

Illinois Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Nancy Sultan

1991

Women in 'Akritic' Song: The Hero's 'Other' Voice

Nancy Sultan, *Illinois Wesleyan University*

Women in “Akritic” Song: The Hero’s “Other” Voice

Nancy Sultan

Abstract

Women have long been considered marginal in rural Greek society. In the mythic realm of Greek heroic song, however, women are empowered over the life-cycle of the wandering male hero. Through their connections with the natural world, their management of all rites of passage, and their timely verbal expressions of pónos in ritual laments, women control the hero’s seasonality and have the power to bring his life full circle. The hero spends his youth as a wandering kseniteménos whose life is external and sterile, occupied with the exclusively male pónos of trials of manhood. Once the hero returns home, he is near death and begins the task of reintegrating into the world of women; it is through their voices that his heroic glory is made immortal.

This paper will discuss women’s voices in modern Greek folk song as the hero’s “other” voice—the cyclical, immortal one, the one that is αθάνατος. I am following in the footsteps of two decades of scholars who have focused on the woman’s role and relationships in both ancient and modern Greek society and within traditional narratives (Alexiou 1974; du Boulay 1974; Caraveli-Chaves 1980; Keuls 1985; Danforth 1982; Dubisch 1986; Skinner 1987; Hart 1990; Cowan 1990).

In studies of ancient Greek heroic poetry, it has long been established that the male hero gains immortal fame through seasonally recurring performance of his life and deeds by singers.¹ Before Margaret Alexiou’s book on modern Greek laments appeared in 1974, these singers were visualized primarily as a group of male professionals like Homer, Demodokos, and Phemios, or as the hero as a singer himself (Odysseus, Achilles, and in modern songs, Digenis). Alexiou introduced the scholarly community to the woman as one of these singers. Here I wish to emphasize the extent to which the hero’s immortal fame is dependent upon his female “other” voice. I will explore in several traditional songs the tension between the male hero’s

linearity and the cyclical nature of women's song. My main objective is to highlight the idea that the completion of the hero's life-cycle is dependent upon his permanent reintegration into the woman's world in general, and woman's song in particular.

The material will come primarily from N.G. Politis' collection of the so-called "Akritiká ásmata" (1909), and other, later sources.² The traditional songs can and will be discussed in the same breath as other songs and song-types in the Greek tradition, even those that we call "epic" and "romance."³ I am allowing myself to move freely between the ancient and the modern oral traditions because themes and images can be discussed across historical time on many different levels from a variety of cross-cultural perspectives. My purpose is not to focus on issues of origin or to prove any sort of linear descent from ancient to modern. I wish to examine the songs for their own sake, applying synchronic as well as diachronic perspectives.

Female sexuality: controlling timely death

Many anthropologists, having lived with and observed people in Greek villages, have concluded that women's sexuality is manipulated and controlled by rules of society and religion: by acts of seclusion, by being covered up with heavy, shapeless clothes, by being guarded by men, and by being kept away from certain public events, people, and even livestock (especially during the menstrual cycle).⁴ Herzfeld states that, among the Glendiot people, women are typecast as passive, indecisive, unable to control their sexuality (1985: 66). Juliet du Boulay reaffirms that in rural villages "a man is the vital validating factor of a woman's life" (1974: 121).

Comparable views about women's sexuality are seen in modern Greek literature and traditional song. In her interesting analysis of the relationship between the hero and his "Girl" in the Grottaferrata *Digenés Akrites*, Catia Galatariotou observes that the "female is so closely defined in terms of her relationship to [the] male, that she literally ceases to exist without such a relationship" (1987: 55). She also says that in this version of the epic "women are weak and in absolute need of male protection from physical and moral danger" (1987: 52).

Scholars of Homer and ancient Greek tragedy have found the female to be in a similar subordinant position.⁵ Of course the political and social history of Greece from the earliest periods has verified the subordinate position of women for us—women *have* been great forces in the man's world, but their power has had to come from within, in private, not from public life. In my own study of the "Akritic" songs, I have found that although women do occupy a subordinate position

in the social and political arena of the "Akritic" song tradition, nevertheless from the point of view of *myth*, women are culturally superior in that the hero's heroic immortality ultimately depends on his returning whence he came—the women's territory of hearth and house. Most importantly, it depends on his establishing a primary place in women's cyclical songs of mourning and praise. In other words, the completion of the hero's life-cycle (his *telos*) is dependent upon his permanent reintegration into the domain of women.

Women *can* use their sexuality to control and consciously affect men. One method—a negative one—is through adultery, considered the "main way of damaging a husband" (Campbell 1964: 152). We shall see how the dying male's fear of losing his wife to another manifests itself in song narrative. Another method is the use of magic against male potency.⁶ A third method is seen in traditional song: it is the use to which women can put the special status they possess by way of their sex, even with all its restrictions imposed by culture and religion, to control the *seasonality* of the male hero. They do this through their control of the home and the rituals surrounding death, through the task of weaving, and through their pictured connection with symbols such as birds and the cypress tree.

We see what Herzfeld has called the "polluting power of sexual contact with women" (1985: 54) in "Akritic" songs such as *Τώρα τα πουλιά* and many others where the hero avoids female sexuality at all costs.⁷ Here I must say that from the point of view of *myth*, there is a divergence from what Herzfeld observed, namely, that women are not in control of their sexuality. On the contrary, woman's sexuality is used to bring the hero full circle, and it is hers to control. In fact, it is the *male hero* who most often displays loss of control, as we shall see.

