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The Very Soul of Propriety and the Soul Equal and Triumphant: Black and White Women's Souls in the Funeral Rites of the Daughters of the Tabernacle and the Order of the Eastern Star

In the years after the Civil War, more than eight million American men joined fraternal organizations with secret rituals.¹ This figure does not include many others who belonged to mutual benefit, ethnic, and labor organizations that had a formal ritual or the smaller number of women who joined single or mixed-gender organizations. **[Slide 2]**

Historians have tended to treat nineteenth-century fraternal organizations and their rituals as cultural givens, as if this both explains the phenomenon and dismisses any need for further engagement. **[Slide 3]** That organizations as varied as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Patrons of Husbandry, and the Knights of Temperance as well as more strictly fraternal organizations, such as the Odd Fellows and Freemasons, grounded themselves in an elaborate ritual framework is too often seen as evidence to dismiss fraternal ritual on the grounds of its ubiquity rather than to study it for the way a shared commitment to ritual tied together disparate organizations and movements. While fraternal organizations may not have dominated the course of nineteenth-century history, the values taught in their rituals played a role in both stabilizing and redefining a nation in flux in largely unrecognized ways. With American religion leaving the Civil War as deeply divided as it had entered it and with older, republican ideas of citizenship in flux,

¹ Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 2.

fraternal ritual became an important means of both stabilizing and creating, and then transmitting a new vocabulary of citizenship and virtue, which transcended sect, region, ethnicity, and economic sector.

In his 1989 *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, historian Mark Carnes concluded that the explosion in fraternal membership was a result of the need to bring young men out of the feminized domestic sphere where their mothers had raised them and into the public sphere of the world of adult men. **[Slide 4]** For Carnes, fraternal initiation brings the young man into and through anthropologist Victor Turner’s liminal state, transforming him into an adult male, delivering them from a “cross-sex identity conflict” in which the feminine and immature old self died and the young man learned that “woman gave birth to man’s body, initiation gave birth to his soul.”² His thesis has merit in its emphasis upon growing male alienation from an increasingly feminized organized religion, but fails to explain fraternalism’s attraction for those who were not middle-class white men.

Carnes is not alone in his gendered view of fraternalism. Historian Lynn Dumenil characterized freemasonry “as a mirror for Victorian, white middle-class, liberal Protestant values. . . . a sort of trans-Protestant church auxiliary society.”³ Publishing in the same year as Carnes, sociologist Mary Ann Clawson suggested her own schema of

² Victor Turner, “Liminality and Comunitas,” in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 326–39; Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, 114, 120.

³ Bayliss Camp and Orit Kent. “Proprietors, Helpmates, and Pilgrims in Black and White Fraternal Rituals.” In *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality*, ed. Theda Skocpol, 95–134 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 98.

what the lodge model accomplished in her *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism*, proposing "[a]ssertion of patriarchal privilege and authority" as one of its four distinctive characteristics.⁴

[Slide 5] So where does all of this theorizing of a generation ago leave poor and working-class people and, particularly, African-American women, who presumably would have the least interest in bolstering white male patriarchy? While it is true that men joined middle-class fraternal organizations in larger numbers, working-class and African-American organizations provide a number of examples of women's organizations and of organizations open to both sexes, which would seem to imply that these organizations fulfilled different purposes for their members. In fact, because most of these organizations provided health and burial insurance, they have been cordoned off as "mutual benefit" organizations and described as a separate phenomenon, even though Freemasons and Odd Fellows did the same.⁵ Some of the most notable of these "mutual benefit" groups were African-American organizations founded in former slave states.

[Slide 6] The International Order of Twelve, headquartered in St. Louis and Arkansas's Mosaic Templars and Supreme Royal Circle of the Friends of the World, all show how African-Americans joined in the rush to fraternalism, but tailored it to suit their own purposes.

Sociologist Theda Skocpol and her fellow contributors to the 2006 volume *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for*

⁴ Ibid., 97.

⁵ Noel Pitts Gist, *Secret Societies: A Cultural Study of Fraternalism in the United States*, (The University of Missouri, 1940), 24.

Racial Equality were the first to recognize this divergence. The authors largely accept that Carnes, Dunemil, and Clawson are correct in their characterization of white groups, classifying white male rituals as patriarchal and white female rituals as “helpmate,” but the authors add a third category they refer to as “pilgrimage,” which see those initiated as being on a journey of world transformation together rather than divided into a rigid hierarchy.⁶

African-American groups founded at the turn of the century would use masonic forms to carry a message of racial uplift and to argue for African Americans’ place in the larger white society. To show how fraternal forms were adapted to meet particular needs, this paper examines the funeral rituals of the African-American Daughters of the Tabernacle in contrast to the contemporary funeral rites of the white branch of the Order of the Eastern Star, the largest and, likely, most bourgeois of the masonic women’s groups.

