

The Homeric Age: Epic Sexuality

In traditional agricultural societies, like those of ancient Greece, sexual beliefs and practices are closely bound up with cult attached to fertility deities, mainly female. Greek women's own fecundity authorized them to intercede with powerful goddesses such as Artemis, Demeter, and Hera; wives and mothers played a leading role in rites promoting the fruitfulness of crops and animals. At female-only festivals, the celebrants' activities might include using obscene speech or handling replicas of sexual organs, because in a ritual context indecency otherwise taboo is charged with procreative energy (Dillon 2002: 109–38). For women in particular, then, certain facets of human sexuality possessed a numinous quality, and we must bear this in mind when reading the amatory verse of Sappho or seeing vase paintings of women tending sacred phalloi (models of male genitalia) as part of the Haloa festival. Although we will not deal with the ritual element in ancient sexuality at much length – that topic is more conveniently treated in a book on Greek and Roman religion – we should remember that seasonal commemorations of the erotic in human life were an important part of ordinary people's devotional experience.

Study of ancient discourses about sexuality properly begins with the epic poets Homer and Hesiod and their archaic followers who composed the *Homeric Hymns*. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer offers intimate glimpses of mortal and immortal couples and alludes to numerous unions of gods with mortals. Hesiod's didactic poems the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* contain important accounts of the origins of the gods Aphrodite and Eros and the first woman, Pandora. In the later *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, the story of the goddess' seduction of Anchises reveals early Greek notions of the pleasures and dangers associated with sexual activity. Epic passages supplied basic models for many later Greek and Roman narratives dealing with erotic relationships. Since these poems were performed orally long before they were written down, and were therefore accessible to wide audiences, it is likely that they deeply influenced men's and women's perceptions of themselves as gendered beings.

For their subject matter, Hesiod and Homer drew upon myths and motifs that had been circulating since at least the third millennium BCE not only among

Greek-speaking peoples of the mainland but, with variations, all over the Eastern Mediterranean world. Archaeological finds indicate that the inhabitants of Bronze Age Greece, the Mycenaeans, whose civilization reached its zenith between 1450 and 1200 BCE, participated fully in the commercial and artistic exchanges of the Eastern Mediterranean. Parallels, thematic and even verbal, between archaic Greek poetry and Near Eastern texts imply that the early Greeks borrowed many ingredients of their religious and cultural heritage from the centralized and long-established Semitic and Egyptian states with which they traded (West 1997: 10–59). For this reason, much current work on the Greek system of gender and sexuality locates it within a larger Mediterranean environment and looks to ancient Near Eastern societies for close structural parallels.

However, religion is one of the most conservative features of any society. When cult practices developed by one culture come into contact with a different system of beliefs, the recipients are sometimes able to integrate such practices into their own religious framework only by changing their meanings radically. During the formative years of classical Greek civilization, in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, Hellenic peoples of the mainland and the settlements on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean were attempting to define their religious identity by purging borrowed myths and rituals of disagreeable constituents (Garrison 2000: 59–88). Epic poetry was vital to this process because it fixed the natures and attributes of the Olympic divinities in the popular imagination: thus the sixth-century philosopher Xenophanes, criticizing erroneous theological beliefs, blamed Homer and Hesiod for popularizing the notion that gods might be capable of theft, adultery, and deception (fr. 11 DK).

Prominent among the deities imported into Greek religious life from the Near East may be the powerful Semitic goddess of love and war variously known as Inanna, Ishtar, or Astarte. If she was incorporated into the Greek pantheon, it was probably well before Homer's time. As the Greek goddess Aphrodite, however, her disposition is quite different from that of her oriental cousins. Hesiod and Homer concentrate almost exclusively upon the sensual and enticing aspects of her divine personality, but traces of her more formidable Eastern character are present elsewhere in early Greek literature.

THE GOLDEN GODDESS

Although some scholars have attempted to make a case for Aphrodite's Indo-European origins on the grounds that she was already being worshiped in the twelfth century BCE by Mycenaean settlers on Cyprus, her name does not appear in proto-Greek Linear B tablets from Mycenaean sites. Whatever her remote antecedents, there has obviously been extensive cross-cultural contamination. If Aphrodite is not originally Cypriot, or, as the historian Herodotus asserts (1.105), Palestinian, her cult does show close links with that of Ishtar-Astarte, including the use of incense and dove sacrifices; the descriptive title *Ourania*, "Heavenly," which corresponds to Astarte's designation "Queen of Heaven"; and associations with war, gardens,

the sea, and – especially at Corinth – sacred prostitution (Burkert 1985: 152–3). The epithet *chryseê*, “golden,” is restricted to her and used in epic verse more often than any other formulaic term: numerous passages describe her wearing golden jewelry. Although it was naturalized into Greek quite early, the word for “gold” is a Semitic borrowing, and the motif of a goddess adorning herself with jewels as she prepares to deploy her sexuality for manipulative purposes can be traced back to the Mesopotamian myth of Inanna and her mortal lover Dumuzi (A. S. Brown 1997: 31).

In Hesiod’s *Theogony* Aphrodite’s birth results from the castration of the sky god Uranus. Urged by his mother, the earth goddess Gaea, to punish Uranus for imprisoning his siblings, their son Cronus lops off his father’s genitals with a sickle and throws them into the ocean. “They were borne along the open sea a long time,” Hesiod recounts, “and from the immortal flesh a white foam [*aphros*] rushed, and in this a girl was nurtured” (190–92). Bypassing the island of Cythera, off the coast of southern Greece, and arriving at Cyprus, she steps forth on land, grass springing up as she walks. She is called by several names: Aphrodite since she was born of foam, Cytherea and Cyprogenes from Cythera and Cyprus, her first ports of call, and Philommedes (“genital-loving”) because she originated from Uranus’ members. Eros and Himeros, “Desire” and “Yearning,” are her attendants, and her assigned realm of interest (*moira*) is “maidens’ banter and smiles and deceits and sweet delight and lovemaking and gentleness” (205–6).

Scholars agree that the story of Uranus’ castration, bizarre and horrific even by Greek standards, is derived from the Near East: parallels with the Babylonian cosmological epic *Enûma eliš* are especially striking (West 1997: 277, 280–83). Aphrodite’s birth, however, is an independent narrative stemming from another source. This was possibly a Cypriot cult myth, for a terra-cotta figurine found at Perachora near Corinth in Greece, dated to the mid-seventh century BCE and showing obvious Oriental influence, depicts a female figure emerging from what appears to be the male genital sac (Sale 1961: 515). Surprisingly, the figure, though given long hair and breasts and clad in a woman’s dress or *peplos*, is depicted as bearded and must therefore be androgynous: the excavators connect it with “the bisexual Aphrodite of the Orient and Cyprus” (Payne et al. 1940: 232). This may also be an early representation of Aphrodite in her aspect as Urania, “Heavenly Aphrodite,” who governed the transmission of the manly way of life by example through the cultural institution of pederasty (see below, p. 117), and whose most salient characteristic was masculinity (Ferrari 2002: 109–11). At the same time, the Hesiodic myth of origins attempts to explain Aphrodite’s name, which is most likely non-Greek, by associating it with the Greek word *aphros*, which can mean both “semen” and “froth of the sea.” It may imply that the semen issuing from Uranus’ severed member was transformed into sea-foam, a familiar phenomenon of the natural world (Hansen 2000). Appropriately, then, the goddess of love would come into being out of a matrix at once supernatural and earthly.

Since the Greeks conceived of the universe as animate and thought of the world and its physical features in biological terms, ancient cosmology endows the divinities who arouse desire with the vital function of creative intermediaries: by

inspiring beings to mate and procreate, they bring new entities into existence. Consequently, Aphrodite is portrayed as older than the other Olympian gods, for she emerges as a stimulus to union in the previous generation, immediately after the sky and the earth are forcibly separated. Her placement outside the genealogical scheme of the *Theogony* indicates that she is not altogether subject to the same rules as the Olympians. The *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* affirms that just three goddesses – Athena, Artemis, and Hestia – are immune from her power, and that she even deceives Zeus himself, the king of the gods, whenever she pleases (*Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 7–39).

