



# Comments on Comparative Mythology 7, Finding a Cure for the Anger of Hērā

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## Comments on comparative mythology 7, finding a cure for the anger of Hērā

April 3, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

Comments off

2020.04.03 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In a previous essay, *Classical Inquiries 2020.03.20*, I highlighted some ancient artwork picturing the hero Hēraklēs being breast-fed by the goddess Hērā after he was brought back to life after death. In the present essay, I will analyze the mythological background, showing that the ultimate benevolence of Hērā toward Hēraklēs, as manifested in the act of breast-feeding, had to be preceded by the malevolence of the goddess during the hero's lifetime before his death. That malevolence, as I will also show, takes the form of a special kind of anger, which to my mind bears an uncanny resemblance to the anger of Mozart's Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* (première 1791, Vienna)—especially as visualized by Ingmar Bergman in his Swedish-language film version of the opera, *Trollflöjten* (1975).



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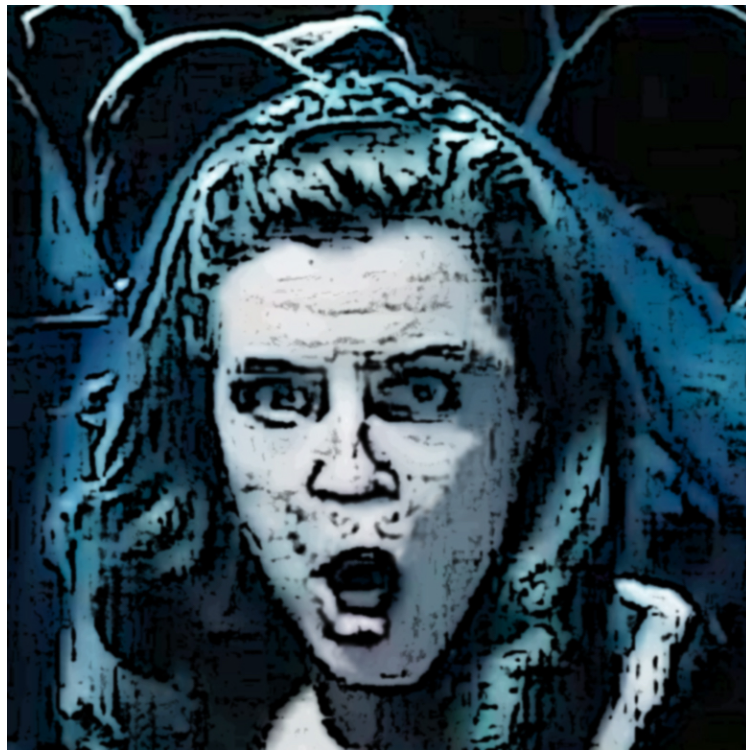
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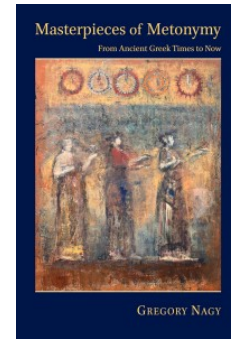
§1. In another posting, [Classical Inquiries 2017.10.26](#), I already drew attention to an aria sung by the soprano Birgit Nordin in her role as Queen of the Night in the film by Bergman. The aria can be viewed [here](#) (at 1:17:11). In that posting, I commented on the wide range of emotions re-enacted in the singing and in the visualization of the singing. In the posting for now, by contrast, I sharpen the focus, commenting only on the emotion of anger as shown in the singing of the aria. This emotion is I think both terrifying and at the same time beautiful. The pictures that I have freeze-framed from the Queen's aria in the film capture both the terror and the beauty. But my thinking takes me further. In what follows, as we consider the malevolence as well as the benevolence of the goddess Hērā toward the hero Hēraklēs, we can find not only the essence of this divine Queen's malevolent anger but also, hidden within that essence, a benevolent cure.