In *Τώρα τα πουλιά* the woman, speaking with the voice of birds, makes sexual advances on the sleeping hero, but he spurns her because he is going to fight:

Τώρα τα πουλιά τώρα τα χελιδόνια,
 τώρ' οι πέρδικες, συχνολαλούν και λένε.
 —Εύπν' αφέντη μου· ξύπνα καλέ μ' αφέντη,
 ξύπν' αγκάλιασε κορμί κυπαρισσένιο,
 κι' άσπρονε λαιμό, βυζάκια σα λείμνια,
 σαν το κρυό νερό πόρχετ' από τα χιόνια.»
 —Ας με, λυγερή, λίγον υπνό να πάρω,
 γιατί αφέντης μου στη βάρδια μ' χε' απόψε,
 για να σκοτωθώ για σκλάβο να με πάρουν·
 Μά δωσ' ο Θεός κ' η Παναγιά η Παρθένα,
 κ' εξεσπάθωσα το διμισκί σπαθί μου,

χίλιους έκοψα, χίλιους σκλαβούς επήρα
κ' ένας μόφυγε κ' εκείνος λαβωμένος».

(*Laographia* 6 [1918]: 637; Pátrai)

Now the birds, now the swallows,
now the partridges sing and speak continuously,
“Rise, my beloved lord, rise and embrace this cypress-like body,
This white throat, these breasts like little lemons
Like the cool water that comes from snow.”
“Leave me, my lithe one, leave me to sleep a little while;
For my lord has me on the night watch,
to kill or to be taken prisoner.
But God and the Virgin Lady gave to me
and I unsheathed it, my sword of Damascus steel;
I cut down thousands, I took a thousand slaves
and one escaped me and he was wounded.”

Sex with a woman before a battle is dangerous for the hero because it makes him vulnerable and because it foreshadows his death. As Campbell has noted, among the Sarakatsani people “sex/sin/death are set in opposition to virginity/continence/life” (1964: 280). The way for the hero to avoid death is to avoid home and family, the woman’s domain. To compound the danger, the woman speaks with the voice of birds, and not just any birds, but swallows and partridges, birds that are mediators between the living and the dead.⁸ This song may be described simultaneously as a lament and as an epithalamium. In other words, only a woman is able to turn the bed of love-making into the θανατικόν κρεβάτι.⁹ The hero avoids sexual contact with the wife because, at the proper time, that union will bring his death. And yet, immortal fame will at once be initiated through the rituals performed by the woman for the dead hero.

Control of πόνος

There seems to be no English word equivalent to *πόνος*. The verb *πονώ* is different from the English “I feel pain” in that it is both active and passive, positive and negative—“I hurt” and also “I care for.” *Pónos* is not just felt by women; it is performed and actively shared in the home and at the grave, two places where women spend much of their time. The open expression of *πόνος* can be a positive emotion for women, one that causes both personal and communal catharsis (Danforth 1982: 144ff.). For women the verb *πόνεσα*, “I felt pain,” expresses in a positive way the feeling of having accomplished something after great effort, such as bearing a child. Men feel *πόνος* differently. Danforth has shown that men feel “hurt” but are not bound

to "care for" in active participation (1982: 19, 119). They do not wear their *pónos* on their backs as the black-clothed women do; when they do display emotion, they are said to act like women, and usually their expression of *pónos* is a private affair.¹⁰ Herzfeld discusses how the thieving Glendiot shepherds demonstrate their "quintessential Greekness" not through *pónos*, but through possession of *πονηριά*, "low cunning" (1985: 40).¹¹ In Homer (*Iliad* 16.568, 21.525, 6.77; *Odyssey* 12.117) *pónos* is most often associated with physical exertion, especially in battle; it is even a metaphor for war itself (*Iliad* 6.77, 525; *Odyssey* 12.177). In Hesiod (*Theogony* 226), Ponos was born from Eris, and is usually translated as "toil."¹²

In Greek heroic poetry and song, the male's *pónos* is directly connected to acts of *andría* that establish his heroic identity and status—war, battles against other heroes, gods, giants, and/or beasts and divine weather, theft of magic treasures, and performing tasks requiring enormous physical strength. While the male gains heroic notoriety through his possession and use of *poniriá* during these actions performed away from home, it is the woman's skills in weaving the proper and timely verbal expressions of *pónos* at home that give her fame. The women's territory of home encompasses all family duties from the *pónos* of birth to burial. These occupations grant them a special status. As Caraveli-Chaves says (1980: 143), "women dominate rituals connected to the life cycle . . . [;] they dominate rites of passage, which makes them culturally dominant." Women who sing laments feel that the power of mourning is theirs alone. Danforth (1982: 144–149) has shown us the power of spiritual and physical pain (*pónos*) as a motivating force for the homebound woman:

Εσὺ ἄντρας, περπατάς, κι οἱ πόνοι διαβαίνουν.
Εγὼ γυναῖκα, κάθομαι, κι οἱ πόνοι αναβαίνουν.

You are a man, you walk, and the *póni* pass.
I am a woman, I sit, and the *póni* mount.

