



### **Going by the Trees: A Response to Auslander**

Peter Bing, Emory University

[pbing@emory.edu](mailto:pbing@emory.edu)

For a Classical scholar, Mark Auslander's paper "Going by the Trees" inspires strange emotions: On first reading I was filled with wonder and barely suppressed envy at the very different circumstances under which a contemporary anthropologist operates—above all, at his access to living, breathing human beings from all strata of society. The thought of being on a first name basis with your informant, of going on a hike with him, helping him clear foliage from family graves, is positively mind-boggling. Anyone wishing to look into ancient tree-lore, by contrast, finds himself stuck at the far end of a temporal chasm spanning thousands of years, trying to piece together fragments of speech that happen for whatever reason to have made it across the divide, endeavoring to tease nuance out of languages no one can speak, and constrained to do so through the medium of books, the end-product of that very process (that *dubious* process) which formed the starting point for many of the reflections at the heart of this paper, the pulping of trees. For classicists, all hikes we can take with our subjects, any foliage we can clear from their graves, are mere metaphors. Our choice of informants, moreover, is severely limited: The voices that reach us across the divide are overwhelmingly male, educated, upper class—if we hope to recoup even the dim echo of *other* voices we must read against the grain. Still, the very distance and otherness of ancient Greece and Rome can open a space for productive questions. As often, the meaning may lie in the difference. However, since I am responding to a living, breathing scholar, I will at least adopt the anthropologist's prerogative and refer to our author by his first name.

“Trees are good to think with,” Mark tells us in reference to modern-day Georgia. And that holds good for ancient times as well. Among his female informants Mark found that trees could embody a sense of “profound belonging”, “family continuity and regeneration”. Unfortunately, ancient authors do not ask women what they think about trees—or much else for that matter. But a similar view appears prominently in the mainstream ideology of Athens and Rome. For these communities trees were potent emblems of civic identity and survival. At Athens, for instance, there was the sacred olive atop the acropolis, gift of the goddess Athena herself in token of her love for the city. Herodotus illuminates the tree’s significance against the backdrop of the Persian invasion when, in the year 480 B.C., the Persians sacked the city and burned its temples:

"On the Acropolis", he says, "there is a spot which is sacred to Erechtheus the earth-born [ancestral king of Athens], and within it is an olive-tree and a spring of salt water. According to the local legend they were put there by Poseidon and Athene, when they contended for possession of the land, as tokens of their claim to it. Now [the Persians] destroyed this olive by fire together with the rest of the sanctuary; nevertheless on the very next day, when the Athenians, who were ordered by the [Persian] king to offer the sacrifice, went up to that sacred place, they saw that a new shoot eighteen inches long had sprung from the stump. They told the king of this." (Hdt.8.55. Another source, Pausanias 1.27.2, says the new shoot was 4 feet long!)

This story, with its reference to the autochthonous, ancestral king Erechtheus, is clearly meant to convey the unbroken regenerative power of Athens. And one may plausibly surmise that it emerged in response to the catastrophic destruction of the community, a miracle-tale that helped undergird the work of “re-membering”, not unlike some of the narratives Mark describes of how “communities reconstitute themselves”. It even employs that three-fold narrative rhythm of life—death—and rebirth, which Mark calls “the classic progressions of Mystery”. But more of that anon.

The Romans likewise saw the health of their state embodied in a tree, the miraculous cornel-tree on the Palatine. Plutarch tells how Romulus, the city’s founder, threw a javelin all the way from the

Aventine. It stuck so fast in the ground that no one was able to pull it out. Instead, the wood sprouted roots and grew into a tree, which came to be considered one of the most sacred objects in Rome. According to Plutarch, “whenever the tree appeared to a passerby to be drooping, he set up a hue and cry which was echoed by the people in the street, and soon a crowd might be seen running helter-skelter from all sides with buckets of water, as if they were hastening to put out a fire” (thus Frazer’s paraphrase of Plutarch’s *Life of Romulus* 20, at *Golden Bough* part I vol.2, p.10).<sup>1</sup> This account, which Plutarch narrates with the droll objectivity of an outsider, vividly communicates that urgent sense on the part of the Romans that their civic well-being was bound up with the health of a tree.

