



Sensations of agony and ecstasy while indexing a book about ancient Greek heroes

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[Home](#) » [By Gregory Nagy, H24H](#) » Sensations of agony and ecstasy while indexing a book about ancient Greek heroes

Sensations of agony and ecstasy while indexing a book about ancient Greek heroes

June 28, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy, H24H

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2019.06.28 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. Authors who opt to write their own general index for their own book are conventionally instructed to concentrate on those things that their readers will want to look up in the book. Having just finished writing such an index for a second edition (2020) of my book [The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours](#), the first edition for which (2013) had only an index locorum, I can report mixed feelings as I come away from my experience. I am reminded here of the painting “The Scribe,” by Arthur Szyk (1927), as shown in the main illustration for this posting. Like that scribe, whom we see in the act of writing “his” message while surrounded by a world of stories told in a dazzling variety of images, I as the writer of an index for a general book about Greek heroes and their gods feel comparably dazzled by their own stories as told in both words and images stemming from their distant past. My feelings in this case could be described as intermittent sensations of agony mixed with ecstasy as I relived a veritable lifetime of thinking about these heroes and their gods. The agony had to do with choosing which words and terms and names I could include or exclude as entries in the index. Each entry I included had to be in some way relevant to my overall thinking. But here is where I found also the ecstasy, since each included entry had its own story to tell—and tell it all over again. Or, I should really say stories, not one story. A radiant example, as we will see, is the case of the god Zeus—and all the various stories about his interactions with heroes and with their other gods. These stories had not only shaped my thinking for the book: they are still there now, ready to shape the reader’s own thinking, independently of anything written by the worrying scribe of this essay.

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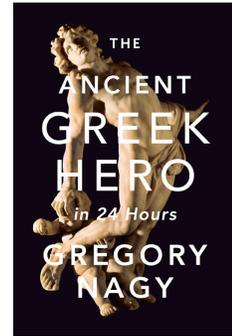
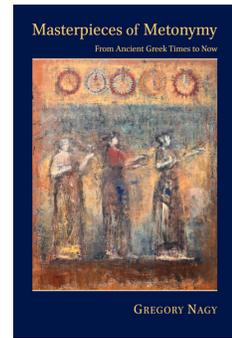
"The Scribe" (1927). Arthur Szyk (1894–1951).

§1. Let us suppose, for the moment, that a given reader of *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, hereafter abbreviated as h24h, really sees no need to look up the entry 'Zeus' as listed in the Index for the new edition of 2020. Such an entry, after all, may not seem at first sight to be all that important for a reader who simply wants to look up details about ancient Greek heroes in general. It would be, granted, a laborious process for the reader to look up, page by page, all the references to Zeus as listed in the Index to h24h 2010:

Zeus as divinity: first mention, 10; then 12–15, 19, 31–33, 35–36, 71, 94–95, 105, 126, 128–129, 143, 146, 165–169, 214, 218, 224–225, 233, 241, 252, 282, 287–290, 292–293, 311–315, 342–343, 361, 396–397, 420, 427–428, 436, 442–443, 455–456, 474, 478, 484, 492, 495, 513, 516, 521, 565, 576, 578, 588–589, 590–591.

§2. Such a laborious process could rightly be seen as a kind of agony for the reader—but it would be compensated by a kind of ecstasy experienced in this very same process of independently thinking through the stories about Zeus as tracked in the index. These stories, all of them, are each in their own way relevant to ancient Greek thinking about heroes.

§3. I have just now deliberately used such hyperbolic terms as agony and ecstasy in order to focus on the sheer creativity of ancient Greek thinking—even if viewed in terms of a not-so-distant modern popular culture. For a specific point of comparison, I have in mind here a historical novel by Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, published in 1961, centering on the creativity of the master artist Michelangelo. The book was based on primary texts: Stone had commissioned Charles Sponer to translate into English the



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extant correspondences of Michelangelo, 495 letters, which were then published in 1962 under the title I, Michelangelo, Sculptor. Stone's book was later turned into a Hollywood film, released in 1965, produced as well as directed by Carol Reed; it had the same title as the book, The Agony and the Ecstasy.