Homer's portrayal of Aphrodite ignores those exotic origins, welcoming her into the Olympian family by making her a daughter of Zeus, born of the goddess Dione. Early in the *Iliad*, she displays her intimidating side when she urges Helen to go to Paris' bedchamber after he has been vanquished by Menelaus. Helen refuses, but Aphrodite frightens her into submission by threatening to withdraw her protection and leave her exposed to the wrath of Greeks and Trojans alike (3.383–420). Shortly thereafter, though, the goddess herself becomes an object of ridicule when she attempts to rescue her son Aeneas on the battlefield and is wounded in the hand by the Greek warrior Diomedes (5.311–430). She flees sobbing to Olympus, where Zeus, her father, sternly advises her that “the deeds of war have not been given to you” (5.428). Hellenic Aphrodite is thus dissociated from her Asiatic counterparts, who are redoubtable battle-goddesses.

In the famous episode of Zeus' deception (14.153–351), Hera, the queen of the gods, contrives to borrow Aphrodite's decorated breast-band (*himas kestos*) in order to make herself sexually irresistible to her husband. Homer describes the sash in this way:

. . . From her breasts she [Aphrodite] loosed the fretted band,
 ornate, and there on it all kinds of spell have been worked:
 thereupon is lovemaking, and yearning, and bantering persuasion,
 which steals away the mind of even those who think prudently.

Normally, Homer uses *himas* to denote a leather strap, such as a chin-strap; thus he seems to envision the abstract elements “lovemaking,” “yearning,” and “persuasion” as anthropomorphic personifications tooled onto the sash. Figurines found in Turkey and Iran, dated to the end of the third millennium BCE, depict a nude goddess with a single strap or a double crossed strap across her breasts and carefully stylized pubic hair, calling attention to her sexuality (Garrison 2000: 75, with figs 3.3a–b and 3.4). However, actual examples of Near Eastern and Greek magical spells dating from the classical period involve the wearing of knotted cords to gain mastery of another, erotically or for some other purpose (Faraone 1990: 220–29). It appears that the love-goddess' emblem, a very old symbol of her control over fertility, has been given an ominous significance through association with the unwholesome use of love magic.¹

In the *Odyssey*, the blind singer Demodocus sings of Aphrodite's adultery with the war-god Ares (8.266–366). The tale is cast as comic entertainment, for

it accompanies a display of skilled dancing by the young men of Phaeacia intended to mollify Odysseus, who has been insulted by one of their number. Hephaestus, the lame divine craftsman who is Aphrodite's husband, is informed of this liaison by the sun-god Helios. He goes to his smithy, forges unbreakable chains too delicate to be seen, hangs them in place around his bed, and then pretends to go off to Lemnos. When Aphrodite and Ares take advantage of his supposed absence to make love, they entangle themselves in the chains. Hephaestus summons all the gods to witness their indignity, demanding the return of the courtship gifts he had given to his father-in-law Zeus. Poseidon, Zeus' brother, negotiates the freedom of the adulterous couple by guaranteeing payment of the fine for adultery (*moichagria*, 332) that Ares will owe. Since Greek custom makes the male the responsible party in cases of infidelity, Aphrodite's susceptibility to seduction is determined by her female weakness as well as her character as a love-goddess. Yet, apart from her humiliation at being exposed to the laughter and joking of the male Olympians (the female gods remain home out of modesty), she suffers no unpleasant consequences. Her impunity contrasts sharply with the brutal punishments inflicted upon mortal heroines who yield to passion.

Homeric epic thus appears to make a conscious effort to dissociate Aphrodite from the transcendent nature of the Eastern goddesses of war and fertility, to foreground the negative implications of her powers, and to limit her sphere of activity to the bedroom. It is revealing that Hesiod's epithet *philommédês*, explicitly glossed in the *Theogony* as having to do with the genitals, appears in Homeric poetry as a creative mispronunciation, refashioned into the much more innocent *philommeidês*, "laughter-loving."

But early Greek audiences remained very much aware of Aphrodite's dangerous aspect. The *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, composed by an anonymous oral poet possibly in the seventh century BCE, tells of the goddess' affair with the Trojan prince Anchises. The child of their union, whose birth is foretold in the final lines of the poem, was Aeneas, who led the survivors of the Trojan War to Italy and became the ancestor of the Romans. In this account, Aphrodite's relationship with a young mortal lover corresponds to that of the Near Eastern goddesses Inanna and Ishtar and their respective mortal consorts, Dumuzi and Tammuz. It also has parallels in other Greek myths, such as that of the dawn-goddess Eos, who sought immortality for her beloved Tithonus but forgot to ask for eternal youth. In the *Hymn*, the tale of Eos and Tithonus serves as a negative paradigm – a cautionary tale – for Aphrodite and Anchises' tryst.

Paradoxically, the poem celebrates Aphrodite's power by recounting how she herself fell victim to a degrading obsession. To punish her for the many times she had driven gods to mate with mortals, Zeus gives her a taste of her own medicine, instilling longing (*himeros*) in her heart for the handsome Anchises. One glance at him as he tends his father's cattle on Mount Ida and Aphrodite is smitten; she rushes to her temple at Paphos in Cyprus, bathes and decks herself out in all her gold and finery, and hurries back to Ida. As she proceeds, wolves, lions, bears, and leopards follow her, fawning, and she puts the desire to mate in all of them. Aphrodite has assumed the character of the awesome Phrygian fertility goddess

Cybele, worshiped in that region as the Mountain Mother and mistress of wild beasts (Burkert 1985: 154).

When she arrives at Anchises' hut, Aphrodite disguises herself as a young, richly clad maiden. Though he is at once gripped by passion (*eros*, 91), Anchises perceives intuitively that she may be a divinity – what would a real girl be doing out in the wilds? Aphrodite disarms his natural fear and suspicion by saying that she is a Phrygian princess kidnapped and brought there by the divine messenger Hermes, who told her she was destined to be Anchises' wife. Then she works her seductive wiles by throwing herself upon the young man's mercy (131–42):

But I implore you by Zeus and your worthy parents,
for dishonorable folk would not get such a son as you,
bring me, virginal and inexperienced in love
and present me to your father and your diligent mother
and to your brothers born of the same blood. 135
I'll be no unseemly daughter-in-law, but a suitable one.
And send a messenger quickly to the swift-mounted Phrygians
to tell my father and my mother, who is grieving greatly;
they will send you gold in abundance and woven clothing.
Receive the many excellent bridal gifts, and having done so, 140
prepare the feast for the longed-for marriage,
honorable in the sight of men and immortal gods.

“So speaking,” we are told, “the goddess cast sweet desire into his heart” – another way of saying that these words fuel Anchises' prior infatuation. He recklessly replies (145–54):

If you are mortal, and a woman was the mother that bore you, 145
and the famous Otreus is your father, as you tell me,
and you are here through the power of the immortal messenger Hermes,
and you will be called my wife all your days,
then not one of the gods or mortal men
will hold me back at this point, before I have lain in love with you 150
right now. Not even if Apollo himself, the far-shooter,
should send dreadful missiles from his silver bow.
I would be willing thereafter, woman resembling the goddesses,
to go down to Hades, having mounted your bed.

Anchises then takes the unprotesting “maiden” to his couch, removes her jewelry and clothing one piece at a time – the four-line description of disrobing is meant to titillate – and has intercourse with her. “He didn't clearly know what he was doing,” the narrator carefully notes (167), but subtle psychological dynamics are at work. When he pounces upon the supposedly helpless girl lost in the wild without a protector, Anchises assumes the position of a god like Zeus or Apollo, “given to surprising virgins in just such secluded locations as this” (A. S. Brown 1997: 34). The sexual exploits of such gods doubtless encapsulate archaic Greek male fantasies.

