

Divine Shame & Early Greek Views of Animal Breeding

Within early Greek mythological narratives that divide the world of humans from that of gods, two particular moments stand out in which a goddess is profoundly shamed through her forced subjugation to a mortal man. In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, Aphrodite explains that she will bear Anchises a son to be named “Aineias” because of the “terrible sorrow” (αἰὼν ... ἄχος) she feels for having engaged in sexual intercourse with a human man (*h. Aphr.* 198-199). So, too, Thetis speaks of her ordeal of being subjugated to the mortal Peleus (*Il.* 18.429-434):

Hephaestus, is there truly anyone, as many goddesses as there are on Olympus,
who have endured so many grievous cares (κῆδεα λυγρὰ) in their hearts,
as many pains (ἄλγε') as Zeus, Cronus' son, has given to me out of all of them?
Out of all the other goddesses of the sea he subjected me to a man (ἀνδρὶ δάμασσεν),
to Peleus, son of Aiakos, and I endured the bed of a man, although I was very much
unwilling.

These narrative scenes and the cosmic implications of Zeus shaming powerful female figures in order to construct his own authority have received much scrutiny (e.g., Bergren 1989, Clay 2006, Faulkner 2008, Slatkin 1991). Relatively little work has examined the emotional response of shame for goddesses, however. First, they come to experience human temporality through their erotic attachment to mortals; second, as they lament in advance the immanent death both lovers and their children which they can do nothing to prevent; and third, through the stigma of producing a child from an unequal marriage. In this paper I wish to explore this third topic: the

shame arising from their sexual experiences with mortal partners and children produced from unequal pairings.

I turn to the poetry of Theognis to uncover elite attitudes about the contemporary practice of animal breeding and concepts of genetic purity as an index of aristocratic elitism (183-192W):

With regard to rams and asses and horses, Kyrnos, we strive for noble birth (εὐγένεας), and each person wants to cover (βήσεσθαι) from noble parents (ἐξ ἀγαθῶν). But a noble man does not care about marrying a low-born woman from low-born stock, if she gives him a lot of money, nor does a woman refuse to be the wedded wife of a low-born man who happens to be rich, but wants wealth instead of nobility. They for their part value money. And a noble man marries a woman from low-born stock, and a low-born man marries a woman of noble stock. Wealth mixes (ἔμειξε) blood-lines. And so, don't be surprised, O son of Polypaïs, that the blood-lines of the city are becoming obscured. For noble things are mingling with base ones.

Theognis speaks of eugenic practices employed in the production of high-quality animal breeds through the careful selection of mating pairs (Howe 2011, Willekes 2019) in contrast with the—in his eyes—unrestricted mixing of nobles with non-elite marriage partners. In antiquity, breeding a superior specimen with an inferior can only produce inferior offspring and spoil a family's genetic strength. Even more dubious is crossbreeding between different species, a possible but potentially problematic practice, especially as it involves crossing animals that may occupy very different hierarchical positions in the Greek imaginary. For instance, horses—considered the aristocratic animal *par excellence* in antiquity (Griffith 2006)—were occasionally mated with donkeys to produce mules. As Griffith (2006) documents, Greek writers widely

interpreted such crossings as inherently shameful to the elite animal, such that “in order for a mare to condescend to let a donkey-jack mount her and thus procreate a mule, it was necessary for her owner first to hack off her mane and show her in a mirror, or in water that her beauty had been ruined; otherwise, she would be too proud” (315).

I wish to suggest that Aphrodite’s and Thetis’ shame involves this very idea of forcible mating with a lesser species. Such a crossing may produce offspring useful for serious labor, but the event can only bring shame to the elite parent.

Works Cited

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