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Aetiologies of Eros: The *Birds* and Plato's *Symposium*

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Ephialtes and Otus in the Platonic Aristophanes' Speech

1. Ephialtes and Otus in the *Symposium* (190b.5-190c)

ἦν οὖν τὴν ἰσχὺν δεινὰ καὶ τὴν ῥώμην, καὶ τὰ
φρονήματα μεγάλα εἶχον, ἐπεχείρησαν δὲ τοῖς θεοῖς,
καὶ ὁ λέγει Ὅμηρος περὶ Ἐφιάλτου τε καὶ Ὀτου, περὶ
ἐκείνων λέγεται, τὸ εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνάβασιν
ἐπιχειρεῖν ποιεῖν, ὡς ἐπιθησομένων τοῖς θεοῖς

trans. Nehamas and Woodruff

In strength and power, therefore, they were terrible, and they had great ambitions. They made an attempt on the gods, and Homer's story about Ephialtes and Otus was originally about them: how they tried to make an ascent to heaven so as to attack the gods.

2. Ephialtes and Otus in the *Odyssey* (11.306-20)

τὴν δὲ μετ' Ἴφιμέδειαν, Ἄλωῆος παράκοιτιν
εἴσιδον, ἣ δὴ φάσκε Ποσειδάωνι μιγῆναι,
καὶ ῥ' ἔτεκεν δύο παῖδε, μινυνθαδίω δ' ἐγενέσθην,
Ὀτόν τ' ἀντίθεον τηλεκλειτόν τ' Ἐφιάλτην,
οὓς δὴ μηκίστους θρέψε ζεῖδωρος ἄρουρα
καὶ πολὺ καλλίστους μετὰ γε κλυτὸν Ὠρίωνα: 310
ἐννέωροι γὰρ τοί γε καὶ ἐννεαπήχες ἦσαν
εὖρος, ἀτὰρ μῆκός γε γενέσθην ἐννεόργυιοι.
οἷ ῥα καὶ ἀθανάτοισιν ἀπειλήτην ἐν Ὀλύμπῳ
φυλόπιδα στήσειν πολυάικος πολέμοιο.
Ὅσσαν ἐπ' Οὐλύμπῳ μέμασαν θέμεν, αὐτὰρ ἐπ' Ὅσση
Πήλιον εἰνοσίφυλλον, ἴν' οὐρανὸς ἀμβατὸς εἶη.
καὶ νῦ κεν ἐξετέλεσαν, εἰ ἦβης μέτρον ἴκοντο:
ἀλλ' ὄλεσεν Διὸς υἱός, ὃν ἠύκομος τέκε Λητώ,
ἀμφοτέρῳ, πρὶν σφωιν ὑπὸ κροτάφοισιν ἰούλους
ἀνθῆσαι πυκάσαι τε γένυς ἐυανθεί λάχνη. 320

trans. A. S. Kline

Next I saw Iphimedeia, Aloeus' wife, who claimed she had slept with Poseidon. She too bore twins, short-lived, godlike Otus and famous Ephialtes, the tallest most handsome men by far, bar great Orion, whom the fertile Earth ever nourished. They were fifteen feet wide, and fifty feet high at nine years old, and threatened to sound the battle-cry of savage war even against the Olympian gods. They longed to add Ossa to Olympus, then Pelion and its waving woods to Ossa, and scale the heavens themselves. They would have done it too, if they had already reached manhood, but Apollo, Zeus' son, born of lovely Leto, slew them both, before the down had covered their faces, and their beards began to grow.

The “Net of Hephaestus”: Plato and Homer

Plato

3. “Net of Hephaestus” in the *Symposium* (192d2-e5).

trans. Nehamas and Woodruff

καὶ εἰ αὐτοῖς ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ κατακειμένοις ἐπιστάς
ὁ Ἥφαιστος, ἔχων τὰ ὄργανα, ἔροιτο:
‘τί ἔσθ’ ὃ βούλεσθε, ὧ ἄνθρωποι, ὑμῖν
παρ’ ἀλλήλων γενέσθαι;
καὶ εἰ ἀποροῦντας αὐτοὺς πάλιν ἔροιτο:
‘ἄρά γε τοῦδε ἐπιθυμεῖτε, ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ γενέσθαι
ὅτι μάλιστα ἀλλήλοις, ὥστε καὶ νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν
μὴ ἀπολείπεσθαι ἀλλήλων; εἰ γὰρ τούτου ἐπιθυμεῖτε,
θέλω ὑμᾶς συντῆξαι καὶ συμφυσεῖν εἰς τὸ αὐτό,
ὥστε δύο ὄντας ἕνα γεγονέναι καὶ ἕως τ’ ἂν ζητε,
ὡς ἕνα ὄντα, κοινῇ ἀμφοτέρους ζῆν, καὶ ἐπειδὴν
ἀποθάνητε, ἐκεῖ αὖ ἐν Αἴδου ἀντὶ δυοῖν ἕνα εἶναι
κοινῇ τεθνεῶτε: ἀλλ’ ὄρατε εἰ τούτου ἐράτε
καὶ ἐξαρκεῖ ὑμῖν ἂν τούτου τύχητε.’

