

# Women, Pain and Death



Women, Pain and Death:  
Rituals and Everyday Life  
on the Margins of Europe and Beyond

Edited by

Evy Johanne Håland

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# INTRODUCTION

EVY JOHANNE HÅLAND

The following collection of articles resulted from a cross-cultural and multidisciplinary seminar on “*Women and Death*”, which I organized and chaired at the Centre for Women and Gender Research (SKOK), University of Bergen, Norway 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> December 2006. In addition to most of the seminar participants, three other researchers are among the contributors included in this publication.

The aim of the seminar was to shed new light on the theme “Women and Death”. Knowing that the theme is very broad, I did not want to make any restrictions when inviting the participants. Accordingly, they were told that any contribution in accordance with the general theme, “Women and Death”, would be appreciated. The result was that a variety of relevant topics were presented, such as ritual laments and other rituals mostly carried out in female space—including offerings/sacrifices—, living or dead female mediators, etc. The program represented different perspectives and topics related to the theme “Women and Death” from different periods and parts—particularly in the margins—of Europe, as well as the Middle East and Asia. The present publication follows this up by also including studies of breast cancer metaphors from Slovenia and early modern Irish wakes, lamenting women and beliefs surrounding death. The participants come from a variety of related academic disciplines: anthropology, archaeology, classics and comparative literature, ethnology/ethnography, folklore, history and religious studies.

## **From Death in General to Women and Death in Particular**

Little attention has been paid historically to the topic of “Women and Death”, particularly from a global gender perspective, where fieldwork is of central importance, and where several of the participants focus on how we present the voices of our informants as well as the historical sources. Thus, the present volume fills a real gap. But, why do we study “Women and Death”?

The death of a member of a society threatens the stability of any society and the descendants' performance, particularly the women's performance of the necessary rituals before, during and after the burial rites, includes a concern for the spiritual world and the ancestors as well as the society in general. Death lies beneath all facets of humanity, and is therefore a crucial factor in the development of societies. The stability of society and the cosmos is not only threatened during death but conversely, death is also a means by which it is possible to encapsulate and to grasp the dynamics that constitute both society and the cosmos. Death triggers reconstitutions of society that invoke both the descendants and the divinities. Both in earlier times and now, all over the world, we encounter peasant societies where the living are dependent on the deceased mediator's successful communication with other powers in the subterranean world to assure the continuity of their own lives through the fertility of the earth.

Despite the significance of death, its pervasive role in the constitution of society is often neglected, with some exceptions however. The most notable works in the field of death were written several years ago; some are also reprinted, for example, Robert Hertz' *Death and the Right Hand* (1960)<sup>1</sup> and Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington's *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* from 1979.<sup>2</sup> More recent publications in the field of death include *The Buried Soul* by Timothy Taylor from 2002, and *Death, mourning, and burial: a cross-cultural reader*, edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben (2004), although all the articles in the collection have been published earlier. Several studies on the cultures of death and dying, are dealing with specific periods or places, such as Paul Binski's, *Medieval Death* from 1996, Sandra Gilbert's *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* from 2006, and *The Buddhist dead: practices, discourses, representations*, edited by Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone (2007).

Several scholars have examined death, moving from the study of death to its relation to the social order<sup>3</sup> or the reverse, claiming that to examine death is to look at society through female eyes.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the central theme of the volume is "Women and Death". The topic has been explored in Western thought and literature.<sup>5</sup> Historical perspectives on the

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of "Contribution à une Étude sur la Représentation collective de la Mort." *L'année Sociologique* (1907): 48-137.

<sup>2</sup> Repr. 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Ariès 1981 (or. 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Seremetakis 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Bassein 1984.

representation of Greek women, also in connection with death, have also been investigated.<sup>6</sup> Most publications on themes related to women and death, however, have focused on lament, often through documentation of the condemnation of the practice of female lamentation, particularly in modern and ancient Greece,<sup>7</sup> but men may also sing laments, such as Achilles' does in his grief over Patrocles in the *Iliad*,<sup>8</sup> and modern Greeks continue the practice, as Gail Holst-Warhaft has illustrated in her writings.<sup>9</sup>

In connection with my application for a postdoctoral fellowship from the Research Council of Norway, the leader of SKOK, Professor Ellen Mortensen, asked if I would be interested in organising a seminar on a Women and a Gender-related theme. Since I was in the process of formulating a comparative project of my own on *Women and Death in Modern and Ancient Greece*, I found the idea very interesting and stimulating. In this connection, I had the possibility of inviting an internationally prominent scholar working in that particular area, and at once I started to think of a particular person.

During the Easter holidays in 1995, I was strolling around in an Athenian bookshop, "Pantelides", where I found Gail Holst-Warhaft's book *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature*, which had been published in 1992. Since then the book, which examines the power and meaning of the ancient lament from a comparative perspective, has been very important to me, so I naturally thought I would like to invite the author to be the key speaker at the seminar.

