the virginity of the bride."[54]

In other words, as far as the bride is concerned, the *anakalypteria* is the decisive sacral action of the wedding. At the moment of unveiling, for the first time, the intact boundary of her person is violated by contact: the contact of vision. Ancient lexical sources leave no doubt that visual exposure was the function and official point of the ritual of the *anakalypteria*. "In order that she may be seen by the men" is the reason why the bride unveils herself, the lexicographers tell us.[55] Once she has done so, the glance of the bridegroom from across the room penetrates her opened veil. She is no longer *parthenos*. She is touched.

This is the moment referred to, metonymically, by Pherekydes in his account of the sacred marriage of Zeus and Chthonie, for he concludes his description of their wedding by saying: "People allege that this was the first *anakalypteria* and from this arose the custom for gods and men."[56] This is the moment renounced by Andromache in Homer's *Iliad* when, upon hearing of Hektor's death, she takes hold of the *kredemnon* on her head (a wedding gift from Aphrodite) and hurls it to the ground.[57] This is the moment exposed (or overexposed) by Sappho in perhaps the most controversial of her poems:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me....[58]

Let us entertain the hypothesis that Sappho's lyric strategy in this poem is to insert us imaginatively into the ritual moment of the *anakalypteria;* that the man in the poem represents a bridegroom observing his bride at the moment of her unveiling; and that Sappho has projected herself into the role of the *nympheutria* who (as illustrated in the red-figure vase mentioned above) stands behind the bride and helps her unveil.[59] Considered in this light, some of the poem's notorious oddities clarify themselves. For example, the unnamed man who appears in verse 1 only to disappear in verse 2 does so because this is the moment in the wedding ritual which, although contingent upon the presence of the groom, belongs more than any other to the bride. The man is the initial subject and visual focus of the poem because Sappho, if positioned behind the bride's back, is looking straight at him over the bride's head. For the same reason, namely her rearguard position, Sappho does not at first respond to what the bride looks like, since she cannot see her face, but rather to the bride's voice and laughter, which she is well positioned to hear. The contrast that follows, however, between the bridegroom and Sappho is framed in visual terms ("when I look at you") to emphasize and exploit the basic ritual fiction of the moment, the fiction that at the *anakalypteria* the bridegroom is seeing his bride unveiled for the first time, whereas Sappho has evidently seen the girl numerous times before and yet cannot accommodate herself to the vision.

verbs of seeming

revelation

infrahuman

James Joyce

The poem is framed in verbs of seeming. "He seems to me" (*phainetai*) it begins. "I seem to me" (*phainomai*) it ends. The Greek verb φαίνεσθαι means "to be seen," "to appear," "to be made manifest," "to stand revealed." As a confession of love and at the same time an evocation of the *anakalypteria*, this is a poem devised "out of revelation itself," as Longinus says. Yet it is not the bride who stands revealed at this wedding. It is not the material boundaries of a bridal veil that fall open. It is not the bridegroom who suddenly sees what he has not seen before. Sappho has constructed her poem as a play upon the ritual formalities of the unveiling ceremony in order to situate her own emotions, which are intensely personal and properly hidden emotions, at the single most extraordinary moment of exposure in female life and so to bend its ritual meaning onto herself with an irony of reference as sharp as a ray of light. The result is what James Joyce would call "infrahuman": the bride is unveiled, but the poet renders herself transparent. And, in a strange way, Sappho's poem confirms everything we have been listening to the Greeks say about the female, namely that she plays havoc with boundaries and defies the rules that keep matter in its place. I suppose this is deliberate. Sappho has chosen the most solemn and authoritative of the

"to explode the distinction between the outside and the inside of her self"

rituals that sacralize female boundaries and used it to explode the distinction between the outside and the inside of her self. In the end I am not sure we can precisely define the spirit in which she does so. Sappho is one of those people of whom the more you see the less you know. But it might well have been for Sappho, as representative of the whole mysterious, polluted species of ancient womanhood, that Dorothy Parker composed her famous epitaph:

cf. Glück, "The Denial of Death."

