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For example:

A bathtub in Pylos

March 16, 2017 By Gregory Nagy

In Odyssey 3, Telemachus as guest of Nestor is given a bath in a bathtub called an asaminthos. Archaeologists have linked this asaminthos with a terracotta bathtub found in the so-called Palace of Nestor at Pylos. Explored here is the ritual significance of a bath in such a bathtub.

[Essay continues here…]

§1. The background for this posting of 2017.03.16 was my visit, 2016.06.15, to the newly-reopened archaeological site of “the palace of Nestor” at Pylos. On the occasion of this visit, I was accompanied by participants in a travel-study program sponsored by Harvard University’s Center for Hellenic Studies together with the Harvard Alumni Association. My fellow visitors and I had viewed the whole site, and I came away with many new impressions. I focus here on one in particular. It has to do with a terracotta bathtub found in the palace. The tub is fixed, not movable, and it would have been filled and emptied by hand. Archaeologists have linked this object with a scene in the Homeric Odyssey. At 0.03.464–468, Telemachus the son of Odysseus is bathed in a tub called an asaminthos, 0.03.468. The bath is part of a welcoming ceremony organized by Nestor, king of Pylos, who is hosting the young prince. Telemachus is being bathed by Polykaste, youngest daughter of Nestor. After the bath, 0.03.469, Telemachus proceeds to a dinner hosted by Nestor in his honor. But while he is still finishing the bath, as we see him emerging from the bathtub, 0.03.468, Telemachus is described as athanatoisin homoios, usually translated as ‘looking just like the immortals’. This description brings me to my topic, which is the impression I get about the ritual significance of such a bath.
§2. In a book entitled Masterpieces of Metonymy (MoM in the Bibliography), I highlighted the Homeric comparison of Telemachus with the immortal gods in the context of his emerging from his bath in the asaminthos ‘bathtub’. What I now highlight here, however, is different: it is the relevance of this comparison to the ritual function of actually taking such a ritual bath.

§3. Most relevant to this act of comparison to the gods is the etymology of homoios (ὁμοιος), which shows that the meaning ‘looking just like’ derives from a more basic meaning, ‘same as’. In what follows, I epitomize what I said about this etymology in MoM 2§7. From the standpoint of Indo-European linguistics, the Greek adjective homoios (ὁμοιος) derives from a prototypical form *somo-, meaning ‘same as’. The English adjective same is derived from this same prototypical form. Another derivative is the Latin adjective similis, meaning ‘same as’ or ‘similar to’. In the usage of both Latin similis and Greek homoios (ὁμοιος), the same semantic principle applies: for A2 to be similar to A1, it has to be the same as A1 in some respect, which is X. Further, for A2 to be the same as A1, it has to be one with A1 in respect to X. That is because the Indo-European root *som- of *somo- ‘same as’ means ‘one’, as we see in such forms as the Latin adverb semel ‘one time’. And the idea of ‘one’ in words like English same has to do with an act of comparing. When we compare things, what is the ‘same as’ something else in some respect becomes ‘one with’ that something in that respect. That is how a word like Latin similis, deriving from the concept of
'one', means 'similar to' in the sense of 'one with'. What is similis 'similar' to something else in some respect is 'one with' that something in that respect. In the case of the Greek adjective homoios (ὁμοιος), it refers to something that is 'one with' and therefore 'the same as' something else in some respect. And, as we will see later, if something else is not the same, then it is alloios (ἀλλοιος) 'a different kind', which is the opposite of homoios (ὁμοιος) or 'the same kind'. As we will also see later, the extension -ios (-ιος) of the two adjectives homoios (ὁμοιος) 'the same kind' and alloios (ἀλλοιος) 'a different kind' is parallel to the extension -ios (-ιος) of the adjectives hoios (ὁιος) 'what kind' and toios (τοιος) 'that kind'.

§4. In MoM §16, my starting point was the passage where Telemachus is 'looking the same as' the immortal gods after he takes a bath in the asaminthos. I compared that passage, which I call here Extract A, with another passage, Extract B:

Extract A

He [= Telemachus] emerged from the asaminthos, looking the same as [homoios] the immortals in shape.

O.03.468[1]

Extract B

He [= Odysseus] emerged from the asaminthos, looking the same as [homoios] the immortals in shape.

O.23.163[2]

§5. And here is another relevant passage, Extract C, involving the related word enalinkios (ἐναλλήκτιος) 'looking just like':

Extract C

And he [= Odysseus] emerged from the asaminthos. His dear son [= Telemachus] marveled at him, | when he saw him, face to face, looking just like [enalinkios] the immortal gods.


