On weaving and sewing as metaphors for ancient Greek verbal arts

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For example:

On weaving and sewing as metaphors for ancient Greek verbal arts

January 19, 2017  By Gregory Nagy

In the light of new research published on the technologies of fabric work in premodern societies, I have been rethinking my formulations about traditional metaphors that were used in ancient Greek verbal arts for the original purpose of comparing these arts to the arts of weaving and sewing.

New research on fabric work, as reflected in a new book

§1. This posting for 2017.01.19 picks up from where I left off at a posting from almost exactly a year ago, 2016.01.07, which had picked up from where I had left off at the posting for 2015.12.03, which in turn had picked up on a sequence of even earlier relevant postings: 2015.11.19, 2015.11.05, 2015.10.22,
2015.10.08, 2015.10.01. Most of these postings involve, one way or another, my ongoing interest in traditional metaphors that were used in ancient Greek verbal arts for the original purpose of comparing these arts to the arts of weaving and sewing. This interest of mine, as made evident in the postings that I
have cited, has been rekindled with the appearance of a new book dealing the technologies of fabric work in premodern societies. As I read this book, which takes into account some important new research on such technologies, I feel the need to rethink some of my own formulations concerning metaphors of weaving and sewing as reflected in the ancient Greek verbal arts.

§2. The book has a most appropriate title: Spinning Fates and the Song of the Loom: The Use of Textiles, Clothing and Cloth Production as Metaphor, Symbol and Narrative Device in Greek and Latin Literature. Hereafter, I will refer to this book simply as Spinning. It was published in 2016, resulting from two symposia held at the Centre for Textile Research, University of Copenhagen, in 2012 and 2013. There are three editors: Giovanni Fanfani, Mary Harlow, and Marie-Louise Nosch. They kindly sent the book to me and appended a collegial note, which I treasure.

§3. One of the editors, Marie-Louise Nosch, hereafter MLN, is Director of the Danish National Research Foundation’s Centre for Textile Research, University of Copenhagen. MLN has in the past already helped me enormously in an e-mail exchange that prompted me to rethink the ancient Greek contexts of the word keris, which I used to translate as 'shuttle' but now interpret as 'weaving pin', as at §§4–15 of my posting for 2016.01.07. (within my analysis at §§4–15, I highlight the views of MLN, as also the relevant views of Edmunds 2012, whose work is listed in the Bibliography below). I happily record here my gratitude to my valued colleague MLN not only for her previous help to me but also for her important role in bringing to light the valuable collection of chapters in the book Spinning.

§4. In Spinning, many of the chapters refer to my analyses of ancient Greek metaphorizations of weaving and sewing with reference to the verbal arts. In my present posting, 2017.01.19, I focus on only one of those chapters. I have in mind Chapter 5 of Spinning, "(B)orders in Ancient Weaving and Archaic Greek Poetry," co-authored by Ellen Harlilius-Klück and Giovanni Fanfani—I will refer hereafter to the two of them as EHK/GF. The second of these co-authors, who as I noted in §2 is also one of the co-editors of Spinning, has been in e-mail communication with me ever since the fall of 2014, and I now put on record here my happy memories of our friendly exchanges. But I blame myself, as I look back on our e-mail correspondences, that I never brought to his attention one of my most relevant publications. In any case, there is no reference in the chapter of EHK/GF to that particular publication of mine. The work I have in mind is the book Homer the Preclassic, Nagy 2010[2009], which is a twin of Homer the Classic, 2009[2008]. Both these books are listed in my Bibliography below, and, from here on, I will refer to them simply as HPC and HC respectively. In the case of HPC, my upcoming references to the content will indicate only the page-numbers of the printed version (2010), not the paragraph-numbers of the online version (2009). By contrast with the younger twin book, HPC (printed 2010), the older twin book HC (printed 2009) is in fact regularly cited by EHK/GF, and they refer in a variety of productive ways to my formulations in that book. EHK/GF also cite and use other relevant books of mine, which I list here by way of abbreviations that are unpacked in my Bibliography below: PH (1990), PasP (1996), PR (2002). As grateful as I am to EHK/GF for their most helpful interactions with these works of mine, I will nevertheless concentrate here on HPC (2010), which I hope will lead to still further interactions.

§5. References to HPC (2010) are missing not only in the chapter of EHK/GF but also in all the other chapters in Spinning. And yet, there is so much overall convergence in topics of interest for HPC and Spinning that, coincidentally, even the image on the cover of HPC, which is a close-up of Moira and the three Muses as painted on the so-called François Vase, matches the image on the cover of Spinning (for more on this image, I recommend the illuminating comments of EHK/GF pp. 95–96).