At evening, Aphrodite, in her true form, wakes Anchises. He panics. “As soon as I saw you, goddess, I knew you were divine, but you didn’t tell me the truth.” Then he begs her to show pity, and not leave him to survive in a weakened state – “a man who sleeps with immortal goddesses is not a strong man thereafter” (185–90). Anchises means this literally. Male sexual energy is thought of as liquid force (*menos*). When a human male fraternizes with a goddess, natural gender hierarchy is disrupted because the greater power of the goddess saps the vitality of the mortal.

Aphrodite kindly reassures Anchises. Yet she also confesses her intense shame at disgracing herself by sleeping with a mortal man and getting herself pregnant by him (247–55). She will take measures, then, to ensure that the baby’s parentage is kept secret. After his birth, he will be reared by woodland nymphs on Mount Ida; when he turns five, she will bring him to live with his father. The cover story Anchises must tell is that his son is the child of a nymph. If he ever boasts that he has slept with Aphrodite, Zeus will strike him with a thunderbolt. Then the goddess takes her departure. Though the hymn ends there, every Greek would have known the rest of the story. Anchises *was* foolish enough to let the truth slip (he’d been drinking). Zeus’ retaliatory thunderbolt disabled him for life. Long before Freud, ancient mythmakers represented castration as lameness, so his punishment is both a kind of poetic justice and a reflection of the actual physical danger posed to men by inordinate sexual relations. Too much sex weakens the body and causes impotence.

Though it may seem to cast Aphrodite in a negative light, this song was composed to honor the goddess. It glorifies her by showing the irresistible might of her eroticism in action, even as it warns us of the threat she poses. Her tricking of Anchises to serve her own selfish needs is a basic fact of nature. This, to the archaic Greek mind, is the way sex operates.

DYNAMICS OF DESIRE

. . . Chaos first came into being, and after that
 broad-breasted Gaea, eternally fixed seat of all the immortals
 who inhabit the peaks of snowy Olympus,
 and murky Tartarus in the depths of Earth with its broad ways,
 and Eros, who is most beautiful among the immortal gods,
 the limb-loosener, who overpowers both mind and wise intent
 in the breasts of all the gods and all mankind.

Hesiod, *Theogony* 116–22

In Greek mythology, personified Desire was initially a cosmic principle of generation. When he describes the coming-into-being of the universe, Hesiod makes Eros spontaneously arise from the primordial abyss, Chaos, along with Gaea the earth goddess and Tartarus the shadowy underworld. Gaea then brings forth her male consort, Uranus or Sky, from her own depths. From that point on, Hesiod’s archaic cosmos functions biologically, as other divinities are born of the physical

union of Sky and Earth, two sexually differentiated partners. To start the process of creation going, then, Eros must be present. But his job is not to bring the sexes together, for Earth's male partner, Sky, does not yet exist. Instead, by inducing Earth to draw her consort out of herself, he causes a rift within an original unity, giving rise to duality (Vernant 1990: 465–6). "Orphic" literature, a term applied by modern scholars to a set of religious texts circulating among sixth- and fifth-century adherents of purification cults, may have subsequently elaborated on this notion. In Aristophanes' comedy *Birds*, produced at Athens in 414 BCE, the chorus of birds proudly proclaims that Eros, creator of the immortals, was hatched from a wind-egg (693–702). Aristophanes' joke is thought to parody Orphic doctrine; if so, the egg, traditionally a symbol of the perfect whole, is an appropriate source from which the principle of cosmic fission must emerge. Along the same lines, Pherecydes of Syros, a mythographer active in the middle of the sixth century BCE, apparently claimed that Zas (Zeus) transformed himself into Eros in order to create the cosmos.²

It is only later, after Aphrodite is born of Uranus' severed members, that Hesiod assigns Eros his more familiar role of bringing sexual partners together so that they may produce other beings in turn. His status is altered, for, as we have seen, he is now reduced to working, along with Himeros, as a subordinate agent of the divinity who oversees relations between male and female. Moreover, he operates in a "fallen world," where an original harmony has been disrupted and the techniques of Aphrodite must come into play because men and women are naturally estranged from one another (duBois 1992: 101). We will understand why the sexes are forever alienated after we have studied Hesiod's myth of Pandora.

The god Eros is a personification of the instinctive drive to mate and reproduce. Greek culture viewed this biological compulsion as both positive and necessary. To civilized harmony, however, the power of Eros posed an unruly threat – witness the carnage of the Trojan War, supposedly provoked by a single act of adultery. While preoccupation with the fecundity of plants, animals, and women made sexuality central to both religious and community life, Greeks of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE dwelt, for the most part, in a subsistence economy, where resources of all kinds, including human fertility, had to be husbanded. Raw sexuality was also deemed a phenomenon belonging to the sphere of nature, *physis*. This word – in contrast to our anthropomorphic cliché "Mother Nature" – did not summon up visions of an unspoiled refuge from civilization's stresses, nor was it associated with healthful products, as in "natural organic foods." Especially when used together with its notional opposite, *nomos* or "culture," *physis* was firmly linked to what could not be radically changed by human agency, but only rendered less destructive. Hence *erôs* had to be controlled through various cultural mechanisms, or "technologies," so that it could be exploited for the benefit of the population as a whole (Thornton 1997: 1–7, 139–60). The mechanisms for harnessing sexual energy were chiefly rites of passage, male and female, leading up to the pivotal institution of marriage (Calame 1999 [1992]: 91–129). Eros' importance in being the reason that such social institutions existed explains his prominence in archaic and classical Greek poetry both lyric and dramatic.

However, representations of the god in later poetry, especially that sung at drinking parties or *symposia*, differ markedly from his portrayal in Hesiod and the Orphic hymns, for he is figured there not as a creative demiurge but rather as a violent and arbitrary force. In Homer, however, he does not appear in either capacity, for, while the noun *eros* occurs frequently, it is never personified.

THE BANEFUL RACE OF WOMEN

Most of us, when still children, heard the story of Pandora, the Greek Eve, and how curiosity tempted her to open the box from which all kinds of human misery escaped. This myth comes down to us from Hesiod, who tells it twice, once in the *Theogony* (535–612) and again in the *Works and Days* (42–105).³ Because it is given such a key place in his two didactic poems, it must have expressed meanings particularly important to his contemporaries. In Hesiod, however, Pandora's story has a significance much bleaker than the simple moral we now assign it, for it explains in each case why the human condition makes no sense and the labors of mankind are doomed to everlasting futility.

“Mankind” is the operative word here. Hesiod has not yet told us when and how humanity originated; its existence alongside the gods is simply taken for granted. (His account of the Five Ages of Man, with the successive creations of the Gold, Silver, and so on, races, immediately follows that of Pandora, *Op.* 106–201.) At this point in the mythic scenario, before the creation of the first woman, human beings are exclusively male. Although they were living in a kind of Golden Age – free from evils, from hard labor and sickness (*Op.* 90–92) – they did not eat the flesh of animals and had no access to technology. Prometheus, one of the immortal Titans, took up their cause. First, he instituted animal sacrifice, tricking Zeus into accepting bones and fat rather than meat as the gods' portion; then he stole the fire that would allow mortals to control their environment. Zeus, in retaliation, resolved to give mankind “an evil thing [*kakon*] in exchange for fire, in which they may delight themselves, embracing their own evil” (*Op.* 57–8). He ordered Hephaestus to fashion a maiden from earth and water; Athena, patroness of women's crafts, to teach her weaving; Aphrodite to bestow grace upon her; and Hermes to put in her “the mind of a bitch and a thieving nature” (*Op.* 60–68). Hermes also endowed her with speech and a name, *Pandora*, or “all-gift.” The narrator of the *Works and Days* explains that she was so called because each of the gods gave her a gift, although the Greek could just as easily mean that she was a gift from all the gods.⁴

When Pandora is ready, Hermes brings her as a present to Prometheus' stupid brother Epimetheus. This is a Hesiodic joke: *Prometheus* means “forethought,” *Epimetheus* “afterthought.” Although Prometheus had sternly warned him against taking any gifts from Zeus, Epimetheus forgets and joyfully accepts her. Pandora subsequently removes the lid of the storage jar (*not* a box – we will see why in a moment) in which sufferings, labor, and sicknesses are contained and scatters them all over the earth. Because Hesiod states plainly that “she devised [*emêsato*]

miserable cares for human beings” (*Op.* 95), it appears she does so maliciously, not through ignorance. By Zeus’ design, however, Hope (*Elpis*) remains trapped in the jar, underneath the lid. Hope’s continued presence there is no consolation, for she too counts among potential plagues because of her capacity to delude (Pucci 1977: 104–5). Thanks to Pandora, then, “the earth is full of evils and the sea is full” and diseases bring suffering to men silently, by day and night (*Op.* 100–104).