(Danforth 1982: 145)

Women weave words of *pónos* and fate as they weave cloth. In Greek myth it is through the act of weaving that the three Moirai (modern Greek: three *μοῖρες*) control all rites of passage and death. In Homer, Penelope creates a cycle of days through her weaving and unweaving of Laertes' shroud, a stratagem that not only keeps Laertes alive to see his son return but also enables Odysseus to regain his rightful status as king and husband. As she works at the loom Penelope "takes joy in lamenting his wanderings by day, and is moved to lament at night" (*Od.* 19.510–517). Here the rhythms of weaving cloth and

of weaving words of *pónos* are steady, unrelenting, and repetitive, like the rhythms of life. Similarly, in modern Greek laments, weaving is a metaphor for a woman's poetic power over nature. In a lament attributed to Chrysa Kalliakati, a renowned "weaver of words" from the Lasithi plateau (recorded in the late 1970s by Anna Caraveli-Chaves), her mother controls the heavens with her loom:

Έ, μάνα μου νεκοκερά τ'αι μάνα μου ξομπλιάστρα
που ήξερες τ'αι ξόμπλιαζες τον ουρανό με τ' άστρα . . .

Eh mother, keeper of the home and mistress of embroidery,
You knew how to embroider the sky with all its stars . . .

(Caraveli-Chaves 1980: 131)

. . . Ah, mother, keeper of the home, mother, weaver and spinner
Even the night sky itself was woven in your loom . . .

(Caraveli-Chaves 1980: 133; no Greek text given)

In "Akritic" songs we find women who weave in moments of crisis, as they make monumental decisions to decide the hero's fate. For example, in a song from Thebes, Annéta, who is under duress to marry Digenís in order to save her kingdom, weaves a murder plot against the hero as one weaves cloth:

Ολονυχτίς εκάθετο σα να έγνεθε 'ς τη σβίγα,
και το πρωί σηκώθηκε έκανε σαν τη στρίγλα.
Χρυσό μαχαίρι έβγαλε από χρυσό φηκάρι
το κεφαλάκι του έκοψε σαν τρυφερό αγγουράκι.

(N.G. Politis 1909: 266, no. 59)

All night she sat as though weaving at her loom,
and in the morning she acted like a witch.
She took a gold knife from its gold sheath
and cut off his head like a tender cucumber.

So strong is the woman's power over the hero's fate that she can bring him back from the dead to fulfill broken promises, as in the Greek song Του νεκρού αδερφού, where the mother uses her control of *pónos* to raise up her dead son to fetch home his sister, whom he had encouraged his mother to marry into *kсениτιά*:

. . . στου Κωσταντίνου το θαφτό τις πλάκες ανασκάνει.
—Σήκω, Κωσταντινάκη μου, την Αρετή μου θέλω»

(Ioannou 1983: 36)

. . . At Kostandinos' grave she raised up the tombstones:
"Arise, Kostandináki, I want my Aretí."

The hero as kseniteménos

The hero's life as portrayed in the traditional songs is essentially external; he stays away from the inner circle of home and spends his youth, his *pallikariá*,¹³ as a wandering exile (ξενιτεμένος), consciously rejecting and systematically avoiding domesticity. This life is seen as unseasonal and sterile in the sense that he is in a state of suspended prepubescence—unmarried, with no paternal or spousal responsibilities. As long as the hero faces external dangers, continence is a primary protection (Campbell 1964: 280). As a *pallikári*, the hero hunts, fights and gallivants with his young male companions. He travels to the edges of the world, through darkness and light. He is extreme in his behavior. "Caution must always be foreign to his nature" (Campbell 1964: 279). He sometimes hunts forbidden animals: in a song from Euboea (N. G. Politis 1909: 224, no.10) the hero shoots the στοιχειωμένο ελάφι, a taboo animal, which causes his illness and death.

The hero must also deal with an antagonistic relationship with God, upon whose power and grace he relies.¹⁴ Galatariotou's apt observation (1987: 40) that the male's wanderings serve to integrate him into the world of men and prove his *andriá* is appropriate in "Akritic" songs. As soon as he returns from his travels, he is reintegrated into the physical and spiritual realm of "home," and is near death.

Home as place of τελευτή

The woman who has remained at home possesses qualities quite different from the hero. While his life is external, hers is internal. While the hero is sterile because of his unseasonal and excessive behavior, the woman, as caretaker of and mediator between the houses of the living and the dead, represents all that is fertile and seasonal. Her connection with birds is a further indication of her existence as mediator between the living and dead. She not only speaks with the voice of birds, but is the primary interpreter of birdsong, and therefore mediates between life and death:

Πάντα κελáιδναν κ' έλεγαν, Πάντα να ζή Ακρίτας.
 Κ' έναν πουνρόν πουνρίτζικον και κερεκήν ημέραν,
 ατά κελáιδναν κ' έλεγαν, «Αύρ' αποθάν Ακρίτας».
 — Ακούσ' ακούσ', Ακρίτα μου κι άξιο μου παλληκάριν,
 ακούσ' ντο λέγνε τα πουλιά, ακούσ' ντο κελáιδούνε;
 — Ατά μικρά πουλόπα είν', 'κ εξέρ' να κελáιδούνε.