§6. The absence of references in Spinning to HPC (2010)—as also to another relevant work of mine, an article on the Homeric Hymns, which is abbreviated as EPR (2011) in my Bibliography below—does not worry me, since I have the opportunity here to engage in what I hope will lead to further contacts with EHK and GF, either in published or in conversational form, and I am certain that such contacts will be most collegial and productive in promoting further research on the metaphors of weaving and sewing. One possible context for future interactions might be the medium that I use for my posting here, which is an online rapid-publication project sponsored by Harvard University’s Center for Hellenic Studies: Classical Inquiries. In any case, the posting that I offer here will I hope be the beginning of future contacts among researchers interested in the metaphorical worlds of weaving and sewing in the ancient world. With such hopes in mind, I have included in the Bibliography below some studies that may be relevant to such future contacts: Burns 2002, Koutsobina 2008, Levaníouk 2011, Papadopoulou-Belmehdi 1994.

Rethinking a formulation about weaving and sewing

§7. In Chapter 5 of Spinning, “(B)orders in Ancient Weaving and Archaic Greek Poetry,” the argumentation of GF/EHK p. 69 has persuaded me to rethink my formulation about the relationship between weaving and sewing as alternative metaphors for the verbal arts of songmaking and poetry. Here is my formulation, at PasP (1996) pp. 65–66: “As we juxtapose these two metaphors for songmaking in archaic Greek traditions, weaving and sewing, we discover that the second of the two is more complex than the first.” GF/EHK p. 69 disagree: “we will show that weaving in archaic times was far more complex than sewing and much better suited to integrate different types of fabric into a unified whole.” I must say, however, in my defense: GF/EHK are speaking here about the technologies of weaving and sewing, whereas I was speaking about the metaphors of weaving and sewing.

§8. I take the point made by GF/EHK pp. 69 and 87, that weaving in the ancient world was basically more complex than sewing. And I also take their point that modern preconceptions about weaving and sewing must not distort our view of the ancient realities. Whereas woven cloth is mass-produced and potentially cheap in the modern world, needing to be cut and sewn to suit the body, woven cloth in the
ancient world was potentially a prized work of art in its own right, ordinarily not needing to be "tailored" by way of cutting—or even by way of sewing different pieces of fabric together in order to produce an article of clothing in its entirety. The weaving itself would suffice to produce the clothing.

§9. Well and good. So, the technology of weaving could be complex and essential for making precious cloth, while the technology of sewing could be simple and incidental. But the metaphorical applications of weaving and sewing to verbal art, as expressed primarily by the verbs ἱφθαίνειν 'weave' and ῥάπτειν 'sew', present a different picture. Although the visualization of weaving as a metaphor for songmaking remains complex as applied to verbal art, the visualization of sewing becomes even more complex in the case of metaphors referring to the verbal art of Homeric poetry. A prime example of such metaphors is the poetic term ῥάπσιδος, meaning 'one who sews songs together', and its derivatives ῥάπσιδεῖν and ῥαψιδιαῖος. To say this much does not detract from the complexity inherent in the actual technology of weaving. Rather, such a formulation is merely a recognition of the fact that there is an intensified complexity to be seen in the process of sewing when this process is visualized as a connecting of twenty-four pieces of cloth in such a way as to produce an integral fabric, as it were, like the Homeric Iliad or the Homeric Odyssey. I refer here to my formulation in HPC (2010) p. 22. And, in making my original formulation in PasP (1996) pp. 65–66 about the complexity of ῥάπτειν 'sew' as a metaphor for songmaking, I had especially in mind the making of Homeric poetry.

§10. In this context, I take this opportunity to epomitize from PasP (1966) pp. 66–69 the background for my original formulation.

§10a. The idea inherent in the word ῥάπσιδος, 'he who sews together [ῥάπτειν] the song(s) [αιδῆ]', is that many and various fabrics of song, each one already made, that is, each one already woven, become re-made into a unity, a single new continuous fabric, by being sewn together. The paradox of the metaphor is that the many and the various become the single and the uniform—and yet there is supposedly no loss in the multiplicity and variety of the constituent parts. In effect, the metaphor that is built into the word ῥάπσιδος amounts to an overarching esthetic principle, one that may even ultimately settle the ever-ongoing controversy between advocates of unitarian and analytic approaches to Homer.