If you can read this, you've come too close.

1. E. Crawley, *The Mystic Rose* (New York 1927), I. 78.

2. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 753–5.

3. Many societies resort to codes of pollution to regulate and rationalize human situations where order and sense elude them, like sex. "When moral rules are obscure or contradictory there is a tendency for pollution beliefs to simplify or clarify the point at issue," says Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London 1966), 141. See also R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford 1983).

4. Hippokrates, *On Regimen*, 27.

5. Aristotle, *Problems*, 879a33–34; cf. 88a12–20; *Generation of Animals*, 765b2.

6. *Aristotle, On Generation and Corruption*, 329b31–33.

7. Plato, *Timaeus*, 49a; 50b–d.

8. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 716a6–7; 727b31–34; 729b15–21; *Physics* 192a20–25; *Metaphysics* 986a22–30.

9. Rhea's name is pertinent, derived from the verb ῥεῖν: "to flow," "to stream," "to pour," "to gush out."

10. Euripides, *Orestes*, 25; Sophokles, *Trachiniai*, 831; Pindar, *Pythians*, 2.36–37.

11. On the Danaids, see the survey by A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus' Supplices: Play and Trilogy* (Cambridge 1969), 234–5.

image of woman as a sieve (of experience) (as wisdom)

12. The image of woman as a sieve furnishes Aristophanes (*Ekklesiazousai*, 991) with a joke that is mainly misconstrued by commentators: a young man wards off the sexual advances of an old woman with the words "Well, at the moment it's not a sieve I want!" Surely this is not a reference to the older woman's flour-whitened face or floury-white hair but implies that a lifetime of sexual experience has not enhanced her desirability.

13. Heraklitos, fr. B118 Diels; Homer, *Iliad*, 14.165; Aristophanes, *Knights*, 95–96; cf. *Wasps*, 1452; Heraklitos, fr. B117 Diels; Diogenes of Apollonia, fr. A19 Diels. Kritias says that, in drunkenness, memory is melted out of the mind by forgetfulness and the mind trips (fr. B6.12 Diels).

14. Archilochos, fr. 122.4 West; Anakreon, fr. 395.4 *PMG;* Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 179–80; *Palatine Anthology*, 11.193.

15. In the absence of any satisfactory etymology for the Greek ἐράω (I desire) applied to one moved sexually, Onians suggests an original derivation from ἐράω (I pour out) related to ἔρσα (dew) and signifying in the middle voice "I pour myself out, emit liquid, am poured

out." He compares στυγέ ω (I hate), which began in the physical "I freeze, stiffen at": R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thinking about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate* (Cambridge 1951), 202 n.4.

16. Sophokles, fr. 195 Pearson; Hippokrates, *On Regimen*, 33.

17. Cf. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 728a19–22; *Problems*, 879a.

18. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 608b; Empedokles, fr. B62.1 Diels; Semonides, fr. 7 West.

19. Aeschylus, fr. 243 Nauck; *Choephoroi*, 594; Sophokles, fr. 932 Pearson; Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousai*, 504ff; *Knights*, 468–70; 616–20; *Lysistrata*, 553–9; Alkiphron, 1.6.2; 3.33; Hippokrates, *Diseases of Women*, 1; Plato, *Timaeus*, 91c; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1150b6; *Politics*, 1335a29.

20. Simon Pembroke discusses a tendency on the part of Greek writers to identify matriarchal situations with female promiscuity on the basis of little evidence, no evidence, or in the face of contradictory evidence and persuades us that such stories were contrived not so much to verify that a matriarchal state of affairs ever existed but rather to show how awful life would have been if it had: "Women in Charge: the Function of Alternatives in Early Greek Tradition and the Ancient Idea of Matriarchy," *Journal of the Courtald and Warburg Institutes* 30 (1967): 1–35. See also S. Pembroke, "Last of the Matriarchs," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8 (1965); P. Vidal-Naquet, "Esclavage et gynécocratie dans la tradition, le mythe, l'utopie," *Recherches sur les structures sociales dans l'antiquité classique* (Paris 1970).

