



Sacred Space as a frame for lyric occasions: The case of the Mnesiepes Inscription and other possible cases

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Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins

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Sacred Space as a frame for lyric occasions: The case of the Mnesiepes Inscription and other possible cases

June 28, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2018.06.30 | By Gregory Nagy

The three terms sacred space and frame and lyric occasions in the primary title of this presentation all need to be questioned for their meanings, which depend in each case on the overall meaning of the title that combines these terms. As for the words case and cases in the secondary title, they refer to specific examples that give context to my questioning of the three highlighted terms of the primary title. The questioning is meant to provoke some friendly debate, and the questioned terms can become the main subject for the debate itself. In the spirit of such friendly debate, I will now proceed to question the highlighted terms of the primary title, going in reverse order: lyric occasions, frame, and sacred space. Of these three terms, as we will see, the third of them is relevant to the illustration placed on the cover of this post.

[[Essay continues here...](#)]



Depicted here is a pair of heteroerotic lovers, in a standing embrace, who are covered by a cloak and surrounded along the edges by a Dionysiac halo of grapevines, from which hang bunches of grapes. The trope of the cloak here in the visual arts matches the trope of the cloak in the verbal arts as we see it at work at the end of the "Cologne Epode" of Archilochus. Black-figure kylix attributed to the Haimon Painter, ca. 525–475 BCE. Athens, National Museum, 651 (ABV 560.514). Photo: M. Collignon and L. Couve, *Catalogue des vases peints du Musée National d'Athènes* (Paris, 1902–1904), pl. XXXVIII. Special thanks to Gloria Ferrari Pinney for help in identifying this kylix and the publication in which it appears.

§1. [[lyric occasions]] The word lyric that I use in the primary title follows the conventions of the Network for the Study of Archaic and Classical Greek Song—and what I am presenting here is actually the text of a paper delivered 2018.06.30 at a meeting organized by members of that Network. But my usage is questionable in the case of the ancient text highlighted in the secondary title, the Mnesiepes Inscription, the main referent of which is Archilochus as poet: the question is, can we describe as lyric the verbal art that this text attributes to the poet? My questioning is implicit in the combination of the word lyric with the word occasions in my primary title. The word lyric raises the question of genre, and genre needs be defined in contexts of occasion. Right away, I enumerate here four such contexts: composition, performance, reception, transmission. For more on all four of these contexts as I have just enumerated them, I refer to an online article listed as number 10 in the Bibliography below (Nagy 2009a). As we will see, the lyric occasions for the compositions attributed to Archilochus are particularly problematic. For now, however, I continue with my questioning of the three terms I have used in the primary title. Next in order, then, is...

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Editor

Keith Stone
kstone@chs.harvard.edu

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§2. [[frame]] From the standpoint of my overall argumentation, a frame for any occasion may be either physical or only notional. That is to say, an occasion may be real or only pictured as real. I draw attention here, already now, to a distinction I need to make in this formulation. When I say that an occasion may be notional in that it may not be real but only pictured as real, this is not the same thing as saying that such a notional occasion is fictional. The very idea of fiction would be misleading here—as also in other such situations to be found in “lyric” writ large, as for example in the songs of Sappho (accordingly, I disagree with the usage of “fiction” in D’Alessio 2018). What may seem as fictional for us as “outsiders” who are merely looking in, as it were, when we view an occasion—as indicated in the text of, say, Archilochus—may have been seen as real by those who were “insiders” to the poetic traditions that shaped this given text. That is why I prefer to say pictured as real, not imagined as real, whenever I refer to occasions in the texts of Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho, and other such exponents of “lyric”—or whatever we choose to call it. Whereas the idea of fiction—or even falsehood—is at least implied in our everyday use of the word imagining, such an implication is not required if I use instead the word picturing. To picture something is not necessarily a fictionalizing of that something.

(It remains to ask, however: what was the prerequisite for becoming an “insider” to an occasion that was being pictured in the poetic traditions that shaped the text of Archilochus and other such figures? The prerequisite, I argue, was that such an “insider” would be a participant in the performance of the poetry that eventually became the text. I made a special effort here to say a participant—not merely a passive member of an audience. For more on this distinction, I refer to the book listed as number 5 in the Bibliography below [PP 83].)

