



A variation on the idea of a gleam that blinded Homer

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Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins

Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

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A variation on the idea of a gleam that blinded Homer

February 25, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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In the posting for [2016.02.18](#), I quoted the text of a story told in a set of ancient myths about the life of Homer. In that story, Homer was blinded by a gleam of light that emanated from the shining bronze armor of Achilles. The telling of the story as I quoted it in that posting is immediately followed in the same text by the telling of another version, according to which Homer was blinded not because he saw a vision of Achilles wearing his shining bronze armor but because he saw a vision of Helen. I will argue here in my posting for 2016.02.25 that such a variation on the theme of the blinding of Homer fits an overall pattern of mythmaking about the power of poetry to picture what really happens in myth. [[full article here](#)]



Paul Buffet (French, Paris 1864–1941)
Bust-length Study of the Blind Homer

Colored gouaches over black chalk on thin, yellow oiled paper; Sheet: 12
5/16 × 10 5/8 in. (31.3 × 27 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Robert Tuggle in honor of
Paul Jeromack, 2013 (2013.1122)

<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/638206>

Introduction

§0.1. In the posting for [2016.02.18](#), I quoted the text of a story told in a set of ancient myths about the life of Homer. In that story, Homer was blinded by a gleam of light that emanated from the shining bronze armor of Achilles. I quote here again the text of the story:

ἐλθόντα γὰρ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἀχιλλέως τάφον εὔξασθαι θεάσασθαι τὸν ἥρωα τοιοῦτον ὅποιος
προῆλθεν ἐπὶ τὴν μάχην τοῖς δευτέροις ὄπλοις κεκοσμημένος· ὀφθέντος δ' αὐτῷ τοῦ
Ἀχιλλέως τυφλωθῆναι τὸν Ὅμηρον ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν ὄπλων ἀγῆς.

Visiting the tomb of Achilles, he [= Homer] prayed if he could only see the hero just the way the hero was like at the moment of entering the field of battle while wearing his second set of armor. The hero then appeared to him, and, as soon as Homer looked at the hero, he was blinded by the gleam of the armor.

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Editor

Keith Stone
kstone@chs.harvard.edu

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§0.2. The telling of the story as I have just quoted it again from Vita 6 of Homer is immediately followed in the same text by the telling of another version. According to this alternative version, which I am about to quote, Homer was blinded not because he saw a vision of Achilles wearing his shining bronze armor but because he saw a vision of Helen. I will argue here in my posting for 2016.02.25 that such a variation on the theme of the blinding of Homer fits an overall pattern of mythmaking about the power of poetry to picture what really happens in myth.

The blinding of Homer by Helen

§1. I proceed, then, to quote the alternative version:

ἄλλοι δὲ φασὶ τοῦτο αὐτὸν πεπονηθέναι διὰ μῆνιν τῆς Ἑλένης ὀργισθείσης αὐτῷ διότι εἶπεν αὐτὴν καταλειομένην μὲν τὸν πρότερον ἄνδρα, ἠκολουθηκέναι δ' Ἀλεξάνδρῳ· οὕτως γοῦν ὅτι καὶ παρέστη αὐτῷ φασὶν νυκτὸς ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς ἡρώϊνης παραινοῦσα καθύαι τὰς ποιήσεις αὐτοῦ <...> εἰ τοῦτο ποιήσοι πρόσοχοι. τὸν δὲ μὴ ἀνασχέσθαι ποιῆσαι τοῦτο.

But others say that he [= Homer] experienced the same thing [= blindness] because of the anger [mēnis] of Helen, who was angry [orgizesthai] at him because he said that she had abandoned her previous husband [= Menelaos] and had followed Alexander [= Paris]. Here is how it happened: the spirit [psūkhē] of the heroine [hērōinē], appearing in the night, stood next to him and advised him to burn his poetry. <...> how, if he did so, things would go well. But (he told her) that he just couldn't bring himself to do this.

Toward the end of this alternative version, we find that the textual tradition has suffered a slight corruption, which I indicate by way of underlines. Still, the overall sense is clear. The story says that Helen appears to Homer by way of a vision. He dreams he sees her while he is asleep. Similarly in the previous version, already quoted, Achilles appears to Homer by way of a vision. In that variant story, however, Homer sees Achilles not in a dream. Rather, he sees Achilles in an epiphany. But there is less of a contrast here than meets the eye. In the world of myth, as we are about to discover, the ground rules for a vision in a dream and a vision in an epiphany are the same. In terms of these ground rules, what matters is the reality of what is seen. In situations where reality is meant to be validated by myth and ritual, the medium of seeing that reality becomes valid in and of itself, whether this medium is an epiphany or a dream.

§2. In speaking of epiphany, I offer this working definition: an epiphany is a vision that is felt to be real, not unreal, since the vision itself is felt to be divine.[1] Such a mentality applies also in the case of any dream that is validated by myth: if a myth says that a vision as seen in a dream is real, then the dream must be valid, just as an epiphany is valid.

§3. In the story as I just quoted it from Vita 6 of Homer, Helen in Homer's dream is angry at him for saying in his poetry that she abandoned her husband Menelaos and went off to Troy with Paris as her lover. Such is the story that is being told in the poetry of the Iliad. So, Helen in Homer's dream demands that Homer should unsay his poetry by burning it, but the poet cannot bring himself to do so, and so Helen punishes him by blinding him. But how exactly does Helen make Homer go blind?

