

Hour 25 Video Dialogue with Olga Levaniouk

~ Olga Levaniouk on Ancient Greek Brides, Death, and Exchange ~

CLAUDIA FILOS: Professor Levaniouk just visited Hour 25, which is a sequel project to The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours, otherwise known as HeroesX; it's a HarvardX project. And Professor Levaniouk was just having a conversation with our community, some members of our community, and we were just discussing the idea, the theme, of death, let's say in ancient Greek weddings and in traditional Russian weddings.

And, Professor Levaniouk, do you see any associations or do you see any moments when the theme of death comes forward in these two traditions?

OLGA LEVANIOUK: Yes: so that is a very, very ... it's actually a very difficult question for me, myself, because I sort of started from thinking that there must be similarities between weddings and death, and a little bit of received opinion in classics that somehow the wedding is the death of the maiden and then rebirth as a woman, and then there are similarities in ritual, in both cases a person — alive or dead — leaves the house never to come back, accompanied, in a procession, accompanied by torches, accompanied by singing. And so it's very tempting to perceive a wedding as death of a young girl. And so... this is going to be a sort of real live look into at least how I work, because I haven't really come to terms with this question; I don't know the final answer.

When I look, what I try to do is to figure out things about Greek weddings and then also look at comparative studies: I look at Russian traditional weddings. And in the Russian case, really that might not be the same in ancient Greece, it doesn't have to be that we can presume the same. I really have to say there is precious little about rebirth. There is quite a lot about death. But rebirth, not so much. And the death is not so much death of a maiden, it's not that we see — just as we can make this argument on the male side that there is some kind of trial and experience and you die as a boy, and you are reborn as a man. But it's much harder to make for a woman. And she wishes to die, she wishes to never make this transition. But it's not at all that she wishes to die as a girl, it's just that she wishes to die. Because, you know, it's such a horrible thing, that is going to happen to her!

And actually the things that they say, what was amazing to me, the things that women say in those dark moments of Russian weddings — which are followed then later by quite cheerful moments so it's not the overall picture of marriage — but there is a moment when the bride is having all those dark thoughts, and they're very similar to what women say in ancient Greek tragedy. So, that is really the end of everything that I know, and this is the moment when you're sold and in one night you're sold and you're no longer cherished and you're no longer the precious flower in your father's garden; now you have to live with foreign people and they may be abusive, and they can go out, and they can have life outside of the house but for you: no, you're entirely dependent on those fine men. So there is this talk of that, of the prospect of that, and it would be better to die now! But there is really no secure indication of the reverse as a woman. That she becomes a woman, no doubt, but it is seen as a reverse. I haven't been able to quite find that, and I expected to, really, you know, I sort of thought I'll find some nice confirmation for that series I found quite pleasant to think with, but so far I have to say I have not found it. And so then I was sort of forced to go back and look at Gloria Ferrari's work who ... she

advances an argument that is quite provocative, saying that in ancient Greek ideology, in ancient Athenian, in Athenian villages of the fifth century women do not grow up, so men make this transition from boys to men, but women in some fundamental state [inaudible] remain children, that the transitions that they make doesn't make them fully citizens, it doesn't make them fully responsible for themselves. They just pass from being in the care of one man, their father, to being in the care of another man, their husband. But that's not really growing up, and not the same kind of transformation as men undergo.

CLAUDIA FILOS: How fascinating.

OLGA LEVANIUK: Yes. And somewhat disheartening!

CLAUDIA FILOS: Janet, did you have any little questions?

JANET OZSOLAK: I have a couple of questions. I am remembering your videos from HeroesX, and you mentioned that during the wedding week you have this very sad moment, and the next day you are celebrating. And the moments you are describing are one of those fragments, and then the next day there would be a celebration. And the bride will feel... and will show the happy face. My question will be mostly about property, something I am very interested in. The bride will get out from the father's house and will probably be going to the father-in-law's house. She will not have her own property, per se. So during that week there are many exchanges, and very ritualized exchanges. Can you talk about that, those exchanges, a little bit?