21. Hippokrates, *Airs Waters Places*, 10.85ff; Aristotle, *Problems*, 879a31–35.

22. Alkaios, fr. Z23 Page.

23. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 582–96.

24. Ibid., 702–5.

25. See also ibid., 700–5; and cf. *Othello:* "O curse of marriage, that we can call / These delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!" (III.3.268).

26. *Palatine Anthology*, 9.165.1–4; cf. Hesiod, Works and Days, 57.

27. Archilochos, fr. 184 West.

28. A man and woman in Theokritos debate this fear: *Idylls*, 27.27–28.

29. Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca 1966), and below.

30. Menander, fr. 488 Kock; Aelian, *On the Nature of Animals*, 1.54; cf. Lucretius, *De Kerum Natura*, 6.17–25.

31. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 572a8–13.

32. Athenaios, 533d.

33. A bull-struck cow will mount the bull herself, Aristotle warns, no herdsman can check her: *History of Animals*, 572a30–b4.

34. C. Wehrli, "Les gynéconomes," *Museum Helveticum* 19 (1962): 33–38.

35. Aristotle, *Politics* 1260a20–24; 1277b21–25. Cf. Freud in a letter to Eduard Silberstein (January 7, 1919): "A thinking man is his own legislator and confessor, and obtains his own absolution, but the woman, let alone the girl, does not have the measure of ethics in herself. She can only act if she keeps within the limits of morality, following what society has established as fitting. She is never forgiven if she has revolted against morality, possibly rightly so."

36. Xenophon, *Oikonomika*, 9.5.

37. Demosthenes, *Against Neaira*, 59.86.

38. Parker (above, n.3), 3.

39. Douglas (above, n.3), 113.

40. For the Melian proverb, see Photios, *Lexicon*, 594.9; Aristotle, fr. 554 Rose; Simon Pembroke (above, n.20) interprets the proverb as corresponding to the more general stipulation "that the earth shall bear no fruit and the sea shall be impossible to sail" in conventional curses (32). But I think it likely that specific sexual and eugenic anxieties are not far beneath the surface of this story. In a society so "unwell" that wives dictate public policy, what man can navigate the waters of everyday life, what husband can even be sure he is the father of his children? Cf. the Odyssean situation: nineteen years of woman's rule in a house that lets in suitors like a sieve provoke from Telemachos the comment "No one ever knows his own begetting" (*Odyssey*, 1.215; 4. 587; cf. Lysias, *Eratosthenes*, 1.33; Euripides, fr. 1015 Nauck.)

41. Sappho, fr. 98 (a) and (b) Lobel.

42. Pherekydes, fr. 50–54 Diels.

43. Michael Nagler has proposed that the two *amphipoloi* ("attendants" or "ones going on either side") who accompany a respectable woman everywhere (e.g., *Iliad*, 24.90–94; *Odyssey*, 18.182–4) similarly betoken chastity, as if the two attendants were regarded as a surrogate personal boundary. An encircled woman is bounded against contact or leakage. A woman deprived of such encirclement is prey to seizure and rape (e.g., *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 5; *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 117; 120; Moschos, *Europa*, 28–32). The decorous Nausikaa even sleeps with a handmaid on either side. When she must confront Odysseus unprotected by veil (cast off at

6.100) or companions (left behind at 6.139), Nausikaa maintains personal boundaries by "holding herself" (*Odyssey*, 6.141). This seems a variation upon the conventional feminine gesture of *aidos*, which is to "hold the veil up in front or on either side of the face" (e.g., *Odyssey*, 18.210). The sham *aidos* of a whore perverts this gesture as it pollutes the veil she wears; a *hetaira* enters the room "holding up to her cheeks her filthy veil": so the parodist Matron, cited by M. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study in the Oral Art of Homer* (Berkeley 1974), 67 n.5. The association of a decent woman's headgear with her battle against pollution is further implied by the word that Sappho (fr. 110 Lobel) and Hekataios (*FGH*, 1.25) use for such covering: *cheiromaktron*, primarily "a cloth for wiping the hands after washing." E. Crawley (above, n.1) discusses the use of veils as protection against infecting others or being infected by evil influences (1.273). Sappho adds that the Graces despise a woman whose head is without a *stephanos* ("crown": fr. 81b Lobel). On the conventional female gesture of holding the veil, see J. Boardman, "Old Smyrna: The Attic Pottery," *British Society of Archaeology* 53–54 (1958–9): 152–81; 159 and p1.9.11; F. Johansen, *Attic Grave Reliefs* (London 1951), 41; F. Studniczka, *Beiträge zür Geschichte der altgriechischen Tracht* (Berlin 1927), 125–6.

