



Classical variations on a story about an Egyptian queen in love

Citation

Nagy, G. 2015.07.15. "Classical variations on a story about an Egyptian queen in love." Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

Published Version

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Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

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July 15, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy, H24H

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In this posting for 2015.07.15, I concentrate on Poem 66 of Catullus, which is a remaking or even a “translation” of a poem of Callimachus known as the Lock of Berenice (Coma Berenices, Callimachus fragment 110 ed. Pfeiffer). These two poems are about an Egyptian queen who dedicated a lock of her hair to Aphrodite, goddess of love and sexuality.

§1. In this posting for 2015.07.15, I concentrate on Poem 66 of Catullus, which is a remaking or even a “translation” of a poem of Callimachus known as the Lock of Berenice (Coma Berenices, Callimachus fragment 110 ed. Pfeiffer). These two poems are about an Egyptian queen who dedicated a lock of her hair to Aphrodite, goddess of love and sexuality. Here is the historical background, reconstructed from the poems and from independent sources concerning the Hellenistic era of Egypt:

The Egyptian queen here is Berenice II, who, shortly after her marriage in 246 BCE to the king Ptolemy III Euergetes, had vowed to shear off a lock of her hair if her husband, who had gone off to Syria on a military expedition, came back home safely. After Ptolemy’s safe return from war, the queen’s lock of hair was duly shorn off and dedicated to Aphrodite in her temple—only to disappear and then miraculously reappear as a constellation in the heavens. That is what both the Greek and the Latin poems say, highlighting the passionate love of the queen for the king.

As we read in the poem of Catullus, the lock of Berenice is shorn from a vertex or ‘head of hair’ that is pointedly described as ‘blond’ or flavus. Here is what the personified lock of hair says about itself:

||₅₉ inde Venus vario ne solum in lumine caeli |₆₀ ex Ariadneis aurea temporibus ||₆₁ fixa corona foret, sed nos quoque fulgeremus, |₆₂ devotae flavi verticis exuvia, ||₆₃ uvidulam a fluctu cedentem ad templa deum me |₆₄ sidus in antiquis diva novum posuit: ||₆₅ Virginis et saevi contingens namque Leonis |₆₆ lumina, Callisto iuncta Lycaoniae, ||₆₇ vector in occasum, tardum dux ante Booten, |₆₈ qui vix sero alto mergitur Oceano.

||₅₉ Then Venus,[1] intending to make sure that, in the varied light of the sky, |₆₀ the golden thing originating from the head of Ariadne, ||₆₁ her garland [corona], should not be alone in having a fixed place there [in the sky], but rather, that I too [= the lock of Berenice] should send forth a flashing light, |₆₂ votive prize that I am, originating from a blond [flavus] head of hair [vertex], ||₆₃ me, dripping wet from the rough seas of my weeping while heading straight for the celestial zones of the gods, |₆₄ me did the goddess [Venus] situate, in the midst of old constellations, as a new one. ||₆₅ For, right next to the lights of Virgo and savage Leo, |₆₆ next to their radiances, and joined to Callisto daughter of Lycaon, ||₆₇ I take my turn heading down into the western horizon, ahead of slow Boötes, |₆₈ who plunges ever too late into the deep river Okeanos.

Catullus [66.59–68](#)

The lock of hair that gets separated from the head of the queen Berenice and becomes a constellation in the heavens is paired here with a garland that gets separated from the hair of the mythical princess Ariadne. I offer here a brief outline of the relevant myth:

Minos, king of Crete and ruler of the Minoan Empire, had a daughter named Ariadne. After outwitting Minos by killing the monstrous Minotaur and escaping from the labyrinth of Knossos in Crete, the hero Theseus of Athens elopes with Ariadne and sails off with her to the island of Naxos in one version of the myth, or to the island of Dia in an older version. In the retelling of Pherecydes (FGrH 3 F 148) as mediated by the scholia MV for Odyssey 11.322, Ariadne and Theseus fall asleep on the shore of the island after having made love there. While they sleep, the goddess Athena appears in the middle of the night and wakes up Theseus, telling him to proceed to Athens and to leave Ariadne behind. When the princess wakes up in the morning and finds herself all alone on the shore, she laments pitiously. The goddess Aphrodite now appears to her, prophesying that the god Dionysus