[Slide 7] The 1876 ritual of the Order of the Eastern Star shows signs of the feminine bourgeois deference hinted at by Carnes, Dumenil, and Clawson.⁷ **[Slide 8]** The services are primarily in the hands of the family of the deceased. The prologue to the service sets the tone in saying that

The services for the interment of the dead of our Order are in their nature deeply impressive. . . . No showy regalia are worn, and no adornment, save that of a simple badge of recognition, an emblem of a meek, sad, and loving spirit. . . . The language is that of acquiescence in the will of the Supreme Grand Patron of the universe . . . and the

⁶ Camp and Kent, “Proprietors, Helpmates, and Pilgrims,” 99-107.

⁷ Robert Macoy, *Ritual of the Order of the Eastern Star : A Book of Instruction* (New York : R. Macoy, 1876), <http://archive.org/details/ritualoforderofe00maco>, (accessed February 9, 2015).

pure affection for a much-loved sister and friend, from whom we are severed only for a time.⁸

The language here is a mix of proper middle-class sentiment, feminine acquiescence, and deference to hierarchy, climaxing in "the Supreme Grand Patron of the universe."

Deference to Victorian middle-class institutions continues in the instructions. **[Slide 9]** Arrangements for the service are not in the hands of the local Worthy Matron, the highest officer of the chapter, but in those of the chapter's male masonic patron. It is he who, having been informed by proper, presumably male, channels of a member's death, orders the secretary to inform the chapter.⁹

Dress for funerals likewise follows conventional propriety, with members being instructed that the "proper clothing to be worn at a funeral is black or dark clothes." The only adornments prescribed are the jewels of office for the chapter's officers draped with crepe and, for the rank and file, a rosette on the left breast, "for an elderly person to be made of black crepe; for a young person to be of white and black ribbon."¹⁰

The funeral service at the church or home is left entirely in the hands of the family of the deceased, with only a fifteen-inch floral star on the casket calling attention to the order.¹¹ As in masonic funerals, it is only at the grave where the order, if invited, takes part, due deference being shown to the institution of family and the headship of male relatives.

⁸ Ibid., 2. [The burial service is at the back of the book and numbering for it starts at p. 1.]

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

[Slide 11] As in masonic funerals, the officers take positions around the grave, but it is the patron who stands at the head and presides. Even here, correct ideals of female submissiveness come to the fore with the opening prayer by the patron assuring those present that, “the memory of her” (appropriate female) “virtues lingers in our remembrances, which the associate matron next reminds the mourners are “Charity, Friendship, Good Counsel, and Morality.”¹² **[Slide 11]** Next, the hymn “I would not live alway” is sung with its sentimental lyrics describing a placid heaven where “the saints of all ages in harmony meet . . . And the smile of the Lord is the feast of the soul.”¹³ **[Slide 12]**

It is only when the casket is lowered into the ground, presumably after any rites of the religion of the deceased, that the members of the chapter come to the fore. The patron remains firmly in charge, holding the floral star he has removed from the casket, prompting members representing Biblical heroines to remove different colored flowers from each point of the star and to recite the virtue it represents along with the lesson it teaches before casting it into the grave. These heroines with their virtues and their lessons are: **[Slide 13]**

<u>Heroine</u>	<u>Color</u>	<u>Virtue</u>	<u>Lesson</u>
Adah	blue	friendship	undying love,
Ruth	gold	disinterested kindness	unending possession
Esther	white	truth and innocence	heart purity
Martha	green	immortality	undeviating sincerity
Electa	red	fervency	unfading beauty

¹² Ibid., 8-9.

¹³ Ibid., 8-11.