§6. In all there of these extracts, we are dealing with a kind of comparison that modern literary critics normally call a simile. In the example that we have just seen, Extract C, the visual aspect of the simile is made explicit with the phrasing ὡς ἄλλοις ... ὄρνη 'when he [= Telemachus] saw him [= Odysseus], face to face'. In this example, then, Odysseus is quite literally 'looking just like' the gods, as expressed by the adjective enalinkios.

§7. In the next example, which is far more complex than the other examples we have seen so far, it is the adjective homoios that expresses the idea that Odysseus is 'looking just like' the gods when Telemachus sees him, face to face. In this case, the divine looks of Odysseus are caused not by a ritual bath in the asaminthos but by direct physical contact with the goddess Athena herself:

Extract D

172 So spoke Athena, and she touched him [= Odysseus] with her golden wand. 173 First she made his mantle and his tunic to be cleanly washed, 174 she made it be that way, what he was wearing over his chest, and she augmented his size and his youthfulness. 175 His tan complexion came back, and his jaws got firmed up, 176 and dark again became the beard around his chin. 177 Then she [= Athena], having done her work, went back where she came from, while 178 Odysseus headed for the shelter. His dear son [= Telemachus] marveled at him, 179 and, in his amazement, he [= Telemachus] cast his gaze away from him, in another direction, fearing that he [= Odysseus] might be a god. 180 And he [= Telemachus] addressed him [= Odysseus], speaking winged words: 181 "As a different kind of person [alloios], stranger, have you appeared [phainesthai] to me just now, different than before. 182 You have different clothes and your complexion is no longer the same kind [homoios]. 183 You must be some god, one of those gods who hold the wide sky. 184 So be gracious, in order that we may give you pleasing sacrifices 185 and golden gifts of good workmanship. Have mercy on us." 186 And he [= Telemachus] was answered then by the one who suffered many things, the radiant Odysseus: 187 "I am not some god. Why do you liken [εἰςκείν] me to the immortals? 188 But I am your father, for whom you mourn and 189 suffer many pains, enduring the violent acts of men." 190 Having said these things, he kissed his son and let fall from his cheeks 191 a tear, letting it fall to the ground. Until then he had persisted in showing no sign of pity. 192 And Telemachus, since he was not yet convinced that he [= Odysseus] was his father, 193 once again addressed him with words in reply: 194 "You are not Odysseus my father. Instead, some superhuman force 195 is enchanting me, and it makes me weep and mourn even more. 196 I say this because no mortal man could craft these things that are happening to me, 197 no mortal could do these things by way of his own devising, unless a god comes in person 198 and, if he so wishes, easily makes someone a young man or makes him an old man. 199 Why, just a little while ago you were an old
man wearing unseemly clothes, [*1200* but now you *look just like* [*= perfect of *eïskein*] *the gods* who hold the wide sky.* [*1201* He was answered by Odysseus, the one with many kinds of craft, who addressed him thus: [*1202* *Telemachus, it does not seem right* [*= perfect of *eïskein*] *for you to be amazed at your father who is right here inside [the shelter],* [*1203* for you to be amazed too much or to feel overwhelmed. [*1204* There will never again be some different [*= *allois*] *person who comes here, some different Odysseus,* [*1205* but here I am *such* [*= *toiosde*] *as I am. I have had many bad things happen to me. I have been detoured in many different ways.* [*1206* But now I am here, having come back in the twentieth year to the land of my ancestors. [*1207* I tell you, this was the work of Athena, the giver of prizes, [*1208* who has made me be *such* [*= *toios*] *as she wants me to be, for she has the power.* [*1209* One moment, she has made me to be looking just like [*enalinkios] a beggar, and then, the next moment, [*1210* just like a young man who has beautiful clothes covering his complexion. [*1211* It is easy for the gods, who hold the wide sky, [*1212* to make a mortal man become exalted with radiance or to debase him.


§8. In this example, Extract D, we see that Odysseus no longer looks the same when his complexion is changed by the goddess. His complexion is no longer *homoios* [*= *allois*] ‘the same kind’ [*= *toios*] (verse 182). Now he looks different; he is a different kind of person. Earlier, I noted that alloios [*= *allois*] *a different kind* is the opposite of homoios [*= *homoios*] ‘the same kind’. In the example I have just quoted, we see this meaning of alloios [*= *allois*] *a different kind* in action (verse 181). I also noted that the extension -*ios* [*= * allois*] of the adjectives homoios [*= *homoios*] ‘the same kind’ and alloios [*= *allois*] *a different kind* is parallel to the extension -*ioi* [*= *allois*] [*= *allois*] of the adjectives hoios [*= *hoios*] ‘what kind’ and toios [*= *toios*] ‘that kind’. In the example I have just quoted, we also see this meaning of toios [*= *toios*] ‘that kind’ in action (verses 205, 208).