In the *Theogony*, the pattern of events is much the same, but there Hesiod is at greater pains to underscore Pandora’s position as first woman. He traces “the race of women” (*genos . . . gynaikôn*, *Theog.* 590) back to her and compares them to drones in beehives, who consume the honey produced by bees “into their own belly [*gastêr*]” while making no contribution to the household themselves. Women are thus a drag upon men’s endeavors; yet a man must marry in order to have children. And he *must* have children, for otherwise there will be no one to care for him in his old age, and no one to inherit, intact, the fruits of a lifetime of hard work. Even – best-case scenario – if he marries a good wife, he may produce bad children. Thus, Hesiod concludes fatalistically, “it is not possible to deceive or to bypass the mind of Zeus” (*Theog.* 613, cf. *Op.* 105).

If we take this account at face value, it is outrageously misogynistic, not least because it ignores the vital economic role wives played as stewards of family property and producers of woven goods, a major source of domestic wealth in archaic Greece. But let us try giving it a broader frame of reference by assuming that Pandora stands for something more than just “Woman.” In creating her, Zeus causes two sexes to exist where there was only one. This means that sexual intercourse has now become an inescapable part of human existence. Pandora is therefore a doublet of Aphrodite, whose emergence from the sea, after the forced separation of the primal parents Sky and Earth, introduces duality of the sexes into the cosmic order. Hesiod underscores that parallelism between divine and human by giving Pandora a “robing scene” similar to those of Hera preparing to seduce Zeus in *Iliad* 14 and Aphrodite beautifying herself for Anchises (Bergren 1989: 10–14). In both poems, he relates that Pandora was decked out in elaborate finery by Athena. In the *Works and Days*, the Graces and Persuasion put gold necklaces upon her, and, in the *Theogony*, Hephaestus fashions for her a golden crown embossed with figures of beasts. Here we are reminded of the radiant robes and golden ornaments donned by each of the two Olympians, and perhaps of Aphrodite’s magic sash as well. Like Hera and Aphrodite, then, Zeus’ gift to mankind presents herself as a vision of dazzling, if superficial, beauty. The goddesses, moreover, are exploiting their sexual appeal in order to deceive, and Pandora too is endowed with “lies and wheedling words and a thieving character” by Hermes (*Op.* 77–8). Such a combination of elegant, “golden” allure and falsity suggests that Pandora is an allegory of sexuality itself, and so another embodiment of the potential risks to a man involved in dealings with Aphrodite and Eros.

What are these risks? Even if he steers clear of goddesses, sex with mortal women can endanger a man because there are physical limits upon his potency. In a later passage of the *Works and Days*, Hesiod advises (582–8):

But when the thistle flowers and the shrill cicada,
 sitting in a tree, pours down his clear song without pause
 from beneath his wings, in the season of toilsome heat,
 then goats are fattest and wine tastes best,
 women are horniest, but men most debilitated,
 because the Dog-star dries up head and knees
 and the flesh is parched by heat.

That women are lusty and men impotent during the dog-days of summer was a widespread folk belief. Approximately a century later, Alcaeus of Lesbos cast this passage of the *Works and Days* into lyric verse for performance at drinking parties (fr. 347 LP). He speaks even more bluntly of the physiological response of each sex to summer heat: “and now women are most polluted [*miarôtatai*] and men insubstantial [*leptoi*].” For a scientific explanation of these alleged facts, we can turn to the author of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata* (4.25). Men are by nature hot and dry, he says, and women moist and chilled. During winter, the moisture and warmth in men are strong enough to produce seed and arouse desire, while in women lack of heat inside and out causes their own moisture to congeal. In summer, the degree of heat in women is in balance, but for men it is excessive, and that surplus heat saps their vitality. Hence the two sexes are diametrically opposed to each other in terms of their bodily constitution, one reason why Hesiod could figure them as originating separately and literally belonging to distinct species.

Such convictions shaped Greek ideas of how females respond to sexual arousal. Since *erôs* has a softening and liquefying effect, they were thought more susceptible to passion than men, whose dryer constitutions enabled them better to resist erotic impulse. That is why more blame attaches to the male partner in cases of adultery. Furthermore, they had no physiological need to curb their appetites, since their capacity for sex, unlike that of men, was bottomless (Carson 1990: 137–45). A sex-hungry woman was a threat, then, not only because she might be prone to make demands during summer, the wrong time of year, but also because she consumed *menos*, a man’s vital fluid. Her womb (*gastêr*) was an unplumbed abyss into which he poured his limited resources of semen. Pandora’s storage jar containing all the evils that plague men is a metaphor for that same *gastêr*, or womb/belly.

Consequently, Hesiod cautions the man planning to marry that, while there is nothing better than a good wife, there is nothing worse than a bad one, “a dinner-trapper who, no matter how stalwart he is, singes him without a torch and gives him to raw old age” (*Op.* 704–5). The warning contained in these two lines should again be taken literally. Since the same word can mean both “belly” and “womb,” the wife’s sexual rapacity is described as gluttony. Her appetite affects her husband in exactly the same way as summer heat by scorching him and drying him out. Eventually he succumbs to premature senility, for she has sucked away the *menos* that ensures youth as well as vigor. It is for this reason, too, that the race of women who descend from Pandora are portrayed as greedy drones.

Lack of reciprocity is inscribed into the sexual act, in which male energy goes to nourish female fecundity. Even intercourse for the purpose of begetting children is a gamble from the masculine point of view: in financial terms, a precious commodity, sperm, must be invested with no assurance that long-run dividends, in the form of a comfortable old age, will be returned. Those are the economics, so to speak, of human sexuality in Hesiod.

The assumption that “women are wet” became the basis of the model of female gynecology contained in the Hippocratic Corpus. Although the sixty to seventy treatises in this collection (credited to the historical physician Hippocrates of Cos, but actually the work of several anonymous, mostly fifth- and fourth-century, writers) often disagree on the causes and treatments of a disease, their basic construction of the female body is consistent, owing much, conceptually, to the myth of Pandora (King 1998: 27–39). Hippocratic woman’s physiology is so distinct from man’s that she might well be a member of a separate race. Her flesh is of a completely different texture, spongy and absorbent, like wool (*Mul.* 1.1). The excess moisture she extracts from food, stored as blood, must be regularly evacuated during the menstrual period or consumed by the fetus in pregnancy; otherwise death could result. The *gastêr*, which the Hippocratics compared to an inverted storage jar, was also a source of female troubles. Because it collected blood to be expelled in menstruation or used to nourish the child, it was unusually susceptible to dryness. It was believed to be an independent organ unattached to the body, and could therefore leave its proper place to go searching for moisture, rising to the lungs and neck and producing suffocation (*Mul.* 1.7; *Loc. Hom.* 47). Intercourse, however, irrigated the womb, heated the blood, and made the menses flow. Hence sexual activity was considered essential for preserving women’s health.⁵

LOVE UNDER SIEGE

Illicit sexuality underpins the plot of Homer’s *Iliad*, for the original cause of hostility between the Greeks and the Trojans was Paris’ abduction of Helen, at that time the wife of the Spartan king Menelaus. The overriding themes of the poem, the inevitability of death and the value of everlasting fame in the face of human mortality, are movingly underscored by frank reminders – often put in the mouth of Helen, who constantly blames herself for what has happened – that all this suffering on both sides has been the outcome of irresponsible behavior on the part of two individuals. Yet Homer does not make Helen, or even Paris, into cardboard villains; each is a complex character. And, although we are given only brief glimpses of their marriage, we realize soon enough that it is an unhappy one: on Helen’s part, a powerful sexual attraction to her present husband vies with shame, regret, and anger at his fecklessness when he blithely ignores the moral consequences of his actions. The self-centered preoccupations of the lovers are in turn offset by the graver concerns of Paris’ brother Hector, commander of the Trojan army, and his wife Andromache, and the essentially comic tryst of Zeus and Hera. It is disconcerting that these various involvements, which provide an

emotional backdrop for the bloody carnage around Troy, are presented merely as short interludes in the dominant business of killing.