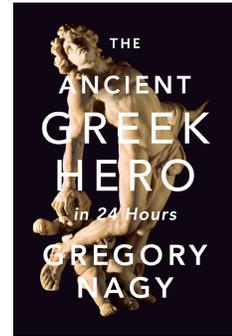
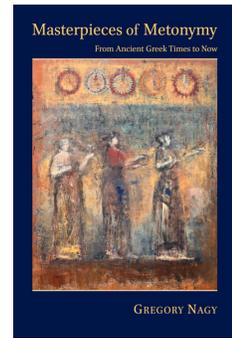
§4. There is an anachronism in Vita 6 that complicates the answer to this question. As we read in the text I just quoted above, Helen as seen in the dream of Homer is described as a hērōinē 'heroine'. As we learn from related stories about another poet, however, Helen is acting here not as a heroine but as a goddess.

The blinding of Stesichorus by Helen

§5. There is a famous story about a palinōidiā 'palinode, recantation' performed by a Dorian lyric poet named Stesichorus, who was struck blind by Helen because he used to sing songs that told how she had gone off to Troy with Paris: when he recanted, his eyesight was restored (Isocrates Helen 64, Conon FGH 26 F 1.18, Plato Phaedrus 243a, Pausanias 3.19.11). The original version of the story told by Stesichorus about Helen corresponds to the Homeric version, according to which she went with her lover Paris all the way to Troy. But this original version is rejected in the wording of the palinode or recantation that is then sung by Stesichorus (PMG 193.2–5); also rejected in his palinode is what seems to be the Hesiodic version, which says that Helen went as far as Egypt, while her eidōlon 'image-double' was taken to Troy (Stesichorus PMG 193.5–7, 12–16). The rejected story about the eidōlon 'image-double', which also tells about a voyage of Paris and Helen to Egypt (Stesichorus PMG 193.15–16, to be compared with Hesiod F 176.7), affirms the seduction of Helen, aligning with the story about the lovemaking of Paris and Helen during their voyage from Sparta to Egypt (Iliad 3.445).[2]

§6. The wording of this recantation attributed to Stesichorus (PMG 193) actually presupposes the story of how Stesichorus was blinded and how his vision was then restored after he had a change of heart. In other words, the whole story about the loss and restoration of the poet's vision is built into the song, and thus the outcome of the story is ostensibly caused by the dramatized here and now of performing the song.[3]

§7. The recantation of Stesichorus, featuring the restoration of his vision, not only denies the Homeric tradition about Helen but also reaffirms alternative traditions about Helen as a goddess who is worshipped in a given locale—and who presumably stays put in that locale. In the posting for 2016.02.18, I already noted a most prominent example of such traditions: at the heights of Therapne, in the territory of Sparta, Helen and her consort Menelaos were worshipped together as goddess and cult hero respectively.



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§8. Here is another example, which is particularly suited to the poetics of Stesichorus. According to Pausanias (3.19.11), the story about Helen and the blinding of Stesichorus is a tradition stemming from the city-state of Kroton. Also sharing in this tradition was the neighboring city-state of Himera, which was the homeland of Stesichorus himself. According to this local tradition, Helen together with Achilles as her consort abides on the sacred Island of Leuke; from there she somehow sends word to Stesichorus that he compose a recantation. Thus the recantation of Stesichorus seems to be a theme that also reaffirms the traditions native to Kroton and Himera. More important for the moment, the recantation of Stesichorus presupposes the distinctness of Stesichorus and his lyric poetry from the likes of Homer and his epic poetry, as we see by comparing the story in Vita 6 of Homer (51–57; also in Plato Phaedrus 243a) claiming that Homer himself had been blinded by Helen as punishment for his having defamed her by way of his story about Helen at Troy. And here is the big distinction: whereas Stesichorus the lyric master recants and is thus released from blindness, Homer as epic master refuses to recant and stays blind for good. An epic master does not depend on seeing: he must simply hear the kleos that is sung to him by the Muses.^[4]

Back to the blinding of Homer by Helen

§9. The fact that Helen has the power to blind Homer in the story that we read in Vita 6 of Homer indicates, I think, that Helen had been imagined a goddess in earlier phases of this story. That is why I argue that the description of Helen as a heroine in Vita 6 is an anachronism. But there is an even bigger anachronism in the story. In Vita 6, as also in all the other Vitae of Homer except for Vita 1 and Vita 2, Homer is anachronistically imagined as writing his poems instead of composing them in performance. I have analyzed this anachronism at some length in my posting for [2015.12.18](#), and I mention it here once again because it is relevant to the fact that Helen in Vita 6 tells Homer that he must burn his poetry. It is as if this poetry were simply a text, and the only way to unmake a text is to destroy it. By contrast, Helen in the story about the blinding of Stesichorus tells the poet that he must unmake his earlier poetry by remaking it. The poet must make a new composition in performance. I think that the original version of the story about the blinding of Homer must have pictured Helen in a comparable way. The goddess must have demanded the unmaking of one song by way of remaking it into a different song. That is, Homer would have had to recompose his song in a new performance. But he simply could not bring himself to do it.

§10. And how did Helen blind Homer? What did it, I think, was the gleam emanating from the poetic vision of Helen as a goddess.

Bibliography

H24H. See Nagy 2013.

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PH. See Nagy 1990.

Notes

[1] H24H 5§§38–39; see also PH 201 = 7§2n10.

[2] This paragraph is an epitome of PH 419 = 14§13.

[3] PH 419 = 14§14.

[4] Again, PH 419 = 14§14.

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