44. Homer, *Iliad*, 22.470; 16.100; *Odyssey*, 3.392.

45. Cf. Latin *nubere*, "to marry," probably cognate with *nubes*, "cloud," and meaning literally "to veil oneself" (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v.).

46. For a useful corrective to the usual anthropological reading of this myth, see C. Patterson, "Attikai: The Other Athenians," *Helios* 13 (1992): 45–62.

47. Scholia on Aristophanes, *Wealth*, 773.

48. Plutarch, *Conjugal Precepts*, 138d. Similarly, we find the bridegroom in Xenophon's *Oikonomika* speaking of his bride as a wild animal which, after the wedding, gradually became "submissive to my hand and domesticated enough to make conversation" (7–10).

49. Zenobios, 3.98–99; E. Samter, *Familienfeste der Griechen und Römer* (Berlin 1901), 99.

50. Zenobios (3.98) goes on to say that this formula became a proverb "applicable to people who anticipate some change for the better in themselves." On marriage as acculturation, see Vidal-Naquet (above, n.20), 77.

51. J. H. Oakley, "The Anakalypteria," *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 97 (1982): 113–18.

52. The boy standing between the couple can probably be identified as the "child crowned with thorns," mentioned above, who distributes bread from a sieve and repeats the ritual formula of nuptial redemption. No one has yet named the large object suspended over the bridegroom's head: a bread-filled sieve?

53. Sources of information on the *anakalypteria* include the lexical entries for this term in Harpokration, Hesychius, Pollux and Suidas; A. Bruckner "Anakalypteria," *Archäologische Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 64 (1904): 60; M. L. Cunningham, "Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 231-247," *Bulletin of the Institute for Classical Studies* 31 (1984): 9-12; I. S. Mark, "The Gods on the East Frieze of the Parthenon," *Hesperia* 53 (1984): 291-303; M. E. Mayo, "The Gesture of Anakalypsis," *American Journal of Archaeology* 77 (1973): 210-21; J. H. Oakley (above, n.51); J. Toutain, "Le rite nuptial de l'anakalypterion," *Révue des études archaiques* 42 (1940): 345-53.

54. Pollux, *Onomastikon*, 3.39.

55. Suidas; Harpokration; s.v. *anakalypteria*.

56. Pherekydes, fr. 50 Diels.

57. Homer, *Iliad*, 22.469-73.

58. Sappho, fr. 31 Lobel. Longinus' citation of the poem (*de Sublimitate*, 10) includes a defective and controversial seventeenth verse, but, as critics have noted, verses 1 through 16 appear to constitute a rhythmical and conceptual whole—whether poem or section of a poem. See H. Saake, *Zur Kunst Sapphos* (Paderborn 1971), 35, for full bibliography on the question.

59. The theory (first advanced by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Sappho und Simonides* [Berlin 1913], 58) that fr. 31 was actually performed at a wedding as some kind of *epithalamium* seems incredible. This poem does not participate in the meaning toward which it points, as ritual language must, but tropologizes it. For further bibliography on fr. 31, see E. Robbins, "Every Time I Look at You ... Sappho Thirty-One," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 110(1980): 255-61; J. Latacz, "Realitat und Imagination: Eine neue Lyrik-Theorie und Sapphos *phainetai moi kenos*-Lied," *Museum Helveticum* 42 (1985): 67-94.