(N.G. Politis 1909: 235, no. 24)

Always they sang and said, "You will live forever, Akritas."
 But one morning, very early, on a Sunday,

The birds sang and said "Tomorrow, Akritas, you will die."
 "Listen, listen, my dear Akritas, my young man,
 Do you hear what the birds speak, do you hear what they sing?"
 "Well, they are just young birds, and do not know how to sing."

As interpreters of bird song, women have the power to bring the hero home from his wandering *ksenitiá*. I have not found a version where the Akritas-type hero dies in foreign parts. Danforth (1982: 112–113) discusses how, in laments, birds are able to return from *ksenitiá* to their homeland, and therefore to help those *kseniteméni* who are dying to communicate with their loved ones at home.¹⁵ Through their connection with birds, therefore, women act as mediators between home and the hero's self-imposed *ksenitiá*.

In the songs, the image of the hero as the brave and daring *pallikári* is limited to his existence as a *kseniteménos*. As soon as he returns to domesticity and the world of women, as he invariably does, death occurs. The hero builds his own *oikos*, be it a palace or castle, and designs it to be the most fertile place on earth:

Ακρίτας κάστρον έκτιζεν κι Ακρίτας περιβόλιν
 'ς έναν ομάλ', 'ς έναν λιβάδ', 'ς έναν πιδέξιον τόπον.
 Όσα του κόσμου τα φυτά, εκεί φέρ' και φυτεύει,
 κι όσα του κόσμου τ'αμπελιά, εκεί φέρ' κι αμπελώνει,
 κι όσα του κόσμου τα γερά, εκεί φέρ' κι αυλακώνει,
 κι όσα του κόσμου τα πουλιά, εκεί πάει και φωλεύουν.

(N.G. Politis 1909: 234, no. 24)

Akritas built a castle, Akritas made an orchard
 in a plain, in a pasture, in a well-apportioned place.
 He brings all the plants in the world to sow there;
 he brings all the grapevines in the world to grow there;
 he brings all the water of the world to flow through;
 he brings all the birds of the world to nest there.

The hero has returned from the sterility of *ksenitiá* to make his permanent, fertile home. This is his tomb.¹⁶ It is here, at this home, that Charos is waiting—the one who wears black, who rides a black horse. At once we see the parallel to the black clothes worn exclusively by mourning women. The hero invites Charos to wrestle on a bronze threshing floor, and inevitably loses the fight:

—Χάρε μ', για 'λ' ας παλεύουμε 'ς το χάλκινον τ'αλώνιν.
 Αν έν και το νικάς μ' εσύ, έπαρ' τη ψήμ μ' και δέβα,
 αν έν και το νικείσαι, θα παίρω και τομ μαύροσ σ'». [sic]
 Εξέβαν και επάλεψαν, ενίκεσεν ο Χάρον.

(N.G. Politis 1909: 233, no. 23)

—Come, Charos, let us wrestle on the bronze threshing floor.
 If you are the winner, come and take my soul;
 if you are defeated, I shall take your black horse."
 They came together and wrestled, and Charos defeated him.

Certainly this fight is one that combines sterility (death) with fertility (threshing).¹⁷ Moreover, the image of wrestling with death can be seen as erotic, from the perspective that death is seen in Greek tradition as inexorably linked with marriage. The one-time *pallikári* becomes a *ψυχομάχος*, one who "fights with death":

Κι ο Διγενής ψυχομαχεί σε σιδερά παλάτια,
 σε σιδερά παπλώματα, σε σιδερά κρεβάτια.

(N.G. Politis 1909: 212, no. 2; Cyprus)

The image of the hero as *ψυχομάχος* on the iron bed, under iron covers, reveals an explicit tension between his sterility and the fertility of sexual union, in that it is in the marriage bed that the hero must face death. Danforth (1982: 74ff.) and others have shown that when a man dies unwed he is often dressed as a bridegroom and is symbolically "married to the black earth," i.e. to the personification of death.¹⁸

Once the hero is conquered by death, his bed becomes the *thana-tikhón kreváti* and is transformed by the woman from iron to flowers and herbs:

Έμπα, καλή και στρώσο με θανατικόν κρεβάτι
 βάλε ανθιά παπλώματα και μουσκομαξιλλάρια . . .

(N.G. Politis 1909: 235, no. 24; Pontos)

He has returned home from his *ksenitiá*, and the woman is there to take charge of the hero's next rite of passage, from death to immortality. In *Τώρα τα πουλιά*, the woman takes on the form of a bird, as we have seen, and also of a cypress tree, which is a symbol long associated with beauty, death, and mourning (Danforth 1982: 99ff.; Alexiou 1974: 198ff.). We remember how she invites him to embrace her "cypress-like" body and "breasts like lemons, like the cool water that comes from snow." As a cypress with watery cool breasts, the alluring woman is the embodiment of death for the hero. He avoids her embrace, perhaps mindful of the cold water springs and white cypress tree in the underworld, as described on a fourth century B.C. tablet instructing the dead who journey below:

εὐρήσσεις δ' Ἀΐδαο δόμων ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ κρήνην,
 πάρ' δ' αὐτῇ λευκὴν ἐστηκυῖαν κυπάρισσον·
 ταύτης πῆς κρήνης μηδὲ σχεδὸν ἐμπελάσειας.

(Kern 1922: 104–105, no. 32a; cf. Alexiou 1974: 202)

You will find a spring to the left of Hades' house,
A white cypress tree stands next to it:
Do not go near this spring.

