

meDea

# The Swinging Woman.

## Phaedra and Swing in Classical Greece

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In 1993 *The Secret Garden* comes out, a film by the Polish director Agnieszka Holland. The story, set in England in the early twentieth century, is about three children who discover a beautiful garden kept hidden for ten long years, because of a mysterious death. In fact, the young protagonist's mother died after falling from a swing hanging from a tree located inside the garden. The premature birth of the baby she was expecting is also a consequence of this tragedy. The film is based on a story written in 1910 by Frances Hodgson Burnett, the acclaimed Anglo-American writer of famous novels for children. The film version is faithful to the original story, except for one thing that immediately caught our attention: in the novel the woman died because the branch of the tree on which she used to sit broke, and not because she fell from the swing. We argue that the ancient link between the feminine death and the swing could have prompted the director to replace the episode of the broken branch with the fall from the swing.

### The dead queen and the swing<sup>1</sup>

Phaedra is well-known for being one of the most famous and major characters in Greek and Latin classical literature. She is a crucial figure in

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this part of the article was presented by the author at the *Celtic Conference in Classics*, organized by the School of History, Classics and Archaeology of the University of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, John Macintyre Conference Center, June 24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>, 2014).



Euripides' two versions of Hippolytus, although she previously appears as a main character in one of Sophocles's lost tragedies. Phaedra becomes a leading figure in Latin works of the imperial period; first, as a main character in one of Ovid's *Heroides* – a collection of verse epistles – and then as a main character in Seneca's title-role tragedy. In spite of its popularity, it cannot be said that this character gained, in old times, a similar fame iconographically. The few surviving representations related to the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus date back to the imperial period. Besides, today we have only few uncertain information about Phaedra, which come from the art repertory of the ancient Greek world, all of them made in Magna Graecia and dating back to the Hellenistic period. We have news, however, of a remarkable exception: we know that Phaedra was portrayed by Polygnotus of Thasus in the frescoed *nekylia* of one of the most famous monuments in ancient Greece: the *Lesche* erected at Delphi by the people of Cnidus. Built between 458 and 447 B.C.<sup>2</sup>, the building was very well-known for two impressive frescoes<sup>3</sup> portraying Odysseus<sup>4</sup> journey to Hades and the taking of Troy<sup>5</sup>. Unfortunately these paintings are now lost, but Pausanias the traveller left us a careful description of them. Moreover, this is what he says about Phaedra<sup>6</sup>:

[Ἀριάδνη] κάθηται μὲν ἐπὶ πέτρας, ὄρα δὲ ἐς τὴν ἀδελφὴν Φαίδραν, τό τε ἄλλο αἰωρουμένην σῶμα ἐν σειρᾷ καὶ ταῖς χερσὶν ἀμφοτέραις ἐκατέρωθεν τῆς σειρᾶς ἔχομένην· παρεῖχε δὲ τὸ σχῆμα καίπερ ἐς τὸ εὐπρεπέστερον πεποιημένον συμβάλλεσθαι τὰ ἐς τῆς Φαίδρας τὴν τελευτήν.

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<sup>2</sup> De La Coste-Messelière 1936: 276 ff.; Roscino 2010: 38 ff. Cnidian people dedicated the monument to the victory of the Delian league against the Persian fleet (469-465 B.C.). The island was the very base of naval operations. See Picard 1928: 42.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch (*Def. Or.* 6 = *Mor.* 412 D ff.) locates in this building one dialogue of his *De defectu oraculorum*; see also Pli. *N.H.* 35, 59. About the artistic personality of Polygnotus see Roscino 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Paus. 10, 28, 1 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Philostr. *VA* 6, 11, 64; *schol. Pl. Grg* 448b; Luc. *Imag.* 7.

<sup>6</sup> Paus. 10, 29, 3.

[Ariadne] is seated on a rock and she is looking at her sister Phaedra, who is on a swing grasping in either hand the rope on each side. The attitude, though gracefully drawn, makes us infer the manner of Phaedra's death.

According to Pausanias, then, the swing is likely to refer *strictu sensu* to the queen, who, as we all know, hung herself at her marriage bed<sup>7</sup>. The uniqueness of this iconographical detail, absent from any other monument representing Phaedra, suggests to Luis Séchan – and then to Charles Picard – that the indication of Pausania could well be the result of a suggestion by a local guide; a suggestion which «*suit sans doute une version athénienne où Phèdre se pendait*» (Picard 1928: 48), and so most likely it must be previous to Euripides's *Hippolytus*. In this regard, it seems plausible that it must be a symbolic connection between the swing and the suicide by hanging. Such an exegetical link can only be related to a ritual perspective.

The death of Theseus' wife is similar to many other mythical women's death<sup>8</sup>: in a way, the unfaithful maidservants under Odysseus<sup>9</sup>, Jocasta<sup>10</sup>, Antigone<sup>11</sup>, and Helen of Troy<sup>12</sup> are hung. And even when a story does not actually end up in someone's death, there is still a clear functional link between the feminine world and hanging. In Euripides' *The Suppliants*, for example, Danaos' daughters threaten to hung

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<sup>7</sup> E. *Hipp.* 769-775. Cfr. Loraux 1987: 23 f.

<sup>8</sup> Doria s.f.p.; Cfr. Picard 1928: 55 f.

<sup>9</sup> Hom. *Od.* 22, 465 ff. It is important to remark that the previous punishment determined by Odysseus for the unfaithful maidservants is the death by sword (440 ff.). It is Telemachus the one who opts for hanging, because in his opinion the behaviour of the maidservants is a great wrong.

<sup>10</sup> So, for example, in Hom. *Od.* 11, 269 ff. See also Cantarella 1985: 92.

<sup>11</sup> S. *Ant.* 1204.

<sup>12</sup> Paus. 3, 19 ff. Pursuant to a Rhodian tradition, Helen is hanged by some maidservants of Polisso, widow of warrior killed during the Trojan war. This episode would be the *aition* for the Rhodian cult of Helen Dendritis (see Picard 1928: 61; Cantarella 1985: 94).

themselves with their virginal belts, unless they are granted refuge in Argos<sup>13</sup>:

Βα. ἤκουσα, καὶ λέγοις ἄν· οὐ με φεύξεται.  
Χο. ἔχω στρόφους ζώνας τε, συλλαβὰς πέπλων.  
Βα. τάχ' ἄν γυναικῶν ταῦτα συμπρεπῆ πέλοι.  
Χο. ἐκ τῶνδε τοίνυν, ἴσθι, μηχανὴ καλή.  
Βα. λέξον τίς' αὐδὴν τήνδε γηρυθεῖς ἔση.  
Χο. εἰ μή τι πιστὸν τῶδ' ὑποστήσεις στόλω.  
Βα. τί σοι περαίνει μηχανὴ συζωμάτων;  
Χο. νέοις πίναξι βρόετα κοσμήσαι τάδε.

King: I hear; say on. It shall not escape me.