I was very glad to receive her positive reply in which she stated that the idea of the seminar was very timely, and added that it was rather surprising that no-one had done such a conference before. She also wrote that she had just written an article on women and death for an encyclopedia and so had been revisiting the subject.

In its oral form, Holst-Warhaft's talk, which opened the seminar as a keynote address, set a rational, fair-minded, but at the same time passionate and engaged tone for the ensuing two days, and the written version does the same for these published proceedings. Holst-Warhaft has written widely on Greek literature and music, particularly lament, as illustrated in her previously mentioned book from 1992. Another important publication of hers, particularly with regard to globalization, is

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<sup>6</sup> Seremetakis 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Alexiou 1974; Loraux 2002.

<sup>8</sup> *Il.* 18.

<sup>9</sup> Recent works dealing with laments include Saunders 2007; Suter 2008; Psychogiou 2008.

*The Cue for Passion: Grief and its Political Uses*, which was published in 2000. Women have been traditionally linked to death in two apparently disparate ways: through their prominence in the rituals of mourning, particularly the performance of laments, and through their sexuality. In her present article, *Death and the Maiden: Sex, Death, and Women's Laments*, Holst-Warhaft examines a range of associations between women, sexuality and death through history, literature and from different cultures, and demonstrates that the two areas of association are closely related. That women's sexuality and their role in death-rituals have been the subject of legal and religious repression in many societies suggests that not only were the two linked, but that both were seen as potentially dangerous to society.

The central theme of my own article, *Greek Women and Death, Ancient and Modern: A Comparative Analysis*, is women's role in connection with the cult of the dead in Greece. Based on practical religion generally, and death-rituals in particular as the most important data basis, the article questions the ways in which history has been written through the ages, and outlines a theoretical approach to supplement a traditional male perspective with a female perspective on historical sources. By combining ethnographical fieldwork with ancient sources and analysing the social meaning of the "death cult" as well as the roles of men and women in the rituals, the aim is to investigate the relationship between the domestic or female sphere, and the official or male sphere.

In her article, "*Let the Earth be Light upon you*": *Remembering the Dead in a Meadow Mari Village*, Helena Ruotsala's argues that the role and position of gender can be studied by using the concepts of space and place. The Mari are a Finno-Ugric people, who live in the area of the Volga River. Gradually, during her fieldwork in one rural Mari village, she started to see the village as consisting of gendered spaces and places. By examining the commemorating of the dead in Mari El using the Semyk festivities as her main example, she focuses especially on the role of women, both generally in religious life and also in the rites related to death.

Tatiana Minniyakhmetova's article, *Symbols of Approaching Death: The Role of the Woman*, discusses some aspects of the spiritual life of the Udmurts, who are Orthodox believers and at the same time follow traditional non-Christian Udmurt beliefs. By examining their concept of the existence of the real world and a parallel other world, she concentrates on how these people understand the relations between these worlds as well as their own relationships to both worlds and the possible meanings of the two dimensions. She also discusses certain symbols which serve as

“instruments” for defining relations between these worlds and analyses the role that women play in these phenomena.

Jenny Butler’s article, *Symbolic and Social Roles of Women in Death Ritual in Traditional Irish Society*, examines the ascribed social roles of women connected with death in the context of early modern Irish society. From the “white women” who prepare and lay out the corpse, to the roles of women during the wake itself and keening women who ritually lament for the dead, the connections between women and death are explored. Irish attitudes towards death and beliefs surrounding this event are also examined in relation to gender. One example is the supernatural figure of the banshee as a gendered symbol of death, a female entity said to be responsible for heralding news that one is about to die.

Liv Helga Dommasnes’ article, *Women and Death in Old Norse Societies. An Archaeological Perspective*, examines the topic in the cultural setting of the Norwegian Iron Age (500 BCE-1050 CE), beginning by asking: What are the archaeological sources and how can they tell us about death? Just as one now realises that material culture is also value-laden, archaeological research is becoming increasingly concerned with matters of gender and religion. Through an exploration of archaeological and written sources, the author suggests that society’s concern for maintaining the status quo, or fertility in a broad sense, is the key to understanding the relationship between women and death from the beginning of the Iron Age until the advent of Christianity.

Alexandra Cuffel’s article, *Between Reverence and Fear: Jewish Women and Death in Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenaz*, examines medieval and early modern Jewish reverence for the holy deceased and the concomitant fear of the dangerous dead themselves or of those who can manipulate spirits. She focuses on the relationships of women to the dead and to women as members of the dead in Ashkenazi (Northern European) culture, maintaining that women’s own death, especially martyrdom, granted them a degree of holiness and authority that they lacked in life, or as individuals not associated with the dead. Furthermore, recognition of women’s interest in and involvement with the dead increased in the Ashkenazi world during this period. Despite continued disapproval from some circles, men and sometimes women themselves, actively encouraged women’s devotion to the dead.

