

Degrees of Separation in Vergilian Ritual: the gendered effects of ritual in *Aeneid* 4, 5, & 12

The concepts of gender, ritual, and the subsequent effects these concepts have on space and progress have been discussed separately in the context of the *Aeneid*, but the intersection of these concepts has not been analyzed together in depth. Panoussi (2007) examines feminine ritual in detail and its specific involvement in the context of civil war but does not discuss how these feminine rituals can affect space in the literary setting of the *Aeneid*. Hutchinson (2015) examines space within the *Aeneid* but does not include analysis of gender or performance of ritual in this context. This paper argues that gendered rituals in *Aeneid* 4, 5, and 12 influence physical space within the relevant scenes themselves but also that these rituals conceptually affect the progress of the plot of the *Aeneid*.

The performance of ritualistic actions in ancient Roman society was often delegated by gender. For example, women had authority over certain, typically negative, parts of the funeral and mourning process, whereas men's participation in funerary rituals involved positive acts such as honorary games. Women's rites, too, are often linked to inappropriate forms of ritual like witchcraft and dark magic, while men's city-founding or oath-creating rituals are seen as promoting progress in society. In the *Aeneid*, ritualistic involvement discerned by gender reveals a divide in the subsequent effects of these rituals: in Vergil's representations of rituals in *Aeneid* 4, 5, and 12, women's rituals cause separation while men's rituals promote a sense of unity and convergence.

For example, after landing in Sicily again the Trojan group must honor Anchises' passing and the resulting ritualistic scenes are marked by these opposing themes. Aeneas states that the rites will be "happy memorials" for his father, and this idea of a celebration— rather than doleful

mourning— is continued throughout the book with the repeated usage of *laetus* (Aen. 5.55-58, 5.100-101, 5.107-112, 5.181-183). As he discusses these rites, Aeneas' language communicates joy: he references the group entering *portus amicos* (friendly harbors) and celebrating the *laetum honorem* (joyful honor) for Anchises. Various forms of *laetus* are used throughout *Aen. 5* in reference to the ritualistic games that Aeneas puts on for his father. The repetitive language of happiness and joy reinforces the positive nature of the men's funerary practices for Anchises. The funeral games themselves also bring a sense of camaraderie and metaphorical closeness between Aeneas and his men as they compete amongst each other.

These celebratory scenes and the luxury of the resulting prizes are juxtaposed by the sadness and destruction of the Trojan women's ritualistic mourning. The Trojan women are physically distanced from the men's games, existing on liminal shores as they participate in their essential rites. Vergil depicts Iris being sent down by Juno and witnessing the Trojan women in a state of intense grieving in an isolated location. The harbor, fleet, and women are described as being in a despairing state with the distanced physical location matching the emotional turmoil, noting that the women wept at the *desertos portus* (forsaken harbor) with the fleet having been abandoned. The word choices in this scene sharply contrast with the playful, competitive scenes of Aeneas and his men participating in games in honor of Anchises. While the men's funerary games promote a much-needed reinvigoration of unity and closeness between the soldiers, the women's funeral processes on the faraway shores end in destruction as the women set fire to the ships and cause a rift amongst themselves and the Trojan men.

The devastation resulting from the women's ritualistic mourning is also representative of women's rituals hindering progress. In fact, the igniting of the ships was an attempt— albeit divinely influenced— to hinder the journey to Italy from progressing forward. And indeed as

posited by Panoussi (2009: 161), when reading this scene directly after the cheerful competition of the men, the women's action "serves as a foil to Aeneas' role as leader and the responsibilities he has to ensure the progress of his mission," solidifying the women's ritual here as an impediment to Aeneas' goal. This dichotomy of rituals in epic, with women being separated and involved in liminal rituals, and men being centered and involved in positive, constructive rituals, ultimately contributes to the construction of a gendered hierarchy in Roman society that disempowers women.

Works Cited

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