

MYSTERIOUS VEILED WOMEN AND THE MEN WHO WROTE ABOUT THEM

--

A draft; comments appreciated: wrconnor1@gmail.com

... [The judges of the dead] are clothed with the veil of eyes and ears and indeed the whole body interposed before their souls as they sit in judgment.

Plato Gorgias 523 d

When one meets one of the veiled women who move through the corridors of ancient Greece, surprising things can happen. They can be an affliction, like Pandora in Hesiod's Theogony (574-78), or they can come to a hero's aid, as Ino does in the Odyssey. In real life one was mostly likely to encounter a veiled woman as the brined, nymphē, at a marriage ceremony, or perhaps in the Mysteries, or at the moment of the ultimate mystery, death. But as we probe into effects, real or imagined, of encountering such women, the surprise often comes from their association, with the inspiring potential of breath (pneuma), an intense visuality. At another level, as we shall see, imagining such encounters provides insight into an ancient Greek view of reality and of a means of apprehending it. That pattern is only sporadically attested since the evidence that survives from Greek antiquity is so sporadic, but it can be seen to have persisted for many centuries. For these reasons it is worth trying to understand imagining a mysterious veiled woman might lead to a distinctive kind of thought or experience. This essay examines some instances of such imagining, from Homer to the second century of our era.

Women in ancient Greece often dressed with a "veil," better described as any of several kinds of head coverings, a scarf, *mantilla*, or any item that could be drawn over the face. Greek women may not have been well treated by modern standards, but they had the choice to veil or unveil – or so some male writers assure us. These acts of veiling and unveiling have, as we shall see, considerable and persistent symbolic power.

Such acts provided a metaphor for situations when we might say understanding was 'clouded.' Where English speaks of such clouding, Greek talks about veils; for example, when Aristotle On

the Soul (III 429 a 8 ff.) speaks about the pernicious effects that passions, sickness or even sleep can have on the mind, the translator says, “the mind is temporarily clouded over.” But the Greek speaks of a *veiling* (epikalyptesthai). This is not a mere terminological quibble, since the Greek metaphor evokes stories of the strange things that can happen when one encounters a veiled woman. Behind the metaphor, I am convinced, is a view of reality as something neither entirely clear nor totally hidden from us, but something one can just glimpse. Sometimes, but only rarely, the veil is drawn back and a deeper vision becomes possible. There may be hints of that view, in the Odyssey, but the pattern only begins to become clear in Hesiod.

Hesiod: In Homer veiled women have power to aid, bewitch, rescue, predict – if they choose to. In Hesiod they have the power to inspire and reveal. They can make someone a poet, conferring more than mastery of the techniques of heroic verse, its formulae, meter, style, etc., but subject matter worthy of such poetry. The Theogony moves beyond the exploits of heroic warriors, to the stories of the gods themselves. At the same time the poem makes it possible to see a mode of thinking evoked by the image of veiled women. The Theogony, probably composed in the seventh century before our era, is set on Mt. Helicon where Muses veiled (kekalymmenai) by a deep mist dance (lines 3 – 9). They also go about by night singing of the Olympian gods and “the whole sacred clan (genos) of the other immortals who live forever” (21). These nine Muses encounter Hesiod, who in this poem casts himself as a shepherd, though as we read on it becomes clear he was a man much travelled and well versed in the myths of many parts of the Greek world, and of traditions reaching in some cases back to the ancient near east. The Muses play along with his adopted persona, and turn it into an occasion to scold him:

*You shepherds of the wilderness, poor fools, nothing but bellies, we
know how to say many false things that seem like true things,
but we know also how to proclaim the truth when we wish to.*

Theogony 26 -28, trans. Lattimore, modified.

Then the Muses tell Hesiod he is to sing, too, and they give him a staff (skēptron 30), as a mark of his authority, and “... *breathed a voice into me, / and power to sing the story of things of the future, and things past, (31 -3).*

How are we to visualize this scene? Not, I am convinced, as some vague “inspiration”; the verb (enepneusan) is active, plural and vivid. The Muses drew close enough that their breath, pneuma, went inside him. Such actions, one late source (Athenagoras 9.1) says are like a flute player blowing into his flute. The vivid physicality is not surprising in antiquity – the Egyptian refugees complain about it in Aeschylus’ Suppliants 17ff.; Lucian (Phalaris II) knows something similar happens to Apollo’s priestess; Jesus breathed on his disciples, according to John 20.22, as God did when creating human beings (Genesis 2.7), and Stephan of Byzantium (s.v. Ikonion) thought a similar thing happened in Deucalion and Pyrrha’s time.