Suppose two lovers are lying together and Hephaestus stands over them with his mending tools, asking, “What is it you human beings really want from each other?” and suppose they’re perplexed, and he asks them again: “Is this your heart’s desire then – for the two of you to become parts of the same whole, as near as can be, and never to separate, day or night? Because if that’s your desire, I’d like to weld you together and join you into something that is naturally whole, so that the two of you are made into one. Then the two of you would share one life, as long as you lived, because you would be one being, and by the same token, when you died, you would be one and not two in Hades, having died a single death. Look at your love, and see if this is what you desire: wouldn’t this be all the good fortune you could want?”

Homer

4. Hephaestus plans his net: *Od.* 8. 272-81,,

trans. A. S. Kline

Ἥφαιστος δ’ ὡς οὖν θυμαλγέα μῦθον ἄκουσε,
βῆ ῥ’ ἵμεν ἐς χαλκεῶνα κακὰ φρεσὶ βυσσοδομεύων,
ἐν δ’ ἔθετ’ ἀκμοθέτω μέγαν ἄκμονα, κόπτε δὲ δεσμοὺς
ἀρρήκτους ἀλύτους, ὄφρ’ ἔμπεδον αὖθι μένοιεν. 275
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ τευῆξε δόλον κεχολωμένος Ἄρει,
βῆ ῥ’ ἵμεν ἐς θάλαμον, ὅθι οἱ φίλα δέμνι ἔκειτο,
ἀμφὶ δ’ ἄρ’ ἐρμῖσιν χεε δέσματα κύκλω ἀπάντη:
πολλὰ δὲ καὶ καθύπερθε μελαθρόφιν ἐξεκέχυντο,
ἠύτ’ ἀράχνια λεπτά, τὰ γ’ οὐ κέ τις οὐδὲ ἴδοιτο, 280
οὐδὲ θεῶν μακάρων: περί γὰρ δολόεντα τέτυκτο.

When Hephaestus had heard the sour tale, he went to his smithy his heart set on evil, and set up his huge anvil on its block, and forged a net of chains, firm and unbreakable. And when, furious with Ares, he had made the snare, he went to his room and marriage bed, and fastened the netting to its posts, and hung its links above from the roof beams, fine as a spider’s web, and so cunningly made it was invisible even to the blessed gods.

5. Ares and Aphrodite ensnared in the Net *Od.* 8.295-9

ὡς φάτο, τῆ δ' ἀσπαστὸν εἰσατο κοιμηθῆναι.
τῷ δ' ἐς δέμνια βάντε κατέδραθον: ἀμφὶ δὲ δεσμοὶ
τεχνήεντες ἔχυντο πολύφρονος Ἥφαιστοιο,
οὐδέ τι κινῆσαι μελέων ἦν οὐδ' ἀναεῖραι.
καὶ τότε δὴ γίγνωσκον, ὃ τ' οὐκέτι φυκτὰ πέλοντο.

295 As he spoke it seemed a pleasant thing to her to lie with him. So they went to the bed and lay down. Then clever Hephaestus' cunning net fell all around them, and they were unable to move or raise themselves. They soon realised there was no escape.

6. The Net and Transitory Nature of Lust: *Od.* 8.315-20

οὐ μὲν σφεας ἔτ' ἔολπα μίνυνθά γε κειέμεν οὕτως
καὶ μάλα περ φιλέοντε: τάχ' οὐκ ἐθελήσετον ἄμφω
εὕδειν: ἀλλὰ σφωε δόλος καὶ δεσμὸς ἐρύξει,
εἰς ὃ κέ μοι μάλα πάντα πατὴρ ἀποδοῶσιν ἔεδνα,
ὅσσα οἱ ἐγγυάλιξα κυνώπιδος εἵνεκα κούρης,
οὐνεκά οἱ καλὴ θυγάτηρ, ἀτὰρ οὐκ ἐχέθυμος.

315 ... "Yet they won't want to lie like this much longer, I think: no, not for an instant, however much they are in love. They'll soon lose their urge for bed, the net and its links will hold them instead till her father repays me all the gifts I gave him while wooing this shameless hussy, a beautiful daughter indeed but faithless."