§10b. Eustathius, in his Commentary on the Iliad (1.10), quotes a description, in Pindar Nemean 2.1–3, of the Homericai 'Sons of Homer' as παρτών ἐνίων ... δοίδοι 'singers [aoidói] of sewn-together [ῥαπτέα] utterances [Ἀρχαί]', interpreting these words as a paraphrasing of the concept inherent in the word ῥάπσιδοι 'rhapsodes'. He goes on to offer what he considers a second interpretation (again, 1.10), claiming that this concept of sewing together can be taken either in the sense that we have seen made explicit in Pindar's wording or in a more complex sense—a sense that is actually implicit in the same Pindaric wording—which emphasizes the characteristic unity of the Iliad and the Odyssey: ῥάπτειν δὲ ή ἀλλός, ὡς εἰρχείτο, τὸ συντιθέναι ἡ τὸ κατὰ μέρος τινός ῥάπτειν ἀρχαίος εἰς ἅν καὶ τὸ διεστάτο. προσαγορεύθησαν γὰρ, φασὶ, καταμενόν τὸ κατὰ μέρος διπηγήμενο τῆς ὑμηρίκης ποίησεως, οἱ δὲ ότε ἀρχαίοι συνεργασάμενοι ἔως τῷ εἰς ἁρῴς ἐδόμενα 'sewing together [ῥάπτειν] either in the simple sense, as just mentioned, of putting together or, alternatively, in the sense of bringing different things, in accordance with some kind of sequencing [heirmós] in sewing [ῥάπτειν], uniformly into one thing; for they say that Homeric poetry, after it had been scattered about and divided into parts, was sewn together [sun-ῥαπτεῖν] by those who sang it, like songs sung into a single fabric [ὑφόσαι]'.

§10c. An analogous interpretation is given by the scholia to Pindar Nemean 2.1d: οἳ δὲ φασὶ τῆς ὑμηρίκης ποίησεως μή ὡς ἐν συνημνημονεῖ, προσαγορεύθησαν δὲ ἀλλός κατὰ μέρος διπηγήμενος, ὡς ἀρχαίοι πραπαράσπειαν ποιεῖσθαι, εἰς ἅν αὐτὴν ἄγοντες 'but some say that—since the poetry of Homer had not been brought together under one thing, but rather had been scattered about and divided into parts—when they performed it rhapsoideoi [ῥαψιδιαῖοι], they would be doing something that is similar to sequencing [heirmós] or sewing [ῥάπτειν], as they produced it into one thing'.

§10d. The scholia to Pindar Nemean 2.1d proceed to offer yet another version, which supposedly explains the naming of Homeric performers as rhapsodes: there was a time when each performer of the once-disintegrated Homeric poems sang whatever 'part' he wanted, and they were all competitors (τῶν ἀγωνιστῶν) for a prize of a lamb or an ōn, so that the performers were then called arnoidoi; but later, once the competitors (τοὺς ἀγωνιστοὺς) started to adjust each 'part' so as to achieve a totality (ἡν σύμμορφον ποιην ἑπιτελοντος), these performers were called ῥαψιδιαῖοι: ἦν δὲ ὅτι κατὰ μέρος πράττετο τῆς ποίησεως διαδικομένης τῶν ἀγωνιστῶν ἔκαστος ὁ βούλοντα μέρος ἢ τὸ δὲ ἄλλο τοῖς νικῶν ἄριστος ἀποδεδειγμένως προσαγορεύεται τότε μὲν ἄρνημοι, οἵτις ἐκ δικαίου τῆς ποίησεως εἰσενέχειας τοῦ ἀγωνιστοῦ ὄν ἀκομένοις πρὸς ἄλληλο, τὸ μὲν καὶ τὴν σύμμορφον ποιημαν ἑπιτελοντος, ῥαψιδιαῖος προσαγορεύεται, τοῦτά ρητα Διονύσιος ὁ Ἀργεῖος 'others say that previously—since the poetry had been divided part by part, with each of the competitors singing whichever part he wanted, and since the designated prize for the winners had been a lamb—[those competitors] were in those days called arnoidoi [= lamb-singers], but then, later on—since the competitors, whenever each of the two poems was introduced, were mending the parts to each other, as it were, and moving toward the whole poem—they were called ῥαψιδιαῖοι. These things are said by Dionysius of Argos [between 4th and 3rd centuries BCE; FGH 308 F 2]'.