§4. To compensate, then, for the agonies of looking up the references to Zeus in the general index for h24h 2020, I offer here an inventory of potential ecstasies to be experienced while viewing the contexts of these references—contexts revealed by the original words and images surviving from the ancient Greek world. In this inventory, the page-numbers of h24h 2020 are matched, within parentheses, by the corresponding paragraph-numbers of H24H 2013 (though the matchings cannot always be made exact):

p. 10 (0§6)

The very first mention of the god Zeus in the book highlights an all-important detail about the hero Hēraklēs: in the story as told in the Homeric Iliad, the god was the father of the hero. By contrast with Hēraklēs, on the other hand, the hero Achilles just barely missed out on being fathered by Zeus. In a sense, then, the hero Achilles was the son that the god Zeus never had.

p. 12–13 (0§§17–18)

The active anger of Zeus, manifested in his thunderstroke as indirectly narrated in Homeric similes, corresponds to the passive anger of Achilles, manifested in the direct narration of the Iliad.

p. 14 (0§20)

The Will of Zeus is the plot of the Homeric Iliad. He masterminds the anger of Achilles, and how this anger will cause countless sufferings endured by Achaeans as well as Trojans in the Trojan War. And the masterminding by the god is a blueprint for everything that Achilles will say and do in the Iliad.

p. 14 (0§20)

Zeus fathers the god Apollo, whose anger precedes the anger of Achilles.

p. 15 (0§21)

Zeus fathers the Muse who inspires the poet to sing the story of the Iliad, and that story centers on the anger of Achilles.

p. 19 (0§36)

Zeus, abiding on Mount Olympus, is the most important of all the Olympian gods.

p. 31–33, 35–36 (1§36a–e)

In the heroic age of myth, Zeus makes mistakes, but he does not make mistakes any more 'today', in the post-heroic age, since the rituals of 'today' frame myths and purify these myths of past mistakes. By the time we reach the post-heroic age of 'today', the goddess who had caused mistakes to be made in the cosmos has already been exiled from the world of the gods in Olympus. She is Atē, and 'today' she inhabits only the world of humans, no longer the world of the gods. Back in the heroic age, the excuse that had been offered by the hero Agamemnon for his having made the big mistake of angering Achilles was that the god Zeus had once upon a time made mistakes himself. The biggest mistake of the god had led to the Labors of Hēraklēs. These heroic deeds of Hēraklēs were depicted in the twelve metope sculptures that graced the temple of Zeus in Olympia. After his Labors are completed, Hēraklēs sacrifices to Zeus before the hero's final agony, at which point the thunderbolt of the god incinerates Hēraklēs. Destruction-by-thunderbolt is a prelude to the hero's immortalization-by-thunderbolt.

p. 71 (3§26)

Nymphs fathered by Zeus plant elm trees that adorn a hero's tomb.

p. 94–95 (5§8)

Zeus is credited with having caused the victory of the hero Hector over the hero Patroklos, who was wearing the armor of the hero Achilles. Now Hector will get to wear that armor, and Zeus is again credited as the cause.

p. 105 (5§49)

Aphrodite is the goddess that she is partly because she was fathered by Zeus.

p. 126 (5§126)

The statue of Zeus in his temple at Olympia was thought to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World in ancient times.

p. 128–129 (6§1)

The hero Achilles prays to the god Zeus on behalf of Patroklos. The divine mastermind of the Iliad will now decide what part of the hero's prayer to grant and what part to refuse.

p. 143 (6§45)

Zeus has not only given to the hero Hector the armor of the hero Achilles. The god has now hermetically sealed Hector inside this armor.

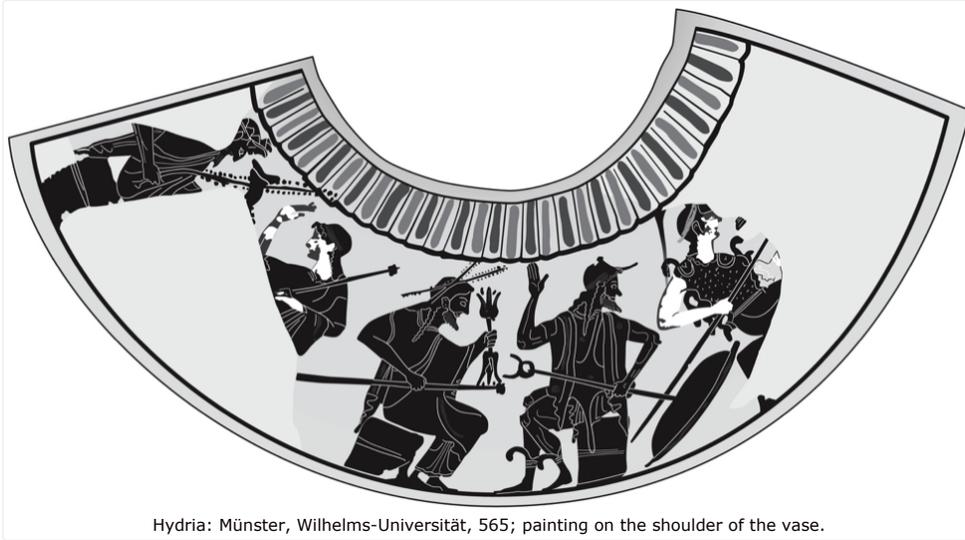
p. 146 (6§55)

Heroes of the more distant past can be imagined simply as attendants of Zeus.

p. 165–169 (7§36; 7§41 Image A2, 7§46 Image B2)

Zeus presides over a council of the gods and makes decisions in joint deliberation with these gods. In this case, the decision leads to the god's sending of Iris, female messenger of the gods, to intervene in the story. Such a sending can be pictured in ancient Greek visual art as well as verbal art. I show here an

ancient painting that shows Zeus in the act of deliberating at the council of the gods. I also show here another ancient painting that shows Zeus engaged in a comparable action: here he is trying to mediate between two chariot fighters: one is the hero Hēraklēs, his own son, and the other is Kyknos, son of Arēs the god of war.



