The sad story of a priestess in love: a resacralizing of sex in Greek myth and ritual

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:
The sad story of a priestess in love: a resacralizing of sex in Greek myth and ritual

July 13, 2018  By Gregory Nagy

§0. The remarks in this post, dated 2018.07.13, pick up from where I left off toward the end of the posting dated 2018.07.06. There I drew attention to a valuable article by Giampiera Arrigoni (1983), who explores a wide variety of ancient Greek stories about amorous encounters that take place in sacred spaces. The story of one such encounter, noted in her article (pp. 15–16, 45–48), is narrated by the first-person speaker in the First Cologne Epode of Archilochus F 196a W, which has been my focus of attention in the two postings that I just cited. In those postings, we saw that there was a sad ending that awaited the two young women who had figured in the story that is told by the first-person narrator of the Cologne Epode. Now, in the present posting, we will see a comparable story about another young woman, a priestess of the goddess Artemis, who experienced premarital sex inside the sacred precinct of that goddess. In both stories, I will argue, what we see is a desecration in myth, by way of sex, and a corresponding sacralization of sex by way of ritual. Such sacralization, I will further argue, is viewed as a resacralization—in terms of the myth.

[Essay continues here...]

Devika Rani kissing Himanshu Rai in the film Karma (aka Fate) (1933). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. The sad story of the priestess in love, originating from the ancient Patrai, the modern Greek name for which city is Patras, gets retold by Pausanias, 7.19.1–7.20.2, and it goes like this. A virgin named Komaitho, who is a priestess of the goddess Artemis, is seduced inside the sacred space of the goddess whom she serves. The seducer, whose name is Melanippos, has fallen in love with Komaitho and asks the father of the priestess for permission to marry her. Permission is denied, but now Melanippos and Komaitho fall into the habit of engaging in consensual sex inside the sacred precinct of Artemis—a place that Pausanias (7.19.1) calls a temenos. This pattern of habitual sex inside the precinct then causes a blight, and the people of Patras consult the oracle of Apollo, who exposes the couple as the cause of the plague. What follows is human sacrifice: the boy and the girl are now killed by the people of Patras. And what further follows, year after year on the appointed day, is that a new set of girl-and-boy is sacrificed yearly on the same day. This practice of human sacrifice continues until a hero named Eurypylos arrives in Patras, and this newcomer introduces to the people there the practice of worshipping the god Dionysus. At this point, implicitly, the practice of human sacrifice is hereafter replaced by animal sacrifice.

§2. This story is comparable to a historically unrelated narrative, attested in the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 34:1–31, where the virgin Dinah is violated by an outsider to her people, Shechem, but he thereafter falls in love with the girl and asks for permission to marry her. In the narrative sequence that
comes after these details, the two comparable stories diverge, and I leave behind me, for now, the story
told in Genesis—though not before citing, as a place-holder, an incisive relevant study by the anthropologist

§3. What I find most remarkable about the story of Komaitho and Melanippos as retold by Pausanias is the
definitive framing of this whole story within the sacral context of worshipping the god Dionysus.
Comparably in the case of stories that are told about Archilochus in the Mnesiepes Inscription, as we saw in
the previous posting for 2018.06.30, the definitive frame is once again the sacral context of worshipping
Dionysus. As I noted in that posting, the text of the Mnesiepes Inscription mandates the practice of
worshipping various gods, along with the cult hero Archilochus, inside the sacred precinct of Archilochus,
the Arkhilókeion (T 4 II 14–19 Tarditi), and, among the gods listed (1–13), Dionysus is accorded a
position of special prominence (10). Likewise in the first-person story of the Cologne Epode, as I argued in
the previous posting, the concluding seduction of the girl who gets all wrapped up inside a cloak shared
with her seducer is sanctioned by the poetic medium of Dionysus. The sexual activity takes place, as I
argued in that posting, within the sacred space of Hera, but the activation is framed within the context of
‘iambic’ language spoken in the context of worshipping Dionysus.

§4. Here I return to the sad story about the young woman whose reputation as a marriageable girl was
ruined because she got seduced by Archilochus in the first-person storytelling of the Cologne Epode—and
about the girl’s sister, whose reputation was likewise ruined in the course of the same story. What, then, is
sad about the story of these two girls? In addressing such a question, I have argued in the posting of
2018.07.06 that a counter-story was told by both young women, claiming that Archilochus falsely defamed
them and that they did not have sex with him in the sacred space of the goddess Hera or in the causeways
that led to that sacred space. In terms of my argument, such a counter-story of antidefamation is framed
by the same tradition that frames the defaming story told by the persona of Archilochus, and the ideal
place for such framing would be the sacred precinct of Hera.