Chorus: I have breast-bands and girdles wherewith to gather up my robes.

King: Such things are proper, no doubt, to womenfolk.

Chorus: In these then, be sure, I have a rare contrivance.

King: Tell me what speech thou hast in mind to utter.

Chorus: If thou wilt not engage thyself to give some pledge unto our company.

King: What is the contrivance of the sashes to effect for thee?

Chorus: To adorn these images with tablets of strange sort.

King: Thy words are riddling; come, explain in simple speech.

Chorus: To hang ourselves forthwith from the statues of yon gods.

Two short annotations about this passage: first, the choriphea in front of the king seems to be fully aware about the connection that links the hanging to the woman. The instrument of the threaten suicide, would in fact be the belt but in antiquity the belt is the symbol of the feminine<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, this type of death, women favoured, is always considered ignominious when associated to men's death. As Servius maintains, interpreting the Vergilian passage about queen Amata's

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<sup>13</sup> A. *Supp.* 456-463 (translation by H. Weir Smyth). See also A. *Supp.* 154-161.

<sup>14</sup> About the symbolic significance of the breast-band in Greek world see: Giuman 2002 e 2005: 89 ff.

suicide, to a man who hangs himself should be denied the burial ritual. This is consistent with the idea that this kind of suicide is considered particularly «dishonourable» (*informis*)<sup>15</sup>. Such a consideration is also confirmed by Livius, when he discusses Quintus Flavius Flaccus' suicide<sup>16</sup>.

Epic poetry drama and Attican tragedies, however, are not the only sources in which a close connection between hanging and women's suicide<sup>17</sup> can be detected. Indeed, there is a number of local myths, in which women have a main role and their *aitia* sometimes seem to refer to this modality of committing suicide; in particular, when hanging is connected to rituals. This is the case of Delphi's Charila, a festival celebrating a young maiden's suicide, who prefers to hang herself rather than surrender to the local king's advances<sup>18</sup>. In Karyes, a village in Arcadia, every year, during the celebrations dedicated to Artemis Karyatis, a delegation from Sparta (a group of singers formed by maidens) dances and sings to commemorate and celebrate a group of young women, who are reported to have hung themselves from a walnut

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<sup>15</sup> Serv. *ad En.* 12, 603. See also Voisin 1979: 422; Durkheim 2007: 67. This prohibition is confirmed, for example, by the statute of a confraternity from Lanuvio (Geiger 1888: 63). According to J.-L. Voisin the sacrilege of the hanging could be individuate in the absence of any contact between dead and heart (Voisin 1979: 432 ff.). In this respect it is important to remark with Nicole Loraux that while Phaedra is swinging from a pole (that is in E. *Hipp.* 780 ff.), «il coro esita ("nessuno allora porterà una lama a doppio taglio per sciogliere la sua gola dal nodo e liberare la sovrana dal laccio che la strangola"); quando, infine, le donne di Trezene sono ben convinte che sia troppo tardi, allora si preoccupano, raddrizzando questo "infelice cadavere", di stenderlo "come è dovuto a un morto". La lettura di questi testi ci offre l'impressione che il gesto di stendere a terra il cadavere dell'impiccato significhi rimpatriarlo nel seno della vasta confraternita dei morti che hanno diritto ai riti funebri» (Loraux 1991: 108).

<sup>16</sup> Liv. 42, 28. See also Hesychius, who confirms us that «for the hanged men there are not the offerings of the dead».

<sup>17</sup> Doria s.f.p.

<sup>18</sup> Jeanmaire 1939: 407 ff.; Nilsson 1967: 460; Gernet 1968: 231; Cantarella 1985: 92 f. e 2011: 59 f. The seven-year structure suggests to Angelo Brelich the possibility that this festival could be earlier than Pythia. On the other hand Herois and Charila are both unrelated to Apollinean cult (Brelich 1969: 428).

tree to escape from rape<sup>19</sup>. In Melitea, a small town in Thessaly, there is a festival, every year, in which a group of maidens hang a goat from a tree to commemorate a peculiar event occurred in that place<sup>20</sup>: the town tyrant Tartarus (*nomen omen*) is said to have repeatedly ordered to kidnap the town young maidens in order to rape them «prior to their wedding» (πρὸ γάμου). Nonetheless, one of them, named Aspalis, is said to have opposed the tyrant by hanging herself<sup>21</sup>.

The connection between hanging and swings is best described by the *Aiora*, an ancient Athenian ritual whose *aition*, too, narrates the story of Erigone, a young maiden<sup>22</sup>. The myth is set in Attic, where Dionysus arrives, he is hosted by Icarius. Dionysus, in exchange for his courtesy, teaches Icarius how to make wine. The man offers the wine to some local shepherds who, unaware of alcohol possible effects, become intoxicated and kill Icarius, suspected to have tried attempted to kill them. The shepherds decide to hide Icarius' body, and bury him under a tree. Erigone, in the end, guided by her dog Maera, finds her father's grave and, in a fit of despair, hangs herself on the same tree. Before dying, Erigone casts a curse<sup>23</sup>: all the maidens in Athens have to undergo her

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<sup>19</sup> Luc. *De saltat.* 10; Pollux 4, 104; Phot. *s.v.* Καρνάτεια; Hsych. *s.v.* κάραα. The festival would be founded by the Dioscuri. See also King 1983: 118 f.; Cantarella 1985: 92.

<sup>20</sup> Ant. Lib. *Tr.* 13 (*apud* Nic.).

<sup>21</sup> See also Brelich 1969: 443 f.

<sup>22</sup> We can probably find the most complete version of the myth in the *Astronomica* of Hyginus (2, 4 ff.), who also quotes a simplified version on his *Fabulae* (130). Between the sources, the better version of the *aition* of *Aiora* rituals is recorded by Probus (*ad Verg. Georg.* 2, 385-389). See also Pollux 4, 55; Hsych. *s.v.* aletis; aiora; E.M. *s.v.* Αιώρα; Fest. *s.v.* Oscillantes; Servius *ad Verg. Georg.* 2, 329; Apollod. *Ep.* 6, 25; 6, 28; Athen. 14, 10; Hyg. *Astr.* 2, 4. About the structuration of this myth see Parke 1977: 118 f.; Hani 1978.

