

Gendered Relations: The *H.Aph.* as a Prelude to *Odyssey* Books 5-7

Although scholars have interpreted the *Hymn to Aphrodite* by historicizing potential performance venues and audiences, there is a lack of discussion concerning the relationship between this hymn and other poems of that same performance (cf. Clay 1989, Faulkner 2008). Using Wolf's theory that rhapsodes composed the *Homeric Hymns* as preludes to performance of epic to which they were thematically appropriate, I will propose that the *Hymn to Aphrodite* served as a prelude to books 5 through 7 of the *Odyssey* (Wolf 1795, 111-112). Through this understanding of the *H. Aph.* as a prelude we can resolve the structural problem of the digression of the virgin goddesses (*H.Aph.* 7-33) and unlock how the Greeks were able to describe the sexual identities of the goddesses even though these exploits violated the Greek perception of proper female sexuality.

Considering the abrupt transition from the Telemachy (books 1-4) to book 5, in which the audience is first introduced to the protagonist, it is likely that book 5 served as the beginning of an epic performance and thus, as Wolf suggests, would require a hymnic prelude. Book 5 begins with a deviation of the typical Dawn formula which indicates the start of a new day.

*And Dawn rose from her bed beside noble Tithonus to carry the light for
immortals and for men. (Od. 5.1-2)*

Out of the forty-two times in which Homer employs this formula in the *Odyssey*, this is the only time in which Tithonus or a bed is mentioned. This sexual relationship between Dawn and her mortal lover is emphasized again when Calypso laments about the double standard between gods and goddesses (*Od.* 5.121-124) and is echoed in the *H. Aph.* when Aphrodite tells Anchises about Dawn and Tithonus' tragic love story (lines 218-224). These strong parallels encourage

one to read these two poems together, offering an example to support Wolf's foundational research.

After establishing the possibility that the *H. Aph.* could serve as a prelude for books 5-7 of the *Odyssey*, the two poems complement each other to emphasize the theme of restricted female sexuality and how this ideal affects the sexually active goddesses. We see this theme played out in both the hymn and epic by the parallels between the three virgin goddesses, praised in the *H. Aph.* and the female characters in the *Odyssey*. The rhapsode of the *H. Aph.* devotes twenty-six lines to a digression about the three virgin goddesses, an oddity considering the hymn is addressed to the goddess of sex (cf Strolonga 2012, Turkeltaub 2003). In this paper I show that the digression of the virgins is in fact not a digression at all, but rather it establishes for the audience a theme for the entire performance. While Athena shows young girls how to perfect their gendered duties and prepare for a husband by reminding Nausicaa of her feminine goals in a dream (*Od.* 6.25-40), Artemis symbolizes the union of the sexes as Nausicaa embodies Artemis, both through a simile (*Od.* 6.102-109) and through Odysseus' perception (*Od.* 6.149-152), as she meets the sea-battered stranger. On the other hand, Hestia epitomizes the ideal wife and household manager through Arete, emphasizing the appropriate outlet for female sexuality. With the help of the virgin goddesses the Greeks have no problem depicting these stages in a mortal woman's life; however, when they try to employ these same templates for the sexually active goddesses they fail. When Aphrodite attempts to imitate Artemis while seducing Anchises, her failures highlight how the Greeks had difficulty constructing the goddesses' sexual identities without their societal notion of restricted female sexuality influencing their portray of the goddesses (lines 117-120).

By examining parallel themes between hymns and epics, we can identify possible preludes to sections of epic with the result that this combination might be able to reveal historically-conscious and societally relevant literary interpretations.

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