Armenians, who were scattered throughout the world after the genocide and deportation from Turkey in 1915, have lived through loss and the brutalities of history. In her article, *Brittle Images, Lingering Pasts: Photographs, Memories and Bereavement*, Nefissa Naguib, examines one response to enduring loss: the role of photo albums in

capturing historical ruptures. For scholars concerned with life stories, family photos and records serve as goads to recollection and as aids to their certification. “Seeing” other pasts obviates, in some sense, our requirement for complete recollections from our interviewees. Sometimes photos portray frozen, static moments cut off from their lived experiences, but these albums are also verification of bereavements that enable the perpetuation of mourning.

In her article, *Metaphors Kill, Don't They? Breast Cancer and Fear of Death in Slovene Medical Metaphors*, Mojca Ramšak examines breast cancer metaphors, especially the frequent orientational and martial metaphors, and their meaning to users and addressees. Metaphors are a literary means of expression, but they are also frequent in medicine. A major body of metaphors derives from the properties of the human body, because we are most familiar with our body and feel it better than anything else. Medical metaphors were common in the older literature, where the descriptions of diseased bodies refer to critical conditions, in which a single defective part could destroy the entire system; medical metaphors are also common in everyday speech and not only when talking about disease or health.

The topic of Terje Oestigaard's article, *The Sisters Kali and Ganga: Waters of Life and Death*, are the two Mother Goddesses in Hindu Bangladesh: Kali, the Goddess of Death and destruction, and her opposite, Ganga. The annual floods in Bangladesh are a re-occurring problem incorporated into the low-religion of common people, who consider water and death to be associated with the taking and creation of life. Each year the river kills people and destroys the land, but the river and floods are also pre-requisites for a successful harvest and further life. More precisely, Kali statues are seen to “die” each year when the divine spirit leaves the statue. These statues are seen as dead bodies and given water burials in the Ganga, thus uniting the micro- and macro-cosmos, nature and culture.

The present collection of articles thus illustrates women's communication with the dead in several places and at several historical periods, and the annual death of a Hindu goddess that in several instances has her equivalents in other parts of the world. One may for example mention the Irish stone carvings called *Sheela-na-gigs* (Sheila [Caecilia] of the breasts).<sup>10</sup> The symbolism of Kali also brings to mind the meaning of Medusa in Greek Mythology, and the cult dedicated to her at certain springs.<sup>11</sup> Female water deities are also important among the Irish, Maris

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<sup>10</sup> MacKillop 2004: 385.

<sup>11</sup> Håland forthcoming.

and Udmurts where women sacrifice to the Water Goddess and where water streams are important in connection with death. Moreover, the statues of Kali are often made of unburnt clay, and in Greek mythology the first woman, Pandora, was made of water and earth, generally associated with female fertility.

All over the world death and fertility are particularly associated with women, who often are seen as both life-giving and life-taking, thus representing both positive and negative aspects, as well as the Mother Goddesses who reflect living women or personal life-experiences of the devotees, for example the ancient Demeter, Isis, the modern *Panagia* (the Virgin Mary)<sup>12</sup> or the couple Kali and Ganga. Women's biologically determined control over birth in many ways parallels their caring role at death. Women, in a sense, enclose men's lives: They bring them into being and through their performance of the death-rituals, they ultimately send them into the next world. In *Death & the regeneration of life*, Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry illustrated the classical anthropological paradox that symbols of rebirth and fertility are frequently found in funerary rituals throughout the world.<sup>13</sup> In modern Greece, a phallus might still be found among the flowers on the coffin at the burial, paralleling similar gifts in the ancient world. Conversely, Medusa symbolises both death and the female sex organ. The worldwide interaction between Death and Fertility is clearly present in our proceedings as well: apart from the material from ancient and modern Greece, it is also present among the Hindus in Bangladesh, the Maris/Udmurts, the Irish and in Old Norse Societies from the beginning of the Iron Age until the advent of Christianity.

Women are connected with death and divination in the Greek context,<sup>14</sup> but this connection is also found other places, from the female seer in Old Norse society, the Irish banshee, to the female Udmurtian interpreters of dreams or the Jewish powerful dead women who communicated with the living. In these instances women and magic are also central elements, although, at least in former periods, women's magical powers are frequently criticized in the male-produced sources, often because of fear, as illustrated by Medea's activities at the cemetery at night invoking the Spirits of Death. There is also a parallel with Jewish gravesites when women were seeking the advice of the dead, or the illustration given by Aeschylus in the tragedy, the *Persians*, correctly characterized as "Orientalism and women's laments" by Holst-Warhaft.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Håland forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Bloch/Parry 1982.

<sup>14</sup> Seremetakis 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Holst-Warhaft 1992: 130.

As Holst-Warhaft has illustrated, the art of lamentation gives women considerable power over the rituals of death, and women's laments became "Dangerous Voices" both in ancient Greece and later in the Byzantine period,<sup>16</sup> the latter also paralleling the clashes between male (i.e. the Catholic Church) and female ritual specialists in the Irish environment. The *moirologhistra*, the great singer of laments in the modern Greek village, is rightly regarded by men with a certain fear. She has an authority that is recognized by all around her to communicate with the dead. She is poet and priestess, spellbinder and exorciser of spells. It is females who have traditionally, by the authority of the Fates, controlled the great mysteries of birth and death cross-culturally.