<sup>23</sup> So also according to Servius (*ad Verg. G.* 2, 389). In the version of Hyginus (*Fab.* 130) Dionysus himself, who according to Ovidius is the husband of Erigone, causes the disease: *ob quod factum Liber pater iratus Atheniensium filias simili poena afflixit*. This element, bearer of a functional structure of the myth in which only the divinity can be the legitimate intermediary between offence and penalty, cold suggests us the recency of this version towards the tradition of Hyginus's *Astronomica*.

same destiny. In a fit of madness (Servius plainly uses the term *furor*<sup>24</sup>) they hang themselves after an uncontrollable and violent death wish, which overwhelms them. When asked to comment on this terrible event, the Oracle of Delphi prophesies that Erigone's death must be atoned. For this reason, they make a swing: by swinging, each one of them will rehearse the maiden's death, without any real killing. So writes Hyginus<sup>25</sup>:

*Qui quod ea se suspenderit, instituerunt uti tabula interposita pendentes funibus se iactarent, ut qui pendens uento mouetur. Quod sacrificium sollemne instituerunt. Itaque et priuatim et publice faciunt, et id Aletidas appellant, quod eam patrem persequentem cum cane, ut ignotam et solitariam oportebat, mendicam appellabant, quas Graeci ἀλήτιδας nominant.*

So since she hanged herself, they instituted a practice of swinging themselves on ropes with bars of wood attached, so that the one hanging could be moved by the wind. They instituted this as a solemn ceremony, and they perform it both privately and publicly, and call it *alétis*, aptly terming her mendicant who, unknown and lonely, sought for her father with the dog. The Greeks call such people *alétides*.

A temporary ritual manifestly recalling functional mechanism connected to symbolic death, the *Aiora*, about which we will discuss in more detail in the second part of the contribution, was wholly included in one of the principal Attican festivals, the so-called *Anthesteria*<sup>26</sup>. At the centre of this wine festival was the celebration of the maturing of the wine and the cyclical spring rebirth. The festival was held annually from the eleventh to the thirteenth of the eighth month of the Attican calendar,

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<sup>24</sup> Serv. *ad Verg. G. 2*, 389: *sed post aliquantum tempus Atheniensibus morbus inmissus est talis, ut eorum virgines furore quodam compellerentur ad laqueum; responditque oraculum, sedari posse.*

<sup>25</sup> Hyg. *Astr. 2*, 4, 5 (translation by M. Grant).

<sup>26</sup> Dietrich 1961; Deubner 1969: 93 ff.; Parke 1977: 107 ff.; Burkert 1981: 158 ff. About the iconographical analysis of the images of this festival, see van Hoorn 1951; Hamilton 1992.

*Anthesterion* (corresponding to the period between February and March), according to an elaborate programme which we can summarise as follows<sup>27</sup>:

• 11 *Anthesterion* – when casks were opened, the ritual called *Pithoigia* took place: the first libations were ritually offered to Dionysus *en Limnais*<sup>28</sup>.

• 12 *Anthesterion* – *Chöes* ceremony, a time of merry making: the city was invaded by the souls of the dead<sup>29</sup>, public and private libations took place for the whole day<sup>30</sup>. Finally, the *basilissa* (the wife of the *Archon Basileus*) would go through a ceremony of marriage to Dionysus<sup>31</sup>.

• 13 *Anthesterion* – the *Chytroi* ritual<sup>32</sup>: cooked pulse was made with cereals and honey and offered to Hermes Chthonios in his capacity of one of the gods of the lower world<sup>33</sup>. According to Callimachus<sup>34</sup>, on this last

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<sup>27</sup> Immerwahr 1946. About the sources on the tripartite structure of *Anthesteria* see *schol. Arist. Ath.* 390 (= Apollod. *FGrHist* 244 f. 133). See also Deubner 1969: 93 ff.; Parke 1977: 107 ff. It is important for us to underline what Walter Burkert argues «secondo l'antico ordine temporale religioso il tramonto segna la fine di un giorno e che sera e notte venivano già considerati come "vigilia" del giorno successivo. In tal modo Pithoigia e Choes si incontrano la sera dell'11, Choes e Chytroi la sera del 12 di Antesterione. Già nell'antichità questo limite fluttuante ha creato talvolta confusione» (Burkert 1981: 159).

<sup>28</sup> Th. 2, 15, 3: ἡ ἀκρόπολις ἢ νῦν οὖσα πόλις ἦν, καὶ τὸ ὑπ' αὐτὴν πρὸς νότον μάλιστα τετραμμένον. τεκμήριον δέ· τὰ γὰρ ἱερὰ ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ἀκροπόλει καὶ ἄλλων θεῶν ἐστὶ καὶ τὰ ἔξω πρὸς τοῦτο τὸ μέρος τῆς πόλεως μᾶλλον ἴδρυνται, τό τε τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Ὀλυμπίου καὶ τὸ Πύθειον καὶ τὸ τῆς Γῆς καὶ τὸ τοῦ ἐν Λίμναις Διονύσου, ᾧ τὰ ἀρχαιότερα Διονύσια ποιεῖται ἐν μηνὶ Ἀνθεστηριῶνι, ὥσπερ καὶ οἱ ἀπ' Ἀθηναίων Ἴωνες ἔτι καὶ νῦν νομίζουσιν.

<sup>29</sup> Phot. *s.v.* Μιαρὰ ἡμέρα: ἐν τοῖς Χουσὶν Ἀνθεστηριῶνος μηνὸς, ἐν ᾧ δοκοῦσιν αἱ ψυχαὶ τῶν τελευτησάντων ἀνιέναι, ῥάμνῳ ἔωθεν ἐμασῶντο καὶ πίττηι τὰς θύρας ἔχρουν.

<sup>30</sup> See also van Hoorn 1951: 15 ff.

<sup>31</sup> D. 59, 73; *Arist. Ath.* 3, 5; Hsch. *s.v.* Διονύσου γάμος. See also Parke 1977: 113 f.; Burkert 1998: 440.

<sup>32</sup> Parke 1977: 116 ff.

<sup>33</sup> It is exactly to the dead that is offered the so-called *panspermia*, that is a cake kneaded by every type of seed (*FGrH* 115 F 347a). About the chthonian meaning of



day of the festival, all the *Aiora* rituals were brought to a conclusion<sup>35</sup>: the Athenian young women would sit on the swing in memory of Erigone’s unfortunate destiny. Meanwhile, everybody sang a characteristic song called *Aletis (the errant)*<sup>36</sup>, a clear reference to the young woman’s wandering in search for her father<sup>37</sup>.

The *Aiora* festival is linked to a series of vascular images found on Attican artefacts<sup>38</sup>, which will be argued later on. However, it is important to remark the cyclical nature of the festival. An essential part of the spring-bud festival (the term *anthos* translates the expressions “flower” and “flower bud” to the letter<sup>39</sup>), whose origin probably dates back to the Minoan-Mycenaean period<sup>40</sup> and whose *leit motif* reminds one of the notion of cyclic nature, the *Aiora* festival can be certainly defined a Chthonic ritual once again based on nature and on the notion of cyclic nature and rebirth<sup>41</sup>. Several ethno-anthropological comparisons, in fact, – from James G. Frazer to Ernesto De Martino – seem to confirm that the symbol of the swing can be associated to the notion of fertility<sup>42</sup>, and, in accordance with the patterns on an *hydria* which belongs to the Louvre collections in Paris, it hints at sexuality (fig. 1)<sup>43</sup>: Eros himself is portrayed in the act of pushing a young woman on a swing.