Mark observes further how in the African American context trees function as symbols of enduring stability in a inconstant world, and of hidden steadfastness, secret knowledge—particularly situated in their roots. These, too, strike a familiar chord for readers of Classical literature, for in the *Odyssey* we find the famous token of the bed, the final test of Odysseus’ identity before Penelope acknowledges his return (23.177-204). Penelope bids the maid Eurykleia move out of the bedchamber that very bed that Odysseus himself had once built for them. The hero responds with angry disbelief since this bed has a peculiar feature, a secret shared only with Penelope and with one serving woman: Odysseus had anchored this bed to the ground by fashioning one of its posts out of a tree-trunk still rooted in the earth. Its removal would imply that the couple’s most intimate secret, the physical embodiment of their marriage bond, had been profaned. Odysseus’ reaction proves to Penelope that her husband has truly returned, as the bed’s continued fixity shows Odysseus that his marriage is intact.

In other ways, however, Greek and Roman tree-lore exhibits striking differences. Trees were commonly thought to be animated, in much the same way as Mark’s friend James describes when he says “That tree’ll talk to you if you stand out here in the dark. You’ll hear that Negro crying out to you man.” But in Classical antiquity, the animating spirit of the tree was typically gendered female.<sup>2</sup> The spirits were

---

<sup>1</sup> Tacitus (*Annals* 13.58) also tells of the sacred fig tree in the Roman forum: “The fig-tree, which 830 years earlier had sheltered the babies Romulus and Remus, suffered in this year. Its shoots died and its trunk withered. This was regarded as a portent. But it revived, with fresh shoots.”

<sup>2</sup> As Prof. R. Hörschele suggests to me (*per litteras*), basically all Greek and Latin tree names are feminine in gender. Further, in ancient tales of

Nymphs, such as hamadryads, coeval with their trees (cf. *H.H. Aphr.* 264-272). Trees, moreover, are particularly associated with the worship of *goddesses* in our literary and artistic sources.<sup>3</sup> Against the backdrop of the very common link between trees and spirits of the dead in other parts of the world, the rarity with which that association occurs in the Classical world is striking.<sup>4</sup>

The typical narrative setting for encounters with animate trees is thus *not* a cemetery - for these were not the carefully fenced in enclosures we think of from our own environment; tombs lined the highway just beyond the city gates, forming a crowded, dusty *necropolis*, a city of the dead. Rather, their setting is the sacred grove of a goddess. And here we find numerous cautionary tales recounting the horrific punishments suffered by those who cut down trees.<sup>5</sup> In Classical lore, the trees retaliate, and they have gods (and sacred laws) to back them up!

Another interesting difference concerns hanging. In Classical sources, hanging is regarded as unmanly and is a mode of death associated especially with women (that, for instance, is already how Penelope's maids die at *Odyssey* 22.461-472)<sup>6</sup>—something about which I will have more to say in a moment. Yet it is the African-American *men*

---

transformation, such as those recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it is mainly women who are turned into trees. Christian Zgoll, in his book *Phänomenologie der Metamorphose: Verwandlungen und Verwandtes in der augusteischen Dichtung* (Tübingen 2004) observes (p. 57) that the only males changed into trees are, in one way or another, effeminate: Attis (castrated), Ampelos (beloved of Dionysus), Kyparissos (beloved of Apollo), the Messapian youths (competitors with nymphs in a dance contest), an Apulian youth (imitating the dance of nymphs at *Ov. Met.* 14.517-26), and Philemon (an old man who functions quasi as a house-wife).

<sup>3</sup> Burkert 1985: 86, section II 5.1.