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Keith Stone
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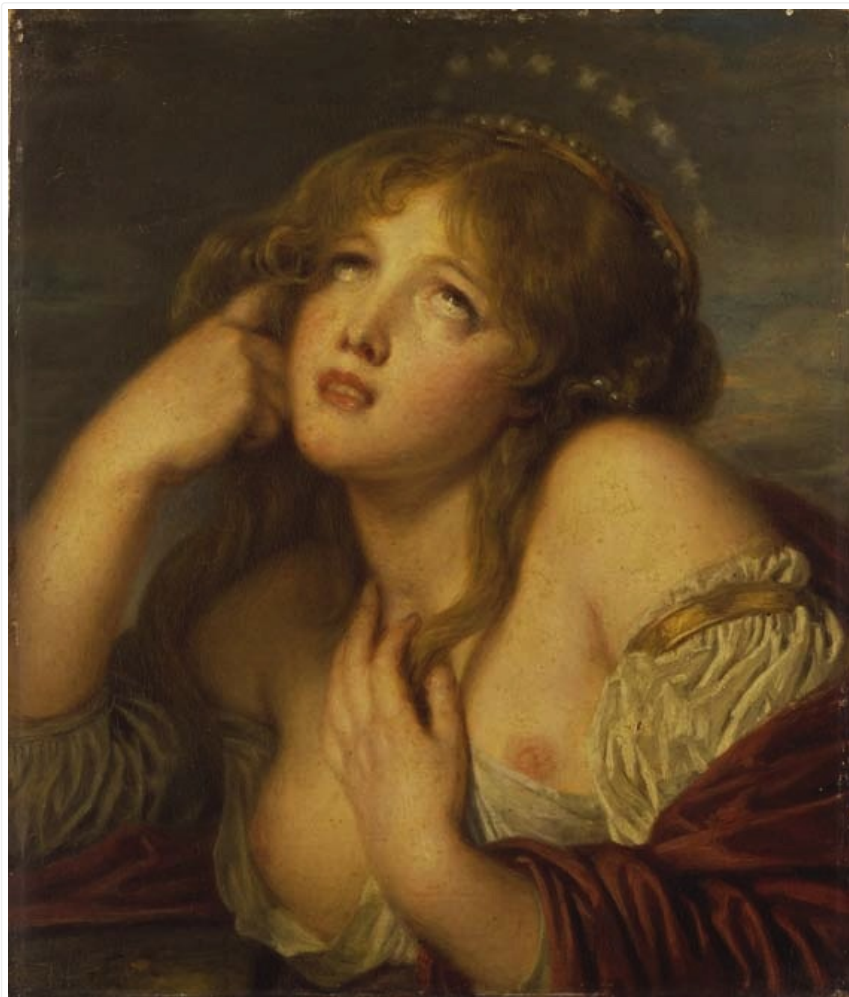
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will come and make her his woman. The prophecy is fulfilled, since Dionysus now comes to Ariadne and makes love to her, giving her a golden garland. Then the goddess Artemis kills Ariadne. But, as a compensation for the death of the princess, the garland that she wears in her hair is separated from her head and becomes a constellation known as the Stephanos or Corona of Ariadne. In the version of the story as retold by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* (8.168–181), it is the god Dionysus himself who transforms the golden garland of Ariadne into a constellation.

The part of the story that centers on the constellation itself is retold in many sources, as we can see from the succinct reportage we find in “Eratosthenes” *Katasterismoi* 27.5 and Hyginus *Astronomica* 2.5, and the mythological foundations of storytelling about such a constellation known as Ariadne’s Garland are actually most ancient, going all the way back to the Minoan-Mycenaean era.[2]

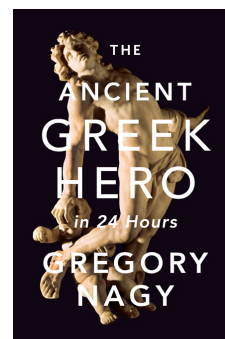
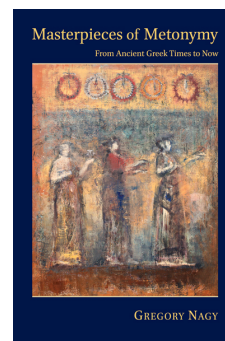


Ariadne with a halo of stars that combine as a constellation originating from her garland or 'crown'.
Ariadne, Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805).

