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Classical Inquiries

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A bathtub in Pylos

March 16, 2017 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy 3 Comments Edit This

2017.03.16 | 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…]



Piękna Polycaste, najmłodsza córka Nestora [Beautiful Polykaste, the youngest daughter of Nestor] by Jan Styka, 1901

§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 O.03.464–468, Telemachus the son of Odysseus is bathed in a tub called an asaminthos, O.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, O.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, O.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.

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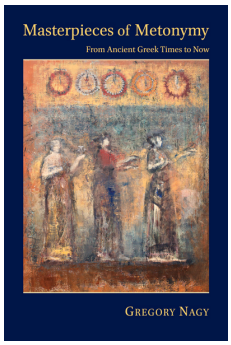
Bathtub at Nestor's Palace, Pylos, by Dan Diffendale. Image provided under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License.

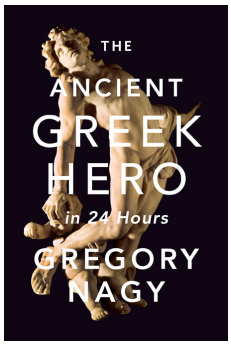
§2. In a book entitled Masterpieces of Metonymy (MoM in the Bibliography), I highlighted the Homeric comparison of Telemachus with the immortal gods in the context of his emerging from his bath in the asaminthos 'bathtub'. What I now highlight here, however, is different: it is the relevance of this comparison to the ritual function of actually taking such a ritual bath.



Bains de Télémaque [Baths of Telemachus], from Odyssée d'Homère by Jan Styka. 2 vols. Paris: Société générale d'imprimerie et d'édition, 1922–1923.

§3. Most relevant to this act of comparison to the gods is the etymology of homoios (ὁμοῖος), 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 (ὁμοῖος) 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 (ὁμοῖος), 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





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'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 (ὁμοῖος), 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 (ἀλλοῖος) 'a different kind', which is the opposite of homoios (ὁμοῖος) or 'the same kind'. As we will also see later, the extension -ios (-ιος) of the two adjectives homoios (ὁμοῖος) 'the same kind' and alloios (ἀλλοῖος) 'a different kind' is parallel to the extension -ios (-ιος) of the adjectives hoios (οἷος) 'what kind' and toios (τοῖος) 'that kind'.

§4. In MoM 2§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 (ἐναλίγκιος) '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**.
>
> O.24.370–371[3]

§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 ἴδεν … ἄντην '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 [**eïskein**]** 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

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man wearing unseemly clothes, |200 but now you **look just like [**= perfect of eïskein**] the gods** who hold the wide sky." |201 He was answered by Odysseus, the one with many kinds of craft, who addressed him thus: |202 "Telemachus, it does not **seem right [**= perfect of eïskein**]** for you to be amazed at your father who is right here inside [the shelter], |203 for you to be amazed too much or to feel overwhelmed. |204 There will never again be some **different [**allos**]** person who comes here, some different Odysseus, |205 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. |206 But now I am here, having come back in the twentieth year to the land of my ancestors. |207 I tell you, this was the work of Athena, the giver of prizes, |208 who has made me be **such [**toios**]** as she wants me to be, for she has the power. |209 One moment, she has made me to be **looking just like [**enalinkios**]** a beggar, and then, the next moment, |210 **just like** a young man who has beautiful clothes covering his complexion. |211 It is easy for the gods, who hold the wide sky, |212 to make a mortal man become exalted with radiance or to debase him.

O.16.172–212[4]

§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 (ὁμοῖος) 'the same kind' (verse 182). Now he looks different; he is a different kind of person. Earlier, I noted that alloios (ἀλλοῖος) 'a different kind' is the opposite of homoios (ὁμοῖος) 'the same kind'. In the example I have just quoted, we see this meaning of alloios 'a different kind' in action (verse 181). I also noted that the extension -ios (-ιος) of the adjectives homoios (ὁμοῖος) 'the same kind' and alloios (ἀλλοῖος) 'a different kind' is parallel to the extension -ios (-ιος) of the adjectives hoios (οἷος) 'what kind' and toios (τοῖος) 'that kind'. In the example I have just quoted, we also see this meaning of 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 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 **liken [**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.

§11. This posting is dedicated to my fellow travelers Hunt and Kelly Lambert, Hélène Emeriaud, David Beardsley, Marina Cheilitsi, Leanne Gaffney, Stephen and Irene Trivers, Michael and Cathy Winer, Robert and Judy Kryger, Cecilia Taiana, Philip Anderson, John Kenny, Milica Ivanis, Alaisha Sharma, Alec Douglas, Ryan LaMonica, Theresa Nguyen, Sunday Hull, Cecil Williams II, Abdur Rehman, Mariam Topeshashvili, Lisa Zheng.

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Notes

[1] ἔκ ῥ' ἀσαμίνθου βῆ δέμας ἀθανάτοισιν ὁμοῖος.