Earlier we spoke of the scene in *Iliad* 3 in which Aphrodite, in the guise of an old servant, compels Helen to go to Paris' bedchamber. Helen's reluctance to do so is motivated by embarrassment at his poor performance as a warrior, which she had witnessed from Troy's walls. As the armies were advancing to meet each other, Paris burst from the Trojan ranks. Wearing a leopard skin and brandishing two javelins – showy trappings, well suited to his personality – he had challenged any man of the Greeks to single combat. But when Menelaus, Helen's former husband, eagerly took him up on it, Paris, losing his nerve, backed off "like a man seeing a snake." Only a cutting rebuke from Hector could make him stand his ground. Seizing upon the opportunity to end the war once and for all through a fair fight between the two principals, both sides, represented by their kings Agamemnon of Mycenae and Priam of Troy, arranged the terms of the competition and formally ratified them with a sacrifice. Helen and her possessions would belong to the man who won; afterward, the remaining Greeks and Trojans would swear an oath of friendship, and the Greeks would return home. Unfortunately, the outcome of the combat left the issue unresolved. When Menelaus, who was getting the better of Paris, attempted to deal the death-blow, his sword shattered. He then grabbed his opponent by the helmet and tried to drag him away, but Aphrodite broke the chin-strap, caught up Paris and hid him in a mist, and carried him off to his bedchamber. She had saved his life at the price of his heroic stature (such as it was), for he was not even allowed to die honorably.

Helen is humiliated, and once she and Paris are face to face she lets him know it. "I wish you had died on the battlefield," she complains. "So much for your boasting that you were a better man than Menelaus. Go back and challenge him to fight again – no, don't: he could very well kill you" (3.428–36). But Paris feels no chagrin whatsoever. If Menelaus won, he retorts, it was with Athena's help; next time it will be *his* turn, as "we have gods on our side too." (He is doubtless thinking of Aphrodite, although she, as we have seen, is no fighter.) Then he coaxes, "But come now, let's both go to bed and enjoy ourselves in making love [*philotêti*]." Never before, he adds, has *erôs* shrouded his heart this much, not even when on the island of Cranae he first "joined [*emigên*] with you on a bed in love" after their elopement (3.441–6). He leads the way to the marital couch, and she meekly follows. We are not told whether she gives in primarily because of desire or because she fears the wrath of Aphrodite.

In this scene, it is the erotic language itself, as opposed to the behavior of the two characters, that offers insight into what Homer's audience ideally expected of sexual intercourse. The word *philotês*, properly meaning "friendship, love, affection," is regularly used in epic verse to denote not just the act of sex but, associated with it, the feelings of intimacy it should foster. Similarly, with the verb *eunaô* "go to bed," Paris uses the dual, a grammatical ending in ancient Greek distinct from the singular and the plural, applied only to natural pairs like a yoke of oxen. The idea of reciprocity is understood: he assumes that Helen actively consents to sex and will experience as much pleasure in it as he himself will. This

assemblage of vocabulary and grammatical constructions is formulaic in scenes of human lovemaking, which suggests that the epic model of sexual relations is one of mutual participation and enjoyment. At the same time, similar language also occurs in genealogical accounts and so implies that the act of intercourse described might be likely to produce offspring (although Paris and Helen themselves have no children). Homeric archetypes of human eroticism therefore attempt to balance the carnal, the procreative, and the affective aspects of sex (Calame 1999 [1992]: 39–43). Yet we should note that, although the elements of consent and reciprocity might characterize any sexual union, the factor of potential reproduction restricts the ideal erotic encounter to that of a heterosexual, if not necessarily married, couple.

Helen and Paris' actual relationship falls short of the ideal, however, because, apart from strong physical attraction and the bond forged by mutual guilt, little enough keeps them together. In Paris, Homer has drawn an intriguing portrait of a man who lives by and for his charm and sex appeal. His brother Hector calls him *gynaimanês*, “woman-crazy” (*Il.* 3.39), and reproaches him for his unwillingness to stand up against the man whose wife he had stolen. “Your lyre and the gifts of Aphrodite, your hair and looks, won't help you when you're joined with the dust,” he remarks (3.44–5), sarcastically using the same verb, *meignumi*, employed as an euphemism for the act of intercourse. Paris acknowledges the fairness of this reprimand, but adds, in his own defense, that gifts bestowed by the gods themselves cannot be cast aside, since no one would choose them willingly (3.65–6). His rationalization puts the blame on Aphrodite: she has made him who he is, and to go against his temperament would be to insult her. Several books later, in a much-admired simile, Paris is likened to a stallion at liberty (6.506–14):

As when a stabled horse overfed at the manger
breaks his ties and runs pounding over the plain,
accustomed to bathe himself in the well-flowing river,
full of himself; he carries his head high,
and over his shoulders his mane tosses; 510
lightly his knees bear him, burnished proud,
to the familiar pasture of the herd; so Paris, son of Priam,
descended from steep Pergamus, shining in his armor like the bright sun,
laughing loudly, and his swift feet carried him on.

The comparison is psychologically acute. There is nothing more eye-catching than a horse bursting with energy and unexpectedly on the loose. Thus “all the qualities of masculine sexuality well used are evoked by the simile” (Beye 1966: 27). Nevertheless, a Greek audience would also be well aware of the danger a runaway stallion, oblivious to his surroundings, poses to himself, other horses, and anyone trying to catch him. Homer drives the point home by inserting this description of Paris right after one of the most poignant scenes in the epic: Hector has just bidden farewell to his wife Andromache, who was tearfully urging him to remain within the city walls. Hector's grim commitment to duty marks the sharpest possible contrast with his brother's insouciance, while Andromache's overriding

concern for her husband's safety is touchingly at odds with Helen's frustration at Paris' dishonorable conduct.

Why is Helen so preoccupied with the shame his lack of nobility brings upon her? From antiquity onwards, audiences have perceived that she, the prize for which Greeks and Trojans are fighting, is an emblem of the *kleos*, the immortal fame, earned by whoever proves himself the best warrior at Troy. Since poetry is the vehicle of such fame, Helen is to some degree a personification of epic values: she self-consciously voices the heroic perspective of the poet. When Iris, messenger of the gods, summons her to attend the single combat between Paris and Menelaus, Helen is weaving a great double-folded cloth on which are figured "the many contests the horse-taming Trojans and bronze-corseleted Achaeans had endured for her sake" (*Il.* 3.125–8). In this weaving project Homer has mirrored himself composing the plot of his song. Subsequently, addressing Hector, Helen speaks of Paris and herself as "subjects of song for future generations" (6.358). Homer, it has been observed, creates a Helen who articulates her own poetic function in two distinct ways: within the epic scenario she recognizes her guilt as the cause of the war, and she also expresses the bard's sense of his cultural importance as preserver and transmitter of the past (Clader 1976: 8–9). Trapped, therefore, into dependence upon a man whose fixation upon lust and its gratification precludes sensitivity to the opinion of peers and posterity, Helen is forced to deny her symbolic identity. This is the dilemma imposed on her by her dual role as spokesperson for Homer and pawn of Aphrodite.

