

The vocabulary of Erotism in Nonnus of Panopolis' *Dionysiaca*

Nonnus of Panopolis' greatest debt in the *Dionysiaca* is to the “father Homer” whom he repeatedly tries to one-up, literally in Hera's two borrowings of a *cestus*, Aphrodite's “charmed girdle” and Deceit's. Nonnus' approximately seven-hundred mentions of Aphrodite and Eros, however, outpace Homer's fifty by a factor of fourteen; the *Dionysiaca* could be subtitled *Aphrodisiaca-Erotica* for the ubiquitous presence of Nonnus' “the Loves.” Winkler's PhD thesis (1974) anticipated the “take off” in Nonnian scholarship by decades, but his treatment of “comedy and sex” in the “Tales of Dionysos” is only cited once in the three *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context* volumes to appear beginning in 2014. That “sex” in the *Dionysiaca* has been an unappetizing research topic must have something to do with its problematic, disturbing, even pornographic nature—drugged rapes, one leading to post-partum depression and infanticide, homoerotism, transvestism, self-castration, erotized lactation, sexualized battlefield carnage, voyeurism, etc. This paper engages with “sex” in the *Dionysiaca* by exploring one example of Nonnus' un-Homeric vocabulary of Erotism, *zoster* and *mitra*, no longer masculine battlefield gear, but also not the ambiguous, Victorian “maiden's girdle” of the 1940 Loeb edition, still the only English translation (Rouse). I can often identify these as, respectively, women's underwear tops and bottoms, central to understanding scenes of transvestism, rape, and voyeurism.

Book 4 of the *Iliad* begins with Menelaus being wounded by an arrow that has been first provoked and then deflected by Athena. In similar passages, the hero and the narrator describe the three layers of protective gear that the arrow penetrates, the ζωστήρ (*zoster*), ζῶμα (*zoma*), and μίτρα (*mitra*). From Kirk's *Iliad* commentary, “Neither the ζωστήρ (belt or girdle) nor the μίτρα ... are well understood.” In addition to their primary Homeric definitions, the *LSJ* gives a

secondary equivalence for all three to the mysterious “maiden’s girdle.” Nonnus uses *zoster* seventeen times, the same as Homer, but the sixty occurrences of *mitra* overwhelm Homer’s four. Nonnus never uses these words for masculine battlefield gear but, rather, for women’s underwear, often a set including top and bottom. Such garments in late antiquity are attested in the mis-named “Bikini girls” mosaic from Sicily, which depicts women athletes in two-piece sportswear. Nonnus can be inconsistent in his use of *mitra*, which first appears as a “breast band” in the Rape of Europa (1.347). In subsequent uses, it is more often an underwear bottom. Ironically, this is most explicit in the case of a cross-dressing, boy-girlish Dionysus (14.159-167). In order to escape the gaze, and “mislead the mind of spiteful Hera,” he dons the foundational “maiden’s *zoster*” at his chest and, around his loins, the “encircling *mitra*,” which I construe as both going around the hips and through the crotch. This is confirmed in the first of two Eros-propelled, divine-retribution, wine-enabled rapes, when a now sexually, if not emotionally, mature Dionysus undoes the knot of the *mitra* of the passed-out-drunk, Artemis-devotee-virgin Nicaia—I imitate here the wordsmith, Nonnus—in order to expose her vulva. She wears the equivalent of a “tie bikini bottom.”

Winkler emphasized Nonnus’ use of voyeurism and the “gaze,” male, female, and divine. In the *Dionysiaca*, contra Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, Dionysus’ cousin, Actaion, is not a hapless victim of (mis)fortune but an active, concealed gawker of disrobing-about-to-bathe Artemis (5.311-315) (Paschalis 2014). Nonnus’ modern readers, like his late-antique audience, become vicarious voyeurs as, in their *phantasia*, they witness Artemis, through the eyes of Actaion, as she unwittingly performs a striptease. She first removes her himation to reveal herself in just her underwear, then the “encircling *mitra*” comes off, and, finally, the “maiden *zoster*” that covers her “modest breasts” (σαόφρονας μαζούς). At the moment of complete undress, the scream of

an already naked nymph alerts Artemis to the presence, but not location, of the peeping Actaion, positioned on the opposite bank of the stream to behold full-frontal-divine-virgin nudity. With *zoster* still in hand, Artemis covers the modest breasts, but Nonnus then has her grab the other two garments so that, “half revealed” (the bottom half), she “sank with gliding limbs into the water, until little by little all her form was hidden,” in a kind of late-antique, “porno slow-mo.”

It was once thought, now believed mistakenly, that a pre-conversion, pagan Nonnus composed the *Dionysiaca* before the Christian one paraphrased the Gospel of John, the *Paraphrasis*. Militantly Christian discourse may have equated the former’s Hellenism with paganism, but the late-antique Near East of Nonnus was more complicated than simple pagan/Christian binarism.

Bibliography

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