<sup>4</sup> I am not denying the association of trees with death in the ancient sources. Already at *Iliad* 6.146-8 for instance, Glaukos compares humankind to the generations of leaves scattered on the ground by the wind and growing again from the tree in spring. This idea may be echoed in ancient mystery initiates' custom of burying *lamellae* – inscribed sheets of gold in the shape of a leaf – in their tombs. See also the connection of trees with the hanging of females in Classical sources, discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Henrichs 1979.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Loraux 1987: 9-10: "It...turns out – but is it just chance? – that hanging is a woman's way of death: Jocasta, Phaedra, Leda, Antigone ended in this way, while outside tragedy there were deaths of innumerable young girls who hanged themselves".

in Mark's study who have more violent associations with trees. I suspect that one reason for this is because *they* formed the main targets of lynching. The victims' gender entails a whole web of culture-specific associations.<sup>7</sup> Here, it invites what Mark calls the "pervasive Christological imagery" associated with lynching. For crucifixion—a form of execution especially favored by the Romans, but going back to ancient Near Eastern practices - was generally inflicted on men, preeminently on Jesus, the Christian messiah. Due to the enduring influence of Christianity, the tale of Jesus' crucifixion has survived the precarious passage across the divide separating us from Classical Antiquity, remaining *the* critical event in Christianity's self-narrative. Such rare continuity does not occur without adaptation, however: the cross is understood in new ways under different circumstances and in changing conceptual frameworks. Many African Americans, then, when looking through the filter of their religion, see Christ's cross embodied in the lynching tree, a new Golgotha in each lynching site. The tree thus helps situate these viewers within a tradition reaching across time, one in which an ancient event invests a modern-day occurrence with meaning. At the same time, the present-day world also decisively shapes the understanding of the past. For here the cross (a man-made artifact fashioned of wood) is transformed, re-naturalized as tree—returned to its roots, so to speak - and thus endowed with a range of new meanings reflecting traditions of the African American community: the tree's status as a living organism that may be thought of as animated; its ability to absorb what goes into the earth around it; the span of its life embracing multiple generations, which makes it an ideal witness; its rootedness to a particular spot, etc.

Trees and their wood have always lent themselves to such cultural adaptation. And it is worth pointing out that we find a comparable, if opposite, transformation—not cross into tree, but tree into cross - already in Medieval times, in Jacopo da Varagine's "Invention of

---

<sup>7</sup> This is also true for the hanging of women in ancient sources. There, as Loraux points out (*ibid.*), the instrument of death is not always "the customary rope", but rather "those adornments with which they decked themselves and which were also the emblems of their sex, as Antigone strangled herself with her knotted veil. Veils, belts, headbands - all these instruments of seduction were death traps for those who wore them, as the suppliant Danaids explained to King Pelasgus [*Suppl.*455-66]." Hanging, moreover, "closes forever the too open bodies of women, hanging is almost latent in feminine physiology".

the Holy Cross" from his 13<sup>th</sup> century *Legenda Aurea*:<sup>8</sup> Here we learn that when Adam died, his son Seth planted a shoot from the Tree of Knowledge on his father's tomb. In time this grew into a mighty tree, which King Solomon particularly admired. Consequently, the king resolved to use it in the construction of his temple. But somehow, try as they might, his workmen were unable to cut it in such a way as to make it fit into the structure. Instead, they used it to build a bridge. Soon after, the Queen of Sheba visited and, upon seeing the bridge, dropped to her knees in adoration before it, prophesying to the king that a man would one day be hanged upon this wood, whose death would mean the end of



Piero della Francesca, Legend of the True Cross: Adoration of the Sacred Piece of Wood (c. 1450-1465). Post-restoration. S. Francesco, Arezzo. Photo courtesy of Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali/Art Resource, NY.

---

<sup>8</sup> For the Invention of the Cross, cf. [Ryan and Ripperger 1941](#): 269-76. Memorably, the tale forms the basis for Piero della Francesca's great mid-15<sup>th</sup> century cycle of frescoes in the church of San Francesco in Arezzo.

the kingdom of the Jews. Naturally, King Solomon was alarmed and, hoping to prevent the prophecy from coming true, ordered the bridge dismantled and buried. Miraculously, however, a spring sprang up at the burial place, and later—just at the time of Christ's passion - the wood spontaneously floated to its surface, was discovered, and served as the material from which the cross was made. Here Christianity's relationship to Judaism—its shared origin as well as its new identity—is figured in the metamorphosis of the Old-Testament's Tree of Knowledge into the instrument of Jesus' death. Moreover, the wood from the tree becomes the battleground revealing the true heir to the legacy of Adam, for this wood somehow resists its inclusion in the structure of Judaism's greatest shrine, the temple of Solomon. At most, it can serve as a bridge—between Judaism and Christianity, one might say -, though it ultimately signify's the former's downfall.

