The Ties That Bind: Women and Tomb Ritual in Classical Athens

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the ways in which women contributed to and even shaped civic community in classical Athens, particularly through their ritual activities (Blok 2009; Eidinow 2011). Indeed, their religious engagement may be considered a form of "cultic citizenship" similar to that of men (Parker 2011: 241; Connor 1988: 184, Blok 2004: 25-26). Social network theory provides an important conceptual tool for articulating how women helped to construct social identities in the classical polis by focusing on the multiple and overlapping ties formed between individuals and groups (Eidinow 2011; Taylor 2011). Athenian drama offers numerous examples of women establishing, and operating within, social and religious networks. This paper will examine how women as performers of tomb ritual constructed and maintained links between family members as represented in Attic tragedy and white ground lekythoi. Through tomb cult, women strengthened ties between family members, linked the household to the community, and managed the public perception of the deceased after death.

Although tragedy more often depicts women as mourners, they sometimes engaged in rituals at the tomb (Garland 2001: 104). Antigone, for instance, pours a libation over her brother's makeshift grave, thereby maintaining his social identity and reinforcing familial bonds of *philia* (S. *An*. 431-2). In contrast, a neglected tomb, such as that of Agamemnon, reflects the severing of family ties, loss of social identity, and a failure of memory. In Aeschylus' *Choephori*, the body of Agamemnon has been buried, but none of the other rituals owed to the dead have been accomplished. Clytemnestra has desecrated his corpse (A. *Cho*. 439) and prohibited the household from mourning him (A. *Ag*. 1554; *Cho*. 8-9, 429-33). In Euripides' *Electra,* Agamemnon's tomb similarly suffers neglect and lacks the appropriate offerings (E. *El*. 324-25). Prevented from visiting her father's tomb, Sophocles' Electra instructs her sister in proper ritual,

urging her to replace their mother's tainted gifts with cuttings of their own hair (S. *El.* 448-51) and her belt (ζῶμα τοὐμόν, S. *El.* 452), objects that assert a personal tie with the deceased. These examples point to the critical significance of women in constructing and maintaining social networks and identity in their performance of tomb ritual.

In contrast to tragedy, Attic white ground lekythoi contain numerous scenes of women visiting the grave. Privately purchased, these vessels were used in Athenian funerary rituals, buried with the dead, or placed on the grave (Arrington 2015: 248). By conveying these vessels to the tomb, women physically linked their households to the civic community. Many scenes depict women tying ribbons around a stele or leaving lekythoi as offerings, as if to affirm that the dead had not been forgotten (Oakley 2004: 204). A vase by the Timocrates Painter depicts women preparing to visit the grave, carrying baskets with these objects (Chazen Art Museum, 70.2). Another by the Vouni Painter (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 35.11.5) shows two women tying ribbons around two identical stelai, possibly at a public cemetery (Arrington 2015: 264). By taking proper care of the tomb, women perpetuated the memory of deceased and propagated family ties beyond the grave. Conversely, the presence of tipped or broken vessel at the tomb, as found on one by the Bosanquet Painter (Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, Basel, Kä 402), may indicate neglect, perhaps serving as a rebuke to the women who tended it (Schmidt 2005: 46). It has also been suggested that the fallen vessel conveys the enduring presence of the dead at the tomb, providing a contrast "between fleeting objects and persistent *eidola*" (Arrington 2014: 8). In this regard, rituals at the tomb placed the dead within a social network largely created and managed by women that perpetuated links between family members and connected them to the civic community, assuring that they would not be forgotten.

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