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honey, see Giuman 2008. Significantly honey is defined by ancient sources *dead food* (Did. *schol. Ar. Ach.* 1076).

<sup>34</sup> Call. *Aet.* 178-184 Goold.

<sup>35</sup> See also Nilsson 1915; Picard 1928; Iles Johnston 1999, 221 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Hsych. *s.v.* Ἀλιήτις· έορτή Ἀθήνησιν, ή νῦν Αἰώρα λεγομένη.

<sup>37</sup> E.M. *s.v.* Ἀλιήτις: Τινές τήν Ἡριγόνην τήν Ἰκαρίου θυγατέρα, ὅτι πανταχοῦ ητοῦσα τὸν πατέρα ἤλατο.

<sup>38</sup> Doria *s.f.p.*

<sup>39</sup> Harp. *s.v.* Ἀνθεστηριῶν: ὄγδοος μὴν οὔτος παρ’ Ἀθηναίους, ἱερός Διονύσου. Ἰστρος (= *FgrHist* 334 F 13) δὲ ἐν τοῖς τῆς συναγωγῆς κεκλησθαί φησιν αὐτὸν διὰ τὸ πλεῖστα τῶν ἐκ γῆς ἀνθεῖν τότε.

<sup>40</sup> Picard 1928: 50 f.; Nilsson 1950: 332.

<sup>41</sup> Picard 1928: 58 ff.

<sup>42</sup> Lefkowitz 1981; Averna 2009: 313 ff.

<sup>43</sup> Paris, Louvre CA2191. Attic red-figure *hydria* dated to the middle of the fifth century BC. Rosokoki 1995: fig. 6; Steinhart 2004: tav. 34.1.



Fig. 1 – Paris, Louvre CA2191. Attic red-figure *hydria* dated to the middle of the fifth century BC with Eros and a swinging girl (from Rosokoki 1995: fig. 6).



Fig. 2 – München, Antikensammlungen J234. Attic red-figured *lekythos* from Vulci dating at the second half of 5th century BC with Paidia and Himeros (from Pellegrini 2009: 129 fig. 8).

On one *lekythos* adorned with captions and kept in Munich, the artist portrayed Paidia, the personification of childhood, in the act of pushing Himeros (twin to Eros and incarnation of sexual desire) on the swing (fig. 2)<sup>44</sup>.

The *Aiora* cannot therefore be seen as a functional ritual, whose peculiarities are exquisitely propitiatory; nor as a passage connected to the world of Eros and, consequently, to young women's sexuality and procreative capacity from childhood or adolescence. This aspect is fully confirmed by the specific etiological typology of the cults, which are in connection with the symbol of swing, as well as by the all-present notions of death and resurrection (although in some of the cases afore mentioned, both events are represented by a functional substitution of human beings with dolls or wooden simulacra) and, finally, by the virginal condition of all the female characters, who have a role within the ritual – virginity, in particular, should not be intended here only as a physiological characteristic – it should rather be associated to the characters' age. In this respect, there is a parallelism between Erigone and Charila with the maidens in the *Aiora* ritual; between Aspalis, raped by Tartarus before her wedding (that is *pro gamou*), and the Thessaly young women, who commemorate her during the ritual in Melitea<sup>45</sup>; between the *parthenoi* and the *virgins* (as they are respectively called by Pausanias in his commentary on Statius' *Thebaid*<sup>46</sup>) and the Spartan young women who sing together for Artemis Karyatis in memory of their peer girls, who hung themselves to escape rape. Hence, the swing ritual seems to be closely connected to the girls' pre-marital life, a time in which the Athenian young women symbolically testify their temporary detachment

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<sup>44</sup> München, Antikensammlungen J234. Attic red-figured *lekythos* from Vulci dating at the second half of 5th century B.C. Shapiro 1993: 120, 182 pl. 73, 140; Rosokoki 1995: fig. 7; Pellegrini 2009: 129 fig. 8. About Himeros see also Hes. *Th.* 64; 201 ff.; Luc. *DDeor.* 15; AP 7, 421; Pl. *Smp.* 197d.

<sup>45</sup> Ant. Lib. *Met.* 13: ὀνομάζεται δὲ παρὰ τοῖς ἐγχωρίοις τοῦτο τὸ ξόανον Ἄσπαλις Ἀμειλήτη Ἐκαέργη, ᾧ καθ' ἕκαστον ἔτος αἱ παρθένοι χίμαρον ἄθορον ἐκρήμων, ὅτι καὶ ἡ Ἄσπαλις παρθένος οὐσα ἑαυτὴν ἀπηγχόνησεν.

<sup>46</sup> *Schol. Stat. Teb.* 4, 225: *cum luderent virgines, meditatus ruinam omnis chorus in arborem nucis fugit, et in eius pependit.*

from the rest of the community in memory of the 'wanderer' Erigone, who was in search for her father: a transitional period which will come to an end with their marriage.

Nonetheless, this specific, symbolical interpretation of the swing within a functional perspective marked by the virginal status, needs deeper and further clarification when associated to Phaedra's exegetic image conceived by Polygnotus for his painting in the Lesche of the Cnidus people in Delphi. One could wonder whether it is relevant to explain the image carefully described by Pausanias, by means of a symbolical comparison, with hanging and the swing.

To answer to this question we might embark on an exegetic research and in the first place focus on what Plato has to say in one of his writings. In the eighth book of his *Laws*, the Greek philosopher draws our attention to the calming effect coming from swinging on whoever suffers from nervous disorders<sup>47</sup>:

Λάβωμεν τοίνυν τοῦτο οἶον στοιχεῖον ἐπ' ἀμφοτέρω, σώματός τε καὶ ψυχῆς τῶν πάνυ νέων τὴν τιθήνησιν καὶ κίνησιν γιγνομένην ὅτι μάλιστα διὰ πάσης τε νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας, ὡς ἔστι σύμφορος ἅπασιν μὲν, οὐχ ἥκιστα δὲ τοῖς ὅτι νεωτάτοισι, καὶ οἰκεῖν, εἰ δυνατόν ἦν, οἶον ἀεὶ πλείοντα· νῦν δ' ὡς ἐγγύτατα τούτου ποιεῖν δεῖ περὶ τὰ νεογενῆ παιδῶν θρέμματα. τεκμαίρεσθαι δὲ χρὴ καὶ ἀπὸ τῶνδε, ὡς ἐξ ἐμπειρίας αὐτὸ εἰλήφασιν καὶ ἐγνώκασιν ὃν χρήσιμον αἶ τε τροφοὶ τῶν σμικρῶν καὶ αἶ περὶ τὰ τῶν Κορυβάντων ἰάματα τελοῦσαι· ἡνίκα γὰρ ἄν που βουλευθῶσιν κατακοιμίζειν τὰ δυσυπνοῦντα τῶν παιδῶν αἶ μητέρες, οὐχ ἡσυχίαν αὐτοῖς προσφέρουσιν ἀλλὰ τὸναντίον κίνησιν, ἐν ταῖς ἀγκάλαις ἀεὶ σείουσαι, καὶ οὐ σιγὴν ἀλλὰ τινα μελωδίαν, καὶ ἀτεχνῶς οἶον καταυλοῦσι τῶν παιδῶν, καθάπερ ἢ τῶν ἐκφρόνων βακχειῶν ἰάσεις, ταύτη τῇ τῆς κινήσεως ἅμα χορεία καὶ μούση χρώμεναι.