The result of the Muse's inspiration is not a cosmology, nor a celebration of universal laws or primal elements. It is not failed science, nor a handbook of mythology, nor the rudiments of a systematic theology. It's not even a genealogy. It is what the Muses sang (11) and told him to sing (33). It is a hymn, charged with the grandeur of gods, chuck full of surging divinity. Nothing is left empty. Every nook and cranny, rock and rill, glade and glen, every cavern, mountain top, river flow, ocean depth is suffused with the procreative power of the divine. The divinities are mighty Olympians, less powers of various sorts, often young female presences, among others Muses, Graces and nymphai - a term which does double duty as "bride" and as rustic female divinities. The Theogony may reflect the image in the Cypria (frag. 5, cited in Athenaeus 15. 682 f.) of Aphrodite, the Nymphs and the Graces all wearing lustrous scarves (liparokrēdemna).

It hymns:

*how at the first the gods and the earth were begotten,
and rivers, and the boundless sea raging in its swell,
the blazing stars, and the wide sky above all, ... of
the gods, bestowers of blessings, who were begotten of all these.. ...*

(108 – 11, trans. Lattimore)

If hymn sometimes seems to morph into catalogue poetry, descriptive flashes bring all to life. When, for example, the Harpies appear, poor, maligned Harpies, the epithet, "with their pretty hair," and a succinct comparison, "*in the speed of their wings keep pace with the blowing/ winds, or birds in flight, as they soar and swoop high aloft*" (268f.). Hesiod's hymnody does not does not shy away from the dark side of divinity. It too is represented with unrestrained vividness:

*And hungry Ouranos came on bringing night with him, and desiring
love he embraced Gaia and lay over her stretched out complete, and
from his hiding place his son reached with his left hand and seized
him, and holding in his right the enormous sickle with its long blade
edged like teeth, he swung it sharply,
and loped the members of his own father, and threw them behind him...*

(176 – 82, trans. Lattimore)

It is easy to be swept along by the visual richness of the verse, but, fair warning: If the Muses are able “to say many false things that seem like true things” (*etymoisin homoia*, 27), as well as to proclaim the truth, perhaps their inspired pupil can too. In any event, as we shall see, the difference between appearance and reality takes on continuing significance among Hesiod’s successors.

What Hesiod started lived on. Although Milesian philosophers were developing another, depersonalized way of viewing the universe, and Hesiod’s approach became the target of scorn from Xenophanes (VS 21 B 11). Yet this form of writing persisted for centuries. Works referred to as *Theogonies* are ascribed to the shadowy Abaris (Henrichs (1972) n. 32), Musaeus (VS 2 A 4), the Orphics (VS 1 A 1), and, perhaps, Empedocles (VS 31 B 128). The puzzling title “The Seven Innermost Places” (*Heptamychoi*) for a work by Pherecydes of Syros was sometimes glossed as “Theology or Theogony” or “Mingling of the Gods” (VS 7 A 2, lines 23 f.). Its story of a divine wedding provided the foundation myth for the *anakalypteria*, or *unveiling*, the central part of ancient Greek weddings, when the bride (*nymhē*) drew back her veil. Another work called a *Theogony* was ascribed to Epimenides of Crete (FGrHist 457 F 3 -17), probably containing the story that while he was asleep, Rip Van Winkle style, for many years, divinities appeared to him, including, one late source says (VS 3 B 1), *Alētheia* and *Dikē* (Truth and Justice). These works are poorly preserved but the allusions in these fragments to female figures has a striking analog in a work by a major figure in the history of philosophy, Parmenides of Elea.