The hero cannot escape the cypress tree, however, and he describes his encounter with it in *Τώρα τα πουλιά*:

Πήρα το στρατί, στρατί το μονοπάτι,
βρίσκω 'να δεντρί, ψηλό σαν κυπαρίσσι.
«Δέξου με, δεντρί, δέξε με, κυπαρίσσι.»
— Πώς να σε δεχτώ, πώς να σε καρτερέσω;
νά η ρίζα μου και δέσε τ' άλογό σου,
νά οι κλώνοί μου, κρέμασε τ' άρματά σου,
νά ο ήσκιος μου, πέσε κι αποκοιμήσου
και σα σηκωθείς, το νοίκι να πλερώσης
τρία σταμνιά νερό στη ρίζα να μου ρίξεις.»

(G. Spyridakis 1962: 236, no. 6A)

I took to the road, I walked the pathway
I find a tree, tall like a cypress.
“Receive me, tree, receive me cypress.”
“How can I receive you, how shall I attend you?
Here are my roots, to tie up your horse,
Here are my branches, hang up your armor,
Here is my shade, lie down and sleep;
And when you get up, to pay your rent,
Pour three pitchers of water over my roots.”

Here the hero has accepted his return from *ksenitiá*, and he is received by the woman as a cypress tree who gives herself to him as a place to “hang up his armor.” Thus he resigns himself to his *telos* at her hands. Comparable here is the scene in Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus uses as a final sign of his true identity the olive tree from which he fashioned his bed and bridal chamber (23.177–206). To complete his *telos*, Odysseus must reestablish himself in his marriage bed.¹⁹

In many songs the hero attempts to escape death by leaving home again and returning to the wilds to hunt. He is never successful at reintegrating into his *pallikariá* once he has been established again in the home. In a cross-cultural survey of hunting practices, Walter Burkert observes that to be successful in the hunt, man must “block . . . responses to female sexuality . . .” (1983: 75). Hunting in strange parts avoids the death/marriage bed; the hero would thereby reassert his youthful manhood by re-creating his first *rite de passage*, but this reversal is impossible:

—ας πάγω και να κυνηγώ και 'ς τα κυνηγοτόπια,
κι αν εύρισκω να κυνηγώ εγώ 'κι θ' αποθάνω,

κι αν 'κ εύρισκω να κυνηγώ εγώ θέν' αποθάνω.»
 Κυνήγεσεν, κυνήγεσεν, πουθεν κυνήγιν 'κ ηύρεν.
 Ο Χάρον τον επέντεσεν απάν 'ς το σταυροδρόμιν.

(N.G. Politis 1909: 235, no. 24)

"I shall go hunting, go out on the chase,
 And if I find something to hunt, I shall live.
 And if I do not find something to hunt, I shall die."
 He hunted and hunted, but found nothing to chase.
 Charos faced him at the crossroad.

Question of free will: ανάγκη

To die for honor is the most noble death for a hero.²⁰ The death means nothing, however, if no one tells about it. The women's seasonal performance is required. In Τώρα τα πουλιά, the hero, reclining in bed with his lover, relates the story of his *andreía* and becomes, like Odysseus, a singer of his own *kléos*. In many "Akritic" songs, and especially those from Cyprus (see N.G. Politis 1909: 45ff.), the dying hero calls his male compatriots around him and sings *τας παιδικιwsύναις, τας αντρειωρκαίς and τας παλληκαρκαίς του*, in effect singing his whole life in a straight line from childhood through manhood. Thus the hero's cycle of physical *pónos* is taken over and revived by the women's cyclical songs of *pónos*.

In Gregory Nagy's definition of *kléos* (see note 1), singers such as Demodokos in Homer, and the heroes as singers themselves, transmit the hero's fame through seasonally recurring performance and recreation of his life. In Homer we see women such as Helen, Thetis, Andromache, and Hecuba using the medium of lamentation in the same way. Richard Martin shows us again how "praise and lament are intertwined" (1989: 144). In the "Akritic" songs, we have two praise-singers—the hero and his female kin. For the song of praise to continue after the hero's death, the woman must take possession of it in her lament. The linearity of the hero's life is therefore made cyclical by the women's song:

Α δε φουσκώση η θάλασσα, ο βράχος δεν αφρίζει,
 κι αν δε σε κλάψη η μάνα σου, ο κόσμος δε δακρύζει.

(N.G. Politis 1932: 213, no.198)

If the sea does not swell, the rock does not foam,
 And if your mother does not grieve for you, the world does not cry.

And yet, while the hero is indebted to the woman for performing this cyclical "grieving" for his sake, the woman often has little choice

in the matter—she *must* sing. Violence often occurs against the wife on the hero's deathbed, violence that is more than a simple affirmation of the woman's vulnerability in a socially male-dominated society. It is a matter of the potential loss of the hero's immortal fame, his *kléos*, if the woman does not sing:

« . . . να σφάξω τη γυναίκα μου, άλλος να μη την πάρη.»
(N.G. Politis 1909: 237, no. 26)