Let us take this, then, as a fundamental assumption in both cases, that for both body and soul of the very young a process of nursing

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<sup>47</sup> Pl. *Lg.* 790 c-e (translation by R.G. Bury).

and moving, that is as continuous as possible both by day and by night, is in all cases salutary, and especially in the case of the youngest: it is like having them always rocked – if that were possible – on the sea. As it is, with new born infants one should reproduce this condition as nearly as possible. Further evidence of this may be seen in the fact that this course is adopted and its usefulness recognized both by those who nurse small children and by those who administer remedies in cases of Corybantism. Thus when mothers have children suffering from sleeplessness, and want to lull them to rest, the treatment they apply is to give them, not quiet, but motion, for they rock them constantly in their arms. And instead of silence, they use a kind of crooning noise; and thus they literally cast a spell upon the children (like the victims of Bacchic frenzy) by employing the combined movements of dance as a remedy.

Plato’s words seem to indicate an analogy with the cradling of newborns. In addition, Athenaeus claims that the *Aiora* song – the *Aletis* – is an out-and-out lullaby<sup>48</sup>:

αἱ δὲ τῶν τιθεουσῶν ᾠδαὶ καταβαυκαλήσεις ὀνομάζονται. ἦν δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ ταῖς ἐώραις τις ἐπ’ Ἡριγόνῃ, ἣν καὶ ἀλητίν λέγουσιν, ᾠδή. Ἀριστοτέλης γοῦν ἐν τῇ Κολοφωνίων Πολιτεία φησὶν· ‘ἀπέθανεν δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Θεόδωρος ὕστερον βιαίῳ θανάτῳ. λέγεται δὲ γενέσθαι τρυφῶν τις, ὡς ἐκ τῆς ποιήσεως δῆλόν ἐστιν. ἔτι γὰρ καὶ νῦν αἱ γυναῖκες ᾄδουσιν αὐτοῦ μέλη περὶ τὰς ἐώρας.’

The songs of nursing-women are called *katabaukaleses*. There was also a song sung at the Swing-festival, in memory of Erigone, which they call the wanderer’s song. Aristotle, for example, says in his *Constitution of Colophon*: «later Theodorus himself also died by a violent death<sup>49</sup>. He is said to have been a luxurious person, as is evident from his poetry. For he was a poet, and even to this day the women sing his lays at the Swing-festival».

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<sup>48</sup> Athen. 618 e-f (translation by Ch. Burton Gulick).

<sup>49</sup> About Theodore from Colophon see also Pollux 4, 55.

According to what the ancient sources hint at, there could be a subtle relation between obsession and swinging which seems to be supported by the semantic derivation of the verb *aiorein*, commonly used to refer to a state of anxiety of psychological origin. Plato's assertion can only be interpreted by taking into account a well-known passage in *De Virginum Morbi*, a work ascribed to Hippocrates, which states that maidens, who are fit for marriage, are prone to violent and devastating fits of anger, unless they are allowed to enjoy marital sexual love<sup>50</sup>:

Αἱ δὲ παρθένοι, ὀκόσησιν ὥρη γάμου, παρὰνδρούμεναι, τοῦτο μάλλον πάσχουσιν ἅμα τῇ καθόδῳ τῶν ἐπιμηνίων, πρότερον οὐ μάλα ταῦτα κακοπαθέουσιν. (...) Ἐχόντων δὲ τουτέων ὥδε, ὑπὸ μὲν τῆς ὀξυφλεγμασίης μαίνεται, ὑπὸ δὲ τῆς σηπεδόνης φονᾶ, ὑπὸ δὲ τοῦ ζοφεροῦ φοβέεται καὶ δέδοικεν, ὑπὸ δὲ τῆς περὶ τὴν καρδίην πιέξιος ἀγχόνας κραίνουσιν. (...) Φρονησάσης δὲ τῆς ἀνθρώπου, τῇ Ἀρτέμιδι αἱ γυναῖκες ἄλλα τε πολλὰ, ἀλλὰ δὴ καὶ τὰ πουλυτελέστατα τῶν ἱματίων καθιεροῦσι τῶν γυναικείων, κελευόντων τῶν μάντεων, ἐξαπατεώμεναι. Ἡ δὲ τῆσδε ἀπαλλαγῇ, ὀκόταν τι μὴ ἐμποδίζη τοῦ αἵματος τὴν ἀπόρρυσιν. Κελεύω δ' ἔγωγε τὰς παρθένους, ὀκόταν τὸ τοιοῦτον πάσχωσιν, ὡς τάχιστα ξυνοικῆσαι ἀνδράσιν· ἦν γὰρ κυήσωσιν, ὑγιέες γίνονται.

And virgins who do not take a husband at the appropriate time for marriage experience these visions more frequently, especially at the time of their first monthly period, although previously they have had no such bad dreams of this sort (...) When this is the state of affairs, the girl goes crazy because of the violent inflammation, and she becomes murderous because of the decay and is afraid and fearful because of the darkness. The girls try to choke themselves because of the pressure on their hearts; their will, distraught and anguished because of the bad condition of the blood, forces evil on itself (...) When this person returns to her right mind, women give to Artemis various offerings, especially the most valuable of women's robes (...) My prescription is that when virgins experience this

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<sup>50</sup> *Corp. Hipp.* 8, 464-471 (translation by M.R. Lefkowitz). De Lazzer 1997.

trouble, they should cohabit with a man as quickly as possible. If they become pregnant, they will be cured.

In this passage, the connection between suicide by hanging and *parthenia* is far from denoting a mere symbolical aspect; on the contrary, it clearly refers to a physiological condition<sup>51</sup>: it is only through marriage or, better say, through legal sexual love and pregnancy that women can overcome this type of syndrome.