Parmenides: I confess to some nostalgia as *Theogonies* fade away in Greek literature and with them views of the world not just as densely populated by divinities but charged with their grandeur and vitality. For the writers of these *Theogonies*, the universe seemed a living organism, best understood through the metaphor of procreation. But there is nonetheless some consolation since the mysterious veiled women who often populate the *Theogonies* continue to appear, most dramatically, perhaps, in a poem by Parmenides of Elea. The poem, composed in the fifth century BCE, is another story of an inspired vision, and echoes Hesiod and other early poets in the choice of heroic verse, the dactylic hexameter, and in the role of veiled female figures. It also reintroduces a woman we have met in Epimenides, *Dike*, Justice. Parmenides’ poem begins in this way:

The steeds that carry me took me as far as my heart (thymos) could desire, when once they had brought me and set me on the renowned way of the goddess (daimonos hē...), who leads the man who knows through every town. On that way was I conveyed; for on it did the wise steeds convey me, drawing my chariot, and maidens (kourai) led the way. And the axle blazing in the socket – for it was urged round by well-turned wheels at each end – was making the holes in the naves sing, while the daughters of the Sun, hastening

to convey me into the light, threw back the veils (kalyptras) from off their faces and left the abode of night. Parmenides VS 28 B 1, lines 1 - 10, trans. Kirk and Raven, modified.

When these maidens “*threw back the veils (kalyptras) from off their faces,*” Parmenides goes one step further than Hesiod – his guides unveil themselves, as if in the anakalyptēria ceremony of a wedding. These daughters of the Sun bring him to great gates; there to encounter:

... avenging Justice (Dikē, line 14) [who] controls the double bolts. Her did the maidens (kourai) entreat with gentle words and cunningly persuade to unfasten without demur the bolted bar from the gates. Then when the doors were thrown back they disclosed a wide opening when their brazen posts fitted with rivets and nails swung in turn on their hinges. Straight through them, on the broad way, did the maidens guide the horses and the car. And the goddess greeted me kindly, and took my right hand in hers, and spake to me these words: ‘Welcome, o youth (kour,) that comest to my abode on the car that bears thee, tended by immortal charioteers. It is no ill chance (moira), but Right (Themis) and Justice (Dike), that has sent thee forth to travel on this way. For indeed does it lie far from the beaten track of men. Meet it is that thou shouldst leave all things as well as the unshaken heart of well-rounded Truth as the opinion (doxa) of mortals in which is no true belief at all. Yet none the less shalt thou learn these things also – how the things that seem (dokounta), as they all pass through everything, must gain the semblance of being. (VS 28 B 1, lines 14 – 32, trans. Kirk and Raven).

Many are the disputes about this passage but for our purposes it is clear that by situating his poem in a tradition that goes back to Hesiod, Parmenides claims inspiration for his work, and hence uses language far from prosaic. Perhaps he is hinting that his Milesian predecessors by abandoning the Hesiodic tradition were missing something important, but, if so, his criticism of the Milesians also includes their failure to recognize the deceptiveness of sense impression – something Hesiod alluded to when his Muses sang “*we know how to say many false things that seem like true things, / but we know also how to speak the truth when we wish to.*” (Theogony, 27f.). If inspiration can reveal some things the senses cannot detect, then we must also be alert to the potential deceptiveness of sense impression and the need for a different approach to knowledge. Parmenides builds on that insight.

In Parmenides we can see that while the writing of Theogonies faded away, mysterious, inspiring veiled woman who had power to conceal or to reveal lived on. They are still around in the second century of our era.

The Shepherd of Hermas: Hesiod cast himself as a shepherd, that is, as someone who worked away from farms and settlements, but found inspiration in a remote setting. This is perhaps a motif drawn from and persisting in folklore, even when not well attested in the texts that have come down to us from antiquity. But in a widely circulated Greek text of the first few centuries

of our era it surfaces again in the story of a slave named Hermas, sold to a beautiful Roman woman named Rhoda. Hermas is tempted by her beauty, especially when he sees her bathing in the Tiber, but, good Christian that he is, what follows is not sex with Rhoda, but a strange experience when he was travelling to Cumae. Like Epimenides, he falls into a deep sleep:

And a Spirit (pneuma) took me, and bore me away through a pathless tract, through which no man could pass: for the place was precipitous, and broken into clefts by reason of the waters. When then I had crossed the river, I came into the level country, and knelt down, and began to pray to the Lord and to confess my sins.

Now, while I prayed, the heaven was opened, and I see the lady, whom I had desired, greeting me from heaven ... Vision One 3-4, trans. Lightfoot

This is the beginning of a series of visions, some involving Rhoda, others an old woman, who is eventually identified as an allegory of the Christian church. In the fourth of these visions, however, a younger woman appears to him:

... lo! a virgin meets me, adorned as if she were proceeding from the bridal chamber (nymphōn), clothed entirely in white, and with white sandals, and veiled (katakekalummenē) up to her forehead, and her head was covered (katakalysis) by a hood (mitra). Vision Four, 2.1, trans. Lightfoot.

