Danae in the Chest: Female Coming-of-Age and Marriage

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The myth of Danae was very popular at Athens in the fifth century. Tragedies entitled *Danae* by Sophocles and Euripides were performed on the Athenian stage and 29 Attic red-figure vases survive which depict episodes of the myth. In this paper, I will demonstrate that the myth reflects contemporary Athenian marriage practices and is a metaphor for female coming-of-age.

The myth of Danae centers on her symbolic death and return to life, a pattern which has long been shown (e.g. Rehm, Alexiou) to be at the core of Athenian wedding ceremonies. Danae's tribulations start with her confinement in an underground chamber as a measure for preventing her pregnancy. The confinement achieves the same result as killing her while keeping her father innocent from murder. But Danae is as good as dead: a *lekythos* (*LIMC s.v*. Akrisios D10) represents the chamber as a funerary monument and shows Acrisius mourning for his daughter.

Avoiding the dismal fate prepared for her by Acrisius, Danae consummates a divine union with Zeus who visits her in the form of a golden rain. Patrick Marchetti (p. 241) has compared this portion of the myth to a nuptial bath, which confers fertility on the bride-to-be. Danae, like a dead *parthenos* in an underground chamber, comes into contact with fertilizing water that will revive her and make her a mother.

Next, Danae and the young Perseus are put in a chest and exposed at sea. With the maiden floating helplessly in a chest that she cannot steer, the sea journey represents Danae's lack of a *kyrios*: she is no longer attached to her father and not yet under the authority of a husband. This sea voyage corresponds to the wedding procession in a marriage ceremony. The procession was meant to indicate the bride's permanent change of residence and the fact that she left the authority of her father and assumed that of her husband.

But the wedding procession also had a strong funerary connection and bore great resemblance to the *ekphora*. Both processions took place in the dark, involved the whole family, and marked a permanent change of residence. A good expression of this complex symbolism is found on Attic *loutrophroi*, vessels used to carry water for the nuptial bath, which frequently represent funeral scenes (Redfield, p. 189-190; Rehm; Avagianou). The bride symbolically died as a child and was reborn as a wife. In the myth of Danae, the funerary connection of the sea voyage is represented by the chest (*larnax*) a container which was generally used to keep food, clothing, and valuables, but was also frequently used as a coffin or cinerary urn (Brulé, p. 125). Thus, Danae's journey in a chest-coffin symbolizes her death as a child and her permanent departure from Argos and her father's house.

Danae's landing and discovery by fishermen on Seriphos marks her return to life and inaugurates her new status as a woman and mother. Her hand is sought by the local king, Polydectes: the *parthenos* is now ready to be married. However, desiring to remain faithful to her divine lover, Zeus, Danae refuses and takes refuge in a sanctuary where she raises Perseus. Once he is grown up and has completed the trials associated with his coming-of-age, the young hero fetches his mother and brings her back to Argos, where he assumes the kingship in place of his grandfather.

Thus, the myth illustrated Danae's passage from the status of *parthenos* to that of *gyne* and provided a model for young Athenian brides who were undergoing the same transition.

References

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