At first blush, one could get the impression that such a long exegetic course might be of little use to better understand Polygnotus's iconographical choices: the virginal behaviour of the young women involved in the *Aiora* propitiatory rituals, with their marriage and procreative expectations, seems to be entirely incompatible with the vile and incestuous figure of Phaedra. Unless we try to overturn radically the premises of our reasoning. Basically, not all the women described in myths and related to hanging are maidens. Like Phaedra, Helen of Troy, Clytemnestra, Jocasta are definitely not; notably, however, those characters, are associated to a significant female sexuality. In my view, it is only by starting from these premises that the figure of Phaedra on the swing (of whom Hippolytus clearly is a male reflection) can be fully understood. In the words of Anna Beltrametti (2001: 101), Phaedra «*si fissa come lo stereotipo negativo della donna secondo il pensiero di V secolo, la personificazione antonomastica della donna malefica, strumento di Afrodite, un'altra, dopo Elena e diversamente da lei, violatrice dell'aidos*». Nonetheless, in order to completely comply with this pattern, Phaedra's figure can only develop by following her path to the uncontrolled and uncontrollable status of *parthenos*, of restless adolescent. This is a biological condition, clearly expressed by the queen with her behaviour: her delusions, her invocations to the woods, her yen for abandoning her married life, all of this aspects are commented by the chorus of Euripides' *Hippolytus* as follows<sup>52</sup>:

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<sup>51</sup> King 1983: 113 f.

<sup>52</sup> E. *Hipp.* 161-164 (translation by D. Kovaks). See also Loraux 1991: 18 f.

φιλεῖ δὲ τᾶι δυστρόπῳι γυναικῶν  
ἀρμονίαι κακὰ  
δύστανος ἀμηχανία συνοικεῖν  
ᾠδίνων τε καὶ ἀφροσύνας.

Women's nature is an uneasy harmony, and with it is wont to dwell the painful unhappy helplessness of birth pangs and their delirium.

M. G.

### The movement of swing<sup>53</sup>

Regarding Polygnotus's *Nekyia*, we saw Phaedra is on a swing. The exceptional importance of the symbolic value implied in this approach seems to lie in his uniqueness and in the intentions expressed by the painter, through his choice to portray Phaedra on a swing. Therefore it will be useful to expand the subject of the swing in Greece, in order to understand the strong link existing between Theseus' wife and the swing in Polygnotus's *Nekyia*. In Greek religion, the ritual of swinging, the *Aiora*, is accomplished through the swing, which emerges in its functional values as a symbolic tool. The swing in fact, in the Attic images<sup>54</sup>, is a strong sign of the abandonment of the state of virginity and the subsequent rebirth of the girls as women<sup>55</sup>. As we have in part already mentioned, the binomial death-rebirth is strongly connected to the ceremony of the Greek ritual of swinging, with many magic and cathartic sides.

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<sup>53</sup> An expanded version of this part of the article will be published by the author in the second volume of the series *Quaderni di Otium* (Doria s.f.p.).

<sup>54</sup> In this particular case we are referring to Attic pottery. Attic images of this ritual are in fact characterized by the almost total exclusivity of the ceramic substrate.

<sup>55</sup> Cantarella 2011: 57 ff.





Fig. 3 – Berlin, Antikensammlung F2394. Attic red-figure *hydria*, dating from the mid-fifth century BC with two girl and a swing (from Rosokoki 1995: fig. 5).

In Berlin there is a Attic red-figure *hydria* (fig. 3)<sup>56</sup>, dating from the mid-fifth century BC: here we see a young woman swinging on a swing, pushed by another female figure. A few details, like a *kalathos* and a *tenia*, clearly indicate a feminine environment, while a half-buried *pithos*, purposely located on a lower position than the main female character in the scene, clearly proves its connection with the *Pithoigia* and, as a consequence, with *Anthesteria*. In this case, the two protagonists do not look like young girls; from the clothing, hairstyles and demeanor it is clear, I think, that the figure on the left can be identified as a young woman, while the other, on the swing, with her hair loose on her

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<sup>56</sup> Berlin, Antikensammlung F2394. Rosokoki 1995: fig. 5; Steinhart 2004: tav. 34.2. We find a similar iconographical structuration of the image on another Attic red-figured amphora (Stuttgart, Württembergisches Landesmuseum 65.1). The only difference with the Berlinian vase is the presence of a second feminine figure who, accompanied by a child, observes the scene (Ruhfel 1984: 22).

shoulders, is a *nymphē*, ready to fill the social role for which she has been educated since birth: to become a wife and a mother<sup>57</sup>. Consequently, in ancient Greece swinging was not just a simple pastime dear to children, especially little girls, but it is also a ritualized practice – as the pictures show well – full of hidden and unpredictable meanings since its origin, that seems to be rooted, as we have already discussed, in the sad etiological myth of Erigone, aition of the *Aiora*.

A detail that immediately catches one's attention is the 'silence' of the literary sources not so much on the ritual of the swing, but on its symbolic meaning, which is the sense of the image of Phaedra realized by Polygnotus. The iconographic and iconological analysis of vascular decorations is instrumental, in this case, to understand and explain the complex structure of the *Aiora* for the figure of Polygnotus's Phaedra. Two vessels in particular give us important information about the practice of the swing, marking it as a real ritual. Not surprisingly, they are two Attic red-figure *choes*. The first, attributed to Meidias, from Athens and now preserved in New York, is dated to the third quarter of the fifth century BC and shows a singular scene (fig. 4)<sup>58</sup>. The woman on the right takes some finely embroidered fabrics from a great chair and places them on the swing<sup>59</sup>; the other, bent over a small fire, pours a liquid on the fire from a *lekythos*. A child closes the picture on the left. The women, ornately dressed and with elaborate hairstyles and tiaras, are two Athenian aristocrats. The scene refers clearly to the stages leading to a ritualized ceremony with great precision, providing codified and rigorous liturgies. Regarding these liturgies, the woman on the left plays a crucial role: she is pouring a liquid into the flames. It is probably a

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<sup>57</sup> Not only is the *kalathos* the symbol of a married woman, but also of the education of girls on domestic work: the importance of female domestic activities (primarily weaving) in the *oikos* in the ancient world is known. See also Vegetti 1979: 123; Campese 1983: 25 ff.; Labarre 1998: 791 ff.; Giuman 2006; Doria 2007.

<sup>58</sup> New York (NY), Metropolitan Museum 75.2.11. Attic red-figure *chous* from Athens, attributed to Meidias and dated to the third quarter of the fifth century BC (c.ca). Cfr. Burn 1987: tav. 52B; Lezzi-Hafter 1988: 97, fig. 65C; Boardman 1989: fig. 288; Rosokoki 1995, fig. 2; Schmidt 2005: 177, fig. 90.

<sup>59</sup> Dillon 2002: 69.

figured transposition of one of the oldest sacrifices in Greece<sup>60</sup>: the combustion of odorous substances such as herbs, ointments and incense<sup>61</sup>. The Aiora ceremony, in fact, is performed on the third day of the Anthesteria festival, when it is necessary to purge the city following the infestation caused by the dispersion of the spirits of deceased ancestors on the second day.



Fig. 4 – New York (NY), Metropolitan Museum 75.2.11. Attic red-figure *chous* from Athens, attributed to Meidias and dated to about the third quarter of the fifth century BC with two women (from Burn 1987: pl. 52B).