§5. In earlier work (Ph 135§37–38), I have analyzed such composite girl-meets-boy traditions and
described them as “carnivalesque,” comparing them with medieval Western European traditions such as the
Provencal pastorela and the Old French pastourelle. Relevant is the work of John Petropoulos (2008), who
has compared carnivalesque traditions as preserved in Modern Greek folk songs. Further, in more recent
work (Nagy 2007b:219–227), I have compared ancient Greek lyric tradition featuring a carnivalesque
mimesis of singing duets where ‘he-says’ is countered by ‘she-says’—as attested for example in a fragment
that is traditionally labeled as Sappho F 137. Still further, in the light of even more recent work on the
songs of Sappho (Nagy 2015), I would now propose that the duet in Sappho F 137 could be pictured as
taking place inside a temenos ‘precinct’ on the island of Lesbos that was sacred primarily to Hera, and I
must emphasize that the goddess shared this precinct with other deities, primarily with Zeus and, yes,
Dionysus. (On the poetic visualization of this precinct, I recommend the article of Calame 2009.)

§6. I have already noted the importance of Dionysus in his sanctioning of a sacred frame for such girl-
meets-boy traditions. But now I must note also the comparable importance of Zeus himself as the sexual
partner of Hera. In the post for 2018.07.06, we have already seen that Zeus and Hera behave like
premarital lovers in the Homeric seduction scene of Iliad 14.
§7. But here we must face an important general question already faced by Arrigoni (1983:26–27) in her overall analysis of myths about sexual encounters that take place inside the sacred precincts of goddesses: why is it that the person who is singled out for divine punishment in such myths is generally the female human who has been seduced or even violated inside the precinct—and not the male superhuman who had initiated the sex? A classic example of such a pattern, as Arrigoni points out (p. 27n43), is a well-known myth about the woman Io, priestess of the goddess Hera, who is violated by the god Zeus inside the Heraion, a most celebrated precinct of the goddess, located between Mycenae and Argos ("Apollodorus" 2.1.3; also Aeschylus Suppliant Women 291–293): in this case, it is clear that the violating god goes unpunished while the violated human is punished by being turned into a cow. There are comparable instances where the violator who goes unpunished is a hero, as in the story recounted by Pausanias 8.47.4 about a girl named Auge who is violated by the hero Herakles inside the sacred space of Athena Alea.

§8. Instead of considering here any further examples of such sad stories where a male superhuman goes unpunished after having seduced or even violated a female human inside the sacred precinct of a goddess, let us consider instead an alternative situation, grounded not in myth but purely in the world of ritual as it applies to everyday humans. In such a situation, any human—male as well as female—is to be punished for any sexual activity, as we see from the clear testimony of Herodotus 2.64, who says that all Greek communities, regardless of their vast diversity in customs, consistently abide by the general rule of prohibiting any and all forms of sexual misbehavior inside any sacred precinct.

§9. By contrast, socially sanctioned forms of sexual behavior, such as various phases of parentally-approved courtship that lead to marriage, are modeled on the relationship of the god Zeus and the goddess Hera as distinct from the same god's many illicit relations with human females. That is the point, I think, of the abbreviated commentary in the scholia for Iliad 14.296 concerning customs of courtship in the island-state of Samos, where girls and boys are described as re-enacting—in the controlled setting of courtship in the world of ritual—the courting of Hera by Zeus in the world of myth. In the world of ritual, the courting of girls by boys should not lead to any trouble—at least, such is the expectation of the controlling parents.

§10. What this reality in the world of ritual teaches me about the corresponding world of myth is that the stories we find about the desecrating of sacred spaces by way of sexual activity in myth must have had an aetiological function, motivating the sacralization of sex in ritual. By ritual here I have in mind protocols of girl-boy courtship involving various phases of initiation that promote both female and male adolescents from one age-class into the next, eventually graduating them into the heterosexual adulthood that they finally attain in marriage. In Hour 20 of H24H, I analyzed such patterns of graduation with reference to myths and rituals of adolescence as explored in the Hippolytus of Euripides. As I argued there, the sexual dysfunctionality of both Phaedra and Hippolytus in the world of myth corresponds to the functionalism of courtship leading to marriage in the world of ritual.

§11. Similarly, I argue, the dysfunctionality that plays out in the story about the daughters of Lykambes and Archilochus in the world of myth corresponds to the overall functionalism of sex in the world of ritual as sanctioned primarily by the god Dionysus. Accordingly, I agree with Arrigoni (1983:32n57, with bibliography) when she considers the possibility that at least one of the daughters of Lykambes may be seen as a priestess of Hera. I see a remarkable parallel in the story retold by Pausanias about Komaitho, doomed virgin of Patras, priestess of Artemis.

Bibliographical Abbreviations


Bibliography


Tags: Artemis, daughters of Lykambes, Hippolytus, Mnesipes Inscription, Pausanias, Phaedra

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