§2. In my search for such a finding, I start with a passage in Rhapsody 18 of the Homeric *Iliad*, verses 107–126. The hero Achilles is speaking here, angrily speaking, and I follow the careful analysis of his angry words by Thomas R. Walsh in his book about anger in Homeric poetry (2005:218). As Walsh shows, these verses are a masterpiece of poetic self-expression by Achilles, where the hero rivals in his poetic mastery the great Homer himself, that ultimate culture hero credited with the composition of that ultimate poetic creation about anger, the *Iliad* (Walsh is following here the insights of Richard Martin 1989:223 about the Homeric representation of Achilles as a master poet in his own right). I now quote the thirteen most relevant verses in the cited passage, verses 107–119, where we see the primary hero of the *Iliad* in the act of expressing anger at his own anger by *cursing it, putting a curse on it*:

ὡς ἔρις ἔκ τε θεῶν ἔκ τ' ἀνθρώπων ἀπόλοιτο  
καὶ χόλος, ὃς τ' ἐφέηκε πολύφρονά περ χαλεπήναι,  
ὃς τε πολὺ γλυκίων μέλιτος καταλειβομένοιο  
ἀνδρῶν ἐν στήθεσσι ἀέξεται ἠὔτε καπνός·  
ὡς ἐμὲ νῦν ἐχόλωσεν ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων.  
ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν προτετύχθαι ἔασσομεν ἀχνύμενοι περ,  
θυμὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλον δαμάσαντες ἀνάγκη·  
νῦν δ' εἴμ' ὄφρα φίλης κεφαλῆς ὀλετῆρα κιχείω  
Ἔκτορα· κῆρα δ' ἐγὼ τότε δέξομαι ὀππότε κεν δῆ  
Ζεὺς ἐθέλη τελέσαι ἢ δ' ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι.  
οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδὲ βίη Ἡρακλῆος φύγε κῆρα,  
ὃς περ φίλτατος ἔσκε Διὶ Κρονίωνι ἄνακτι·  
ἀλλὰ ἐ μοῖρα δάμασσε καὶ ἀργαλέος χόλος Ἥρης.

So may strife [*eris*], leaving the gods, leaving mortals, go to perdition,  
and so may anger [*kholos*] as well, the kind of anger that pushes even a sound-thinking  
man into harshness,  
the kind of anger that is much sweeter to the taste than honey as it pours down  
in the breasts of men, the kind of anger that billows out like smoke from a fire,  
—that is what happened to me now, angered [verb of *kholos*] as I have been by the king of  
men, Agamemnon.  
Those things, though... They are in the past. Done. I should let go of them, full of sorrow  
though I am.

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I will overcome that spirit of mine in my breast. I just have to.  
And now I will go off, chasing after the one who destroyed that near-and-dear head-to-be-hugged, I will catch up with that one,  
I mean, Hector. And then I will be ready to accept the fate-of-death [*kēr*], whenever it will be—I now see it—  
that Zeus wishes to make happen, together with the other immortal gods.  
I say this because not even the might of Hēraklēs could escape his own fate-of-death [*kēr*].  
Even if he was most near-and-dear to Zeus, son of Kronos, the lord.  
Still, fate [*moira*] overcame him, and so too did the painful anger [*kholos*] of Hērā.

*Iliad* 18.107–119

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etymology Eurystheus Georges Dumézil  
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§3. In the next three paragraphs, I interpret these verses as the hero's own poetry about anger, inside a poem that is all about anger.

§3A. So, the anger of Hērā caused the death of Hēraklēs. Achilles himself, main hero of the Homeric *Iliad*, says it here. And he says it at the very moment when he decides, once and for all, to accept his own death. Achilles was talking about such an impending decision already at verses 410–416 in Rhapsody 9, but he finally gets to decide only now, in Rhapsody 18. This death of his, he has just been told, will be his fate. His death will be his fated death if he chooses to fight and kill Hector in revenge for that hero's killing of Patroklos. And his own death, Achilles says, is fated, inevitable, just as the death of Hēraklēs was fated, inevitable. That death, Achilles goes on to say outright, was caused by anger—by the anger of Hērā. But his own death, Achilles is also saying now, will have been likewise caused by anger—by his own anger. And he bitterly curses this anger of his.