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<sup>60</sup> According to many (sounds vague), the introduction of incense and the practice of fumigation in Greece dates back to the beginning of the seventh century BC (in Homer there is no trace of the custom of burning odorous substances), but according to others it was a tradition already widespread in the Minoan-Mycenaean. Cfr. Sacconi 1969: 286 ff.; Fabbriotti 1979: 410, n. 40; Squillace 2010 e 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Thphr. Fr. 2. Regarding the combustion of odorous substances, see also Zaccagnino 1998; Dillon 2002: 71-72; Squillace 2010 e 2014. On the purification and the fire see Bruit Zaidman 1991: 412; Dillon 2002: 69-70.

Returning to Meidias's *chous*, we notice how in such circumstances the magic-purifiers traits in the Aiora are distinguishable in the purification of the clothes put on the swing – suspended right over the coals –, destined to be worn by the girl protagonists of the ceremony. Therefore, the tunics, the chitons and *himatia* are subjected to an aromatic fumigation, in view of an important ritual, which is regarded as a form of atonement for Erigone's death<sup>62</sup>. Returning to the protagonists of the Meidias vessel, women would not be identified with the same girls, who take part in the ritual of the swing, on the contrary, as the elaborate hairstyles and smart clothing demonstrate, with the *gynaiikes* (mothers, or other female members of the *genos*), who we have already noticed playing a major role in the preparation of the different ritual phases of the *Anthesteria*.

We would like to offer an in-depth interpretation on the second *chous*. It is a red-figure vase, belonging to the same chronological horizon of the previous, whose decoration shows an unusual scene, which indeed is an *unicum* in the world of vase paintings with a swing (fig. 5)<sup>63</sup>. In the centre of the composition there is a bearded man, placing a very young child on the swing; on the left we can see a young man and a girl. On the right, there is a chair with many tastefully embroidered fabrics, some of which can be seen also on the swing. One should notice the presence, exactly below the swing, of three branches ready to be burned. Finally, one can detect the usual *pithos* in a prominent position. Although the values of *pithos* are quite comprehensible, from clothes and fire, we do not understand in a first analysis the exegesis of the whole picture. Although its uniqueness seems to exist in the central figures of the man

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<sup>62</sup> Dillon 2002: 69-70. On the fumigation of peplum offered by the Athenians to Athena Parthenos see also Paoletti 2004; Simon, Sarian 2004: 255-268.

<sup>63</sup> Athens, National Archaeological Museum VS319. Attic red-figure *chous* dated to the third quarter of the fifth century BC and attributed to the painter of Eretria, depicting a scene of worship. Cfr. Lezzi-Hafter 1988: 201, fig. 66; Guazzelli 1992: figg. 13-14; Rosokoki 1995: fig. 4; Oakley, Palagia, Coulson 1997: 481, fig. 13; Simon 1998: 151, fig. 12.10; Neils, Oakley 2003: 104, figg. 18A-B; Paoletti 2004: 30, tav. 143; Steinhart 2004: tav. 34.4; Schmidt 2005: 178, fig. 91; Kaltsas, Shapiro 2008: 265; Norskov 2009: 230, fig. 11; Pirenne-Delforge, Prescendi 2011: 74, fig. 10.

and the child on the swing, I contend that the hermeneutical key for a proper reading of the scene is to be found in both the particular attitude of the girl and the unusual gesture of the boy close to her: on closer examination of the two characters' position, we note the frightened expression of the girl, who almost clings to the young boy, who supports and tries to reassure her by embracing her.



Fig. 5 – Athens, National Archaeological Museum VS319. Attic red-figure *chous* dated to the third quarter of the fifth century BC and attributed to the painter of Eretria, depicting a scene of worship (from Simon 1998: 151, fig. 12.10).

The frightened female figure, probably one of the girls who will take part in the ceremony of *Aiora*, whose imminence emerges from the preparations for fumigation, seems to explain the action by occupying the

centre of the scene: the bearded man – the archon *basileus*<sup>64</sup> or the father of the girl? –, in an attempt to comfort her, he puts a baby on the swing to show her that nothing dangerous will happen.

Therefore, it is clear how these vase paintings are characterized by the same common details, showing a ceremonial context regarding the preparatory stages of *Aiora*. This connects them to a ritual background which the texts don't speak about. Furthermore, the *Aiora* would return immediately to a dual image: the oscillatory movement<sup>65</sup> and especially that of the suspended body. The movement of the swing constitutes the most immediate connection with Erigone's death by hanging, a connection based on the slow and rhythmic rocking motion of the swing, with a strong direct link of a logical and visual nature.

Erigone's death, linked to the suicide by hanging of Phaedra, suggests further reflections. In the case of Phaedra and other doomed companions if death by hanging is analogous to the death of brides, than one should point out that it is typical of virginal characters and marriage. Hence, Jocasta and Phaedra hang themselves by attaching the rope to the ceiling of the bridal chamber. In this case, as Nicole Loraux claims «it is by men that women meet their death, and it is for men, usually, that they kill themselves»<sup>66</sup>; however, most often a maiden chooses such a transition, but all in all her fate does not seem very different from that of the wives: virgins become brides in death, because in it they rehears marriage. Accordingly, Antigone commits suicide with a noose made with the virginal veil, whereas the Danaides threaten to commit it with the virginal belts<sup>67</sup>, a provocation implemented without hesitation, as we

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<sup>64</sup> The archon *basileus* had to play an important role in the *Anthesteria*: he probably personified the god with whom his wife joined during hierogamy, at the end of the second day of celebrations (Arist. *Ath.* 3, 5; D. 59, 73, 76; Hsch. s.v. Διονύσου γάμος). Cfr. Burkert 1998: 440.

<sup>65</sup> For the movement in Seneca's tragedy see Trombino 1987.

<sup>66</sup> Loraux 1987: 23.

<sup>67</sup> The tool used by Danaus' daughters for killing themselves further proves how the hanging is a gimmick clearly associated to female. The suicide, in fact, is accomplished by using belts, a highly symbolic feminine vector (Suda, s.v. Λυσίζωνος γυνή. See also Apostolius 10, 96; AP 7, 324).

have seen, from Charila. By killing themselves in a way that appears intensely feminine, these girls find their femininity through death, which becomes something very similar to the wedding that they did not have in life<sup>68</sup>. Of course, those are 'reversed weddings', because they lead to the house of a groom, who is Hades, in a deadly and perhaps mocking equivalence that hanging = marriage where *parthenos* dies<sup>69</sup>. In the instant of death, in fact, she loses both her life and her virginity: Hecuba, in the homonymous tragedy of Euripides, defines very consciously her daughter Polyxena *νύμφην τ' ἄνυμφον παρθένον τ' ἀπάρθενον*, «bride without bridegroom, virgin who is no longer a virgin»<sup>70</sup>. The queen of troy's are undoubtedly enlightening words. Here there is no doubt that – for obvious reasons – the killed virgins will never become *gynaikes* but, on the other hand, with their life they will also lose their *parthenia*. The act of hanging, then, is the time in which such a deprivation takes place. No women and no virgins, or virgins no longer virgins, but certainly brides of Hades, which eventually brings us to the concept of liminality and transition, that will be the link between the *Aiora* and initiation rituals. However, in the myths of Charila, Carie, Aspalis and Sparta, and in the stories reported by Pausanias about the cult of Artemis Kondyleatis, it is also rebirth that unites all the stories of hanging. And precisely such a rebirth is the key to understanding the profound nature of the passing of virgins. Here, death and renewal seem intertwined, as they appear closely and inevitably connected in female rites of passage, where the symbolic death of girls puts an end to the *status* of *parthenos*, so that the girl is prepared to enter a new phase of life as a *nymphé*, a woman ready to become a wife and mother<sup>71</sup>. In this sense, in the images we have seen,

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<sup>68</sup> Especially in relation to the sacrifice of virgins, see Foley 1982: 169; Redfield 1982; Jenkins 1983; Loraux 1987. The link between sacrifice and marriage is, moreover, already mentioned in E. IT 216; 364; 371; 818-819; 856-861.