Hydria: Münster, Wilhelms-Universität, 565; painting on the shoulder of the vase.



Hydria: Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 63.473; painting on the shoulder of the vase.

p. 214 (9§4)

The Muse is the goddess that she is partly because she was fathered by Zeus.

p. 218 (9§16)

The god Zeus swallows his pregnant wife, the goddess Mētis, who is the embodiment of intelligence. He thus becomes the surrogate mother of Athena, the new goddess of intelligence.

p. 224–225 (9§§30–31)

Zeus not only causes countless sufferings for Achaeans and Trojans in the story of the Trojan War. He also causes countless sufferings for Achaeans in the stories of the Returns of the Achaeans. He intervenes in the Returns because he is morally offended by the behavior of the Achaeans as victors after the capture of Troy. In particular, the god is outraged by their cruel treatment of Priam, the old king of the Trojans.

p. 233 (10§2)

Again, the Muse is the goddess that she is partly because she was fathered by Zeus

p. 241 (10§23)

Zeus brings light and life for heroes.

p. 252 (11§3)

Zeus masterminds the story of a bad Return for the hero Agamemnon.

p. 282 (12§9)

Zeus is father of Dikē, a goddess who is absolute Justice personified.

p. 287–290, 292–293 (12§8, §§19–34)

Zeus creates five generations of humankind: the story of this act of creation is another way of viewing ancient Greek heroes. The god also creates an ideal City of Justice as a counterweight to a nightmarish City of Injustice.

p. 311–315 (13§§26–31)

Zeus creates the social institution of kingship, and he becomes the ultimate cosmic model for such an institution.

p. 342–343 (13§§36–37)

The authority of Zeus translates into the authority of kings in the heroic age, who carry scepters as a sign of this authority.

p. 361 (15§36)

Pausanias sacrifices to Zeus in the god's role as Basileus, the ultimate 'King'.

p. 396–397 (16§11)

As already noted, Zeus causes countless sufferings for Achaeans and Trojans in the story of the Trojan War. At the beginning, he was morally offended by the behavior of Paris/Alexander in abducting Helen from Menelaos.

p. 420 (17§20)

Even the avenging Furies heed the cosmic authority of Zeus, wielder of the thunderbolt.

p. 427–428 (18§9)

Zeus protects all living things, including the olive trees of a sacred place like Colonus, where his actions can be pictured as not only celestial but also chthonic, that is, having power in the underworld. That is why the thundering of Zeus can be heard even from beneath the earth.

p. 436 (18§29)

Zeus in his interactions with heroes can be localized as well as cosmic, all at the same time.

p. 442–443 (18§41)

The death of Oedipus is signaled by the thundering of Zeus; being struck by the thunderbolt of the god is one possible scenario for this hero's death.

p. 455–456 (19§15)

Zeus has the power to punish a whole community for pollution caused by even one person, as the priest of Zeus declares.

p. 474 (indirectly, 20§21)

Even Zeus is involved in patterns of god-hero antagonism.

p. 478 (20§30)

Zeus incinerates Asklepios with his thunderbolt.

p. 484 (20§43)