§3B. But this anger that Achilles is now bitterly cursing, this accursed anger, had once upon a time felt sweet to the taste—back when the hero first felt it in Rhapsody 1. That is what he is now saying in Rhapsody 18. This anger had once felt deliciously sweet, to be savored. But this accursed anger, the hero now admits with the deepest regret, had not really ever been sweet. It was always bitter, bitter all along, and it will have to be cured in the fullness of time. But not yet. Before any cure, this anger will be the fuel that drives Achilles in his quest to kill Hector. He must first kill Hector. And this accursed anger that now drives Achilles, which got started when he got angry at Agamemnon in Rhapsody 1 and which now billows out like the smoke of some raging fire in Rhapsody 18 as he sets out to kill Hector, is modeled on the *kholos* or 'anger' of Hērā, which had caused the death of Hēraklēs. The hero of the *Iliad*, in his own words, models his own future death on the kind of anger that caused the death of Hēraklēs, and that anger was the anger of Hērā.

§3C. I say "a kind of anger" here, not "the anger." That is because Achilles in Rhapsody 18 of the *Iliad* is un-stating and thus un-thinking one kind of anger, *mēnis*, which he has experienced ever since Rhapsody 1 but which is now behind him, while he is restating and thus rethinking another kind of anger, *kholos*, which started for him in Rhapsody 1 and will continue for him beyond Rhapsody 18 all the way into Rhapsody 24. That is where the second kind of anger will finally stop. The hero's first kind of anger, *mēnis*, had been directed against his fellow warriors, led by Agamemnon, overking of the Achaeans. And so too with his second kind of anger, *kholos*: it had been originally directed at Agamemnon and the Achaeans, back in Rhapsody 1, but now, in Rhapsody 18, it has been redirected. Achilles is now angry only at the Trojans, led by Hector.

§4. Throughout my interpretation of *Iliad* 18.107–119 in the previous three paragraphs, I have been speaking about the "kinds of anger" experienced by Achilles, instead of saying simply "the anger of Achilles." That is because there is no single all-encompassing word for "anger" in Homeric poetry—any more than there is any single word for "anger" in the English language. In English, we may say "wrath" or "rage" or "fury" as well as "anger," and they are all synonyms, as we call them. But of course they are only partial synonyms, since each one of these words has its own special way of being used. Similarly with Homeric words that we translate into English as 'anger' or the like: they too are synonyms, yes, but they too are only partial synonyms, as I point out in my Foreword (p. ix) to the book of Thomas Walsh on Homeric anger (2005). What is dissimilar, however, about such Homeric words that we translate as 'anger' or the like is that they, unlike the English words we use to translate them, belong to a system of poetry—what can best be described as a formulaic system. And this system that is Homeric poetry integrates the different uses of the different Greek words for "anger" into a unified poetics of heroic anger. That is the fundamental insight of Walsh's book on anger in Homeric poetry (2005), concentrating on the Greek words *kholos* and *kotos* while building on the earlier findings of Leonard Muellner, whose own book on Homeric anger (1996) concentrates on the Greek word *mēnis*. In an abbreviated Homeric commentary (Nagy 2017b), I summarize as follows, with specific reference to *Iliad* 1.74–83:

The words spoken by Kalkhas the seer at *Iliad* 1.74–83 indicate three different kinds of anger: *mēnis* at verse 75, *kholos* at verse 81, and *kotos* at verse 82. In the case of *mēnis*, it is a kind of "cosmic sanction": I cite the definitive work of Muellner 1996, especially chapter 1. As for *kholos*, it is a kind of explosive anger that is generally instantaneous, as opposed to *kotos*, which is an anger that is timed to go off only in the fullness of time, when the course of events in the narration has come to fulfillment, as expressed at verse 82 by way of the verb *teleîn* 'come to fulfillment'. On *kotos* in particular and on *kholos* in general, I cite Walsh 2005, especially chapter 1, where he analyzes the wording of the seer at verses 74–83 as a kind of "folk definition" for all three of the different kinds of anger mentioned in this passage.

§5. Looking back at this summary, I now think I may have overstated my view when I describe *kholos* as a kind of "explosive" anger that is "generally instantaneous." While I still think that this kind of anger, when it

manifests itself, is pictured as a most powerful explosion, I must now add that the explosiveness, once it is there, will always be there, unseen, just waiting to happen.