Hermas listens closely to her interpretation of a fearsome beast he had met, and accepts her injunction to declare “to the elect of the Lord His mighty works, and tell them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation which is to come.” She then turns Hermas over to a Shepherd who gives him further instruction about what he must do to be saved.

The Shepherd of Hermas, usually dated in the mid-second century of our era, echoes the language of passages in the Christian scriptures where the church is called the bride of Christ, (Ephesians, 5.25), and, as we shall see, the Revelation to John. The symbolic imagery of bride and bridegroom is widespread, for example in the Gnostic Gospel of Philip, a Coptic text from Nag Hammadi, probably composed in the third century CE.

The Revelation to John:

The last book of the New Testament is now usually referred to as “Revelation.” That is good because the transliteration of the Greek title apokalypsis has come to be the term for doomsday, the moment when all life on the planet is destroyed. That is not what John was up to. The world, in his vision, is not being destroyed; it is about to be transformed in radical ways for the better. The book claims to be an *unveiling* of things obscured by trials and tribulation, by sinfulness and neglect. Far from the gloom that our use of *apocalypse* evokes, John’s work is about anticipated joy. To be sure, ancient readers might also have trouble with the word since it was a rarely used until the Christians (and Plutarch) took hold of it. That too is obscured by our modern terminology: there are plenty of hell fire and brimstone passages in the Hebrew

scriptures (Isaiah 23 –27, for example) which modern scholars often call *apocalypses*, but these seem not to have been called by that term in antiquity. The word *apocalypse* is rare in the Septuagint; it can apply to the uncovering of a man’s sins at his death (Sirach 11.27) but not to a book or form of writing. It is also rare in classical texts before the first century of our era (Philodemus (Peri kakōn p. 38 Jensen) is one exception). It does occur in the Christian gospels, but only once, in Luke 2.32 (where the familiar translation “*a light to lighten the Gentiles*” obscures the Greek phrasing phōs eis apokalypsin ethnōn, “*a light for revelation to the nations.*”) The apostle Paul, however, uses it with some frequency, associating it closely with the inspiring pneuma, *breath*, in Galatians 1.17. Still, chronological uncertainties being what they are among these texts, the first sentence of Revelation might be one of the first places an ancient reader encountered the word, and certainly one of the first uses of it as a title of a book; it may indeed be the start of the genre to which Porphyry alludes, “*There were in his (Plotinus’) time many Christians and other sectarians (hairesetikoi)...[who] produced revelations by Zoroaster ... and others*” Porphyry Life of Plotinus 16, trans. A. H. Armstrong. (Perhaps Porphyry had gnostic texts in mind, such as the Apocalypse of Peter, known from the Nag Hammadi texts.

The idea of an unveiling of reality, as we have seen, had been well developed by this time, but John gave it a fresh spin. To be sure, he too was in a remote setting, on the island of Patmos (1.9, tradition has it in a cave). He was in a state of inspiration (en pneumati 1.10) when a loud voice ordered him to write down what he saw. The title of what he wrote suggested no gentle lifting up of a veil, as in the anakalyptēria ceremony of a Greek wedding. The prefix apo- hinted that the veil was removed, taken away, not just lightly lifted. That unveiling opens the way to the most intense visuality in any of the early Christian writings. It invites representation in the visual arts, most notably perhaps in the fourteenth century Apocalypse Tapestry, 71 panels (1700 feet) of which survive in Angers France.

But where, one wonders, is the veiled female figure, a nymph, as we have seen so often before? At such an appearance seems unlikely: the first female to appear in Revelation is a false prophetess:

that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols. (2 .21, Revised Standard Version, modified),

Calling this woman “Jezebel” evokes the wife of the great sinner Ahab, mentioned in 1 Kings 16.31 and 2 Kings 9.10. She is no nymphē. Only near the end of the work does someone called a nymphē, *the Bride*, appear, counterbalancing the Jezebel of chapter 2, and the whore of Babylon in chs. 17 – 18. The anticipated nymphē finally appears in a passage of such intensity that it turns from prose to verse:

And I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying,

*‘Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent
reigneth.*

*Let us be glad and rejoice, and give him the glory
for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his
Bride (nymphē) has made herself ready.*

And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, bright and pure.’