THE BEGUILMENT OF ZEUS

"What high immortals do in mirth / is life and death on Middle Earth," observed W. S. Auden. He was not necessarily thinking of Homer (nor, for that matter, of Tolkien), but his couplet accurately sums up the interactions of divine personalities in the *Iliad*. In the petty rivalries of the Olympians grave human concerns are burlesqued. Sexuality, of course, emerges as one of those chief concerns.

The tragic events of the *Iliad* are set in motion by Zeus' decision to honor Achilles, whom Agamemnon, his king and overlord, had grievously insulted. To show the Greeks that they cannot win without Achilles' help, Zeus allows the Trojan forces to gain the upper hand while Achilles withdraws to his tent, refusing to participate in combat. Hera is a partisan of the Greeks, and her clever seduction of her husband comes very close to thwarting that objective. She schemes with Hypnos, the god of sleep, to render Zeus unconscious after lovemaking. This, in turn, permits her favorites to regain mastery of the field and, in the process, seriously to disable the Trojan champion Hector.

When she approaches Zeus, bathed, perfumed, and dressed to kill, Hera's coy demeanor is reminiscent of those other supernatural seductresses Aphrodite and Pandora. Upon seeing her, Zeus reacts as impulsively as Paris and Anchises. "As soon as he saw her, *eros* shrouded his shrewd heart," the narrator says, "even as when they first joined in love [*emisgesthên philotêti*], going, the two of them, to

omniscience fails in the face of his desire. Invincible and all-knowing, he is nevertheless baffled by eros” (Holmberg 1995: 110–11). In a universe that comes into existence through spontaneous generation, rather than the creative act of a demiurge, and continues to function on biological principles even under a rational Olympian regime, Hera’s seductive wives pose a challenge to the established order, for they create, if only temporarily, a lapse of direction, a failure of Zeus’ will, that might well culminate in a return to primeval chaos. Zeus wakes before any permanent damage is actually done, but the plot of the *Iliad* has come close to being subverted.

ALTERNATIVES TO PENELOPE

It is an axiom of scholarship on the *Odyssey* that all its female figures, human and divine, are “foils,” or substitute models, for its heroine Penelope. Implied contrasts with Clytemnestra, Helen, Calypso, Nausicaa, Circe, and Arete delicately illuminate various facets of Penelope’s character, such as her chastity, steadfastness, intelligence, and capacity for queenship. Yet Odysseus’ transactions with other types of the feminine also serve an ideological purpose, for they point up the negative consequences of allowing female sexual desire to range freely without restraint. Odysseus’ own objective of resuming his position as king and husband on Ithaca is expressly endorsed by the poem, while female sexuality is depicted throughout as a major impediment to that goal (Holmberg 1995: 108).

The *Odyssey* is, as Wohl neatly puts it, “a charter for the transition from the warrior society of the *Iliad* to the *polis* culture of fifth-century Athens” (1993: 19). Odysseus’ homecoming to an Ithaca completely changed from the one he left mirrors the degree to which Greek society itself changed during the Dark Age, the twelfth to eighth centuries BCE. For example, the queens Helen and Arete join their menfolk dining with visitors in the central hall of the Homeric palace; epic poetry takes it for granted that noble women will participate in hospitality. This assumption may reflect the relative accessibility of one-room private residences during the immediate post-Mycenaean period. Archaeological remains indicate, however, that residential architecture was subsequently modified to provide greater privacy for the inhabitants: starting around 700 BCE, rooms began to be clustered around an interior courtyard with a single door giving admission from the street (Morris 2000: 280–86). This new layout, which soon became the norm and continued to prevail in the classical Athenian city-state or *polis*, emphasized the wife’s role as guardian of the domestic interior, as opposed to the husband’s function of representing the household to the outside world. Indeed, a corresponding literary tendency to gender the interior area of the house as feminine, dissociating the physical space of women from the larger public realm, surfaces for the first time in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (519–25) and is therefore contemporaneous with this architectural revolution.

If the single-family household, the *oikos*, is destined to be the basic unit of society in the city-state, the man and woman who together manage it must be

well suited in character and abilities for their respective tasks, and must also exhibit *homophrosynê*, “like-mindedness,” in supervising its dependents and expending resources. Odysseus’ brawn and courage complement Penelope’s fidelity, and they possess an equal amount of *mêtis* or practical intelligence. This makes them ideal partners in such an enterprise. They are, then, the epic archetype of marital excellence. Odysseus’ encounters with other females, conversely, test alternative models of relations between the sexes and demonstrate why they are unsuited to the emerging *polis* society.

The goddesses Calypso and Circe are examples of sexually autonomous females. Each lives alone on an island that seems a paradise of lush fertility, and each hankers after Odysseus as her mortal lover. At the beginning of the poem, Calypso has been holding the hero prisoner for seven years. When Hermes arrives bringing Zeus’ direct order to release him, she bitterly complains that male divinities, who regularly consort with mortals, grudge their female counterparts the right to do the same (5.118–29). But if Homer allows Calypso to point out the unfairness of the Olympian double standard, it is only to make her own ethical position the more untenable: she herself has been detaining Odysseus against his will, compelling him to sleep with her by force (*anangkêi*, 5.155). Furthermore, like the loutish Cyclops, she dwells in a cave, on an island in the midst of the formless sea; her environment is “distant from all forms of social, political, or religious normativeness” (Peradotto 1993: 176). The very meaning of her name, “Concealer,” hints at both death and the oblivion that is the antithesis of everlasting fame. When Calypso offers Odysseus immortality as a bribe to remain with her, we realize that life as the goddess’ companion would be tantamount to extinction for the epic hero. The Calypso episode questions whether the subjection of female libido is both proper and necessary and gives an unambiguously affirmative answer.

Circe poses an even more dangerous threat to male sexuality, for her secret weapons are drugs, *pharmaka*, and she employs them, together with her magic wand, to change Odysseus’ men into swine after they have eaten and drunk with her. Female independence is automatically equated with female domination, which strips men of their essential humanity and reduces them to the level of beasts. To be a man, conversely, is to keep women’s sexuality properly in check. Odysseus is able to withstand the power of Circe’s potion by relying on a counter-herb, the mysterious plant *moly* given him by Hermes; he then gains mastery over the goddess by drawing his sword and threatening violence to her (10.321–2). Realizing that he is Odysseus, whose arrival Hermes had already predicted, Circe pleads with him to put away his blade and make love: “then let us both go up to bed, so that, mingling in affection on the bed, we may have faith in each other” (333–5). This is a particularly clear expression of the idea that intercourse should foster intimacy and trust between the sexes. Yet Odysseus nevertheless fears that Circe, once he is naked, will render him unmanly (*anênora*, 341) and agrees to sex only after she swears a great oath to do him no further harm. Once she has restored his comrades to their proper human shape, however, and they are all settled in her palace as her guests, Odysseus stays with

her a full year and decides to leave only after his men become impatient. Supposedly benign, Circe still remains capable of delaying his homecoming.

Although Phaeacia, Odysseus' first landfall after leaving Calypso's island, is a civilized, even hyper-civilized society, it is entirely cut off from other peoples. The Trojan War, which had created such a political cataclysm throughout the Mediterranean world, has reached its inhabitants only as the subject of song. It is also an inbred society: Arete, the wife of king Alcinous, is at the same time his niece, whom he married when he succeeded his brother on the throne (7.63–8). Her status as the former king's only child, through whom the royal bloodline would doubly pass, might explain the unusual political influence she is said to possess. Both her daughter Nausicaa and the disguised goddess Athena hint to Odysseus that the queen is the real decision-maker in the palace.