§6. In the Homeric *Iliad*, the *kholos* of Achilles has always been there, from the very beginning, in Rhapsody 1, where the hero “blew up” at Agamemnon, all the way toward the end, in Rhapsody 24, where Achilles is still at it, brutally mutilating the corpse of Hector. But now, at the very end, the brutality will stop because the anger will stop. And the stopping of this anger of Achilles can be seen as a cure for the anger, *just as the anger of the goddess Hērā can be stopped only if it too can be cured*. That is why it is essential that Achilles, in the course of performing his own poem of anger in Rhapsody 18, links his own *kholos* to the *kholos* of Hērā herself.

§7. We know how the *kholos* or ‘anger’ of Achilles is stopped, cured, in the *Iliad*. The hero’s acceptance of his own impending death, fated for him once he has killed Hector, leads him to let go of his anger at the end of Rhapsody 24—once his emotions connect with the emotions of Priam, father of Hector, who sorrowfully accepts the death of his own son. Once the anger of Achilles stops, so too does his bestial behavior come to an end. He stops his vengeful attempts at mutilating the corpse of Hector, and his humanity as a hero is ultimately restored, as I argued in *The Best of the Achaeans* (Nagy 1979/1999 7§§22–23 = pp. 135–137). But how, on the other hand, is the *kholos* or ‘anger’ of the goddess stopped, cured? As I will now argue, the cure for this anger is the death of Hēraklēs. In other words, the death of the hero is the cause of the cure for Hērā, just as the anger of the goddess was the cause of his death.

§8. To start the argument, I must first note that the Homeric *Iliad* tracks two different myths about the anger of Hērā. One of these myths—the one to which the words of Achilles are referring in the verses I quoted from Rhapsody 18—tells about the anger felt by Hērā toward Hēraklēs. But there is another myth, all-pervasive in the *Iliad*, that tells about the anger felt by Hērā toward the Trojans in general—all on account of the Judgment of Paris. At verses 31–36 of Rhapsody 4, Zeus condemns this kind of anger, called *kholos* at verse 36, as a most bestial emotion, and the divine husband and brother of Hērā says here that the only cure for his divine wife and sister would be for her to devour the uncooked flesh of Priam and all the Trojans. The anger of Achilles against Hector and his Trojans is condemned in comparable terms by the god Apollo, who refers to the hero at verse 207 of Rhapsody 24 as a savage who devours uncooked flesh. Earlier, at verses 346–347 of Rhapsody 22, Achilles even brings himself to expressing, in his anger, a bestial desire to devour the uncooked flesh of the dying Hector.

§9. To be cured of this kind of bestial anger, Achilles will have to accept his own future death, and he does that in Rhapsody 24 of the *Iliad*. In the case of the goddess Hērā, however, the cure for her own bestial anger is more complicated. In one myth, centering on the Trojan War, it is not enough for her to accept the death of all Trojans: she will require it. And, similarly in the other myth involving the antagonism between Hērā and Hēraklēs, she will require the death of the hero. But, in this case, not only is her anger cured. Likewise cured is the wound caused by the arrow shot into her right breast by Hēraklēs in an incident retold at verses 392–394 of Rhapsody 5, analyzed in the previous post, at [Classical Inquiries 2020.03.20](#), where we read that Hēraklēs wounded Hērā by shooting an arrow into her right breast, causing an incurable *algos* ‘pain’, highlighted at verse 394. When we look beyond this part of the myth, we can see what is left unsaid in the *Iliad*: once Hēraklēs is reborn, he is breast-fed by Hērā, and I highlighted in the previous post some relevant images from the ancient world. This benevolent gesture on the part of the goddess shows that the wound inflicted once upon a time by the arrow of Hēraklēs, incurable in the heroic world of myth, has been cured in the post-heroic world of ritual, where the pollutions retold in myth may be purged by way of re-enacting myth in ritual.

§10. But how are we to imagine the sequence of mythological events leading from the wounding of the right breast of Hērā all the way to the breast-feeding of Hēraklēs by the goddess? To address this question, I make a start here by tracking some other myths that tell of Hērā in the act of breast-feeding:

§10A. Hērā breast-feeds a monstrous serpent, the Hydra of Lerna, in the Hesiodic *Theogony* 313–314; this Hydra is the progeny of another monstrous serpent, the Ekhidna; then Hērā also breast-feeds the Lion of Nemea, another progeny of the Ekhidna, in *Theogony* 327–329.