Togetherness the Goal

7. Finding your Other Half: *Sym.* (192e10-193a1)

ὅταν μὲν οὖν καὶ αὐτῷ ἐκείνῳ ἐντύχη τῷ αὐτοῦ
ἡμίσει καὶ ὁ παιδεραστής καὶ ἄλλος πᾶς, τότε καὶ
θαυμαστὰ ἐκπλήττονται φιλίᾳ τε καὶ οἰκειότητι καὶ
ἔρωτι, οὐκ ἐθέλοντες ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν χωρίζεσθαι
ἀλλήλων οὐδέ σμικρὸν χρόνον.

Translations mine.

Whenever someone should happen upon his own half, both the pederast and everyone else, then they are struck marvelously by affection and familiarity, and desire, not wanting so to speak to be apart from each not even for a little time.

8. What Eros does for us (*Sym.* 193d1-2)

οὐ δὴ τὸν αἴτιον θεὸν ὑμνοῦντες δικαίως ἂν ὑμνοῖμεν
Ἔρωτα, ὃς ἔν τε τῷ παρόντι ἡμᾶς πλεῖστα ὀνήνησιν εἰς
τὸ οἰκεῖον ἄγων.

If we would praise the god responsible for this, then we should praise Eros, who at present assists us the most, leading us to what belongs to us.

Appendix: Myth of Eros in Aristophanes' *Birds* 685ff

ἄγε δὴ φύσιν ἄνδρες ἀμαυρόβιοι, φύλλων γενεᾶ
 προσόμοιοι,
 ὀλιγοδρανέες, πλάσματα πηλοῦ, σκιοειδέα φύλ'
 ἀμενηνά,
 ἀπτῆνες ἐφημέριοι ταλαοὶ βροτοὶ ἄνδρες
 εἰκελόνηροι,
 προσέχετε τὸν νοῦν τοῖς ἀθανάτοις ἡμῖν τοῖς αἰὲν
 ἐοῦσιν,
 τοῖς αἰθερίοις τοῖσιν ἀγήρωσ τοῖς ἄφθιτα
 μηδομένοισιν,
690 ἴν' ἀκούσαντες πάντα παρ' ἡμῶν ὀρθῶς περι
 τῶν μετεώρων.

φύσιν οἰωνῶν γένεσιν τε θεῶν ποταμῶν τ'
 Ἐρέβους τε Χάους τε
 εἰδότες ὀρθῶς, Προδίκω παρ' ἐμοῦ κλάειν εἴπητε
 τὸ λοιπόν.

Χάος ἦν καὶ Νύξ Ἐρεβός τε μέλαν πρῶτον καὶ
 Τάρταρος εὐρύς,
 γῆ δ' οὐδ' ἀήρ οὐδ' οὐρανός ἦν: Ἐρέβους δ' ἐν
 ἀπέιροσι κόλποις
 τίκει πρῶτιστον ὑπηνέμιον Νύξ ἢ μελανόπτερος
 ὦόν,
 ἐξ οὗ περιτελλομέναις ὥραις ἔβλασταν Ἔρωσ ὁ
 ποθεινός,
 στίλβων νῶτον πτερύγοιν χρυσαῖν, εἰκῶς
 ἀνεμώκεσι δίναις.
 οὗτος δὲ Χάει πτερόεντι μιγείς νυχίω κατὰ
 Τάρταρον εὐρὺν
 ἐνεόττευσεν γένος ἡμέτερον, καὶ πρῶτον
 ἀνήγαγεν ἐς φῶς.

700 πρότερον δ' οὐκ ἦν γένος ἀθανάτων, πρὶν
 Ἔρωσ ξυνέμειξεν ἅπαντα:
 ζυμμιγνυμένων δ' ἐτέρων ἐτέροις γένετ' οὐρανός

“Now then, ye men by nature just faintly alive,
 like to the race of leaves, do-littles, artefacts of
 clay, tribes shadowy and feeble, wingless
 ephemerals, suffering mortals, dreamlike people:
 pay attention to us, the immortals, the
 everlasting, the ethereal, the ageless, whose
 counsels are imperishable; once you hear from us
 an accurate account of all celestial phenomena,
 and know correctly the nature of birds and the
 genesis of gods, rivers, Erebus, and Chaos,
 thenceforth you'll be able to tell Prodicus from me
 to go to hell!