<sup>69</sup> There are many sources which state a clear correspondence between death and marriage, see for instance Artem. 2, 65; AP 7, 182-185, 188, 492, 547; see also Rose 1925, 238.

<sup>70</sup> E. *Hec.* 352-353; 368, 414-416 e 612.

<sup>71</sup> Giuman 1999.

the swing metaphorically represents the symbolic death of *parthenoi*<sup>72</sup>, through an immediate and logical connection with the hanging-visual made by the rocking. The images also immediately catch the oscillatory phases that characterize the girls' life-changing moments<sup>73</sup>. Hence, during the *Aiora*, the virgins' death would be projected on the swing; therefore only through fluctuations symbolizing the passage, virgins, will rise as brides.

And there's more. Not only *parthenoi* die by hanging, but – as we have seen – even some *gynaikes*: the unfaithful maidservants of Ithaca, Helen, Phaedra and Jocasta – women of course, but no virgins – die in this manner, and Clytemnestra, who fits well in this group, threatens to kill herself in the same way. Such women, at least in appearance, have nothing in common with young girls as Antigone, Erigone, Charila, Aspalis and the Danaides; however it is worth going into this apparent difference. It is well known, as in ancient Greece, that the women's social model is projected in the woman who is perfectly aware of the role and expectations that are required from her *status* as a wife and a mother, as exemplified for example by Xenophon and Plutarch<sup>74</sup>: a good woman knows what *sophrosyne* and *aidos* are, virtues that clearly seem to be lacking – voluntarily or not – to Helen, Phaedra and Jocasta and Odysseus's maids. Here, to these female figures hanging becomes the fatal outcome that can result from the inability to control the overwhelming power of Eros. Especially, to oppose the legitimate link of *gamos* it will end in a world turned upside down, and an extremely risky life, characterized by transgressions that will inevitably bring the guilty ones to ruin<sup>75</sup>. Consequently, in myth not only virgin women have something to do with the hanging, but also female figures of adult women, associated to a distorted reading of feminine sexuality. Phaedra, Elena and Jocasta – not only married women but also mothers, certainly

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<sup>72</sup> About the various types of virgins' death see Loraux 1984 e 1987; Sissa 1992; Cantarella 2011: 162 ff.

<sup>73</sup> Burkert 1998: 443.

<sup>74</sup> Plu. *CP* 18 (= *Mor.* 139 C).

<sup>75</sup> Pellegrini 2009: 28.



not any more *parthenoi* – regress to a *status* of uncontrolled and restless wildness that usually characterize the Greek adolescent, the *parthenos* that has not reached the biological *status* of *gyne* yet. Death by hanging would seem to unite both *gynaikes* who misuse their sexuality and the girls who still do not have a complete sexuality. If we go on with the examination of vascular decorations, further implications surface: in a *skyphos* by the painter of Penelope, from Chiusi and dated to the mid-fifth century BC, it is a satyr who pushes the girl on the swing (fig. 6)<sup>76</sup>; in the *hydria* of Paris, belonging to the same chronological horizon, the same role is played by the god Eros himself (fig. 1)<sup>77</sup>.



Fig. 6 – Berlin, Antikensammlung F2589. Attic red-figure *skyphos*, dated to about the mid-fifth century BC, with a satyr who pushes a girl on the swing. Under the swing we can read the letters ΑΛΗ (from Averna 2009: 314, fig. 144).

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<sup>76</sup> Berlin, Antikensammlung F2589. Attic red-figure *skyphos*, dated to about the mid-fifth century BC, with a satyr who pushes a girl on the swing. Under the swing we can read the letters ΑΛΗ, in reference to Erigone's nickname and to the ritual song that accompanied the girls during the Aiora. See also Hunziker 1877: 171; Hedreen 1992: tav. 20; Mikalson 2005: 61; Averna 2009: 314, fig. 144.

<sup>77</sup> Paris, Louvre CA2191. Attic red-figure *hydria*, dated to the mid-fifth century BC, with Eros who pushes a girl on the swing. See Rosokoki 1995: fig. 6; Steinhart 2004: tav. 34.1.

In these cases, the symbolic sexual<sup>78</sup> implications will be even more meaningful<sup>79</sup>. It is also clear that the swing, through its oscillating movement, is also metaphorically connected to sexual intercourse, well symbolized by the presence of the satyr or Eros.

At this stage one should be able to understand the hermeneutical keys to grasp the symbolic projection in Polygnotus's painting, exemplified in the second part of Pausanias's description. Here he makes a clear reference to the suicide of Phaedra. The element that, in the description of Polygnotus's Phaedra, assumes characters of greater sharpness is obviously constituted by the swing movement, which would connect immediately to the queen's death by hanging.



Fig. 7 – Rome, Vatican City, Sala delle Nozze Aldobrandine s.n. Picture from a suburban house at Tor Marancia, where we see a *nekyia* of heroines, including Phaedra (from Linant de Bellefonds 1994: 358, nr. 19).

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<sup>78</sup> Lefkowitz 1981; Averna 2009: 313-317; De Martino 2009: 232 ff.

<sup>79</sup> Pellegrini 2009: 128-129.

In order to mark this close funeral relationship between Phaedra, the swing and death by hanging, we will look at a painting kept in the Vatican City from a suburban house at Tor Marancia, where we see a *nekyia* of heroines, including Phaedra (fig. 7)<sup>80</sup>: Theseus's upset wife holds a rope in her left hand, the noose with which she will kill herself, and which leads immediately to suicide by hanging. Then, we find twice the image of Phaedra well inserted into a scene of *nekyia*, in both cases she is clearly linked to death by hanging, with a strong and lasting bond between the tragic heroine and the sphere of the underworld, where its unfortunate relationship will lead her.

F. D.

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<sup>80</sup> Rome, Vatican City, Sala delle Nozze Aldobrandine s.n. Picard 1928: 49 f.; Borda 1958: 283 f.; Linant de Bellefonds 1994: 358, nr. 19.

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