It seems odd, then, that Arete only speaks three times in the epic, once when she recognizes the clothing Odysseus wears and asks where he got it (7.237–9), again when she sensibly advises him to knot the ties to a chest she has just given him (8.443–5), and, finally, when she praises his account of the mythic heroines he had seen in the underworld (11.336–41). There, indeed, she refers to him as “my guest,” although she quickly adds that all the other Phaeacian nobles share in that honor. Otherwise, her husband Alcinous is the one to give orders for Odysseus' entertainment, to plan his homecoming, propose gifts, and even, in an unexpected move – considering that he does not yet know his visitor's identity – hint at offering him Nausicaa's hand in marriage (7.311–15). When Echeneus, spokesman for the elders of the community, endorses Arete's call for additional gifts to Odysseus, he pointedly states that the king has the final say: “the action and the word depend on Alcinous here” (11.346). Yet appearances may be deceiving. Nausicaa's and Athena's independent testimony to Arete's authority raises the possibility that the fine speeches of Alcinous, who seems rather defensive about his right to command, and the deference to him shown by the elders are fictions masking his wife's genuine though publicly unacknowledged rule (Wohl 1993: 30–31).

If Nausicaa's mother is the actual power behind the throne, that could account for the unusual poise and self-possession her daughter displays when she comes upon Odysseus, shipwrecked and naked, in Book 6. Homer's tact in alluding to matters sexual is at its most diplomatic in this episode, as his listeners would be quite aware of implicit parallels with stock scenes of maiden abduction. First, the meeting of hero and adolescent girl takes place on a beach, often a venue for rape or seduction: in the false tale Odysseus tells the swineherd Eumaeus, his nurse is seduced by a Phoenician sailor while washing clothes (15.520–22). Again, the mythic motif of girls carried off while dancing or playing with their companions is only too familiar – Hades' seizure of Demeter's daughter Persephone comes immediately to mind (*Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 4–32). Before playing ball, Nausicaa and her companions cast off their veils, the symbol of female modesty (6.100). As Odysseus emerges from his hiding place, he is compared to a ravenous lion stalking his prey through rain and wind (6.130–34): the simile does not externalize his own mental state, but instead conjures up the impression he makes upon

the maidens. When her companions scatter, Nausicaa is left alone to confront the stranger.⁶ Given these parallels with mythic rape scenes, it is wholly unexpected of her to stand up to him bravely instead of passively submitting to whatever might befall her.

Nausicaa is unusual in other ways as well. Critics have noted her precocious sexuality (Wohl 1993: 28–9). In later Greek literature, virgins often blush at the very suggestion of marriage, but she anticipates it with some eagerness. Although she is ashamed to mention it in front of her father (6.66–7), she speaks frankly about it to her maidens and even to Odysseus, whom she has barely met. In lines 275–88, she explains why he should dissociate himself from her party before they enter the city:

And then some common fellow, coming upon us, might say thus: 275
 “Who’s this tall and handsome stranger following after Nausicaa?
 Where’d she find him? He’s going to be her husband.
 Either she’s got herself off his ship some traveler from a faraway people –
 since nobody lives near us – or else in answer to her prayers
 the god she longed for came down from the sky, and she’ll have him 280
 all her life. Better so, if she herself went and found somebody elsewhere.
 For she turns up her nose at these Phaeacians among her people
 though there’s many excellent young men courting her.”
 That’s what they would say, and this would bring shame on me. 285
 And I would blame a girl who did such things,
 and who, going against the will of her father and mother,
 would sleep with men before being publicly married.

In just a few lines, Nausicaa brings up, through an imaginary third party, the notion of Odysseus marrying her, informs him that she is not averse to it, for she is not particularly interested in the several suitors who pursue her now, but also insists that it is marriage or nothing, because she is not the kind of girl who sleeps around. Her seamless segue from talk of marriage to talk of relations with a man before marriage is especially worthy of note. Nausicaa may be a sheltered princess, but she possesses a keen sense of how to play the flirting game, implying that she has already devoted a good deal of private daydreaming to it.

Just as he had previously turned down the opportunity to live as an immortal with Calypso, Odysseus rejects the option of marrying the king’s daughter, for the *Odyssey* is not a conventional fairy-tale. For all her charm and intelligence, moreover, Nausicaa may not be quite suited to serve as mistress of an *oikos* in the real world, as opposed to the storybook land of Phaeacia. Her opening conversation with her father (6.57–70), in which she pointedly avoids reference to her own impending need for clean clothing at her wedding, indicates that she can be devious. This impression is confirmed in her speech to Odysseus, which, for all its apparent common sense, attempts to set a personal agenda. While her efforts to exert subtle control over older men are part of the humor, that precocity could interfere with the *homophrosynê* that, as Odysseus himself tells her (6.180–85), is the most essential ingredient of a successful marriage. Putting

this another way, Nausicaa is as yet too lighthearted and too self-absorbed to be able to use her wits as Penelope does, in scheming to keep Odysseus' household as intact as possible while bearing up under a painful weight of uncertainty.

The most troubling stand-in for Penelope is Helen, once again restored to her erstwhile position as queen of Sparta. Entertaining the young Telemachus in Book 4, she initiates the telling of stories about the exploits of Odysseus in Troy – after first drugging the wine with a *pharmakon* that will allow those present to relive the past without pain.⁷ In her own account of how, while in Troy, she recognized Odysseus in disguise and was eventually taken into his confidence, she portrays herself as his equal in cunning and secretly loyal to the Greeks. Her husband Menelaus then counters with a story of how she almost exposed the device of the Trojan Horse by walking around it imitating the voices of the wives of the warriors inside; Odysseus alone prevented them from answering (4.235–89). While the paired narratives agree in crediting Odysseus with extraordinary achievements, they likewise underscore the ambiguity of Helen's position as a “multiple, inconclusive, and dangerous figure, whose reputation fluctuates repeatedly between praise and blame” (Worman 2001: 20). Like Aphrodite in Demodocus' song, but unlike her sister Clytemnestra, she enjoys full immunity from the consequences of adultery, while her store of mind-altering medications permits her to exert a form of psychic control over the men in her company. In the *Iliad*, Helen had embodied a fascination both awesome, “dreadfully like that of immortal goddesses” (*Il.* 3.158), and terrifying. Though in the *Odyssey* her sexual allure is supposedly disciplined, she remains an imposing and very unsettling presence. Hence Menelaus' prophesied fate – to dwell with Helen forever in the Elysian fields (*Od.* 4.561–70) – must appear, on reflection, a “less than unequivocally blissful” one (Suzuki 1989: 63).

The problem of gender on which the plot of the *Odyssey* turns is the weakness in the organization of *polis* society created by the wife's capacity to betray her absent spouse. Corollary tales present contrasting resolutions of that domestic and political dilemma. Clytemnestra, who, after cheating on her husband Agamemnon, conspired to murder him, is opposed throughout to the faithful Penelope, constantly reminding us that female loyalty can never be presupposed. The adultery of Ares and Aphrodite, like the deception of Zeus in the *Iliad*, burlesques the epic action by shifting it to Olympus and transposing it into a comic mode. In allowing Hermes and Apollo to joke roguishly about the sorry predicament of the lovers, it momentarily subverts the gravity of the central thematic issue (Olson 1989: 141–3; Peradotto 1993: 178–81). Yet the parallels between Hephaestus, the wronged husband, and Odysseus himself, especially in his disguise as a beggar, underscore the seriousness of those concerns on the human plane. Hephaestus is physically lame, and Odysseus feigns a limp, supporting himself on a staff; each triumphs over potential or actual violators of his household primarily through cunning; each is a master craftsman (Newton 1987). While Hephaestus forges magic chains to trap the adulterous couple, Odysseus constructs the very bed whose secret of manufacture proves his identity. Male virility – called into doubt by the kind of physical disability inflicted as punishment upon Anchises – is reaffirmed when the husband asserts authority over the *lechos*, the marital bed.

