



Comments on Comparative Mythology 4, a Dysfunctional Misunderstanding of Trifunctionality in Myths About the Judgment of Paris

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March 6, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

Comments off

2020.03.06, rewritten 2020.03.08 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In the previous two posts, *Classical Inquiries* [2020.02.21](#) and [2020.02.28](#), I connected the idea of “trifunctionality” with the idea of “sins” committed in myths connected with two different Greek heroes, Hēraklēs and Paris/Alexandros. Each of these two heroes violated, according to myths told about them, three “functions” of society, which are (1) sovereignty, (2) warfare, and (3) what I described already in the first post, [2020.02.21](#), as “reproductivity.” In the case of Hēraklēs, as we saw in that same post, the myths show that he committed three different “sins” on three different occasions, violating on each occasion one of these three functions of society. In the case of Paris/Alexandros, on the other hand, as we saw in the second post, [2020.02.28](#), the myths show that he violated the three functions not on three separate occasions but all at once, on a single occasion, known as the Judgment of Paris, which is retold most concisely in *Iliad* 24.25–30. As we also saw in the second post, the “sin” of Paris was that he praised the goddess Aphrodite in her role as the representative of sexual pleasure—which is a vital aspect of the third function—and that he thus undervalued the first and the second functions of sovereignty and warfare as represented respectively by the goddesses Hērā and Athena. In such a zero-sum mythological game of having to choose one goddess as the best of the three goddesses, the act of praising Aphrodite requires the commensurate act of insulting Hērā and Athena by way of blaming them—and we can see a visual interpretation of such an insult in the painting I have chosen as illustration for my essay here. In the logic of such mythmaking, however, the undervaluing of the first and the second functions resulted not from giving too much praise for Aphrodite. Rather, as I will now argue, such undervaluing resulted from a dysfunctional misunderstanding, by the hero Paris, of the functionality of trifunctionality.



The Judgment of Paris (1808). François-Xavier Fabre (1766–1837). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. As I have already argued in the previous posting, *Classical Inquiries* [2020.02.28](#), the myth about the Judgment of Paris shows that the hero did not completely understand the role of Aphrodite. As a representative of the third function, Aphrodite has a dual role: she is the goddess not only of sexuality but also of fertility—or, as I describe it more explicitly, of reproductivity. But there is more to it. Such a dual role of reproductivity as well as sexuality needs to be analyzed in terms of *ritual* as well as *myth*.

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§2. I highlight my relevant analysis in [Hour 20 of H24H](#). There I rethink, in general, the relationship of myth and ritual—while focusing on various ancient Greek myths and rituals that center on the worship of the goddess Aphrodite. In terms of that analysis, I have offered this general formula: *dysfunctionality in the world of myth corresponds to functionalism in the world of ritual* (further comments at §10 in [Classical Inquiries 2018.07.13](#)). In the world of ritual, which needs to be seen in the historical context of whatever present time is being analyzed, the worshippers of Aphrodite could understand in its completeness her dual role as goddess of reproductivity as well as sexuality. In the world of myth, by contrast, heroes may fail to understand, thus making errors in judgment.

§3. I now argue that such errors include a misunderstanding, in myth, by Paris. He does not understand the functionality of the trifunctionality represented by the goddesses Hērā and Athena and Aphrodite, all three—a functionality that can only be understood in the post-heroic world of ritual as a frame for re-enacting the heroic world of myth. In such a post-heroic world, trifunctionality was functional, to be understood and appreciated by contemplating the re-enactments of misunderstandings experienced by heroes in their own heroic world.

§4. In terms of this argument, I find it preferable to speak of such misunderstandings as “dysfunctionalities,” instead of “sins.” Up to now, I have used the term “sins” only because others have used it with reference to the errors of heroes in myth (for background, I refer back to §1 in [Classical Inquiries 2019.09.20](#)). But my use of “scare-quotes” enclosing this term in my essay here has been an indication, all along, of my guardedness about saying “sins.” From now on, in any case, I can dispense with the term altogether.

§5. In general, I prefer to think of errors made in myth as examples of dysfunctionality in the there-and-then of the past, destined to be corrected by the functionalism of ritual in the here-and-now of the present.

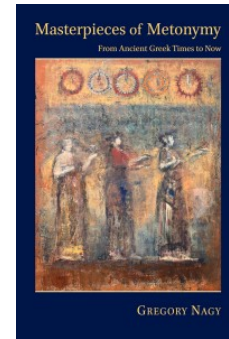
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