

“Cleaning Up” the Meaning of καθαρῷ θανάτῳ in *Odyssey* 22.462

After Odysseus and Telemachus have finished slaying the suitors, Odysseus orders Telemachus to kill the disloyal slave women with a “long-edged sword” (ξίφεσιν τανυήκεσιν, *Od.* 22.443). Instead, however, Telemachus decides to hang them once he has gathered them in the courtyard. At no point does he seem to explain directly to his father this change of execution method, but he does give a short speech to the women before killing them. Saying that they have poured shame onto him and his mother, he declares that he will not grant them a “clean death” (καθαρῷ θανάτῳ, *Od.* 22.462). This paper looks to elucidate Telemachus’s decision by examining his use of the adjective καθαρός, especially in comparison with other uses of the word in Homer and through this to add nuance to the connection between cleanliness, hanging, and bodily fluids.

In his commentary, Heubeck (1992, 300) finds the meaning of καθαρῷ here to be “uncertain.” The small number of uses of the adjective (nine in total) throughout both poems limits the range of meanings available as possibilities—it is used in the *Odyssey* to describe clean clothing, and in the *Iliad* for a clear and unencumbered space. Its use in religious contexts arises later in time, and suicide by hanging seems a legitimate option for tragic heroes, therefore excluding the possibility of a “clean and honorable” death by sword in contrast to a dirty death by hanging. Heubeck is left with the unsatisfying idea of a “quick and easy” death.

If a religious sense of the word cannot be applied here because of its post-Homeric origin and if Telemachus does indeed have in mind some kind of physical cleanliness of object or space, then how does execution by hanging, as compared to a much bloodier killing by sword (which would require further purification from ritual pollution), stop the death from being clean?

One solution may be the application of Helen King's work (2008), in which she discusses an ancient Greek view of 'woman' that divides female maturation by moments of bleeding. Ancient Greek physicians interested in this idea of bleeding women reflect the tension between woman as an undisciplined threat to social order, identified with Artemis, and as a controlled and reproductive *gynē*. Telemachus, then, can be understood as one attempting to assert his own authority and prove his legitimacy as Odysseus's successor by controlling the bleeding of women in his household.

Additionally, as Emily Wilson writes (2021, 33), hanging keeps the blood (and by extension other fluids) inside the body and thus avoids the "public, masculine glory of death by sharp metal instrument". Killing the "maids by rope rather than by sword may reflect a desire to punish them for their sexuality" (Fulkerson 2002, 343). These critical perspectives can be used with Helen King's framing to elucidate further the meaning of Telemachus's of a "clean" death.

In conclusion, Telemachus's choice to hang the slave women rather than follow Odysseus's command to execute them with a sword and to describe that decision as one depriving the slave women of a "clean death" invites a deeper exploration of bodily fluids, gender, and authority in Homeric society. His use of *καθαρός* seems to convey a concern not only with physical cleanliness but also with the control of feminine sexuality and bleeding, reflecting broader cultural anxieties about women's bodies and social order. By opting for hanging, Telemachus asserts his power and distances himself from the violent masculine glory associated with death by sword, thereby reinforcing his role as a successor to his father in a manner that emphasizes discipline and control over the domestic sphere and subjugated gender.

Works Cited

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