If the wife is expected to remarry, or be taken by another forcibly, the hero will kill her because he cannot risk losing his *kléos* in her memory. In other words, a new life for a wife after the hero's death might make her forget her responsibility to him. She might not wear black; she might not sing his praises. The hero cannot depend on outsiders (*kséni*) to perform this duty, for, as Danforth has shown (1982: 122), true *pónos* is expressed only for one's own kin. In N.G. Politis 1909, no. 32, the dying Digenís asks his wife whom she will marry after his death. Twice the woman replies that she will be consumed with black clothes as the black earth consumes her husband. The third time, however, she says that she will marry the chief. Hearing this, Digenís grabs her by the hair and begins to kill her, whereupon she interrupts him with a song about the deaths of her sisters and herself:

—Αν αποθάνης Διγενή, τον άρχο θε να πάρω,
οπού 'ν' η πρώτη μου χαρά, το πρώτο μου καμάρι».
Που τα μαλλιά την άρπαξε τρεις γύρους και τη κάνει.
—Άφισ με σκύλε Διγενή, να πω ένα τραγούδι.
Τρεις αδερφίδες ήμεσαν κ' οι τρεις αδικοπήγαν,
η μια επήγ' από φωτιά κ' η γι' άλλη από πηγάδι,
κ' εγώ το κακορρίζικο 'ς του Διγενή τα χέρια!»

"If you die, Digenis, I shall marry the chief,
Who was my first joy, my first pride."
He seized her then by the hair and swung her round three times.
"Leave me be, Digenis, you dog, so I can sing you a song.
We were three sisters, three who died unjustly.
The first burned in a fire, the second fell in a well,
and I, wretched one, die by the hands of Digenis!"²¹

Clearly Digenís' anger arises from his fear that his wife would happily forget her duty to him once he is dead, especially since she claims a preference for the former love. He must take her to the underworld with him to secure her allegiance. If the couple die together (with or without violence), the hero might gain his immortality through association with the woman after death:

«Κόρ', έλα φτειάμε ασπασμόν και τς αποχωρισιάς».
 Κλίς'εται κά' να προσκυνά τ' Ακρίτα τηγ καρδίαν.
 Ατός τηγ κόρηγν έγλυσεν την θαμαστήγν τηγ κόρηγν.
 Οι δίσσ' μίαν επέθαναν, οι δίσσ' μίαν εθάφαν.

(N.G. Politis 1909: 234, no. 23; Kerasoús)

"Come, my girl, let us embrace and say goodbye."
 She lay down and submitted to Akritas' desire.
 He held her fast, the admirable girl.
 The two died as one, the two were buried as one.

This would be made possible, perhaps, by the fact that women have no reciprocal dependency on men for their own immortal fame. Their death is cyclical owing to their innate ability to metamorphose into the natural world, as in this "Akritic" song:

«Έπαρε πέρδικα πλουμί, και συ τρυγόνα πάσο,
 και συ το σφακολούλουδο πάρε την κοκκινάδα,
 και συ βρουλιά, κομποβρουλιά, έπαρε τα μαλλιά μου,
 να μην τα πάρη θηλυκό να χη τα βάσανά μου.»

(N.G. Politis 1909: 242, no. 32; Crete)

"Partridge, take my finery, and my steps, you turtledove;
 take my red cheeks, you rose-bay,
 and you knotted bullrushes, my hair,
 so that no woman will take them and have my sufferings."

In other words, if the female can remain fertile after death because of her ability to reintegrate into nature, the dying male hero can make a desperate attempt to save his immortal fame by taking a traitorous female with him to the underworld.²²

In yet another scenario, the woman denies the hero immortality by not believing that he deserves it. Galatariotou points out that, in the Digenís romance, the hero "dies a disappointed man, without hope, because the only person in the world for whose recognition he craves (i.e. the Girl) remains unconvinced [of his 'supreme *andreía* and invincibility']" (1987: 63, 66). Why else would the hero recount his exploits to his wife on his deathbed, if not to give her a story to sing after his death?

This theme is long embedded in Greek oral tradition. In *Odyssey* 24.191–203, for example, the ghost of Agamemnon tells Odysseus that he lost his *kléos* because his unfaithful wife murdered him (cf. the murder of Digenís by Anneta in N.G. Politis 1909, no. 59). Odysseus does not have to worry, Agamemnon says, because *his* wife, Penelope, is most faithful and mindful of him (24.195). Sheila Mur-

naghan (1987: 107ff.) shows how the success of Odysseus in Homer is dependent upon “Penelope’s continued willingness to consider him her husband.” Consider also the scene in Bergadís’ *Apókoπος* (143ff.) when the dead men inquire about their wives and are told that they have not only forgotten their husbands but have remarried and borne new children. The men’s anger is appeased only by the opportunity their mothers’ lamentations provides them to return as *revenants*.

The question remains: Is the woman so empowered by the nature of her sex that she is forced against her will to act as the perpetuator of the hero’s immortality? The answer seems to be Yes. Wives, especially, and also the hero’s kin, are unable to deny powerful *pónos*. On the other hand, they really have no desire to deny it. As one lament says:

Θαν πάγω και στο χρυσικό [τον πόνο] για να νάνε χρυσώση,
να φκιάσω ’να χρυσό σταυρό κι έν’ ασημένιο γκόλφι,
να προσκυνάγω το σταυρό και να φιλώ το γκόλφι.

(D. Petropoulos 1959: ii.235; cf. Danforth 1982: 143)

I will go to a goldsmith to have [the *pónos*] gold-plated
I will have it made into a golden cross, into a silver amulet,
so that I can worship the cross and kiss the amulet.