For now, in any case, I continue with my questioning of the three terms I have used in the primary title. Next and last in order, then, is the third one...

§3. [[sacred space]] My use of this term takes me back to an old article of mine that I contributed to the Festschrift for Bruno Gentili, published in 1993, which is number 4 in the Bibliography. The title of the article was “Alcaeus in Sacred Space,” with reference to a temenos or ‘sacred precinct’ mentioned in Alcaeus Fragment 129.2 V and in Fragment 130b.13 V. This temenos is described in the language of the poet as a great federal space common to all the people of the island of Lesbos, and such a place can be identified with a sacred precinct that went by the name of Messon, mentioned in two inscriptions dated to the second century BCE, which Louis Robert (1960) connected with the name of the present-day place known as ta Mesa in Modern Greek. This temenos or ‘sacred precinct’, situated on the island of Lesbos, was sacred to the goddess Hera—as also to Zeus and to Dionysus—so we read in the text of Alcaeus. And the identity of this place as sacred to Hera is likewise indicated in the songs of Sappho, as we can now see even more clearly since the recent discovery of new papyrus fragments. (I offer a detailed analysis of the relevant texts in an online article listed as number 16 in the Bibliography.) But this sacred space was sacred not only to Hera and to other gods: as I argued in the same article I cited at the beginning of this paragraph, the temenos was sacred also to the poet Alcaeus himself in his role as a cult hero who is personified as speaking from the dead. A comparable personification, as I went on to argue in that article, is at work in Theognis 1209-1210, where the poet is likewise pictured as speaking from the dead—in the same role of cult hero. And now, in my presentation here, I will extend my argument by comparing what we know about a sacred space situated on the island of Paros, where the poet Archilochus was worshipped in his own role as a cult hero. Here is where the evidence of what is said in the Mnesiepes Inscription, as mentioned in the secondary title, will become decisive for my argumentation.

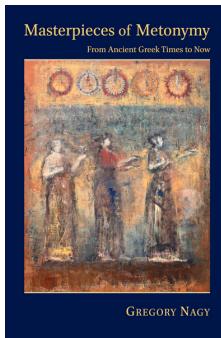
§4. Having offered working definitions for lyric occasions, frame, and sacred space, I will now offer a set of three placeholders, as I call them, which will each support the argumentation as it gets underway.

Placeholder 1.

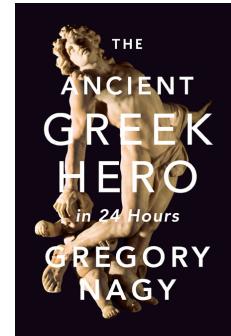
Epitomized from [PH 12549](#). The compositions ascribed to Archilochus take the form of a specialized kind of poetry that is differentiated from song. As we see from external references to this poet, including the testimony of Plato (Ion 531a), the professional performers of compositions attributed to Archilochus were rhapsōdoi ‘rhapsodes’, not kitharōdoi ‘lyre singers’ (documentation in [PH 15516-20](#)). Still, the figure of Archilochus retains a choral personality, as evidenced by his self-description in one fragment (Archilochus F 120 W) as an exarkhōn ‘choral leader’ of the dithurambos ‘dithyramb’, where his performance is explicitly accompanied by the aulos ‘double-reed’; in the wording of this fragment, the dithyramb is described as sacred to the god Dionysus. In another fragment (F 121 W), Archilochus is self-described as an exarkhōn ‘choral leader’ of the paieōn [=paiān] ‘paean’; implicitly, his performance there is accompanied by the kitharā ‘lyre’, as we see from the description of Apollo’s own model performance of the paean in the Hymn to Apollo (514–519), where the god accompanies on the kitharā ‘lyre’ his own choral singing and dancing as a lead-in for performance by the rest of the chorus. We may compare two images I showed in the posting for [2018.06.06](#), where we see Archilochus in the act of performing his compositions while holding a lyre—as pictured on the surface of coins minted by the state of Paros, the poet’s homeland.

Placeholder 2.

