



A bathtub in Pylos

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Classical Inquiries

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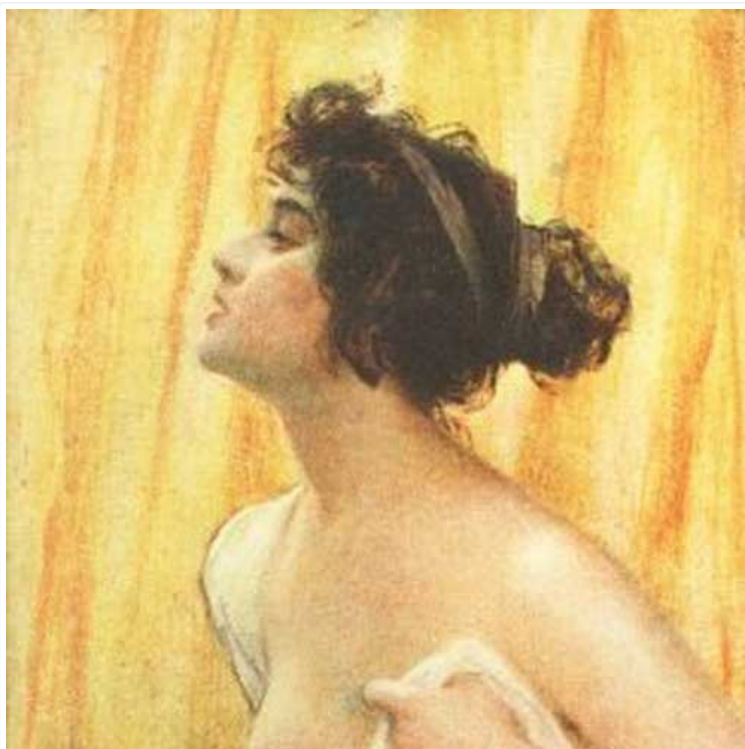
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A bathtub in Pylos

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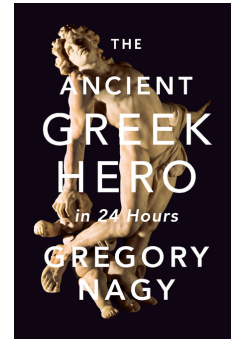
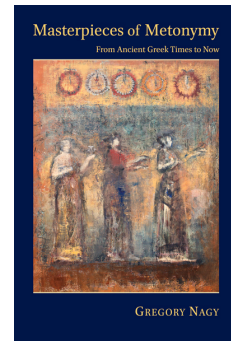
Bathtub at Nestor's Palace, Pylos, by Dan Diffendale. Image provided under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License.

§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* (ὅμοιος), 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* (ὅμοιος) 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* (ὅμοιος), 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 similar '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 (ἐναλῖγκιος) '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 three 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 [eĩskein] 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

man wearing unseemly clothes, |₂₀₀ but now you **look just like** [= perfect of *eiskein*] **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 *eiskein*] 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 (οἶος) ‘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** [*eiskein*] me **to the immortals**’ (verse 187), Telemachus can rightly answer: ‘but now you **look just like** [= perfect of *eiskein*] **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, H  l  ne 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]   κ ρ’   σαμίνθου βῆ δ  μας   θαν  τοισιν   μοῖος.

[2]   κ ρ’   σαμίνθου βῆ δ  μας   θαν  τοισιν   μοῖος.

[3]   κ δ’   σαμίνθου βῆ· θα  μαζε δ   μιν φίλος υἱός, |   ς ἴδεν   θαν  τοισι θεοῖσ’   ναλῖγκιον   ντην.

