Comments on Comparative Mythology 5, an Afterthought of Georges Dumézil About Trifunctionality and the Judgment of Paris

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Comments on comparative mythology 5, an afterthought of Georges Dumézil about trifunctionality and the Judgment of Paris

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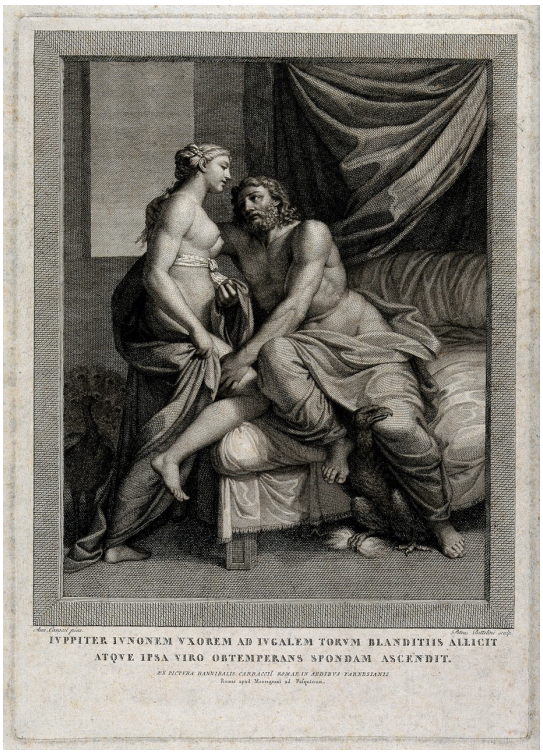
2020.03.13, rewritten 2020.03.18 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In the previous two posts, *Classical Inquiries* 2020.02.28 and 2020.03.06, I analyzed the idea of trifunctionality in the myth about the Judgment of Paris, especially with reference to the version of this myth as retold in Homeric poetry, at *Iliad* 24.25–30. In my analysis, I followed the formulation of Georges Dumézil in his book *Mythe et épopee* I (originally published in 1968), who shows that the goddesses Hērā, Athena, and Aphrodite are representatives of the first, second, and third "functions" of society: (1) sovereignty, (2) warfare, and (3) "reproductivity" or, to say it more simply, (3) fertility. As we saw, the hero Paris 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. As we also saw, the act of praising Aphrodite required the commensurate act of insulting Hērā and Athena by way of blaming them. And so, in terms of the overall myth about the Judgment of Paris, the dysfunctionality of undervaluing Hērā and Athena by way of overvaluing Aphrodite resulted in disaster both for Paris and for his homeland of Troy. But now, in the post here for *Classical Inquiries* 2020.03.13, I draw attention to an afterthought of Dumézil about the Judgment of Paris as narrated in the Homeric verses I have already cited, *Iliad* 24.25–30. In terms of his afterthought, the myth about this judgment—and about the resulting disaster—is signaled not only in those verses. Rather, the Judgment of Paris is a grand epic theme that pervades the overall plot of the *Iliad*, visible especially in Rhapsodies 3, 4, 14, and 21. I will focus here on Rhapsody 14, which features an erotic scene where Hērā seduces her husband and brother Zeus on the heights of Mount Ida. The painting that I have chosen as illustration for this posting pictures the divine couple at the very moment when they begin to engage in an act of cosmic lovemaking.



Jupiter and Juno. Engraving by Pietro Bettelini (1763–1829) after a painting by Annibale Carracci (1560–1609). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. So, what is the afterthought, as I have called it, of Dumézil? My starting point is his formulation in *Mythe et épopee* I (1968:579–586 = [1995:] 607–614), where he examines the Homeric version of the myth about the Judgment of Paris only in terms of a single passage, *Iliad* 24.25–30. But then, in a later publication, he found further evidence.

§2. This later publication of Dumézil is *Esquisse* 51, to be found in a series of 100 "esquisses" on comparative mythology, published in four volumes, with 25 *Esquisses* in each volume (Dumézil 1982, 1983, 1985, 1994). These four volumes were later consolidated into a single volume by Joel H. Grisward (Dumézil [2005]).

§3. The title that Dumézil gave to his *Esquisse* 51 (Dumézil 1985:15–30 = [2005] 531–546) is most revealing: "Homerus uindicatus." How, then, is Homer vindicated? For Dumézil, the vindication comes from a simple fact—which is the substance of his afterthought. The fact is, the myth of the Judgment of Paris is clearly at work in the overall narrative of the *Iliad*, especially in Rhapsody 3, where the hostility felt by Hērā and Athena toward Aphrodite is motivated by the insult that the first and the second of these goddesses had experienced once upon a time—back when Paris chose the third goddess as the best of the three.

§4. This fact is not lost, I should add, on at least some classicists: a shining example is the last chapter of *Achilles Unbound*, by Casey Dué (2018), whose analysis of Homeric diction in *Iliad* 3 shows that the narrative here is making formal references to the Judgment of Paris. And there are other such references to be found in *Iliad* 4, 14, and 21, as we see from a reading of Dumézil's *Esquisse* 51. But I will focus here, as I already said, only on Rhapsody 14, which features an erotic scene picturing Hērā in the act of seducing her husband and brother Zeus on the heights of Mount Ida. In this scene, as noted by Dumézil (1985:24–26 = [2005:] 540–542), Hērā is aided in her seduction of Zeus by Aphrodite and, at least indirectly, by Athena. So, for Dumézil, the triadic participation of the three goddesses in this scene of seduction is a reflex of their trifunctionality.