The symbols and rituals of the official "death-festivals" are important, but also domestic festivals and rituals, including how, by way of different tasks such as cleaning and food preparation, the dead are thought to be present in the house on certain days, such as in Russian/Mari/Udmurt contexts or modern Greece, where they also are thought to wander among the living from the sprouting of the grains until harvest time. During the ancient Greek Anthesteria festival, the dead were thought to visit their former homes and roam around the living for three days around the time of spring germination.<sup>17</sup>

Women give birth to the next generation and prepare the departure of the old. At death, they prepare and lay out the corpse, who is washed, anointed and dressed in clean robes, often made by women. The preparation of death, may start long before the actual death, and among the Maris, older women have already made themselves a dress to be buried in, or they might be buried in their wedding dress, thus paralleling ancient and modern Greek and other Balkan customs where unwed maidens might be wearing a white bridal dress and wedding crown, and thus wed to death. In Greek mythology, Penelope held her suitors at bay for more than three years while she wove a figured funerary cloth for her father-in-law, Laertes,<sup>18</sup> paralleling the embroideries from the Oseberg burial from the Viking period, but also the modern hand-embroidered towels made by Mari women. The dead are generally also lamented, during the washing, wake and burial, the latter marking the end of the rituals in the domestic sphere. After the burial, Udmurtian women restore the balance, and as in other places, memorial rituals are usually performed at the tomb. Since women generally are the performers of these rituals, the cemetery is, however, turned into a female ritual space.

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<sup>16</sup> Holst-Warhaft 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Håland 2005: 209-220, 228 f.

<sup>18</sup> Håland 2006: 174.

Women's tasks and rituals at the cemetery, a space controlled by women several places, are also central. Interesting parallels, found cross-culturally, are the numerous obligations towards the dead, deeply connected with the close relationship between the dead ancestors and the living, whose fate is closely tied to that of the dead. The contributors present illustrations from different places in the margins of Europe, for example several places in Russia, such as among the Mari and Udmurts. Material from Greece as well as Jewish communities and Ireland is also discussed.

In these instances, women's mediating roles and rituals are central, rituals involving washing, and particularly cooking and feeding. In other words, women's mediating roles and rituals seem to recur across several religious communities, including pagan, Jewish, Christian or Muslim.

Burials constitute one of the most important sources of knowledge that we have of earlier societies, and are particularly important both geographically and socially, since literary texts were mainly written for a small elite.<sup>19</sup> In many cases, burials also predated literary texts, as in the Old Norse context. Women's earthly tasks followed them into the other world, and in Greek burials from the Dark Ages (c. 1200-800 BCE), spindle whorls served to identify corpses as female. The same pattern is found in Byzantine burials.<sup>20</sup> Burials might, however, also be important in later periods, and the Udmurtian women's favourite belongings are placed in their coffins. In modern Greece Aikaterinas G. Taboulari, who died when she was 75 years old, was provided with her glasses and watch in the small enclosure on her tomb that holds an icon and three red flowers. Another person might get a packet of John Players cigarettes, candies or toys, depending on age and taste.<sup>21</sup>

P. Ariès and other historians have argued that the visual representations of death stopped around the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By studying public, and especially graphic, representations of death, T. Walter<sup>22</sup> has shown that this is far from the case, once one shifts one's gaze from art to more popular representations. One may add that women are crucial in these representations, for example in connection with pilgrimages to shrines made sacred by their association with the dead, such as sanctuaries often dedicated to the remnants of, or other symbolic associations with the dead. These are very often female saints, holy persons or the "very special

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<sup>19</sup> Morris 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Håland 2006: 168-172.

<sup>21</sup> Håland 2004: 577 f.

<sup>22</sup> [www.rdg.ac.uk/AcaDepts/lw/Sociol/publish/people/academic/tony/bio.htm](http://www.rdg.ac.uk/AcaDepts/lw/Sociol/publish/people/academic/tony/bio.htm).

I want to thank Jenny Butler for giving me information about Tony Walter.