Each is accompanied by an appropriately sentimental speech extolling these appropriately feminine virtues.¹⁴ It is notable that these are all heroines of appropriate femininity, a far cry from the assertive Miriam and the inquisitive Samaritan woman at the well enshrined in the ritual of the Daughters of the Tabernacle.¹⁵

It is only when the last flower is cast into the grave that the worthy matron speaks, directing those present to think how flowers are "Emblems of our own resurrection" and "of the brighter, better land" as she scatters flowers on the grave, before holding aloft a single white rose, extolling it as a symbol of the belief in a "purer and better state of existence beyond the grave" and of how the resurrected will "come forth from the grave radiant."¹⁶ The patron resumes control by commending the virtues that have been extolled and by placing the remainder of the floral star in the grave, after which is sung "Shall we gather at the river," or some other appropriate hymn. Following this hymn, the patron cautions those present that, while "the duty we owe to the dead is performed," the living must be on their guard that they not "leave their duties imperfect" and remain steadfast in charity, hope, and faith. After this, "Nearer, my God to thee" or another appropriate hymn is sung before the presiding clergyman or, in his absence, the associate matron, leads a prayer asking God to remind the mourners that "the ties of kindred, affection, and friendship are not broken by death, and that the family in heaven and on earth are the same."¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 12-16.

¹⁵ Moses Dickinson, *Consolidated Ritual of the Daughters of the Tabernacle* (Kiergan & Hatcher Printers, 1883), 9-10.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16-22.

In the Eastern star rite, nothing offends Victorian propriety, from the male patron setting preparations in motion to the final prayer’s assurance that the institution of the family continues in heaven much the way it existed on earth. **[Slide 14]** The rites of the Daughters of the Tabernacle take on a different tone, though it is sometimes more evocative than overt. Even though the Daughters were affiliated with the male Knights of Tabor, just as the Eastern Stars were of Freemasons, their funeral rite has more place for the leadership of women and a stronger view of the church militant on earth rather than an unbroken life and afterlife of placid, bourgeois comfort. While the Eastern Star’s very membership requirements were rooted in subordination, requiring a woman to be a close blood relative of a male mason, Daughters were admitted to tabernacles on the same basis as men to their temples: good moral character, sound mind and body, and a belief in the supremem being.¹⁸

[Slide 15] As with the Eastern Star rites, the Daughters’ ceremonies were written by a man, in this case, barber turned African Methodist Episcopal minister, Moses Dickson. Dickson’s very different view of women’s ritual may have been influenced by his own experience of racism, a canny grasp of the potential power of women, or by the promptings of his wife Mary Elizabeth Dickson, who held the honorary title of Mother of all Knights and Daughters of Tabor. At least one scholar has suggested that Moses and Elizabeth had a highly egalitarian relationship, but biographical information on the

¹⁸ Moses Dickson and International Order of Twelve, *A Manual of the Knights of Tabor, and Daughters of the Tabernacle: Including the Ceremonies of the Order, Constitutions, Installations, Dedications, and Funerals, with Forms, and the Taborian Drill and Tactics* (Press of G. I. Jones, 1879), p. 76, 140.

Dicksons is disappointingly scant.¹⁹ Whatever his inspiration, Dickson produced a quite different ritual than that of the Eastern Star, though, like it, Dickson's 1879 funeral rites for a Daughter of the Tabernacle drew from familiar masonic forms.

[Slide 17] The difference in the two rituals becomes apparent from the introductory paragraph, where the service is described as "a token of affection and respect to the memory of the departed daughter." Also on the opening page, it is stated that it is the duty of the Chief Preceptress, the highest female officer of the Tabernacle, "to issue orders to the Tabernacle to make preparations to attend the funeral." While the Tribunes of the brother Knights of Tabor are to arrange the burial and the Chief Mentor or Chief Orator of the local Temple is to preside, it is the Chief Preceptress who is ultimately in charge, down to selecting which Knights are to be a Daughter's pallbearers. Bayliss Camp and Orit Kemp in their analysis of the fourth degree ritual of the Knights of Tabor note the text's assertion, in relation to the Biblical judge Deborah, that "the higher duties of leading the people to the plains of honor and success are often given to a woman." They took this as an indication of "a slightly different attitude toward women . . . than one might typically find," which the Daughters' funeral ritual bears out.²⁰

In fact, in subsequent years, the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor would introduce mixed-gender higher orders, the Palatium and the

¹⁹ Jennifer Rebecca Harbour, "'Bury Me in a Free Land': African-American Political Culture and the Settlement Movement in the Antebellum and Wartime Midwest" (University of Iowa, 2008) 84-86.

²⁰ Moses Dickson, *A Manual of the Knights of Tabor, and Daughters of the Tabernacle: Including the Ceremonies of the Order, Constitutions, Installations, Dedications, and Funerals, with Forms, and the Taborian Drill and Tactics* (Press of G. I. Jones, 1879), 187-188; Camp and Kent, 109.