[2] ἔκ ῥ' ἀσαμίνθου βῆ δέμας ἀθανάτοισιν ὁμοῖος.

[3] ἐκ δ' ἀσαμίνθου βῆ· θαύμαζε δέ μιν φίλος υἱός, | ὡς ἴδεν ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσ' ἐναλίγκιον ἄντην.

[4] |172 ἦ, καὶ χρυσείῃ ῥάβδῳ ἐπεμάσσατ' Ἀθήνη. |173 φᾶρος μέν οἱ πρῶτον ἐϋπλυνὲς ἠδὲ χιτῶνα |174 θῆκ' ἀμφὶ στήθεσφι, δέμας δ' ὤφελλε καὶ ἥβην. |175 ἂψ δὲ μελαγχροιὴς γένετο, γναθμοὶ δ' ἐτάνυσθεν, |176 κυάνεαι δ' ἐγένοντο ἐθειράδες ἀμφὶ γένειον. |177 ἡ μὲν ἄρ' ὣς ἔρξασα πάλιν κίεν· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς |178 ἦϊεν ἐς κλισίην. θάμβησε δέ μιν φίλος υἱός, |179 ταρβήσας δ' ἐτέρωσε βάλ' ὄμματα, μὴ θεὸς εἴη, |180 καί μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα· |181 "ἄλλοΐός μοι, ξεῖνε, φάνης νέον ἠὲ πάροιθεν, |182 ἄλλα δὲ εἵματ' ἔχεις καί τοι χρὼς οὐκέθ' ὁμοῖος. |183 ἦ μάλα τις θεός ἐσσι, τοὶ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσιν· |184 ἀλλ' ἵληθ', ἵνα τοι κεχαρισμένα δώομεν ἰρὰ |185 ἠδὲ χρύσεα δῶρα, τετυγμένα· φείδεο δ' ἡμέων." |186 τὸν δ' ἡμείβετ' ἔπειτα πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς· |187 "οὔ τίς τοι θεός εἰμι· τί μ' ἀθανάτοισιν ἐΐσκεις**;** |188 ἀλλὰ πατὴρ τεός εἰμι, τοῦ εἵνεκα σὺ στεναχίζων |189 πάσχεις ἄλγεα πολλά, βίας ὑποδέγμενος ἀνδρῶν." |190 ὣς ἄρα φωνήσας υἱὸν κύσε, κὰδ δὲ παρειῶν |191 δάκρυον ἧκε χαμᾶζε· πάρος δ' ἔχε νωλεμὲς αἰεί. |192 Τηλέμαχος δ',—οὐ γάρ πω

ἐπείθετο ὃν πατέρ’ εἶναι,—|193 ἐξαῦτίς μιν ἔπεσσιν ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπεν· |194 “οὐ σύ γ’ Ὀδυσσεύς ἐσσι πατὴρ ἐμός, ἀλλά με δαίμων |195 θέλγει, ὅφρ’ ἔτι μᾶλλον ὀδυρόμενος στεναχίζω. |196 οὐ γάρ πως ἂν θνητὸς ἀνὴρ τάδε μηχανόῳτο |197 ᾧ αὐτοῦ γε νόῳ, ὅτε μὴ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἐπελθὼν |198 ῥηϊδίως ἐθέλων θείη νέον ἠδὲ γέροντα. |199 ἦ γάρ τοι νέον ἦσθα γέρων καὶ ἀεικέα ἕσσο· |200 νῦν δὲ θεοῖσιν ἔοικας, οἳ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσι.” |201 τὸν δ’ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς· |202 “Τηλέμαχ’, οὔ σε ἔοικε φίλον πατέρ’ ἔνδον ἐόντα |203 οὕτε τι θαυμάζειν περιώσιον οὔτ’ ἀγάασθαι· |204 οὐ μὲν γάρ τοι ἔτ’ ἄλλος ἐλεύσεται ἐνθάδ’ Ὀδυσσεύς, |205 ἀλλ’ ὅδ’ ἐγὼ τοιόσδε, παθὼν κακά, πολλὰ δ’ ἀληθείς, |206 ἦλυθον εἰκοστῷ ἔτεϊ ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν. |207 αὐτάρ τοι τόδε ἔργον Ἀθηναίης ἀγελείης, |208 ἥ τέ με τοῖον ἔθηκεν ὅπως ἐθέλει, δύναται γάρ, |209 ἄλλοτε μὲν πτωχῷ ἐναλίγκιον, ἄλλοτε δ’ αὖτε |210 ἀνδρὶ νέῳ καὶ καλὰ περὶ χροῒ εἵματ’ ἔχοντι. |211 ῥηϊδιον δὲ θεοῖσι, τοὶ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσιν, |212 ἠμὲν κυδῆναι θνητὸν βροτὸν ἠδὲ κακῶσαι.”

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