dead”, paralleling for example Jewish women’s pilgrimages to female powerful dead, particularly martyrs, in former times. In this connection, photographs are important, and from narratives about genocide, loss and deportation, where photo albums are central, we also learn how the forces of history are brought to bear on the lives of Armenian women in the Middle East, a geographical area where various illustrations of deceased family-members have a long tradition, for example in ancient vase-paintings, grave stelai, gravestones and at modern tombs. One might also mention the motifs or pictures ancient women wove into their weavings, and “the practice of laying a story-cloth over the body during the funeral and eventually the coffin”.<sup>23</sup> These pictures parallel photographs on modern Mari memorials, on Greek tombs, but also on coffins both among Muslims in North-Africa and among the Christian Greeks during Easter when they hang pictures of their own dead family-members on the *Epitaphios* (Christ’s funeral), on Good Friday, before they start lamenting their dead, while tearing their loosened hair. In this way, the photographs are clearly related to performances of grief. So, photographs might be objects that evoke a painful global moment as well as a painful personal moment, and the modern illustrations might shed new light on ancient practices from a comparative perspective. In this connection, the presentation of the painful lived, or living experiences of today’s Slovene women with cancer are also particularly important, as well as the death notices in newspapers, telling about of those who did not manage to defeat the disease and passed away “after a long battle with a serious illness”, thus paralleling North European death notices, where people often are asked not to send flowers to the home, but to deposit some money to the bank account or make a contribution to the cancer association. The life-stories from the women who participated in the Slovene project tell about fear of death: after being diagnosed with breast cancer women fear that they are already at death’s door, but they also tell about strong and brave women who tackle their illness while facing lamenting men: their whining and moaning husbands, thus paralleling both the ancient Achilles and the modern Greek man, Giannēs, on the Aegean island of Tinos in August 1998, who lamented when his older brother died.

In short, the seminar and this resulting collection of articles present different perspectives and topics related to the theme “Women and Death” from different periods and parts—particularly in the margins—of Europe, as well as the Middle East and Asia, i.e. areas where, through the ages,

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<sup>23</sup> Håland 2006: 174.

there has been a constant interaction and discourse between a variety of people, often with different ethnic backgrounds.

From the presentations and the present collection of articles, which are mostly arranged thematically, one might also say that when studying “Women and Death” cross-culturally, with examples particularly from melting-pots or crossroads of cultures,—such as the area of the Ural Mountains and Volga River on the border between Europe and Asia, the Balkans, or the Mediterranean and Middle East—, as we did during the seminar, it is illuminating to see how many parallels there are between the various societies, despite of many differences, both in time and space.

The collection of different perspectives and topics related to the general theme “Women and Death” has important ramification for current research surrounding the shaping of a “European identity”, the marketing of regional and national heritages, and associated activities. In connection with the present-day aim of connecting the various and quite different European heritages, and developing a vision of Europe and its constituent elements that is at once global and rooted, our work has great relevance. One may also mention the new international initiative on intangible heritage, spearheaded by UNESCO.

Particularly because of all the similarities between the different geographical groupings, the articles offer new perspectives on the processes of cultural change in Europe and the rest of the world.<sup>24</sup> In the era of globalization, our articles should be of great relevance, particularly since they present a very important theme, death, seen from what have been regarded as the geographical margins,<sup>25</sup> particularly of European societies and their populations, by focusing on the marginalized groups of women who most often have been described as being confined to a domestic sphere, where they played the role of unmarried women to be married to men and as wives in households dominated by men. By entering the female domestic sphere, however, one realizes that it is very important: Women have always played a central role when dealing with death, pain and loss, and their lamenting voices are still important in several localities, especially in connection with the religious ideologies that are flowering in modern Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Balkan societies. According to Jewish sources facing attacks from Christian crusaders, women took over formerly male religious duties. As in the Greek Orthodox Church, the majority of the congregation at religious celebrations in Russia are women, although the priests are men. In

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. also Friedman 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Das/Poole 2004 for discussions of margins.

contemporary Russian societies, however, men have been marginalized in religious matters generally and particularly death-rituals, while women's religious space has grown. So masculinity is in crisis in post-Soviet Russia generally and among the Maris and Udmurts particularly. Accordingly, studies of "Women and Death" might clarify certain contemporary political phenomena in the particular areas and beyond.

In other words, by representing concepts of death, death-rituals and painful experiences, mostly, but not uniquely, through female eyes, the present collection tries to give a broader understanding of society, seen from below or "from the grassroots", and is therefore of great importance in enhancing a deeper understanding of structural aspects of transitions both in an European and global context. From these particular focuses on "Women and Death", we will need to go further and look more closely at the relation between "*gender, death and pain through history*".

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# DEATH AND THE MAIDEN: SEX, DEATH, AND WOMEN'S LAMENTS

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT

## **Abstract**

Women have been traditionally linked to death in two apparently disparate ways: through their prominence in the rituals of mourning, particularly the performance of laments, and through their sexuality. The article examines a range of historical, literary and cultural associations between women, sexuality and death, and demonstrates that the two areas of association are, in fact, closely related. That women's sexuality and their role in death rituals have been the subject of legal and religious repression in many societies suggests that that not only were the two linked, but that both were seen as potentially dangerous to society.