OLGA LEVANIUK: Well unfortunately we, "we as scholars", don't know that much about it, and I specifically know even less, because I haven't really looked that much into it. I know that there are various occasions on which people even receive gifts. And there is, of course, the official property exchange which is negotiated even before the week happens, during the moment of betrothal. Then it is decided what the dowry will be, and the property arrangements are made, between two men. Then there are also more symbolic property exchanges that are brought from the groom to the bride, and that are brought from the bride to the groom, during the week. And we don't ... the most information we have in Greece is that there is this particular part in the ritual — which everybody is wondering exactly what it is — but the bride is sort of revealed. Or sometimes it's called a "watching", a "looking on" festival, something like that, a "seeing" festival, when she is ... some people are saying she is unveiled, and other people are saying she is not unveiled, but brought out, and publicly presented as a bride, in all her splendor. And on the occasion of this event she is given some kind of gifts from the groom, and we don't know what they are.

Yeah, it's really hard to determine. It's also that there's so much complexity in Greece that ... I don't know if you remember from reading the *Iliad*, on the Shield of Achilles there is a wedding scene. Or a pre-wedding scene. It isn't actually a wedding scene, where they lead processions. But then at the very end it's very striking to me that the Shield of Achilles starts with the depiction of the first human scene that we see is actually a wedding procession — or several of them: there is the city of Thebes and they're celebrating weddings. And this is after the stars and the moon — that's the first thing we see. And then the last, the very last scene, before, again, the rim of the Shield and all the cosmic elements of it, and it's a pre-wedding dance on Crete and palace of Minos and the dances for Ariadne, and they're dancing there, boys and girls, holding hands. And on this occasion the girls — do you remember that,

Janet, it's the girls — who are ox-fetching. And they're ox-fetching because, you know, they're not married yet, and they're dancing with the boys, but when they are married those boys will pay oxen for their brides. And so the girls are "ox-fetching", for their parents.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Wow!

OLGA LEVANIUK: There is a complexity in also that there is dowry and there is bride-price and it's.... you know, when you look at something that is so multi-relegated[?], so diverse as a culture, that it's very hard to come up with an overall picture of how they exchanged property. But it is definitely true that women did bring some property with them, and in the cases where marriages were dissolved in Athens we know that sometimes property could be returned. So even though she married, she did retain some kind of connection to that property. And if she is unmarried the property can go back to her father.

JANET OZSOLAK: I remember Penelope's property, if she didn't get married, was going to go back to her father, and there was that "Who is going to own this property" issue. If my recollection is right, or wrong?

OLGA LEVANIUK: It's absolutely right, and it's also: so, the property ownership in the Odyssey, but this is just about as complex as you get with this question, because, first of all, the Odyssey: we're not sure it's absolutely always consistent, and it's not depicting any particular place or time. So there is always a question of we shouldn't be, you know, terribly narrow-minded or demanding excessive realism from the Odyssey. But at the same time it is definitely central, you know, this is the central question. Because it's all about in some ways, all about economies of life. And it's all about... what will happen to the household of Odysseus.

And so there is even a question, when the suitors want to marry Penelope, what do they want to get? Do they want to get Penelope? Or do they want to get whatever she might bring as daughter of Icarius? Or do they actually want to get the household of Odysseus? And several times in the poem it is said that they want to marry Penelope, and to have the "*geras*" which is a way of saying, you know, the heroic portion of Odysseus. And what does that mean? So some scholars have hypothesized that their plan is to marry Penelope before Telemachus completely comes of age, and then you can have another son, and then you can somehow kill Telemachus, or get rid of Telemachus... and then you will become the heir to Odysseus's property. You step into the shoes of Odysseus. And then, the theory goes, that maybe they lose such hope during the course of the poem because Telemachus comes of age, and he says, "Well, you can have my mother, but you cannot have my property... That house that Odysseus left to me." And so the strategy of those suitors and their chances change as the poem develops. And Penelope is one of the players, and Telemachus is also one of the players. And sometimes, you know, you have the sense that Telemachus has grown up and makes... and asserts his prerogatives. But Penelope in the meanwhile is worried about the dangers of that, because she knows that as soon as Telemachus says "Actually I am the owner of this property" then the only way for the suitors to have any success there is to kill him, which they're trying to do and that's exactly what Penelope is worried about.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Well, Professor Levaniouk, thank you so much for talking to us today. Unfortunately it just gets more and more interesting!

OLGA LEVANIUK: Well, this is a big, a very big question, that Janet asked!

CLAUDIA FILOS: Well, we're so grateful that you took the time to talk to us today, and we hope that you'll visit Hour 25 again.

OLGA LEVANIUK: I would love to — thank you very much, Claudia, and thank you, Janet.

JANET OZSOLAK: Thank you so much!

OLGA LEVANIUK: OK, thanks. Bye bye.

JANET OZSOLAK: Bye bye.