§2. I focus here, however, not on the garland of Ariadne but on the vertex or 'head of hair' adorned by this garland. This vertex of Ariadne, as we are about to see, is flavus or 'blond'. At verse 62 of the passage I just quoted from Poem 66 of Catullus, we have seen that the vertex of Berenice the Egyptian queen is flavus. Now I turn to Poem 64 of Catullus, where we will see that the vertex of Ariadne the Minoan princess is likewise described as flavus. And I highlight in advance the fact that this description is synchronized with the moment when Ariadne discovers that she has been abandoned by her lover Theseus. The poem pictures her standing helplessly on the island shore, looking out toward the sea, when, all of a sudden, her hair comes undone as she sees the ship of her lover sailing away. At this moment, her beautiful head of hair or vertex is pointedly described as blond or flavus:

|₆₀ quem procul ex alga maestis Minois ocellis, |₆₁ saxea ut effigies bacchantis, prospicit,
eheu, |₆₂ prospicit et magnis curarum fluctuat undis, |₆₃ non flavo retinens subtilem
vertice mitram, |₆₄ non contacta levi velatum pectus amictu, |₆₅ non tereti strophio
lactentis vincta papillas, |₆₆ omnia quae toto delapsa e corpore passim |₆₇ ipsius ante
pedes fluctus salis alludebant.

|₆₀ She [= Ariadne] sees him [= Theseus] out there at sea from far away, far beyond the shore's seaweed. The daughter of Minos, with her sad little eyes, |₆₁ is like a stone statue of a Maenad as she stares, oh how sad! |₆₂ Staring she sees him out there, and she is tossed around in huge waves of anxieties. |₆₃ She loses control of the fine-woven headdress on her blond [flavus] head of hair [vertex]. |₆₄ Her chest is no longer covered



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by her light shawl. |₆₅ Her milk-white breasts are no longer held back within her smooth bodice. |₆₆ One by one, all her coverings slipped off altogether from her body, some here and some there, |₆₇ while the waves of the salt sea were frolicking in front of her feet.

Catullus [64.60–67](#)

At the very moment when Ariadne comes emotionally undone here, her hairdo likewise comes undone, and so too all her clothing comes undone. Now she looks like a perfect Maenad, that is, like a woman possessed by the Bacchic frenzy of the god Dionysus. It is the maenadic looks of Ariadne that attract Dionysus to her from afar, and, as we read in Catullus 64.253, the god is inflamed with passion for the princess as he now hastens toward her.

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Ariadne holding her garland or 'crown', which is star-studded, corresponding to the constellation of stars that her garland will become. Bacchus and Ariadne, Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835).

§3. The disheveled maenadic hair of Ariadne is blond, as we have just seen it described in Catullus 64.63, while the hair of Berenice is likewise blond, as we saw earlier in Catullus 66.62. And it is this blond hair of Berenice that now joins, as a constellation in the heavens, the garland that once adorned the blond hair of Ariadne. The garland becomes a perfect fit for the blond hair of the Egyptian queen. Garlands and hair go together.[3] They are meant for each other. So, now the garland of fair-haired Ariadne and the fair hair of Berenice are joined together at last, as paired constellations in the heavens.

§4. The blond hair of the Egyptian queen Berenice matches not only the blond hair of the Minoan princess Ariadne. It matches also, I argue, the blond hair of the Egyptian queen Nitōkris. I return here to my posting for 2015.07.01, where I analyzed a brief notice originating from the Egyptian historian Manetho, who lived in the third century BCE. As we read in this notice, the queen Nitōkris ruled toward the end of the 6th Dynasty, in the late third millennium BCE. In a surviving paraphrase from the work of Manetho, who composed in Greek, we read these further details about Nitōkris the queen:

Νίτωκρίς, γεννικωπάτη καὶ εὐμορφοτάτη τῶν κατ' αὐτὴν γενομένη, ξανθὴ τὴν χροιάν, ἢ τὴν τρίτην ἤγειρε πυραμίδα, ἐβασίλευσεν ἔτη ιβ'.