§9. In this same example, Extract D, it is said that Odysseus looks just like an old man or looks just like a young man, whatever a divinity may wish (verse 198). But when he looks just like a young man for Telemachus to see, his son needs to avert his eyes because he sees what he sees (verse 179). What he sees is that Odysseus is at that moment looks not only just like a young man but also just like a divinity. When Odysseus asks his son, ‘Why do you *like [eïskein] me to the immortals*’ (verse 187), Telemachus can rightly answer: ‘but now you *look just like* [*= perfect of *eïskein*] *the gods* who hold the wide sky’ (verse 200). And, in terms of the ritual transformation of Odysseus by way of a sacred bath in an asaminthos or by way of a sacred contact with the wand of the goddess Athena herself, this mortal not only looks just like one of the gods but he actually becomes a god in the ritual moment marked by the similes that liken him to the god.

§10. I offer at this point this general formulation: for a mortal to appear like an immortal to other mortals is to become a divinity in a ritual moment of epiphany—as marked by the similes that make mortals equal to divinities in that ritual moment.


Bibliography


Notes


[4] 172 ὃ, καὶ χρυσαι ’Βάρδοι ἀπεμψασσάτ’ Ἀθήνη. 173 θάρσος μὲν οἱ πρῶτοι ἐκπελνικτει ἤ ἐχ χυτιόναν 174 Ἰθήκ’ ἀμφί δὴ στήθος καὶ ἐρχόμενα. 175 ἐκ δὲ μελαγχροι ἱερά. 176 νάλαζε δ’ ἐγένοτο ἐφεβίδες ἀμφιδόνειοι. 177 μὲν ἄρ’ ἢρρεξα πάλιν κινεῖ· αὐτάρ Ὀδυσσεύς 178 ἠδὲ κλαίν. 179 ἀπεβάζει δὲ μὲν τοῦ φίλου υίός. 180 ἠδὲ ταρβάζα δ’ ἐπέτρωσε βαλ’ ὄμσιντ, μὴ θεὸς εἰπ. 181 ἡ μὲν ἡ φωνή τον δ’ ἐμπόλα ἥματεν, ἡ δὲ ἡ φωνή τοιν δ’ ἠτέρωσεν. 182 ἠδὲ δὲ εἰματ’ ἔχεισ τοι καὶ τοι χρός σόκαθ’ ὁμοίος. 183 ἠδὲ μὰ τούς τούς ἐπαινεῖ, τούς οὔνεν εὐρυν ἐκουσίν. 184 ἦνα ταύτας τοιν δ’ ἠτέρωσεν. 185 ἦνα τοις δ’ ἠτέρωσεν. 186 ὁ τοις δ’ ἠτέρωσεν ἠτέρωσεν. 187 ἠδὲ δὲ εἰματ’ ἔχεισ τοι καὶ τοι χρός σόκαθ’ ὁμοίος. 188 ἠδὲ κατά ποιμένας ἐκεῖνος 189 ἦνα τοῖς τούς ἐπαινέ. 190 ἦνα τοῖς τούς ἐπαινεῖ. 191 ἠδὲ τοιν δ’ ὁματ’ ἀθανατίοισιν ἐκεῖνος. 188 ἠδὲ ποιμένας ἐκεῖνος. 189 ἠδὲ κατά ποιμένας ἐκεῖνος. 190 ἠδὲ ποιμένας ἐκεῖνος. 191 ἠδὲ ποιμένας ἐκεῖνος. 192 ἠδὲ τοιν δ’ ἠτέρωσεν.
On weaving and sewing as technical terms for ancient Greek verbal arts

Happens that I'm writing a piece on Transformations on my own blog, and will gladly include a link to this.

I'm reminded of the interesting parallels in the Abrahamic concept of religious purification by immersion in water – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all recognize variations of this theme of spiritual transformation via ritual cleansing.

The ritual of Christian Baptism seems an easily recognizable parallel as a spiritually transformative event, with the baptism of Jesus in the Christian New Testament being probably the most notable.

Did the early Greeks associate ritual bathing with spiritual transformation, or was it more of a practice based on the cultural protocols of hospitality?

I'm starting to appreciate the power of this transformation, and I thank you for your insights.