§10B. Hērā breast-feeds Thetis, mother of Achilles, in *Iliad* 24.59–60; Thetis in turn breast-feeds Achilles, in *Iliad* 16.203.

§11. The myth about the breast-feeding of the serpentine Hydra by Hērā is I think relevant to other myths that tell how Hēraklēs, when he split open the body of the monster after killing it, made poisoned arrows by dipping the metallic tips into the gall that flowed from the gall bladder of the Hydra. The sources are Sophocles, *Trachinian Women* 569–577; Diodorus of Sicily 4.11.6; the “Library” of Apollodorus 2.5.2 p. 189 ed. Frazer; Pausanias 2.37.4.

§12. In three of these sources (Sophocles, Diodorus, Pausanias), it is made explicit that any wound caused by the poisoned arrows of Hēraklēs will be incurable. And here I return to the pain, described as incurable, of the wound caused by the arrow shot by Hēraklēs into the right breast of Hērā. I ask myself: is the pain of this wound incurable because it was infected by the gall that flowed from the bladder of the Hydra—the gall that poisoned the tips of the arrows shot by Hēraklēs? There can be no certain answer, but one thing is for sure: the same gall that poisoned the arrows of Hēraklēs killed not only Nessos, the Centaur who tried to rape Deianeira, wife of Hēraklēs: it also killed Hēraklēs himself, as we read in the myth as retold by Diodorus (4.36.4–5), where it is made clear that the toxic liquid that killed Hēraklēs by mere contact with his skin was a mixture of olive oil, blood, semen from the Centaur, and, fourth, gall smeared on the tip of the poisoned arrow that had killed the Centaur.

§13. In Greek, the word that I translate as 'gall' here is *kholē*. But another Greek word that can also mean 'gall' or 'bile' is *khólos* itself, as we see from the careful etymological and contextual analysis of these two words *kholē* and *khólos* in the book on Homeric anger by Walsh (2005:217–225). So, *kholos* as the anger of Hērā—and as the anger of Achilles—is visualized as yellow bile. In fact, the English word *yellow* is cognate with the Greek words *kholē* and *khólos*.

§14. And here we find the ultimate connection between the *kholos* or 'anger' of Hērā and the *kholos* or 'anger' of Achilles, conjured together in the words of Achilles about the poetics of anger in Rhapsody 18: as Joan V. O'Brien (1993:93) has noted, the anger of Hērā is transmitted to Achilles by her mother's milk, since she breast-fed Thetis just as Thetis breast-fed Achilles, as I pointed out already at §10B. I think that the toxic gall in the mother's milk of Hērā, infected by the poisoned arrow of Hēraklēs, is transmitted by way of Thetis to Achilles.

§15. In his own words, spoken at verses 200–209 of Rhapsody 16 in the *Iliad*, Achilles shows an awareness of the gall that infected the mother's milk of Thetis. He is speaking here to his fellow warriors, the Myrmidons, admitting to them that they must be shocked by the savagery of his anger, which he calls *kholos* at verse 206. He is already saying at verse 203 that he would not blame his comrades for thinking that he must have been breast-fed by Thetis not on mother's milk but on anger, and here too at verse 203 he uses the word *kholos*, just as he uses it later at verse 206—except that this time, at verse 203, *kholos* can refer directly to gall, real gall mixed in milk, not only to gall as a metaphor for anger. As Laura Slatkin has pointedly shown in her book about Thetis (2011), this goddess has her own anger, inherited from her by Achilles. And, as we now see further, the hero's anger is also transmitted through his mother's toxic milk, which is transmitted in turn from the gall mixed into the mother's milk of Hērā. And the hero is aware, as I have argued here, of the anger that comes from Hērā, since he is also aware of the malevolence shown by the goddess toward Hēraklēs when that hero was alive—to be contrasted with the benevolence of this same goddess toward that same hero when he is reborn after death. What galls Achilles, though, is that he too, like Hēraklēs, must accept death as a cure for his own anger. By contrast, unlike Achilles, Hēraklēs must accept death as a cure for the anger of Hērā herself. Once this anger is cured, the mother's milk of the goddess will no longer be toxic for the hero.



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