Past Arcanum, in which women served as second in command and presided along with men. **[Slide 18]** Women would also hold office in the state-wide organizations and frequently lead devotions in mixed-gender groups, even though there were usually ordained Christian ministers present. Most notably, state grand temples would later hold many of their sessions in the women’s Saba Meroe degree, in which women were exalted as priestesses of the primordial tabernacle and keepers of ancient wisdom.²¹

The funeral dress of a Daughter of the Tabernacle also differs from that of an Eastern Star. **[Slide 19]** The Eastern Stars would likely have approved of the Daughters’ required brown dress, but might have looked askance at it and the black veil being trimmed with white, much less the obligatory white gloves. In a further stipulation differing from the dress of the Eastern Stars, which almost let them blend into the crowd, officers of the local tabernacle carried their rods and staves. While the prescribed dress and bearing wands of office gave Daughters an identity as a body and pointed out female authority, it also served at least two other purposes.

First, before the funeral, the opening ritual of the Tabernacle was held in a convenient location and not closed again until after the funeral. The ritual reminds Daughters that “A Tabernacle in procession is under the discipline of an open Tabernacle, and no one must leave ranks without the positive permission of the Chief Preceptress.”

[Slide 20] The Chief Orator or Chief Mentor may have more speaking parts, as would be

²¹ International Order of Twelve and Frank Wilson, *Revised Taborian Constitutions of the Several Departments* ([S.l. : s.n.], 1906), pp. 90-92, 123-127; “Knights and Daughters,” *The Leavenworth Times*, April 30, 1891; “Annual Convention: Colored Benevolent Organization to Meet in Salina,” *The Salina Daily Union*, June 6, 1899; Dickson, Moses, and International Order of Twelve. *Saba Meroe: Ritual of the Daughters of the Tabernacle : International Order of Twelve*, 1907.

expected in a public religious service of the period, but, behind it all, the Chief Preceptress maintains control of the ritual.²²

Second, and more importantly, processing in formation was integral to Daughters' ritual. The officers' rods showed their martial authority and the rank and file's white trim and, particularly, white gloves, called attention to the women's movements. Marching and drill were such a part of the Ritual of the Knights of Tabor that the manual of the order closes with a section titled "Tactics and Drill for the Use of the Knights of Tabor," showing elaborate figures for use by members with their spears and swords. Drilling and marching had been part of African-American culture since at least the days of the Union League during Reconstruction, when freedmen practiced marching and drills both as a sign of community cohesion and as an implicit reminder to white communities that violence could be met with violence. Among the Knights and Daughters, women shared in marching and drilling, nowhere more conspicuously than at the funeral of a fellow Daughter.²³

After the Tabernacle was opened, members marched in a meticulously ordered procession to the home of the deceased to receive the body, then to the church with the Chief Preceptress leading the way flanked by knight tribunes with spears, followed by members by rank before the hearse. In this, the Daughters borrow their form from the usage of the masonic lodge rather than the more demure rites of the Eastern Star.²⁴ And,

²² Dickson, *Manual*, 1879, p. 189.

²³ Ibid., 217. Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 173-176.

²⁴ *The Masonic Funeral Service: Peoria Lodge No. 15, A.F.A.M* (Cremer & Spalding, printers, 1867), 7-8.

by 1891, even the male knight tribunes with their spears would be replaced by two female members of the fourth degree with spears of their own.²⁵

On arriving at the church, the lines of Daughters opened ranks for the casket and family to pass through, forming a salute to the deceased, then the Daughters filed into the church to take their own seats for a funeral service in the hands of a minister or the local Temple’s Chief Orator. **[Slide 21]** The Daughters assembled once again at the service’s end to file by the corpse and make a second ordered procession to the cemetery, using carriages if the distance required.²⁶

At the cemetery, Knights and Daughters formed a circle around the grave with the family of the deceased at the head and the Chief Orator and any ministers at the foot. Given the precision of the order of the processions to the church and to the cemetery, this rather informal circle seems surprising, especially given that the Eastern Star ritual gave a very precise diagram where various officers and representatives of the Biblical heroines were to stand. However, this seeming informality may be seen as an allusion to a more powerful African-American form. **[Slide 22]** Just as the processions called to mind the drilling of the Union League, the circle around the grave evoked the ring shout, used by the League in its initiation ritual and possibly representing a survival of African culture among generations of enslaved African Americans. Others have seen parallels to the ring in black initiation rituals, but the funeral rite parallel is even clearer when, after singing a hymn on assembling at the grave, the encircling Knights and Daughters join hands and

²⁵ Moses Dickson and International Order of Twelve, *Manual of the International Order of Twelve of Knights and Daughters of Tabor, Containing General Laws, Regulations, Ceremonies, Drill, and a Taborian Lexicon* (A. R. Fleming, printers, 1891), p. 173.