In the beginning were Chaos and Night and black
 Erebus and broad Tartarus, and no Earth, Air, or
 Sky. And in the boundless bosom of Erebus did
 black-winged Night at the very start bring forth a
 wind egg, from which as the seasons revolved
 came forth Eros the seductive, like to swift
 whirlwinds, his back aglitter with wings of gold.
 And mating by night with winged Chaos in broad
 Tartarus, he hatched our own race and first
 brought it up to daylight. There was no race of
 immortal gods before Eros commingled
 everything; then as this commingled with that,
 Sky came to be, and Ocean and Earth, and the
 whole imperishable race of blessed gods. Thus
 we're far older than all the blessed gods, and it's
 abundantly clear that we're the offspring of Eros:
 we fly, and we keep company with lovers. Many

ὠκεανός τε
καὶ γῆ πάντων τε θεῶν μακάρων γένος ἄφθιτον.
ὧδε μὲν ἔσμεν
πολὺ πρεσβύτατοι πάντων μακάρων. ἡμεῖς δ' ὡς
ἔσμεν Ἔρωτος
πολλοῖς δῆλον: πετόμεσθ' ἀ τε γὰρ καὶ τοῖσιν ἐρῶσι
σύνεσμεν:

705) πολλοὺς δὲ καλοὺς ἀπομωμοκότας παῖδας
πρὸς τέρμασιν ὥρας
διὰ τὴν ἰσχὺν τὴν ἡμετέραν διεμήρισαν ἄνδρες
ἔρασταί,
ὁ μὲν ὄρτυγα δούς ὁ δὲ πορφυρίων' ὁ δὲ χῆν' ὁ δὲ
Περσικὸν ὄρνιν.

Χορός

πάντα δὲ θνητοῖς ἐστὶν ἀφ' ἡμῶν τῶν ὀρνίθων τὰ
μέγιστα.
πρῶτα μὲν ὥρας φαίνομεν ἡμεῖς ἦρος χειμῶνος
ὁπώρας:
710) σπεῖρειν μὲν, ὅταν γέρανος κρώζουσ' ἐς τὴν
Λιβύην μεταχωρή.
καὶ πηδάλιον τότε ναυκλήρω φράζει κρεμάσαντι
καθεύδειν,
εἴτα δ' Ὀρέστη χλαῖναν ὑφαίνειν, ἵνα μὴ ριγῶν
ἀποδύη.
ἰκτῖνος δ' αὖ μετὰ ταῦτα φανείς ἐτέραν ὥραν
ἀποφαίνει,
ἠνίκα πεκτεῖν ὥρα προβάτων πόκον ἠρινόν: εἴτα
χελιδών,
715) ὅτε χρή χλαῖναν πωλεῖν ἤδη καὶ ληδάριον τι
πρίασθαι.
ἔσμεν δ' ὑμῖν Ἄμμων Δελφοὶ Δωδώνη Φοῖβος
Ἀπόλλων.
ἐλθόντες γὰρ πρῶτον ἐπ' ὄρνις οὕτω πρὸς ἅπαντα
τρέπεσθε,
πρὸς τ' ἐμπορίαν, καὶ πρὸς βίотου κτήσιν, καὶ πρὸς

are the fair boys who swore they wouldn't, and
almost made it to the end of their eligible bloom,
but thanks to our power men in love did get
between their thighs, one with the gift of a quail,
another with a porphyrion, a goose, or a Persian
bird.

Chorus

And mortals get all their greatest blessings from
us birds. To start with, we reveal the seasons of
spring, winter, and autumn. It's time to sow when
the crane whoops off to Africa; that's when it tells
the shipowner to hang up his rudder and go to
sleep, and Orestes⁵⁶ to weave a cloak so he won't
be cold when he's out mugging people. And then
it's the kite's turn to appear and reveal another
season, when it's time to shear the sheep's spring
wool. And then there's the swallow when you
should be selling your coat and buying a jacket.

And we're your Ammon,⁵⁷ your Delphi, your
Dodona,⁵⁸ your Phoebus Apollo, for you don't
embark on any course without first consulting the
birds—about business, about acquiring a
livelihood, about a man's getting married.
Whatever's decisive in prophecy you deem a bird:

γάμον ἀνδρός.

ὄρνιν τε νομίζετε πάνθ' ὅσαπερ περὶ μαντείας
διακρίνει:

720) φήμη γ' ὑμῖν ὄρνις ἐστί, πταρμόν τ' ὄρνιθα
καλεῖτε,

ξύμβολον ὄρνιν, φωνήν ὄρνιν, θεράποντ' ὄρνιν,
ὄνον ὄρνιν.

ἄρ' οὐ φανερώς ἡμεῖς ὑμῖν ἐσμὲν μαντεῖος

Ἀπόλλων;

to you, an ominous utterance is a bird, a sneeze
you call a bird, a chance meeting's a bird, a
sound's a bird, a good-luck servant's a bird, a
braying donkey's a bird. So aren't we obviously
your prophetic Apollo?

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