§10e. Following up on what he considers to be two different interpretations of Pindar Nemean 2.1–3, Eustathius (1.10) offers a third one as well: that the concept of sewing together songs is parallel to the concept of rhapsoideîn, a word that he uses to designate any one of the twenty-four scrolls of the Iliad or Odyssey. In PasP, I argue that these twenty-four 'scrolls' were originally twenty-four units of performance—which is the original point of reference for the word ῥαψιδιαῖος.
§1f. In the esthetics of sewing, as conveyed by the verb ῥάπτειν, one's attention centers on the totality of the Gestalt that has been sewn together, not on the constituent parts. For an attention-getting example, we may consider the following description of a type of fashionably tailored kitōn worn by the young women of Sparta to show off their beauty: τῷ γόρ ὤντι τοῖς παρθενικοῖς χτιῶνος αἱ πτέρυγιες ὅς ἦσαν συνερραμμέναι κάτωθεν, δὲ λ᾽ ἀπεντύσσοντο καὶ συνανεγύμνουν ἄλον ἐν τῷ βαδίσεν τόν μηρόν 'for in fact the flaps of the kitōn worn by their young women were not sewn together [ῥάπτειν] at the lower ends, and so they would fly back and bare the whole thigh as they walked' (Plutarch Comparison of Lycurgus and Numa 3.4). Just exactly where you sew together—and where you leave off sewing together—becomes an exquisite art of tailoring to suit the senses and the sensibilities of the viewer.

§11. Having come to the end of my epitome, I return to my starting point: I continue to think that the metaphorical world of ῥάπτειν 'sew' as applied to the making of Homeric poetry is even more complex than the corresponding metaphorical world of huphaínein 'weave' as applied to songmaking in general. Further, on the basis of passages like the one I cited at §10f, I resist the argument (GF/EHK pp. 69 and 87 and 90n160) that the idea of 'tailoring' to suit the body is unsuitable for metaphors involving the verb ῥάπτειν 'sew'.

Interactions in the metaphorical worlds of weaving and sewing

§12. Although the technologies of weaving and sewing were distinct in the ancient world, as GF/EHK show most eloquently, I propose that the metaphorical worlds of weaving and sewing interacted with each other in the verbal arts. A shining example is the use of the noun ἕχμον and of the verb ἕχμεν in Hesiod, in the Homeric Hymn, and in the Homeric Odyssey—only once there, ἕχμον at 8.429. Both the noun and the verb, as I argued in EPR (2011) and elsewhere, conventionally refer to the making of the all-important starting border in weaving, but the noun as attested at Odyssey 8.429 can also refer to the rhapsodic continuum of Homeric poetry, as I argued at length in HPC (2010) pp. 79–102. And here I see a possible point of agreement between my views and those of GF/EHK pp. 87 and 90, who explore on those pages various contexts where the poetics of the generic rhapsode, originating from metaphors involving sewing rather than weaving, nevertheless converge with the poetics of weaving. Such convergence is what I would describe as a pattern of interactions in the metaphorical worlds of weaving and sewing.

The etymologies of prooímion and ἕχμον

§13. The words prooímion 'proemium' and ἕχμον 'hymn' can both refer to the beginning of a composition in verbal art, and such references reflect the technology of weaving the starting border of a web, as GF/EHK show clearly. Further, as I now epitomize from MoM (2015) 4§§87–89, the etymologies of the two words likewise reflect the same technology.

§14. In the case of prooímion, the conventional meaning of this Greek word is conveyed by the Latin borrowing prooemium, which refers to the beginning of any work of verbal art. The original Greek form prooímion is a compound noun, where pro– is combined with oim– as in olmos and oimê, both in the sense of 'threading', and the etymology derives from a metaphorical reference to pattern−weaving: the word means literally the 'initial threading' of a song, parallel to the etymology of Latin ex-ordium, which is a synonym of pro-oemium in poetic and rhetorical contexts and which can likewise be traced back to the basic idea of an 'initial threading'. Details in HC (2009) 2§292; also PasP (1966) p. 63n20 and PR (2002) 72, 81. To say it more technically in Greek, using the terminology of fabric work, the 'initial threading' of the prooímion is the exatais or 'selvedge'.

§15. As for the etymology of the simplex noun ἕχμον, I argue that it too derives from a metaphorical reference to pattern−weaving. According to one explanation, humnos is derived from the root of the verb huphaínein 'weave'; according to another, the root of ἕχμον is cognate with the root of ἑμόν 'membrane'. Details in HC (2009) 2§91. Either way, the basic idea conveyed by this noun is 'web'. In terms of my overall argument, then, a ἕχμον is metaphorically the product of weaving in general and of pattern−weaving in particular. As already noted, however, the same noun ἕχμον at Odyssey 8.429 can also refer to the rhapsodic continuum of Homeric poetry. So, I end by highlighting one last time my argument for interactivity in the metaphorical worlds of weaving and sewing.

Bibliography


EPR. See Nagy 2011.