The choral personality of Archilochus is also evident in the Life of Archilochus tradition as preserved by the Mnesiepes Inscription (Archilochus T 4 Tarditi). This inscription, dated to the third century BCE, narrates the life of Archilochus, giving context to “quotations” of the transmitted compositions that were attributed to him. The Life of Archilochus tradition, as memorialized by the Mnesiepes Inscription, aetiologizes the hero cult of Archilochus; in fact the setting for the Mnesiepes Inscription was the Arkhilókheion, the sacred precinct at Paros where Archilochus was worshipped as a cult hero. As we will see in Placeholder 3, the Mnesiepes Inscription gives explicit testimony about a traditional myth, native to the island of Paros, that represented Archilochus as a chorus teacher of his community (T4 III 16–57). For more on the text of the Mnesiepes Inscription, I refer to an online article listed as number 8 in the Bibliography below (Nagy 2008).



GREGORY NAGY



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Archives

{13§28.} As we have seen, the poetry of Archilochus refers to itself as a choral lyric medium: for example, the persona of Archilochus describes himself as capable of being an exarkhōn ‘choral leader’ of a chorus that sings and dances in honor of the god Dionysus—to the accompaniment of the aulos ‘double-reed’ (F 120 W). Such self-reference is an example of what I call diachronic skewing, that is, where the medium refers to itself in terms of earlier stages of its own existence. As I have argued elsewhere in the online book listed as number 2 in the Bibliography (PH), especially in Chapters 1 and 12, the medium of Archilochus was originally undifferentiated lyric, that is, sung and danced, but it evolved eventually into differentiated non-lyric recitative.

...

{13§30.} In the Poetics (1449a9 and following), Aristotle says that both tragedy and comedy had a beginning that is autoskheldiastikē ‘improvisational’ (ἀν’ ἀρχής αὐτοσχέδιαστικής), and that tragedy was derived from the exarkhontes ‘choral leaders’ of the dithurambos ‘dithyramb’ (ἀπό τῶν ἔξαρχόντων τὸν διθύραμψον). Aristotle may have had in mind the wording of Archilochus F 120 W, where the persona of the composer declares that he knows how to be the exarkhōn ‘choral leader’ of the dithyramb, performed in honor of the god Dionysus, while the poet’s mind is thunderstruck with wine. The meter of Archilochus F 120 W is trochaic tetrameter catalectic. According to Aristotle the meter of dialogue in early tragedy, before it was replaced by iambic trimeter, was this same meter, trochaic tetrameter catalectic (Poetics 1449a22 and following). What Aristotle says about the evolution of comedy and tragedy implies that he thought that Archilochus was a typical exarkhōn of dithyramb, which Aristotle understood as characterized by trochaic tetrameter catalectic, typical of both comedy and tragedy.

...

{13§32.} From the testimony of the Mnesiepes Inscription (Archilochus T 4 Tarditi), we learn of a traditional myth, native to the island of Paros, that represented Archilochus as a chorus teacher of his community (T4 III 16–57). I propose to consider how this myth, preserved in the context of the poet’s hero cult in Paros, dramatizes the social function of Archilochean poetry in the civic life of the polis.

{13§33.} In the wording of the Mnesiepes Inscription, it can be argued, we are witnessing a cognate of the source of Aristotle Poetics 1449a and 1448b23, who considered Archilochus an exponent of primitive blame poetry. I summarize here the relevant story as retold in the Mnesiepes Inscription, Archilochus T4 III 16–57 Tarditi. The story has it that Archilochus improvises ([αύτο]ο|σχεδίασ[...] 19–20) a composition, which he teaches (διδάξαντα 22) to some of the citizens of Paros. (I note here the context of μιμησκομ[...] ‘remember’ at line 52, which seems to be pertinent to the concept of Mnēsiepēs ‘he who remembers the words [as in epos ‘word’]’, discussed at [PH 12§49n133](#) and at [BA 18§4n3](#).) From the standpoint of the narrative, Archilochus seems to be represented here as a “chorus teacher.” The Mnesiepes Inscription then proceeds to quote the words of the composition (F 251 W = 219 Tarditi): the text is fragmentary, but we can see clearly that Dionysus figures prominently (251.1), in the context of the epithet Oiphelios (251.5), a derivative of the obscene verb oiphō ‘have intercourse [male subject]’. The polis finds this composition ‘too iambic’ (ἰαμβικώτερο[...] Mnesiepes Inscription T4 III 38). Archilochus is put on trial (ἐν τετ̄ κρίσει T4 III 42) and apparently condemned. But then the polis is afflicted with a plague that affects the genitalia (42–44). Emissaries of the polis consult Delphi (45–46), and the Oracle tells them that the plague will not abate until the polis honors Archilochus (47–50). The connection here of Archilochus with Dionysus and the notion of Oiphelios institutionalizes the ‘iambic’ composition of Archilochus. I should stress the explicit testimony of the Mnesiepes Inscription concerning the practice of worshipping various gods, along with the cult hero Archilochus, in the sacred precinct of Archilochus, the Arkhilókheion (T 4 II 14–19 Tarditi): among the gods listed (1–13), Dionysus is accorded a position of particular prominence (10).