²⁶ Dickson, *Manual*, 1879, p. 190-191.

raise them above their heads as the Chief Orator gives a prayer, at the end of which "all say: 'Amen, amen, amen!' raising and lowering their hands slowly three times."²⁷ This clearly mimics the League's use of the form in their initiation ritual as described by historian Steven Hahn. Later in the service, those assembled punctuate a verse and response prayer by the Chief Orator with single claps, further paralleling the ring.²⁸

As the ritual movements of the Daughters differ from those of the Eastern Stars, so too does the rhetoric. While the Eastern Star ritual can be characterized as assuring the living that the life after death is not to be feared because it will be much like the one here, the Daughter's ritual speaks of toil passed and triumph gained. The opening prayer referenced above speaks of rest for the departed and "receiv[ing] the kingdom prepared for you." The hymns used speak of the tomb as a place without grief, pain, or anxious fear, of the joy that comes from being free from this life, and of the dead as "prisoners now released from slavery's sad abode." While the Eastern Star was assured that the hereafter would be much like the here and now, the Daughters were comforted that they were going to a quite different and better place than this world.²⁹

²⁷ Camp and Kent, "Proprietors, Helpmates, and Pilgrims," 123.

²⁸ Hahn, 184. Dickson, *Manual*, 1879, p. 193. In some forms of the masonic funeral, the assembled members of the lodge did join crossed arms to form a "chain" and pass a secret phrase, but the effect was quite different; Freemasons Grand Lodge of Michigan and Jefferson S. Conover, *Michigan Masonic Monitor: Adopted by the Grand Lodge Free and Accepted Masons of Michigan 1897* (Grand Lodge, 1897) 15.

²⁹ The three hymns for the graveside service include two by eighteenth-century hymnist Isaac Watts ("Unveil thy bosom faithful tomb" and "How still and peaceful is the grave") and one by contemporary Seventh Day Adventist Franklin E. Belden ("Dear as thou wert, and justly dear"), which stands in sharp contrast to the Eastern Star's use of hymns from within the previous fifty years with more optimistic sentiments: "I would not live away" (circa 1824), "Shall we gather at the river" (1864) with its composer's note of "cheerful," and "Nearer my God to Thee" (1841); Dickson, *Manual*, 1879, p. 192-196; www.hymntime.org (accessed February 9, 2015); www.hymnary.org (accessed February 9, 2015).

[Slide 23] In contrast to the bourgeois Victorian sentiment of the hymns suggested for Eastern Star funerals, the Daughters’ ritual goes back to the hymnody and circumspect piety of the eighteenth century. The optimism about human perfectibility that had so affected the increasingly affluent mainline Protestantism of the period seems to have had little appeal to African-Americans, who continued to struggle against too many concrete obstacles. Rather than being assured of continued progress, Dickson’s Daughters were assured that the hard fight of life would lead to eternal victory, as in the third verse of “Dear as thou wert,” which says:

Triumphant in thy closing eye
The hope of glory shone
Joy breathed in thine expiring sight,
To think the fight was won.³⁰

In fact, in the exhortation delivered by the Chief orator after a hymn while the casket is lowered into the grave, Tabernacle meetings are described as “our undisturbed retreat, away from the worldly-minded, to enjoy a little season of happiness.”³¹

After the versicle and response prayer mentioned above and a final hymn, the Chief Orator leads a final prayer reassuring the mourners that the bodies that now sleep will be “made like unto His own glorious body” and that Christ will “subdue all things unto himself.” At the prayer’s conclusion, the orderly procession of Daughters returns to the place where it began the day and the Chief Preceptress and officers conduct the closing ritual.³²

³⁰ Dickson, *Manual*, 1879, p. 193.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

³² *Ibid.*, 195-169; Hahn, 184.

[Slide 24] In summary, the Eastern Star ritual models the contemporary, hierarchical, gendered society, with Masons maintaining control of the proceedings, women being praised for appropriately feminine virtues, and all being assured that not even death itself would dissolve familiar institutions and relationships. In sharp contrast, the Daughter's funeral ritual shows women exercising leadership, even over male co-fraternalists, using images and music that recognize the suffering and uncertainty of the present while assuring members of future triumph, and allowing women to display martial discipline without excessive deference to male authority. While the Eastern Star funeral service reminded women of their place and limits, that of the Daughters of the Tabernacle modeled a reality in which women could exercise agency on more equal terms with men and encouraged members to believe that the struggles of this life would be vindicated in eternity. **[Slide 25]**