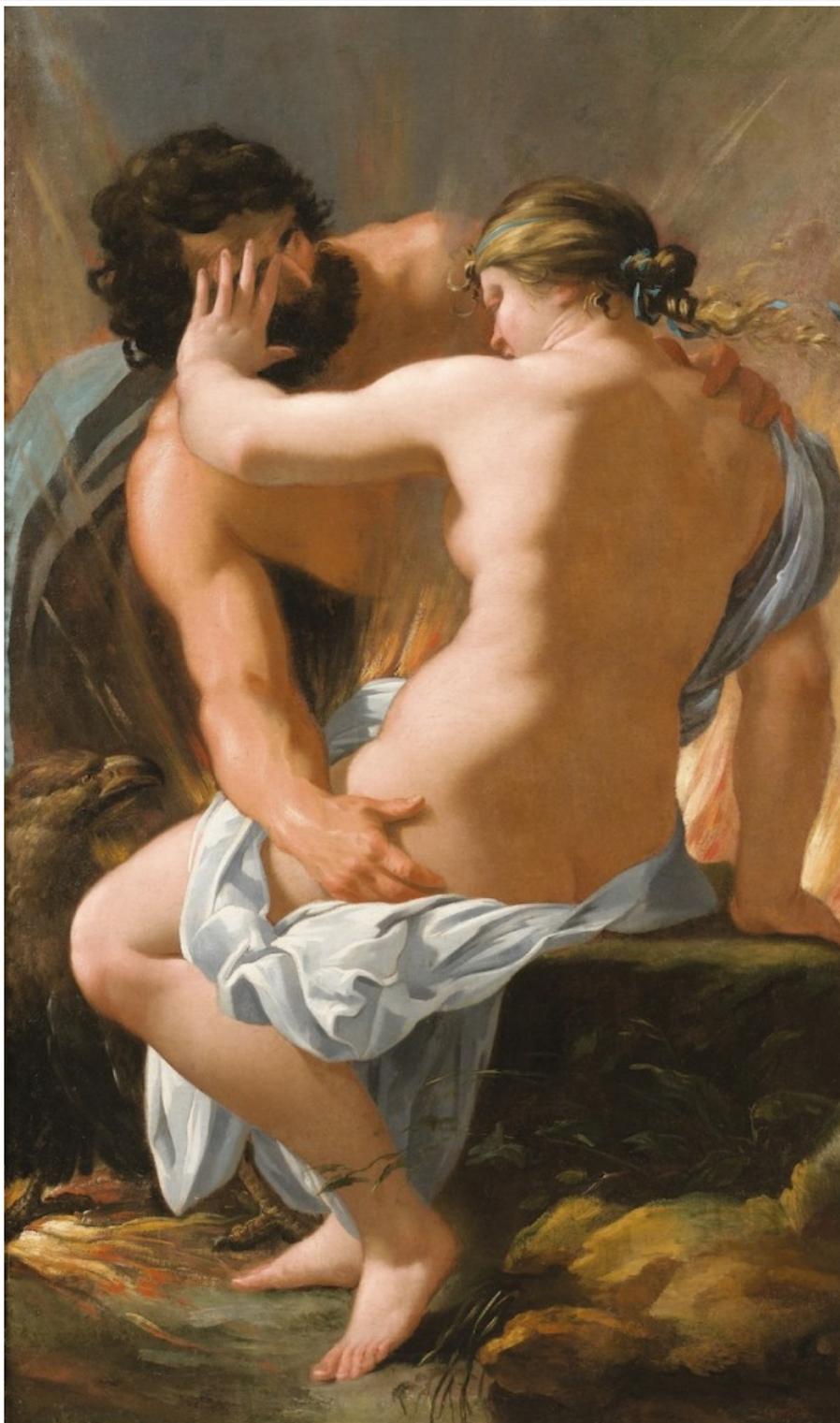
Artemis and Aphrodite are the goddesses that they are partly because they were fathered by Zeus.

p. 492 (20§61)

Zeus reposes in the garden of the Hesperides; nearby is where the hero Phaethon, driving the chariot of the sun god, crashed into the waters of the horizon.

p. 495 (21§5)

Zeus impregnates Semele, who becomes the mother of the god Dionysus. In the ancient myth, the god's motive is cosmic as well as sexual. His motive in modernist views, by contrast, seems merely sexual, as we see for example in the illustration I show below:



"Jupiter and Semele" (n.d.). François Perrier (1594–1649).

p. 513 (21§47)

Rhea, mother of Zeus, reassembles the disassembled Dionysus.

p. 516 (21§52)

Dionysus is the god that he is partly because he is the son of Zeus.

p. 521 (21§62)

The Muses and the Graces are the goddesses that they are partly because they were fathered by Zeus.

p. 565 (23§44)

A man is swearing by Zeus in despair over what seems at first to be a derailment of Socratic arguments for the immortality of the soul.

p. 576 (24§12)

Dionysus, in an epiphany, can look like Zeus himself.

p. 578 (again, 24§12)

Again, we see a reference to the impregnation of Semele by Zeus.

p. 588–589 (24§32)

If Zeus or Poseidon had impregnated the local goddess Thetis, the son born to her could have overthrown his divine father. Achilles deservedly receives the epithet 'dear to Zeus'.

p. 590–591 (24§36)

The radiance that comes from Zeus is seen as rescuing the island of Aegina, which was mother earth to the hero Aiakos, ancestor of the hero Achilles. Achilles is specially connected to the radiance of Zeus. The last time we read about this god in h24h, Zeus is making a clear sky for smooth sailing into the future.

Tags: [Arthur Szyk](#), [H24H](#), [indexing](#), [Irving Stone](#), [Semele](#), [The Agony and the Ecstasy](#), [Zeus](#)

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