[4] |₁₇₂   , καὶ χρυσεῖη ρ  βδω   πεμ  σαστ’   θῆνη. |₁₇₃ φ  ρος μ  ν οἱ πρ  τον   υπλυν  ς ἤδ   χιτ  να |₁₇₄ θῆκ’   μφι στῆθεσφι, δ  μας δ’   φελλε καὶ ἥβην. |₁₇₅   ψ δ   μελαγχροῖης γ  νετο, γναθμοὶ δ’   τάνυσθεν, |₁₇₆ κυ  ναι δ’   γ  νοντο   χειρ  δες   μφι γ  νειον. |₁₇₇ ἥ μ  ν   ρ’   ς   ρξασα π  λιν κῑεν· α  τ  ρ   δυσσε  ς |₁₇₈ ἦῖεν   ς κλισίην. θα  μβησε δ   μιν φίλος υἱός, |₁₇₉ ταρβ  σας δ’   τέρωσε β  λ’   μματα, μῆ θεός εἶη, |₁₈₀ καὶ μιν φωνῆσας   πεα πτερόεντα προση  δα· |₁₈₁ “  λλοῖός μοι, ξεῖνε, φ  νης νεόν ἤ   παροῖθεν, |₁₈₂   λλα δ   εἶματ’   χεις καὶ τοι χρ  ς ο  κ  θ’   μοῖος. |₁₈₃ ἥ μ  λα τις θεός   σσι, τοὶ ο  ρανόν ε  ρ  ν   χουσιν· |₁₈₄   λλ’ ἴληθ’, ἴνα τοι κεχαρισμ  να δ  ωμεν ἱρ   |₁₈₅ ἠδ   χρ  σεια δ  ρα, τετυγμ  να· φειδεο δ’ ἡμ  ων.” |₁₈₆ τ  ν δ’ ἡμ  ιβετ’   πειτα πολ  υτας δῖος   δυσσε  ς· |₁₈₇ “ο   τις τοι θεός εἰμι· τί μ’   θαν  τοισιν εἶσκεις; |₁₈₈   λλ   πατῆρ τεός εἰμι, το   εἶνεκα σ   στεναχῖζων |₁₈₉ π  σχεις   λγεα πολλ  , βίας ὑποδ  γμενος   νδρ  ν.” |₁₉₀   ς   ρα φωνῆσας υἱόν κυσε, καδ   δ   παρει  ν |₁₉₁ δ  κρυον ἦκε χαμ  ζει· παρος δ’   χε νωλεμ  ς αἰεὶ. |₁₉₂ Τηλ  μαχος δ’,—ο   γ  ρ πω

ἐπίθετο ὄν πατέρ' εἶναι,—|₁₉₃ ἐξαυτίς μιν ἔπεσιν ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπεν· |₁₉₄ “οὐ σύ γ' Ὀδυσσεύς ἐσσι πατήρ ἐμός, ἀλλά με δαίμων |₁₉₅ θέλγει, ὄφρ' ἔτι μάλλον ὀδυρόμενος στεναχίζω. |₁₉₆ οὐ γάρ πως ἂν θνητὸς ἀνὴρ τάδε μηχανόωτο |₁₉₇ ᾧ αὐτοῦ γε νόω, ὅτε μὴ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἐπελθὼν |₁₉₈ ῥηϊδίως ἐθέλων θείη νέον ἠδὲ γέροντα. |₁₉₉ ἦ γάρ τοι νέον ἦσθα γέρων καὶ ἀεικέα ἔσσο· |₂₀₀ νῦν δὲ θεοῖσιν ἔοικας, οἳ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσι.” |₂₀₁ τὸν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς· |₂₀₂ “Τηλέμαχ', οὐ σε ἔοικε φίλον πατέρ' ἔνδον ἐόντα |₂₀₃ οὔτε τι θαυμάζειν περιώσιον οὔτ' ἀγάασθαι· |₂₀₄ οὐ μὲν γάρ τοι ἔτ' ἄλλος ἐλεύσεται ἐνθάδ' Ὀδυσσεύς, |₂₀₅ ἀλλ' ὄδ' ἐγὼ τοιοσδε, παθὼν κακὰ, πολλὰ δ' ἀληθείς, |₂₀₆ ἦλυθον εἰκοστῶ ἔτει ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν. |₂₀₇ αὐτὰρ τοι τόδε ἔργον Ἀθηναίης ἀγελείης, |₂₀₈ ἣ τέ με τοῖον ἔθηκεν ὅπως ἐθέλει, δύνатаι γάρ, |₂₀₉ ἄλλοτε μὲν πτωχῶ ἐναλίγκιον, ἄλλοτε δ' αὔτε |₂₁₀ ἀνδρὶ νέω καὶ καλὰ περὶ χροῖ εἵματ' ἔχοντι. |₂₁₁ ῥηϊδίον δὲ θεοῖσι, τοῖ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσιν, |₂₁₂ ἡμὲν κυδῆναι θνητὸν βροτὸν ἠδὲ κακῶσαι.”

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