More Stubborn than the Sea: Erotic Passion and Water in Myth

Within ancient Greek myths that prominently feature rape, there is a connection between the sea and violent, erotic passion. For the Greeks, the sea was not only an integral part of daily life but also a source of fear and chaos. Despite its geographical ubiquity, many Greek myths contain a connection between acts of violent erotic passion and water. Ultimately, water--and more specifically the sea--represents violence and appears contrary to Greek notions of temperance (σωφροσύνη and μηδέν ἄγαν). As Thornton states, the Greeks' "dependence on and fear of the sea made it, storms, and shipwreck the most common metaphor for chaos and disorder, an image most Greeks could feel in their bones" (1997, 35). In Greek poetry, falling in love and certain sexual acts are sometimes described with aquatic and boating metaphors (Thornton 1997, 36-37). The sea is uncontrollable, unpredictable, but is nonetheless life-giving. In the same way, erotic love is also a source of life, but when in excess, uncontrollably leads to violence and heartbreak. This paper will explore this motif within particular myths. It will include a close reading of the birth of Aphrodite from Hesiod's *Theogony*, Poseidon's interaction with Tyro in Homer's *Odyssey* and Caenis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Achilles' and Deidamia's relationship in Statius's *Achilleid.*

The birth of Aphrodite in Hesiod's *Theogony* (154-206) creates a theological connection between violent passion and the sea. From the foam that forms around Uranus' severed genitals that penetrate the water, Aphrodite, the goddess of love and passion, is born in the sea. The sea is not described as calm but as πολύκλυστος (189: "much-dashing" or "stormy"). Here are the shared characteristics of passion and water. Uranus's passion produces children, and the stormy water produces Aphrodite, but both are turbulent. The goddess of sexual desire arises from severed sexual organs in the turbulent sea from a violent sexual encounter. Sexual violence and water beget Aphrodite, and these things define her realm.

The motif of water and violent passion is also present within Poseidon's interaction with Tyro (Homer, *Od.* 11.235-259) and Caenis (Ovid, *Met.* 12.168-209). These examples highlight the

shapeshifting quality of the sea and passion. First, Homer recounts that the princess Tyro, despite her self-proclaimed engagement to king Cretheus, was in love with the river Enipeus, something mortal women rarely do according to Gantz 1993, 172. Poseidon, the Gaea-holding (γαιήοχος: *Od.* 11.241) god of the sea, takes advantage of her immoderate love and, mad with passion, rapes her after shapeshifting into Enipeus (*Od.* 11.241-245). Poseidon first puts her to sleep, as though she has drowned (11.245) There is intemperance from both Tyro and Poseidon. Tyro was already unfaithful to her husband and unnaturally longed for a god, and Poseidon uncontrollably acted on violent passions, changing his slippery form. Nevertheless, despite the chaos, Tyro births two powerful children, Pelias and Neleus.

Second, the woman-born Caenis is transformed into the man Caeneus because of her intemperate disdain for marriage and Poseidon's violent desires. While she was walking along the shore of Thessaly, Poseidon is violently struck by Caenis's beauty and rapes her (*Met.* 12.195-197). In return, Poseidon grants her a wish, and she asks that she be transformed into a man so that she would never again suffer such violence. The examples of Tyro and Caenis show not only the violent and uncontrollable nature of passion and the sea, but also their proclivity to change shape.

Finally, the connection between immoderate passion and the sea is also present in the scenes of Deidamia and Achilles in book I of Statius's *Achilleid*. There are several watery elements. Thetis, the Nereid, decides to hide Achilles away on the island of Scyros, which was celebrating the day of Littoral Athena (1.285: *Palladi litoreae*). Here Achilles, having crossed the gender boundary by being dressed as a woman, falls terribly in love with Deidamia. Achilles laments that his nature as a fierce, manly warrior has been suppressed on this island by his wearing women's clothes (624-639). Ultimately, Achilles and Deidamia have a child, but their wild throes of passion end in tragedy. The violence, however, is psychological. For, despite his passion, Achilles fully abandons Deidamia and their child, since "his secret love means nothing, Troy alone is in his heart" (1.856: *nusquam occultus amor, totoque in pectore Troia est*).

Works Cited

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Thornton, Bruce. 1997. *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*. Colorado, Boulder: Westview Press.