The wife risks death at the hero’s hands if she rejects him. Although she can sometimes outsmart him before any commitment of marriage has been made (as in N.G. Politis 1909, no. 59), forces from within and without make it impossible for the woman to reject her obligations to bring the hero’s life full circle and perpetuate his fame.

To sum up: The hero as we see him in the “Akritic” songs possesses complementary characteristics to those of the female, upon whose control he depends for his ultimate heroic immortality. He is a wandering exile who, by means of excessive behavior, is characterized as unseasonal and sterile. As long as he avoids home and his wife’s sexuality, his linear lifestyle as a *pallikári* continues without a *télos*. The homebound woman, on the other hand, is ultimately in control of bringing this lifestyle full circle, and she has little choice but to accept this power. Through her association with birds, the cypress, and her songs of lament, she acts as a mediator between the hero’s sterile *ksenitiá* and his final homecoming. If all goes well, the woman will accept him, make his deathbed and immortalize him through the praise-songs of lamentation. If she is suspected of remarrying and forgetting him, the hero kills her in an attempt to be immortalized thereafter by association with her. The voice of women in these songs is, for the hero, the bringer of unwilting fame.

NOTES

Acknowledgements. A version of this paper was given at the "Voices of Greek Women" conference at Cornell University in March 1990. Thanks are due to Ernestine Friedl, Margaret Alexiou, Gregory Nagy, and Charles Stewart for their helpful comments.

¹See G. Nagy 1979 and 1990a; Martin 1989. Nagy's definition of heroic fame centers on the word *kléos*, which is "glory as conferred by poetry" (1979: 8 n 4, 16–18).

²On the label "Akritic" see M. Herzfeld 1980 and 1982. The songs are rather short, roughly 10–125 lines of fifteen-syllable verse, and have been collected in all parts of Greece, even to the present. Some are narrative, ballad style, while others are more in the form of a lament or wedding song. Some reveal hints of a link with Byzantium and the *Digenís* romance. I think it is risky and unverifiable to categorize folk songs because their nature is so multifaceted, but some labels have persisted so tenaciously that it is hard to shake them. Since I do not wish to insinuate that the themes I am discussing occur only in a specific "type" of song, I prefer to use quotation marks around labels (e.g. "Akritic") whenever I use a particular collector's classifications, to indicate that I do not necessarily accept them.

³I mean ancient *epos* (Homer) and Byzantine epic-romance such as *Digenís Akritís*.

⁴Campbell (1964: 35) observed that among the Sarakatsani shepherds, women are kept away from sheep (as opposed to goats) because they are a sexual contaminant to these animals. See also important field work of Friedl 1962; Danforth 1982; Dubisch 1986; Cowan 1990.

⁵See, for example, Rabinowitz and Murnaghan. Murnaghan (1987: 149–151) discusses how Penelope's remarriage is treated in the *Odyssey* as a "reprehensible betrayal of Odysseus"; Rabinowitz (1987: 127–129) describes the pollution of women's sexuality in Euripides' *Hippolytus* and explains how men conquer by curtailing and controlling women's language and sexuality.

⁶Campbell (1964: 290) discusses how old women possess certain magical powers and are therefore feared by males.

⁷See *Laographia* 6 (1917–18); Spyridakis 1962: 22–26; and the marvelous recording of his version no. 2 by Domnia Samniou (1982).

⁸For excellent discussions of bird imagery in laments see Alexiou 1974: 93–98, 180–186; Danforth 1982: 62–65, 112–115. Claude Lévi-Strauss discusses birds as mediators in *The Savage Mind* (1966).

⁹Thus the female controls the hero's timely death by lamenting him on his wedding night. In Homer we find Andromache mourning Hector in advance of his death, confirming its inevitability (*Iliad* 16.371ff.). The theme of sex as a danger to the hero's intentions can also be found in the Celtic tradition. See J. Nagy 1985.

¹⁰Cf. Danforth (1982: 14): "Eleni's father would also come to his daughter's grave and lament *like a woman*" (italics added). He would even sing laments while he was herding his sheep and goats in the hills above the village.

¹¹πονηριά < αρχ. πονηρ-ία (= κακία) < πονηρός < πονῶ (= κοπιάζω). See Andriotis 1990: 290–291; Chantraine 1968: 881.

¹²The *áthloi* or *pónoi* of Herakles have been traditionally defined as "labors," "toils" (cf. *ponêrós* in Hes. *Frr.* 138, 139), but see Loraux 1982; G. Nagy aptly defines them as "life and death struggles" (1990b: 151).

¹³From ancient Greek πάλλαξ, "youth." Campbell (1964: 160) defines *pallikári* as a young unmarried man between the age of 23 and 30 who has completed military service. The "ideal" type is the hero-warrior unencumbered with family responsibilities.

¹⁴For antagonism between gods and heroes in ancient Greek epic, see G. Nagy (1979, chapter 7). The "Akritic" hero is indebted to God for his magic sword (as in

Τώρα τα πουλιά). But in Politis (1909, nos. 1 and 2; Cyprus), God gives a magic charm to inept Charos to enable him to kill Digenís and bring his soul to heaven. In other words, God works both for and against the hero. Another song (Politis 1909, no. 38; Pontos) narrates how Yánnis asks St. George to barter with God for more years to live; Yánnis' wife eventually gives him some of her years (cf. Euripides' *Alcestis*).