Nitōkris was the most noble and beautiful of all the women of her generation. She was fair [xanthē] in complexion [khroia]. It was she who erected the third pyramid. She ruled for twelve years.

Manetho FGrH 609 F 2 (p. 26) lines 18–21

In [my posting for 2015.07.01](#), as also in [my posting for 2015.07.08](#), I translated the Greek word xanthē in this passage as 'fair', recalling the English expression 'fair-haired', and I allowed for the alternative translation 'blonde': according to the relevant paraphrase of Manetho by Eusebius in this context, the description of Nitōkris in the surviving Armenian translation of Eusebius's original Greek wording is rendered in Latin as *flava rubris genis* 'blonde with blushing cheeks'. These descriptions of Nitōkris, as we have seen in my earlier postings, correspond closely to the meaning of the Greek name Rhodōpis, 'the one with the rosy face'—or 'the one with the rosy looks'. And such correspondences, as we have also seen,

point to a pattern of estheticizing that verges on a kind of eroticizing. And this eroticizing leads to mental associations identifying a courtesan with a queen who supposedly built the third pyramid at Giza.

§5. A striking parallel to the meaning of the Greek name Rhodōpis, as I mentioned in [my posting for 2015.07.08](#), is the portrayal of the sensuous Beroe, daughter of Aphrodite and Adonis, in the Dionysiaca of Nonnus (42.75–78): the cheeks of this nymph are described as 'having rosy looks [rhodoeidea]' (77: ῥοδοειδέα) and showing a natural blush that needs no cosmetics simulating 'the complexion [khrōs-] of a blonde [xanthē]' (76: ξανθόχροϊ κόμῳ). I must now add that the context of this description is Bacchic: the sensuous nymph Beroe is said to be attracting here the passionate attention of the god Dionysus himself.

§6. The blond hair of the Minoan princess Ariadne, viewed in the context of her disheveled Bacchic frenzy, also matches the blond hair of the Carthaginian queen Dido in Virgil's Aeneid (4.590: flavesque abscissa comas), which is being shorn off at the very moment when she too, like Ariadne, comes emotionally undone. Just as Ariadne was abandoned by Theseus, Dido was abandoned by Aeneas.



Dido on the funeral pyre, which will be lit after her suicide, while the ship of Aeneas is seen sailing away toward the horizon. La morte di Didone, Guercino (1591–1666).

§7. At a later point in the Aeneid, during his sojourn in Hades, Aeneas encounters the shade of his former lover, the queen Dido, who has committed suicide after he abandoned her in Carthage. Aeneas says to Dido:

|₄₅₆ infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo |₄₅₇ venerat extinctam ferroque extrema
secutam? |₄₅₈ funeris heu tibi causa fui? per sidera iuro, |₄₅₉ per superos et si qua fides
tellure sub ima est, |₄₆₀ invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi. |₄₆₁ sed me iussa deum, quae
nunc has ire per umbras, |₄₆₂ per loca senta situ cogunt noctemque profundam, |₄₆₃
imperii egere suis.

|₄₅₆ Unfortunate Dido! So it was true, then, the news that I got. |₄₅₇ It [= the news] came
to me and said that you had perished, that you had followed through on your final
moments with a sword. |₄₅₈ So your death, ah, was caused by me? But I swear by the
stars, |₄₅₉ and by the powers above—and by anything here that I could swear by, under
the earth in its deepest parts: |₄₆₀ Unwillingly, O queen, did I depart from your shore
[litus]. |₄₆₁ But I was driven by the orders of the gods, which force me even now to pass
through the shades, |₄₆₂ passing through places stained with decay, and through the
deepest night. |₄₆₃ Yes, I was driven by their projects of empire.

Virgil Aeneid [6.456–463](#)

In verse 460 of this passage, the poet is making a reference to a verse in Poem 66 of Catullus, where a lock of hair originating from another queen, Berenice, is speaking:

invita, o regina, tuo de vertice cessi

Unwillingly, O queen, did I depart from the top of your head [vertex].

