

Bath Time: Three Homeric Bathing Scenes and Greek Marriage

This paper argues that Aphrodite's extended *toilette* type-scene (bathing and dressing) in the fifth Homeric Hymn, the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (*hAphr.* 58-63) reflects traditional practices of a Greek bride preparing for her wedding and promoting her fertility. Recent scholarship has shown that the scene shares common language and themes with Hera's *toilette* as preparation to seduce Zeus in *Iliad* XIV and Aphrodite's *toilette* in Demodokos' song the *Lay of Aphrodite and Ares* in *Odyssey* viii. S.D. Olson in his text and commentary on the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* lists common language between the *Hymn* and the Homeric epics, writing that the poem "interacts creatively and often aggressively with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in particular, the most obvious example of the tendency being perhaps 59-68, which rework and combine Aphrodite's visit to Paphos after she and Ares are caught in bed together by Hephaistos in *Odyssey* 8, on the one hand, and Hera's retreat into her bedchamber to prepare to seduce Zeus in *Iliad* 14, on the other" (Olson, 2012). In the *Hymn*, Aphrodite shuts the doors of her temple before beginning her *toilette*. The shutting of the doors is in language (*hAphr.* 60) exactly matching that of the identical action during Hera's *toilette* in preparation to seduce Zeus in *Iliad* XIV (*Il.* 14.169) *entha he g'eiselthousa thyras epetheke phainas*.

Cora Sowa noted that all three works, the *Hymn*, the *hieros gamos* of *Iliad* XIV, and the *Lay* share numerous common motifs which she laid out in tabular form (Sowa, 1984). In all three Homeric works, a goddess (Aphrodite or Hera) beds a male (Anchises, Zeus, and Ares), and deceives a male (Anchises, Zeus, Hephaistos). In all three works, Aphrodite's own power is arrogated or adopted and used against her to expose her to the treatment she has inflicted upon others. In the *Hymn*, Zeus casts desire into her for the mortal Anchises because she has been boasting among all the gods of causing deities to mix with mortals in love, resulting in semi-

divine offspring. In *Iliad* XIV Hera borrows Aphrodite's girdle, purportedly to reunite Okeanos and Tethys, in reality to seduce Zeus and further the cause of the Greeks in the war attributable to Aphrodite, in which the latter has supported the Trojan cause. In the *Lay of Odyssey* viii, Hephaistos entraps Aphrodite so that her affair with Ares is exposed to the gods and the humiliation he feels is inflicted upon her and Ares. Holmberg has argued that Hephaistos' woven trap is a metaphor for Aphrodite's own power of deceit, and this power is used to entrap the cuckolding couple (Holmberg 2003).

Although the bathing scenes in the three works are related, one significant difference in *Odyssey* viii is that in the *Lay*, Aphrodite's bath comes *after* she has bedded with Ares and not before. In the other two works, the goddess' toilette scene is in preparation for a seduction. In the *Hymn*, it is part of Aphrodite's extended deceit of Anchises in which as the supposed mortal noble daughter of Otreus she extends the fictional possibility of marriage.

The bathing scene represents a customary step in preparation for marriage to increase the fertility of the bather, a practice attested outside Archaic poetry by its common depiction on Attic wedding vases (Oakley and Sinos, 1993). The lovemaking in the *Hymn* and *Iliad* XIV can both be regarded as *hieroi gamoi* and both result in fertility, with Aphrodite conceiving Aeneas and the famous sprouting of vegetation on Ida. Aphrodite's *toilette* in the *Hymn* is part of a conventional marriage whose fiction is exposed only after Aphrodite and Anchises have made love. However, there is no mention of any resultant fertility in the *Lay*, and none would be expected because Aphrodite's bath follows her lovemaking with Ares. Because the goddess' bath is both an essential stock-in-trade step to seduce and also a rite to increase fertility, in casting desire for Anchises into Aphrodite Zeus sets off a chain of events which predictably result in

Aphrodite experiencing the very thing she has been visiting upon other Olympians - not only simply desire for and sex with a mortal, but also conception and birth of a demigod child.

References Cited

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