...

And he said to me, “Write this: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’” (19.6 – 9)

(The Revised Standard Version, which I have used with modification, is correct, I believe in following a reading for verse 7 found in the great Codex Sinaiticus: nymphē, *Bride*, where other manuscripts read gynē, wife.)

The words of this thundering voice beg to be sung as a hymn, and, of course, that is exactly what Handel did in the Messiah:

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! :|

For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. Hallelujah!

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! :|

For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

So apocalypse turns into hymn, not in Hesiod’s manner, to be sure, but certainly in language charged with grandeur and vividness. That becomes clear when the Bride next appears. We expect to hear of the wedding and the marriage feast, but instead we see them transformed into a different scene:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a Bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be

mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (21.1 – 4 RSV)

John describes his vision of the new Jerusalem a second time, with even more vivid detail

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the spirit (en pneumatī) to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. (21.9 – 11, RSV modified)

The inspiring breath (pneuma, as in 1.10) and the nymphē, *the Bride*, are now together:

The Pneuma and the Nymphē say, "Come." And let him who hears say, "Come." And let him who is thirsty come; let him who desires take the water of life as a gift. (22.17 RSV, modified).

Conclusion on a Personal Note:

I started probing into veiling and unveiling in antiquity with the hope that I might find in women's choices about clothing clues to their patterns of thinking. That was a naïve hope. What I found instead was an image that recurred in the writings of some ancient authors, all male.

I was at first disappointed. Had this inquiry led me not to hoped-for pastures but into blind alleys of the irrational? Or had these men so long ago glimpsed something I could not or would not see on my own? One easy affirmative was to grant that the image of a woman veiled or unveiling corresponds to a reality we all encounter –that while we see some things clearly enough and others we may never see at all, in between are things we can just glimpse, as if they were obscured by mist, or gauze – or a veil. Important things are often in this intermediate zone. Naturally then, all of us, ancient and modern, male and female, yearn for the veil to be lifted, as a bride lifts it at her wedding.

That is part of it, I think. But there may be more. Had these male writers found in this image a means of moving (albeit it temporarily) beyond modes of thinking deeply rooted in business, politics, war – "executive functions" we say, such as planning, calculating, strategy, abstracting, generalizing? These activities were all located primarily in man's sphere. But they have to coexist with another way of comprehending -- associative, visual, evocative, intuitive. Those forms of cognition men often associate, rightly or wrongly, then and now, with women. So did the image of a mysterious veiled woman make possible another mode of thought for certain

men of antiquity? Was it a whiff of oxygen for lungs craving freshness? Or to take a further step: was it a way of activating otherwise atrophied capacities of the mind, when, as Goethe put it at the culmination of Faust, *Das Ewig-Weibliche/ Zieht uns hinan* ("The eternal feminine/ draws us forward." Faust II 1209 f.)?

I don't know. But I know that these texts sometimes make me feel as if I have awakened in a tropical forest surrounded by plants, flowers, birds, animals I had never encountered before, all packed in close, one next to another, a jungle of overwhelming richness,-- or, as if I were entering a gothic cathedral for the first time, overwhelmed by the sweep of the vaulting, the light transformed by stained glass, the images of saints, prophets, kings. It seems not to matter whether one is a believer or not; the visual richness is what matters, and what rewards so richly.

W. Robert Connor

www.wrobertconnor.com

March 2016

Some Reading:

Berg, William 1976: "Pandora" Pathology of a Creation Myth" Fabula 17:1-25. Also at https://www.academia.edu/5176744/Pandora_Pathology_of_a_Creation_Myth

Burkert, W. 2013: "Parmenides Proem and Pythagoras" Descent " in Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Religion ed. V. Adluri, pp. 85 ff.

Henrichs, A. 1972: "Toward a New Edition of Philodemus' Treatise *On Piety*" Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies 13, pp. 67- 98.

Larson, J. 2001 Greek Nymphs New York, Oxford Press.

Oakley, John H. and Sinos R.H.: (1993) The Wedding in Ancient Athens. Madison WI, University of Wisconsin Press.

Oepke: (1964) "καλύπτω" Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* Volume 3, trans. And ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromley, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Press.

--

I am indebted to William Berg, Rick McKim and W. Gary Pence for helpful comments and criticisms.