## **Women, Sexuality, and Death**

Perhaps it should not surprise us that women should have been linked throughout history, to death. Given their biologically-determined control of birth, they might be expected to play a symmetrical role at the end of life. Traditionally, women have surrounded the dying as they do the newly born, comforting, tending, laying-out the corpse and mourning. Even in societies where their public role has been severely limited, women have played a prominent role in rituals associated with death and mourning. They have been linked to death not only through their role as caretakers and mourners, but through their sexuality. These two areas in which women have been associated with death are not as distinct as they appear. In the funeral rituals of many pre-industrial societies, mourning is juxtaposed with sexuality and humour. At Irish wakes, dirges for the dead

were once followed by sexually suggestive games.<sup>1</sup> In Venezuela and rural Greece women may still use language that would normally be regarded as crudely sexual in their laments for the dead, in Borneo and Madagascar, women who are otherwise expected to behave modestly, join in obscene activities with men as part of the funeral ceremony.<sup>2</sup> Even in modern, urban centres of Africa, young men and women still attend funerals to find a mate.<sup>3</sup> Wedding and death rituals are also symbolically intertwined in countries as far apart as rural China, Romania, and Greece, with the same sad laments being sung for brides as they leave the house of their parents as are performed at funerals.<sup>4</sup>

Sex, through its connection to fertility and renewed life, may be opposed to death, but the two are never far apart. Eros and Thanatos, Love and Death, were regarded by the ancient Greeks as twin deities. Female sexuality, linked to menstruation and birth, has always been mysterious and potentially frightening to men. Menstruating women, like those who have recently given birth, are widely considered to be polluted and are often isolated from the community and forbidden to participate in religious ceremonies. The link between female sexuality and death is represented in the literature of many countries where mythical female creatures like the Sirens, Fata Morgana, Circe, the Hindu goddess Kali, and the Maenads, lure men to their deaths by their beauty or kill them while in a state of frenzied possession.

In western thought, Aristotle's view of women as incomplete beings lacking a soul, as mere vessels for the male seed, has had a pervasive influence on attitudes to women, encouraging a view of the female as carnal rather than spiritual. Similarly, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Biblical story of Eve's birth from Adam's rib and her responsibility for the expulsion of humankind from the Garden of Eden reflected and perpetuated the identification of women with sin and sex.

Christianity contributed to the association of women with sexuality and death through its strong polarization of body and soul, sin and virtue. The early Christian theologians granted women a soul, but an inferior one. Being more carnal than men, she had to make a greater effort to achieve closeness to God, denying her sexuality and preferably remaining a virgin.

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<sup>1</sup> The reports on the nature of these games are, unfortunately, in English rather than Irish, but they concur on the explicit sexual nature of the games and on the sexual free-for-all that followed the wake. See Holst-Warhaft 2000: 68-70.

<sup>2</sup> See Holst-Warhaft 2000: 54-77 for a more detailed treatment of the link between sexuality, humour, and death.

<sup>3</sup> Holst-Warhaft 2000: 56

<sup>4</sup> See, *inter alia*, Danforth 1982: 80-81.

The notorious chastity belt was an attempt to control women's sexual appetites. Women who failed to abide by the expectations of chastity were punished with the only appropriate punishment: death. From the Middle Ages until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to the laws of continental Europe, the so-called "crime of passion" permitted a man to kill his adulterous wife and her lover without punishment. The killing of "witches" was, in many scholars' view, the most egregious manifestation of Christian Europe's obsession with female sexuality. Denounced for their "carnal" relationship with the Devil, or any other offence that fitted notions of aberrant female behaviour, millions of women were tortured and killed. Although recent research into what is referred to as "The Great Witch Hunt" of Europe establishes that the persecution was not always directed at women, it is true that most people tried as witches were female, poor and often unmarried.<sup>5</sup>

In the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods, a fascination with death encouraged a fondness for the *memento mori*, a dancing skeleton, or a grinning death's head. These reminders of mortality were often linked to beautiful young women or to pregnant hags. The depiction of death as a male corpse or leering skeleton preparing to carry off a young naked or semi-naked woman became a favourite theme in western art from the Renaissance on. Hans Baldung Grien's *Death and the Maiden*, painted in 1517, shows a thinly-veiled, buxom young woman, her hands clasped in entreaty, while a skeletal Death grasps her by the hair.<sup>6</sup> This theme, with its eerie combination of sexuality and morbidity continued to be popular until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Schubert set the poems of Matthias Claudius to music in his famous lieder cycle *Der Tod und das Mädchen*. As Sandra Gilbert notes in her perceptive analysis of the cycle, it is not only dread that the maiden expresses in her dialogue with Death, but a degree of complicity, even of love for the grim reaper, a reciprocity that gives the theme its seductive edge.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the association of women with death in European thought was responsible for the widespread view that sexual intercourse with women robbed men of their strength. The so-called "little death" (*la petite mort*)—

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<sup>5</sup> In her article "Recent Developments in the Study of The Great European Witch Hunt", (<http://www.draeconin.com/database/witchhunt.htm>), Jenny Gibbons summarizes research from the mid 1970's in the subject, and concludes that 75%-80% of the victims were women.