§5. But more can be said, I think, about the roles of the three goddesses here. I find it significant that it is not only Aphrodite who confers upon Hērā the charms that are activated for seduction (*Iliad* 14.187–223): even Athena participates, since Hērā prepares for this seduction by dressing herself in luxurious fabric that Athena, as goddess of weavers, has made with her own hands (14.178–179). So, I see here a sense of functionality, trifunctionality, not dysfunctionality, in that all three goddesses are synergistically promoting the sexuality required for seduction. And the act of lovemaking that follows is signaled by the exuberance of nature, which now literally envelops the loving couple (14.346–353):

> Ἦ ῥα καὶ ἀγκὰς ἔμαρπτε Κρόνου παῖς ἣν παράκοιτιν·
> τοῖσι δ' ὑπὸ χθὼν δῖα φύεν νεοθηλέα ποίην,
> λωτόν θ' ἑρσήεντα ἰδὲ κρόκον ἠδ' ὑάκινθον
> πυκνὸν καὶ μαλακόν, ὃς ἀπὸ χθονὸς ὑψόσ' ἔεργε.
> [350] τῷ ἔνι λεξάσθην, ἐπὶ δὲ νεφέλην ἔσσαντο
> καλὴν χρυσείην· στιλπναὶ δ' ἀπέπιπτον ἔερσαι.
> Ὣς ὃ μὲν ἀτρέμας εὗδε πατὴρ ἀνὰ Γαργάρῳ ἄκρῳ,
> ὕπνῳ καὶ φιλότητι δαμείς, ἔχε δ' ἀγκὰς ἄκοιτιν·
>
> Having spoken [to Hērā], [Zeus] the son of Kronos seized in his arms his bedmate.
> Then the shining Earth grew for them greenness from below—a greenness that quickened all over again,
> growing for them clover covered with dew, also crocus and hyacinth,
> thick-and-fast, soft, lifting them [= Zeus and Hērā] off [the ground].
> [350] They were lying there, with a cloud as their cover,
> a cloud beautiful, golden. And glittering drops of dew were dropping.
> Just like that, in serenity, did the father fall asleep on the peak [of Mount Ida], Gargaron,
> overcome by sleep and lovemaking, holding his bedmate in his arms.

§6. So, sex and fertility go together here—though not to the extent that these two anthropomorphic divinities, Zeus and Hērā, would produce anthropomorphic offspring at this sacred moment. No, their sacred lovemaking, their *hieros gamos*, promotes a cosmic sort of fertility, as symbolized by their elemental forebears. I have more to say about this *hieros gamos* in *A sampling of comments on the* Iliad *and* Odyssey, at I.14.200–210.

§7. But can we infer that this lovemaking, experienced by the two most powerful divinities of the cosmos, is a prototype of functionality? As I argue in *Classical Inquiries* 2018.07.27, such an inference is valid only in terms of ritual, not in terms of the myth as it plays out in the mythical past that is being retold in the *Iliad*.

§8. In terms of ritual, the specific role of Hērā as a sexual partner of Zeus is an aspect of her more general role—or, to say it more precisely, her more general *function*—as a goddess who presides over a most basic aspect of human experience, which is, *coming of age*. And, again in terms of ritual, coming of age is a matter of *initiation*. For a most telling example from the ancient world, I single out the Argive Heraia, otherwise known as the Hekatombaia, which was a grand festival celebrated by the people of the city of Argos in honor of their foremost divinity, Hērā. This goddess presided over their rites of passage into adulthood, which involved both female and male forms of *initiation into heterosexuality*, including the formalities as well as informalities of courtship between the sexes (I offer relevant comments in MoM 4§§160–161).

§9. Besides her specific function as a goddess centrally involved in rituals of initiation at a festival like the Argive Heraia (relevant is the term "rite of passage" as used by Joan O'Brien, 1993:148, in her comments on this festival), I must add, however, that Hērā can also be viewed as a model of ritual correctness in general. As I have indicated in H24H 1§49 and 13§18, this goddess is in general worshipped as the essence of perfection in ritual. And such perfection can be seen as a model of the first function, *sovereignty*—not only of the third function, *fertility*.

§10. I close, for now, by returning to my point about Hērā as a representative of *fertility*. A similar point can be made in the case of Athena: in terms of ritual, this goddess too can be a representative of the third function, *fertility*, as we see for example in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, 902–915 (text and commentary at H24H 17§22). So, it could be argued that Hērā and Athena are fitting rivals of Aphrodite as representatives of the third function, not only of the first and the second functions. And it could be argued in general that the trifunctionality of the three goddesses Hērā/Athena/Aphrodite is perfectly functional in the world of ritual. In the world of myth, however, this functionality gets to be tested by way of misunderstandings, that is, by way of dysfunctional understandings, and a premier example is the Judgment of Paris.

See the dynamic Bibliography for Comments on Comparative Mythology.

Tags: Aphrodite, Athena, Comments on Comparative Mythology, Georges Dumézil, Hera, trifunctionality, Zeus

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