{13§34.} The narrative pattern of the story of Archilochus and the punishment of the Parians is typical of aetiologies concerning the founding of a hero cult: (1) some hero is dishonored, sometimes even killed, by a community; (2) the community is then beset by some plague; and (3) the Oracle is consulted and prescribes the hero cult of the given hero as the remedy. In such aetiologies the well-being of the community, as threatened by the plague, is visualized as fertility of crops and inhabitants alike—a fertility that is then restored and guaranteed to continue through the proper maintenance of the hero cult (examples for fertility of crops: Pausanias 6.11.6–8; for fertility of humans: Pausanias 2.3.6–7). In the Archilochus story as well, the fertility of the polis is connected in general with the hero cult of Archilochus, which is after all the context for the telling of the story, and in particular with the institutionalization of Archilochus as ‘chorus teacher’. Here we have the nucleus of the civic function of Archilochean poetry in that the chorus is the traditional medium for the self-expression of the polis ([PH 5§10–11](#), [5§15](#); also [12§48–49](#) and following).

{13§35.} The theme of fertility is explicit in the story of Archilochus in his stylized role as chorus teacher, which is connected with the cult of Dionysus (cf. T 4 II 10 Tarditi and F 251 W; also F 120 W).

§5. According to what we read in the text of the Mnesiepes Inscription, the poet Archilochus was worshipped as a cult hero within an enclosure that was named the Arkhilókheion, as we see at line 17 of the text as I translate it here:

1. To Mnesiepes did the god [Apollo] make the oracular declaration that it is more propitious and just plain better if
2. in the precinct [*temenos*] that he [= Mnesiepes] is constructing he [= Mnesiepes] sets up [participle of *hidruein*]

3. an altar and makes sacrifice [participle of *thuein*] on it to the Muses and to Apollo
4. the Mousagetēs and to Mnemosyne. And that he make sacrifice [infinitive of *thuein*] (and perform correctly the sacred acts [infinitive of *kallhiereuein*])
5. to Zeus Huperdexios, to Athena Huperdexia,
6. to Poseidon Asphaleios, to Herakles, to Artemis Eukleia.
7. (And) that he organize a delegation [infinitive of *pempein*] to go to Delphi and offer there to Apollo a sacrifice for well-being. [*paragraphē* mark here]
8. To Mnesiepes did the god [Apollo] make the oracular declaration that it is more propitious and just plain better if
9. in the precinct [*temenos*] that he [= Mnesiepes] is constructing he [= Mnesiepes] sets up [participle of *hidtruein*]
10. an altar and makes sacrifice [participle of *thuein*] on it to Dionysus and to the Nymphs
11. and to the Hōrai. And that he make sacrifice [infinitive of *thuein*] (and perform correctly the sacred acts [infinitive of *kallhiereuein*]) to Apollo
12. Prostatērios, to Poseidon Asphaleios, to Herakles.
13. (And) that he organize a delegation [infinitive of *pempein*] to go to Delphi and offer there to Apollo a sacrifice for well-being. [*paragraphē* mark here]
14. To Mnesiepes did the god [Apollo] make the oracular declaration that it is more propitious and just plain better if
15. he [= Mnesiepes] honors [participle of *tīmān*] Archilochus the poet, in accordance with the intent (of the god).
16. And, in the light of this oracular declaration of Apollo,
17. we call this place [*topos*] the *Arkhilókheion* and we have set up [indicative perfect of *hidtruein*] the relevant altars
18. and we make sacrifice [indicative present of *thuein*] both to the gods and to Archilochus and
19. we honor [indicative present of *tīmān*] him in accordance with what the god declared to us.
20. Now, concerning what we wanted to put on record in writing, the following are the things that have been
21. handed down to us by the ancients and that we have made our concern.
22. For they say that Archilochus,
23. when he was still a young man, ...