¹⁵See also Saunier (1983: 78–121) for a discussion of texts for Η γυναίκα του ξενιτεμένου.

¹⁶On the *oikos* as both the house and the tomb of a hero, see G. Nagy (1990b: 274 n. 20).

¹⁷For a full discussion of Charos in folk song see Alexiou 1978, especially section 3.

¹⁸See also Alexiou 1974: 120–122; Alexiou and Dronke 1971; Herzfeld 1982.

¹⁹The theme Ο γυρισμός του ξενιτεμένου is widely diffused in traditional songs throughout Greece. Often the wife demands proof of her husband's identity by means of sexual tokens such as their bedroom and marks on the woman's body. See N.G. Politis 1932: 120–122 and Ioannou 1983: 75–81.

²⁰Campbell 1964: 281. Also see Galatariotou's discussion of this in the Digenís romance (1987, sections iv and v).

²¹On women's unjust deaths, see Saunier 1979.

²²An example from another tradition is the commonplace "briar and rosebush" often found in English, Scottish, and American ballads. After a husband and wife die and are buried side by side, a briar grows out of the male's grave and twists around the female's rosebush, as in "Barbary Allen." This can be interpreted as the reversal of the male's sterility by association with the fertile female.

REFERENCES CITED

Alexiou, Margaret

1974 *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1978 *The Evolution of Charos in Greek Tradition*. Βυζαντινά και μεταβυζαντινά 1: 221–236.

Alexiou, Margaret and Peter Dronke

1971 *The Lament of Jephtha's Daughter: Themes, Traditions, Originality.* *Studi Medievali* 12: 819–863.

Andriotis, Nikolaos P.

1990 *Ετυμολογικό λεξικό της κοινής Νεοελληνικής*. 3rd edition. Thessaloniki.

Burkert, Walter

1983 *Homo necans: Interpretations of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Campbell, John Kennedy

1964 *Honour, Family, and Patronage: A Study of Social Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Caraveli-Chaves, A.

1980 *Bridge Between Worlds: The Greek Women's Lament as Communicative Event*. *Journal of American Folklore* 93: 129–157.

Chantraine, Pierre

1968 Dictionnaire étymologique de la Langue Grecque. Paris: Editions Klincksieck.

Cowan, Jane K.

1990 Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Danforth, Loring

1982 The Death Rituals of Rural Greece. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Dubisch, Jill, editor

1986 Gender and Power in Rural Greece. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

du Boulay, Juliet

1974 Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Friedl, Ernestine

1962 Vasilika; A Village in Modern Greece. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Galatariotou, Catia

1987 Structural Oppositions in the Grottaferrata *Digenes Akrites*. Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 11: 19-68.

Hart, Janet

1990 Women in Greek Society. In M. Sarafis and M. Eve, editors, Background to Contemporary Greece. London: Merlin Press.

Herzfeld, Michael

1980 Social Borderers: Themes of Conflict and Ambiguity in Greek Folk-Song. Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 6: 61-80.

1981 Performative Categories and Symbols of Passage in Rural Greece. Journal of American Folklore 94: 44-57.

1982 Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece. Austin: University of Texas Press.

1985 The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Ioannou, Yiorgos

1983 Το δημοτικό τραγούδι: παραλογές. Athens: Ermis.

Kern, Otto

1922 Orphicorum Fragmenta. Berlin: Weidmann.

Keuls, Eva C.

1985 The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens: an Illustrated History. New York: Harper and Row.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude

1966 The Savage Mind. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lorau, Nicole

1982 *Ponos*: Sur quelques difficultés de la peine comme nom du travail. In Annali del Seminario di Studi del Mondo Classico. Naples: Archeologia e Storia Antica 4: 171-192.

Martin, Richard

- 1989 *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Murnaghan, Sheila

- 1987 Penelope's *agnoia*: Knowledge, Power and Gender in the *Odyssey*. In Skinner 1987: 103–116.

Nagy, Gregory

- 1979 *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
1990a *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
1990b *Greek Mythology and Poetics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Nagy, Joseph Falaky

- 1985 *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Petropoulos, Demetrios

- 1958–59 *Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια*. 2 volumes. Athens.

Politis, Alexis

- 1981 *Το δημοτικό τραγούδι: κλέφτικα*. Athens: Ermis.

Politis, Nikolaos G.

- 1909 *Ακριτικά άσματα: ο θάνατος του Διγενή*. Λαογραφία 1: 169–275.
1932 *Εκλογαί από τα τραγούδια του ελληνικού λαού*. Athens: Leoni (1st edition, 1914).

Rabinowitz, Nancy

- 1987 *Female Speech and Female Sexuality: Euripides' Hippolytos as Model*. In Skinner 1987: 127–140.

Samniou, Domnia

- 1982 *Chantes des Akrites. Musique populaire du tradition orale*. Ocora 558.600. Harmonia Mundi. France. [Sound recording.]

Skinner, Marilyn, editor

- 1987 *Rescuing Creusa: New Methodological Approaches to Women in Antiquity*. Helios 13.

Spyridakis, Yeorgos, D. Petropoulos, and George Megas, editors

- 1962 *Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια*, vol. 1. Athens.

Spyridakis, Yeorgos and Spyridon Peristeris, editors

- 1968 *Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια*, vol. 3. Athens.