Returning to our Classical sources now, and crucifixion aside, when it comes to hanging we are struck by how the typical victim was female. Countless Classical myths relate the death of heroines. One such is the tale of Erigone, daughter of Ikarios. It was to Ikarios that Dionysus first gave the gift of wine. A generous man, he shared the new beverage with his neighbors, who quickly became drunk and, unaccustomed as they were to alcohol, thought Ikarios had poisoned them. Therefore they killed him. Upon finding his corpse, his daughter Erigone hanged herself from a tree in grief. “When the Athenians afterwards were struck by a plague, the Delphic oracle advised them to hang up figures and masks in the trees and to put their children in swings in honor of Erigone.”<sup>9</sup> The dreadful hanging was thus commemorated and redeemed by a “Swinging” festival, the Attic *Aiora*.

With its substitution of harmless “child's play” for the deadly act of hanging, this charming ritual represents precisely the sort of “inversion ritual” Mark speaks of. But here, as typically in Greek religion, the unspeakable act that the rite commemorates lies safely in the mists of a remote past, the process of confronting it is already complete, its symbolic transformation already accomplished. What I find fascinating in Mark's account, where the unspeakable acts belong to our immediate past, is that he allows us to observe those rituals emerging.

I close by returning to the question of the Mysteries. Mark claims that modern attempts to confront the legacy of lynching are organized according to the logic of mystery rites. In discussing Winfred

---

<sup>9</sup> [Simon 1983](#): 99.



Rembert's account of surviving an attempted lynching, Mark characterizes it as a "narrative form", namely witnessing. Winfred's story, he says, "as he has shaped and reshaped it in his marvelous renditions, is one of the oldest stories of all...He was for all intents and purposes dead...And then he was reborn. Are these not the classic progressions of Mystery?" (p.5). Any similarity with mystery religion lies, as Mark's own terms reveal, *in the narrative structure*. But this structure of life, death, and rebirth, is common to a whole range of rituals. In particular, the broad categories of New Year's festivals and those of initiation have, as H. S. Versnel has lucidly shown, "a firmly related ritual and social function and follow, in essence, identical basic patterns: the old situation has to be taken leave of (symbol of death, fall, farewell: the *séparation*); there is a period of transition between old and new (sojourn in death, underworld, labyrinth, flood, foreign countries, a monster's belly: the *marge*); the new situation is accepted (rebirth, resurrection, reinvestiture, return and reintegration: the *agrégation*)."<sup>10</sup> That pattern is common to literature as well, with no necessary link to ritual, much less to mystery ritual. What is interesting, however, is that Mark finds it useful to think of the present day attempts to deal with the heritage of lynching in terms of mystery ritual. One wonders whether this is the investigative scholar speaking here, responding to the veil of silence he has discovered, or the committed activist, persuaded by the allure of partially disclosed symbols to place his own hope in the power of the unseen.

---

<sup>10</sup> [Versnel 1990](#): 64.



**WORKS CITED**

- Burkert, W. 1985. *Greek Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Loraux, N. 1987. *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Henrichs, A. 1979. "Thou Shalt Not Kill A Tree. Greek, Manichaeic and Indian Tales." *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 16: 85-108.
- Ryan, G. and H. Ripperger. 1941 [1969] *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*. Vol. I London: Longman, Greens and Co. (1941); New York: Arno Press (1969).
- Simon, E. 1983. *Festivals of Attica: an Archaeological Commentary*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Versnel, H.S. 1990. "What's Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander." In L. Edmunds, ed., *Approaches to Greek Myth*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pp. 23-90.