This, then, is the reason Penelope plays the “bed trick” on the stranger professing to be Odysseus. Readers often wonder why she continues to resist even after the nurse Eurycleia and Telemachus have both vouched for his identity. When Odysseus, faced with her lack of cooperation, finally gives up and tells Eurycleia to prepare a bed for him, Penelope takes the cue (23.174–80). She is not being unreasonable, she says: “I know very well how you looked [*mala d’ eu oid’ hoios eêstha*] when you left Ithaca.” Then she confirms the order: fix a bed for him outside the bedchamber, “that very bed he himself made [*ton rh’ autos epoiei*].” In revealing that she has in fact recognized him, she catches Odysseus off-guard. Aghast at the possibility that some man had hacked through the trunk of the olive tree that formed one of the bed’s supports, rendering it portable, he abandons discretion and blurts out the secret of its manufacture, proving beyond doubt who he is. Critics have rightly noted that the immovability of the bed is symbolic of not only the permanence of marriage (a meaning already obvious to ancient audiences)⁸ but, more to the point, the wife’s continuing fidelity, and, by extension, the steadfastness of her resolve (J. J. Winkler 1990a: 157–8; Doherty 1995: 144; Zeitlin 1995: 123–4). Because the bed is a concrete emblem of the sexual act itself, its fixed position within the innermost chamber of the house epitomizes the fundamental role of marital sexuality in stabilizing the *oikos*. Moreover, its metaphorical function as the defining token of Odysseus’ identity may also imply that sexual experience was felt to play a vital part in developing a consciousness of oneself as unique.

ACHILLES IN THE CLOSET?

Perhaps the most significant feature of sexuality as it is represented in the Homeric epics is their meaningful silence about what later Greek civilization took for granted. There is no explicit mention of pederasty or any other form of same-sex eroticism in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. When the abduction of the Trojan boy Ganymede is mentioned, “the gods” as a group are held responsible; nothing is said of Zeus’ own infatuation with him (*Il.* 20.232–5). Hermes appears to mortals in the guise of an adolescent with his first growth of beard, “the most attractive time of young manhood” (*Il.* 24.348, *Od.* 10.279), but the adjective *charieis*, “graceful, elegant, beautiful,” describes what is visually pleasing in general and need not imply an erotic response. Finally, nowhere is it actually stated that Achilles and Patroclus are anything more than comrades, although commentators ancient and modern have claimed that the phrasing of a few lines, even if formulaic, hints that a more intimate bond is to be understood.

Although the interaction between Nestor’s son Pisistratus and Odysseus’ son Telemachus is handled casually, references to their sleeping in close proximity have raised suspicion that the relationship should be understood as a pederastic one (W. M. Clarke 1978: 383). We can deal with this suggestion quickly, since the passages on which it rests are few. Accompanied by Athena in the guise of his father’s associate Mentor, Telemachus sails to Pylos on the west coast of Greece

seeking news of Odysseus, and then proceeds overland to Sparta escorted by Pisistratus. At Pylos, king Nestor invites him to spend the night in the palace rather than on his ship, and he is given a bed in the portico alongside Pisistratus, who, we are informed in the next line, is “still a bachelor” (*Od.* 3.397–401). However, Homer is not telling us about his erotic inclinations but instead explaining why he customarily sleeps there; if Pisistratus was married, he would occupy a bedchamber with his wife. While the two young men are staying at Sparta, they bed down in the forecourt of the palace, and they may be lying alongside one another, since Telemachus wakes Pisistratus by kicking his foot (*lax podi kinêsas*, 15.45). On the other hand, he could also do that while standing above him, and the action, in any case, is not terribly romantic. Between themselves, Pisistratus and Telemachus show none of the fervent affection that Achilles and Patroclus feel for one another; when they part company (15.193–216); Telemachus characterizes their relationship as that of hereditary guest-friends (*xenoi*) and youths of the same age (*homêlikes*). Their like-mindedness (*homophrosynê*), which he also acknowledges, is a desirable thing in future rulers and allies as well as man and wife. On balance, the two princes seem simply to be travel buddies who have shared a memorable adventure.

With Achilles and Patroclus it is different. After giving Patroclus permission to wear his armor into battle as a ruse to assist the Greeks, Achilles expresses a wish that both armies, Trojans and Greeks alike, would perish, so that the two of them by themselves might capture Troy (*Il.* 16.97–100). The apparent callousness and egotism of the remark shocked ancient scholars, who excised it on the grounds that it was a later insertion by someone who thought the pair were lovers (W. M. Clarke 1978: 384–5). Yet the grim fancy suits Achilles’ aggrieved mood, for he is still seething over Agamemnon’s insult. Although it would hardly be reflective of his ordinary state of mind, it shows that at this critical juncture, when he is so caught up in bitter resentment, Patroclus is the only other person who still exists for him. The hero’s subsequent hysterical reaction to the news of his friend’s death, his fanatical thirst for revenge, and his persistent grief and sleeplessness even after Patroclus is buried seemed no less excessive to ancient critics. Modern readers are also struck by his constant embracing and touching of the corpse, his self-confessed longing (*pothos*, 19.320–21, a word often found in erotic contexts) for the dead man, his stubborn refusal of food and drink, and his mother Thetis’ consoling advice “it is good even to mingle with a woman in love” (24.130–31), where the phraseology might mean either that “even having sex,” along with eating and sleeping, or that “having sex even with a woman,” as opposed to a man, is a good thing. At the very least, the intensity of Achilles’ passion goes far beyond the emotional attachments other males in the epics feel not just for their fellow soldiers but even for their blood kin.

In classical Athens, numerous persons familiar with Homer had no doubts about the nature of the friendship. In his lost play *Myrmidons*, the tragedian Aeschylus represented the distraught Achilles speaking of Patroclus’ thighs (*mêrôn*) and of their many kisses (frr. 135 and 136 Nauck²); Phaedrus in Plato’s *Symposium* praises Achilles for being a devoted *erômenos* who avenges his lover’s death

(179e–180b); and in a forensic speech before a jury the orator Aeschines cites the pair as models of temperate and noble love, as opposed to the unrestrained and violent lusts of men like his opponent (1.141–50). However, the Socrates of Xenophon’s *Symposium* vigorously attacks the presumption of pederasty, saying that Achilles avenges “not a boyfriend but a companion” (*hetairos*, 8.31). We should also note a real confusion over who was the *erastês* and who the *erômenos* among those who inferred such a relationship. Nestor recalls Patroclus’ father advising him to give Achilles good counsel, since he, Patroclus, was the older (11.786); Plato’s Phaedrus therefore chastises Aeschylus for portraying Achilles as the lover. Yet Achilles is clearly the dominant figure in Homer, a fact that absolutely contradicts the protocols of the mentor–protégé relationship on which pederasty was conceptually grounded.⁹ Halperin (1990: 86–7) points out that classical Athenians were obviously attempting, with great difficulty, to impose a notional framework of man–boy relations familiar to them upon the alien patterns of emotion and behavior displayed by the Homeric heroes. In a sense, their grasp of what is going on between Achilles and Patroclus was as incomplete as ours.

CONCLUSION

No one will deny that Homer recognizes the reality of strong homoerotic affect between two adult males. But the lack of any explicit mention of physical relations has been taken as evidence that the practice of institutionalized pederasty was not yet established in Greece (Dover 1978; Percy 1996: 36–41). Some ancient readers had a different explanation for Homer’s reticence. Aeschines, in the speech mentioned above, claims that the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus is not called by its real name because any educated listener would understand the situation. Yet that begs the question of why direct reference would be suppressed in the first place. The absence of any overt recognition of pederasty in epic – the verse of Hesiod as well as that of Homer – is thought-provoking in view of the prominence it will soon assume in lyric poetry of the Greek archaic age, for that period falls roughly between 700 and 500 BCE; that is, it begins scarcely a century after Homer. During that time, literary treatment of *erôs* undergoes a great shift in focus, with boy-love becoming one of its central motifs. Does this change reflect a genuine alteration in social practice – the sudden appearance of pederasty as an institutionalized custom, at least among the elite – or can it be explained simply by the emerging popularity of other genres of poetry, composed for a different audience? Or are both factors involved? To gain a broader perspective on this question, we need to examine the recitation of explicitly pederastic poetry in the context of elite male drinking parties (*symposia*) and the social purpose of such gatherings. So we now turn to the Greek symposium, an occasion considerably more convivial than its modern scholarly namesake.