Mnesiepes Inscription, column II, 1–23

§6. This enclosure, called a temenos or ‘sacred precinct’ at lines 2 and 9, is also a sacred space for gods, and these gods receive the sacrifices of their worshippers on two bōmoi ‘altars’. Sharing one of the two altars are Apollo Mousagetēs, the Muses, and their mother, the goddess Mnēmosunē, lines 3–4. After that, at lines 4–7, we read that these other gods also receive sacrifice: Zeus Huperdexios, Athena Huperdexia, Poseidon Asphaleios, Herakles, Artemis Eukleia. And then there is a second altar, to be shared by Dionysus, the Nymphs, and the Hōrai ‘Seasons’, lines 10–11. After that, at lines 11–12, we read that these other gods also receive sacrifice: Apollo Prostatērios, Poseidon Asphaleios, Herakles. Finally, in the context of the reference to the entire enclosure as the *Arkhilókheion*, at line 17, it is prescribed at lines 17–19 that worshippers are to offer sacrifice on the two altars not only to the gods named but also to Archilochus, described as ‘the poet [poiētēs]’ at line 15. I note with special interest that the verb *thuein* ‘sacrifice to’

applies not only to the gods as recipients of sacrifice, lines 3, 4, 10, 11, 18, but also to Archilochus himself, line 18.

§7. I draw attention to the fact that the entire enclosure within which Archilochus is worshipped here as a cult hero is a sacred space that is shared by a variety of gods who are worshipped in the context of the hero cult. I find a remarkable parallel in a passage of Pausanias where our traveler describes a precinct in the city of Troizen that is sacred to Hippolytus, who is worshipped there as the city's primary cult hero. Before I quote my literal translation of the relevant passage, I emphasize already here the fact that the *peribolos* or 'enclosure' of Hippolytus, as mentioned at 2.32.2, is described already at 2.32.1 as the *temenos* or 'sacred precinct' of Hippolytus. Keeping this fact in mind, let us now consider the relevant passage:

{2.32.1} To Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, is dedicated a very famous precinct [temenos], in which is a temple [nāos] with an ancient [arkhaion] statue [agalma]. Diomedes, they say, made [poiein] these, and, further, he was the first to sacrifice [thuein] to Hippolytus. The people of Troizen have a priest [hiereus] of Hippolytus, and he is consecrated [hierâsthai] [to Hippolytus] for life. Also, it is an established practice for them to have annual sacrifices [thusiai] performed [for Hippolytus]. In addition [to this ritual practice performed for Hippolytus] they have another one. They perform-a-ritual [drân] that is as follows. Every girl before marriage cuts off for him [= Hippolytus] a lock [plokamos] of her hair and, having cut it off, she brings it, in an act of bringing-in-procession [pherein], to his temple [nāos] and dedicates it. They [= the people of Troizen] are unwilling to accept that he died, dragged to death by his horses, and they do not show [apophainein] his tomb [taphos], though they know where it is. But they customarily-think [nomizein] that the one who is called the Charioteer [= Auriga = hēniokhos] in the sky, this one [houtos], is that one [ekeinos], the Hippolytus who receives this honor [timē] from the gods.

{2.32.2} Within this enclosure [peribolos] [of Hippolytus] is a temple [nāos] of Apollo Epibatérios ['boarding (the ship)'], a dedication of Diomedes for having weathered the storm that came upon the Greeks as they were returning from Troy. They say that Diomedes was also the first to hold the Pythian Contest [agōn] in honor of Apollo. Of Damia and Auxesia (for the people of Troizen, too, share in their worship) they do not tell [legein] the same story [logos] as do the people of Epidauros and of Aegina, but they say that they were maidens [parthénoi] who came from Crete. When factionalism [stasis] broke out everywhere in the city, even these girls, they say, were stoned to death by an opposing faction and they [= the people of Troizen] celebrate [agein] a festival [heortē] for their sake, calling it the Lithobolia ['throwing of stones'].