<sup>6</sup> Reproduced in Gilbert 2006: 356.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert 2006: 355-359 also analyzes the seductive tone of Emily Dickinson's poetry that deals with death, especially the famous poem *Because I could not stop for Death*, where the figure of Death is a courtly, even "kindly" suitor.

a sensation of loss and depression that many men experience during coitus—was blamed on women's sexual nature.<sup>8</sup> As the embodiment of the sin of lust, woman also contaminated and destroyed the purity of men. Before the discovery of penicillin, venereal disease provided a more concrete link between women, who were thought to be responsible for the disease, and death. There was even a myth that the vagina was equipped with teeth—the so-called *vagina dentata*—, a snapping mouth that could castrate the male. A Celtic version of the *vagina dentata* can be observed in the strange stone figures known as *Sheela-na-gigs*, found scattered all over Ireland (Fig. 1):



Figure 1. *Sheela-na-gig*, Bunratty Castle, Co. Clare, Ireland, June 2008.  
Photo: Evy Johanne Håland.

Dating from the early medieval period but lasting well beyond it, they are usually situated in churchyards. The faces of these grotesque female figures are skull-like, their ribs skeletal, and they display their huge vaginas to the passer-by, often holding the labia apart with their hands, as

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<sup>8</sup> Bassein 1984: 21. Bassein writes that women, through sex, were not only linked to death in the Christian view, but came to be equated with it.

if to say “Here is the door to death”.<sup>9</sup> The myth of the vagina as a symbol of death as well as birth extended into the modern era. In Alan Ginsberg’s lament for his mother, *Kaddish*, for example, the poet casts a savage eye on his aging, senile mother’s naked body, speaking of the “ragged long lips between her legs” which become the “entrance through crotch” to death.<sup>10</sup>

In nineteenth century western literature the association of women, sexuality, and death was made explicit in the writings of such authors as Poe, Hardy, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Flaubert, whose adulterous heroines frequently died a grotesque and terrible death. In Edgar Allan Poe’s *Berenice*, the protagonist becomes fixated on the heroine’s teeth. So intense is his desire for her teeth that he opens her grave to recover them.<sup>11</sup> Finding her still alive in her coffin he is aghast, but we are left to wonder if he will rescue her or simply recover the object of his sexual fantasy. Although twentieth century writers began to question the stereotype of the “fallen woman” as both death-dealing and death-bound, the association between women’s sexuality and death has remained a constant of western thought.

Early feminists, among them Betty Friedan, described the stereotypical role of women in western society as a form of “death in life”. Women were enjoined to “come alive” and reject the trap of marriage. In many societies, however, including those of Muslim Africa, the Middle East, and India, women are still associated with sin and, by extension, with death. In India, child-brides may die as a result of forced intercourse, and despite laws prohibiting the practice, Hindu widows may cast themselves onto their husbands’ funeral pyres in the belief that the sins they have committed in a previous incarnation are responsible for their spouses’ death.<sup>12</sup> Genital mutilation and the cutting of the hymen are both still practiced in parts of Africa.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mercier 1962: 53-54.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Sandra Gilbert (2006) for her excellent analysis of this poem: 417-420.

<sup>11</sup> Poe’s interest in dead women may have been inspired by medical articles he read in *Blackwood’s* magazine that suggested a link between female beauty and disease, or by the deaths of women close to him. Whatever the cause, his morbid writings had a great influence on other writers, especially in France. See Bassein 1984: 44-57.

<sup>12</sup> Friedan 1964: 35-36

<sup>13</sup> Mary Daly (1978: 157-167) reports that among the Bambaras, men fear death from the clitoris of a woman who is not first cut.

Perhaps the ultimate association of death and sexuality with women remains the prevalence of rape as a concomitant, often deliberate, weapon of war. From Troy to Rome, Somalia to Bosnia, Nanking to Vietnam, women have been brutally raped in the context of war, often before being killed. When mass killing is legitimized, it seems, the universal associations men make between sex, women, and death find their oldest and ugliest expression.

### **The Traditional Prominence of Women Mourning Rituals**

It would be a mistake to think that the link between women and death is simply the product of male fantasies of castration. Sexuality and fertility are universally recognized as the obverse of death. The rituals of mourning, in which women play a prominent role in most societies, frequently conclude with drunkenness, bawdy games, and a sexual free-for-all. During these festivities women are granted a sexual license denied them in ordinary life. In societies where women are kept tightly under control, it seems that death opens a door briefly, allowing women to participate freely in communal rituals designed to generate new life.<sup>14</sup>

The anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep<sup>15</sup> was the first to discuss the rituals of mourning as rites of passage, that is, as activities appropriate to a transitional phase, just as the rites of initiation are appropriate to adolescent boys about to enter manhood. There is a time, in many societies of the world, when the dead are believed to inhabit neither the world of the living nor the world of the dead. Unless the suitable rituals of burial and mourning are performed, the dead will not, it is believed, successfully separate from the living. They may even cause them harm. This makes the performance of death rituals one of the most important activities for the living. It may also explain the fear and superstition surrounding those who perform them. If death is viewed as a process, and the recently deceased hovers between this world and the next, the role of the lament-singer acquires magical dimensions. If women's laments and their accompanying secretions are, as the Romans believed, a form of symbolic nourishment for the dead, women occupy a powerful, liminal position, one for which men cannot substitute. They must appease the dead, easing his or her departure as they did his or her arrival in this world as midwives.

Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf have challenged the universal applicability of Van Gennep's theories in their work with the Bara people

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<sup>14</sup> Holst-Warhaft 2000: ch. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Van Gennep 1960 (or. French 1909).

of Madagascar.<sup>16</sup> The Bara hold that death is associated with order, with the father and with ancestors. In contrast, women are associated with vitality, flesh and fecundity. The sex-related activities of the funeral nights are a way to keep a balance between sterility and order, represented by the male, and the vitality of the female. Women's and men's roles in the funeral preparations differ, with women weeping over the body while men see to the logistics of the ceremony. In Bara society, where death creates sterility and excessive order, only female vitality, represented by sexual intercourse and rebirth, can bring the dead safely to the world of the ancestors. However different the Bara's view of death and its gendered associations, we are reminded of the link between death and birth, and birth with sex.

In the ancient world, and in most parts of the developing world, men and women's roles have been well-defined in the rituals of death and burial. In the ancient Near East, in pre-industrial Europe, in India and parts of Africa the archaeological record is remarkably consistent. Depictions of funerary rituals on pots, tombs, or sarcophagi show women standing beside the dead body, their hands raised to their heads, often tearing their loosened hair in what appears to be a classical gesture of mourning. Men may also be present in these scenes of mourning which date back at least to the Bronze Age, but their gestures are more restrained, and they rarely stand beside the dead body.<sup>17</sup>

Contemporary descriptions, literary sources, archaeological and anthropological evidence support the view that the women with their raised arms were weeping and singing dirges for the dead.<sup>18</sup> In the ancient societies of the Near East and the Mediterranean, there were professional mourners as well as unpaid ones. There is evidence to suggest that Greeks prized lament-singers who came from the east, especially from Persia, and were prepared to pay for their services.<sup>19</sup> The Greeks had, as we shall see, an uneasy relationship with laments and with the women who sang them,

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<sup>16</sup> Huntington and Metcalf 1979.

<sup>17</sup> Among the best-known depictions of such scenes are those on Greek vases, where women surround the corpse, hands raised to their heads, while men stand to one side, often with one arm raised (Metropolitan Museum 27.228, 54.11.50).

<sup>18</sup> The earliest depictions in the Greek world of such figures are from the Bronze Age. By the early geometric period, the women lamenters are conventionally represented with raised arms and loose hair, but depictions from Bronze Age Crete and Mycenae depict women also involved in other activities associated with the funeral including libation and sacrifice.

<sup>19</sup> On the eastern influence on laments in antiquity, see Holst-Warhaft 1992: 149-151.

but their very unease emphasizes the prevalence and power of the tradition. It is Homer, after all, who introduces the lament as a literary trope. Men and women weep openly in his poems, and the *Iliad* ends with three powerful women's laments, as Helen, Andromache and Hekuba mourn the dead Trojan hero, Hektor. Hektor has already urged his wife to lament his death, telling her that men, when they see her weep, will say:

“There is the wife of Hektor, the bravest fighter  
they could field, those stallion-breaking Trojans,  
long ago when the men fought for Troy.”<sup>20</sup>

There has been much written of Homeric laments, and the fact that they play a role in establishing the glory of the dead hero,<sup>21</sup> but Homer's lamenting women say little of Hektor's glory. Instead, his wife Andromache chides him for abandoning her to slavery. Hekuba speaks of her son's physical beauty and religious piety, while Helen singles him out among the Trojans for his kindness. I will come back to the nature of women's laments, but the three laments that end the most famous war epic in western literature do as much to undermine the hero's glory as they do to promote it. They also make women, as singers of mourning songs, an indispensable part of the poetic tradition.

In the ancient Middle East, laments were also performed by women, some of them professionals. We read of *mekonot* or professional wailing women in the Hebrew *Bible*,<sup>22</sup> where God commands Jeremiah to “Call the lament-singing women, let the wise women come”. Jeremiah tells the lament-makers to teach their daughters the craft of lament because the prophesied devastation will require so many lamenters.<sup>23</sup> Even the poor, it seems, were expected to provide at least one hired mourner, and funerals could be delayed so that a lament-singer might be summoned.<sup>24</sup> Only small fragments of these laments survive, but sources suggest that rhythmical stamping, breast-beating, and tearing one's clothes were common.<sup>25</sup> The Biblical Book of *Lamentations* is the only extended lament in Hebrew literature, and its protagonists are a male poet and a mourning female: Zion. As in the ancient Greek examples, the Book is a

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<sup>20</sup> *Iliad*, 6.548-550, translated by Robert Fagles.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Murnaghan 1987; Sultan 1991.

<sup>22</sup> *Jeremiah*, 9: 16-17. For a brief discussion of lament in the Jewish tradition, see Adler 2006: 16-21.

<sup>23</sup> *Jeremiah*, 9: 19.

<sup>24</sup> Adler 2006: 68.

<sup>25</sup> Adler 2006: 68.