So far, I have argued that the lock of hair that gets severed from the head of Berenice and becomes a constellation in the sky is parallel to the Garland of Ariadne. But now I argue further that the verse *invitus regina . . .* in Aeneid 6.460, referring to the doomed love affair of Dido and Aeneas, refers also to a poetic tradition about the doomed love affair of Ariadne and Theseus; and this additional reference is achieved through the intermediacy of the verse *invita, o regina . . .* in Catullus 66.39.^[4]



Dido, as imagined by contemporary medievalists who admire this generic image of a beautiful queen wearing a 'crown' that adorns her unruly blond tresses. Tapestry by William Morris (1834–1896).

§8. Just as Theseus rejected Ariadne in the Athenian version of the myth, so also Aeneas rejected Dido in the story of their doomed love affair. After all, as Leonard Muellner has noted, the moralistic as well as ritualistic temperament of Aeneas as the future founder of the Roman empire is ultimately incompatible with the *furor* or 'frenzy' of Dido. In the narrative about the death of Dido in Aeneid 4, as Muellner has also noted, we see a clear sign of this incompatibility:

When the self-destructive fire of passionate love within her emerges as the fire of her funeral pyre, she [= Dido] cannot actually die. As a person invested with *furor* by Venus, she is by definition hostile to *fatum*, to Aeneas' destiny to be sure, but even to her own wished-for death, which should not have happened at this point in her life. So a *dea ex machina*, Iris the rainbow goddess, is sent from heaven by Juno to effectuate the impossible.^[5]

Here Muellner cites the actual verses of Aeneid 4.696–705, where Iris finally shears off a lock of blond hair from the head of Dido, ending it all for the doomed lover of Aeneas. I quote here only the beginning of the scene:

|₆₉₆ nam quia nec fato merita nec morte peribat |₆₉₇ sed misera ante diem subitoque
accensa furore |₆₉₈ nondum illi flavum Proserpina vertice crinem |₆₉₉ abstulerat.

|₆₉₆ For, since she was about to die neither by fate nor by a deserved death, |₆₉₇ but before her day, the poor wretch, inflamed as she was by her sudden frenzy [*furor*], |₆₉₈ it had not yet happened to her that the blond [*flavus*] hair on the top of her head [*vertex*], at the hands of the goddess of death, |₆₉₉ was to be taken away from her.

Virgil Aeneid [4.696–699](#)

Just as Dido experiences a Bacchic *furor* or 'frenzy' in reaction to her abandonment by Aeneas, thus showing her incompatibility with the future founder of the Roman Empire, so also Ariadne in Catullus 64 is *furens* 'frenzied' in verse 124, experiencing *furores* 'moments of frenzy' in verses 54 and 94. In this reaction, Ariadne shows her own incompatibility with Theseus, that future founder of the Athenian Empire. But this same incompatibility translates into a compatibility with Bacchus. More than that, it translates into an attraction, even a fatal attraction, since Ariadne, in her Bacchic frenzy, attracted the attention of Dionysus.^[6]

Dedicatory Postscript

This essay is dedicated to Stamatia Androna, Leighton Braunstein, Maria Brouard, Meredith Brown, Chao Chen, Brooke Cheney, Annie Dang, Kanon Dean, Nakoa Farrant, Mattha Galakouti, Kathryn Gunderson, Jack Jue, Veronica Kane, Michael Kikukawa, Emma Kromm, Sally Marsh, Jiha Min, Kaveh Motamedy, Christabel Narh, Colleen O'Leary, Maryrose Robson, Andrew Secondine, Xiaoxia Tang, Nicola Xanthopoulos,

Shao Zhao. They were participants in a seminar that I organized at Olympia in Greece, 2015 July 5–12. It was a delight for me to work with them. And it was an honor for me as a philhellene to be in Greece on July 5. My personal opinion is that this day was a historic moment when Greek voters made a clear choice about their country's future. It was hardly the first time that Greeks have said "no" in times of crisis.

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Notes

[1] The verb that goes with the subject "Venus" is postponed until verse 64.

[2] Blech 1982:259–62. In Nagy 2013, I survey some of the major variations in surviving myths about Ariadne's garland.

[3] I elaborate on this formulation in the Epilogue of Nagy 2015.

[4] This argument was first presented in Nagy 2013.

[5] Muellner 2012.

[6] This paragraph repeats my argumentation in Nagy 2013.

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