{2.32.3} In the other part of the enclosure [peribolos] is a race-course [stadion] named after Hippolytus, and looming over it is a temple [nāos] of Aphrodite [invoked by way of the epithet] Kataskopiā ['looking down from above']. Here is the reason [for the epithet]: it was at this very spot, whenever Hippolytus was exercising-naked [gumnazesthai], that she, feeling-an-erotic-passion-for [erân] him, used to gaze away [apo-blepein] at him from above, Phaedra did. A myrtle-bush [mursinē] still grows here, and its leaves—as I wrote at an earlier point—have holes punched into them. Whenever Phaedra was-feeling-there-was-no-way-out [aporeîn] and could find no relief for her erotic-passion [erōs], she would take it out on the leaves of this myrtle-bush, wantonly injuring them.

{2.32.4} There is also the tomb [taphos] of Phaedra, not far from the tomb [mnēma] of Hippolytus, which is a piled-up tumulus near the myrtle-bush [mursinē].

§8. As we see from this passage (I give further commentary in [Hour 20 of H24H](#)), the temenos or 'sacred precinct' of Hippolytus contains not only a nāos 'temple' that is sacred to him but also a nāos that is sacred to Apollo and, even more interesting, a nāos that is sacred to Aphrodite, who is given an epithet that evokes the myth about the love of Phaedra for Hippolytus. I analyze that epithet in my posting for [2018.06.21](#). But I save for last here the most interesting detail of them all, from the standpoint of my argumentation: also contained by the sacred space of Hippolytus is the tomb of Phaedra herself.

§9. As I argued in the posting for 2018.06.21, the presence of a tomb for the suicidal Phaedra within the temenos or 'sacred' precinct of Hippolytus is an indication of hero cult. And, as I argue in my next posting for Classical Inquiries, the tomb of Phaedra is comparable to the tomb of the suicidal daughters of Lykambes as signaled in a fragmentary poem preserved in Dublin Papyrus 193a, dated to the late third century BCE, and in a poem by Dioscorides, likewise dated to the third century BCE, in the Greek Anthology (7.351). Laura Swift (1974:26), in a most perceptive analysis of these and other sources, quotes a telling summary, formulated by Martin West (1974:26), of the underlying story: "A match was arranged between Archilochus and one of Lykambes' daughters, Neoboule. But Lykambes afterwards broke it off, whereupon Archilochus abused him and his two daughters in such fierce iambi that they (the daughters only, in the earlier sources) hanged themselves for shame. He claimed that he had met the girls in the precinct of Hera and that they had indulged in a sexual orgy or orgies together, the details of which were described with the most indecent explicitness."

§10. About the daughters of Lykambes I will say only this much more for now before I draw this presentation here to a close: the references to these two doomed girls in the so-called First Cologne Epopē of Archilochus (F 196a W) do in fact signal erotic activity within a sacred space. In my next posting for Classical Inquiries, however, I argue that this activity is not simply an act of desecration, as Laura Swift

(2015) describes it: rather, it is also an act of sacralization, sanctioned within a space that is sacred to the goddess Hera. I should add that I do agree with Swift when she points to this goddess as a model for the poetics of seduction, as we see such poetics at work in the celebrated erotic scene of Iliad 14 where Hera seduces Zeus as if these two divinities were young lovers, not a mature married couple, but I disagree with her view that this seduction scene is some kind of epic model for the “lyric” scene of seduction as narrated in the Cologne Epode. In making my own argument about Hera as a model for the poetics of seduction in “lyric” traditions, I draw on the insights of the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers (1970) in his study of “women and sanctuary,” who analyzes examples of “ritual inversion” within various kinds of “social order” (p. 873). For now, though, I conclude by returning here to that image of a pair of lovers featured in the cover illustration for this posting. There they are, all wrapped up inside the cloak that hides their lovemaking, and their sexual activity is sanctioned by the Dionysiac halo, as I called it, of grapevines surrounding their act of making love. So also in the Cologne Epode, I argue, the seduction of the girl who is all wrapped up inside a cloak with her lover is sanctioned by the poetic medium of Dionysus as activated within a sacred space of Hera.

Bibliographical Abbreviations

BA = Nagy, G. 1999. *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Revised ed. with new intro. Baltimore (available online).

H24H = Nagy, G. 2013. *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Cambridge, MA (available online).

HC = Nagy, G. 2008|2009. *Homer the Classic*. Hellenic Studies 36. Cambridge, MA, and Washington, DC (available online).

HPC = Nagy, G. 2010. *Homer the Preclassic*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA (available online).

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