

## “The Silent Handmaiden”: Poison & Poiesis in the *Women of Trachis*

EUGENE E. NARRETT

Surveying the unfolding trauma of Herakles and Deianeira, the chorus identifies the poison that connects the four main players in erotic magnetism: “That silent handmaiden, Cyprian Aphrodite is revealed; it is her work” (859-61). From the first it is Aphrodite, in the midst of the waters as Herakles wrestled with Achelous, mediating beast-man metamorphoses, joining erotics with poetics (7-17; 503-30). This is an extension of her essence, formed in the midst of waters as the result of trauma in the marriage bed (Hesiod 132-5). The immersion of Herakles in these erotic drives and changes unites him with its major tropes: tri-form river-god, hydra and centaur. Aphrodite too is linked to “the will of the beast,” Nessus (WT 934-5) and the hydra (987) as Deianira, unintentionally closes the circle of poison. Herakles and his specter, Nessus become polarities circulating the fluid that animates his wife, also a transforming mediator: Seeking to accommodate shape-changing Aphrodite, ubiquitous in her forms and compulsion of gods and humans (“she is in the swell of the sea...and like a bee she flits”), the role of Deianira emphasizes the link of the Cyprian to the beasts (934-5; *Hippolytus* 447-50, 561-3, 359-60). But the effort fails and implacable power asserts itself in a tragedy of eros.

Erotic desire and the horrible transfiguration in the origin of Aphrodite is poiesis as idealized trauma and primal displacement (*Hesiod* 132-5); a potent change-agent, it eats Herakles from within: “The filthy thing eats me again... the inexorable flowering of madness” sparked by the “sickness” of erotic desire (WT 441-7, 475-7, 543, 986-7, 999, 1030 and 1138). A similar ambiguous charm destroys Hippolytus in his passionate virginity and Phaedra in her passion and shame (*H* 405, 479, 597). For Hellas, eros is poiesis: its metamorphic ambiguities and transfigurative power fuse god, beast and man, a “wedding” in which identity is doubled and boundaries dissolve: Iole is “the filly of Oechalia”; Bacchus, “beast with a laughing face” has a female and male birth and Semele a “bloody doom” (*H* 545-63; *B* 1020). The silent handmaiden does the god-work: “the shaft neither of fire nor of stars is superior to that of Aphrodite’s.” The “keys to her dearest inner chamber” are held by “Eros, tyrant of men” (*H* 538-42). The transformative, compulsive power in theurgic poiesis is the glory, horror and fascination of Greece and, beginning often in erotic trauma, its possession and ensuing displacements of its host follow a trajectory from idyll to apocalypse to elegy. This pattern is illustrated in *the Women of Trachis*.

The Chorus, in the first two passages quoted above is right so perhaps it is appropriate that the play bears their name rather than that of the greatest hero of Hellas, “the best of all men” as Hyllus says (WT 811); but the best has an ambiguous nature and is, in his ambiguity a liminal figure for poison. *The Women of Trachis* is a passion play, a primer for its world-girdling successor. Herakles, a martyr to Eros is a full-bodied prototype of the redeemer of the West, a meta-figure that transfigures. The cultural sequel, the church also transfigures the role of the Queen. For Hellas, her role is to torture her namesake: Hera (“protectress”) whose name he bears, an ironic witness to her cruel glory (*kleos*) and might. This prototype underwent inversion when Rome’s appropriation of Judaic ethics sought to cleanse divinity of lust and revenge, divine adultery and composite beings. In Sophocles, these passions join together the play’s main characters in a game that reduces all things to the symbolic essence of a centaur, a “beast’s treacherous words” and “murderous confusion” (837-9), an “impulse” (*orge*) of erotic power and transformative vengeance. If not as extensively as Euripides in *Hippolytus* or *Herakles*, Sophocles indicts the vindictive cruelty of the Greek gods, (“Zeus, whoever this Zeus may be”) and their lack of compassion, “what is here now is pitiful for us, and shameful for the gods,” Hyllus concludes (1266-72). Euripides has Herakles ask, “Who could pray to such a goddess,” his suffering being her “glory” (*Herakles* 1264, 1304-11). The “renown” of the “Defender” is to destroy her mortal scapegoat; his labors and suffering witness her divine spite. It is perhaps in similar mood that Homer refers to the gods as “the dogs of war” and, also in that work, Apollo refers to them as “monsters of cruelty” who delight in the mutilation of human flesh (*Iliad* xx, xxiv). Transfigured by envenomed agony which binds him to the hydra and centaur, Herakles is a trope of poiesis and expresses its transformative erotic component.

The demonic (supernatural and metamorphic) ironies in the deaths of Herakles and Deianeira are supreme emblems of the investment of the gods of Hellas in the primal poiesis, the formation of Aphrodite from the passionate violence of the divine marital bed, a radical displacement and subsuming of the father. The Herakles myths, imbued with divine jealousy and heroic madness dramatize the cultural logic encoded in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. The disfiguring metamorphoses of battle, depicted in *the Iliad*, also were prompted by Aphrodite whose singular allure, mixing “pleasures and penalties” enchants Paris into his “fatal error” in “the audience in the shepherd’s hut,” the “hateful contest of beauty” (*Iliad* xxiv; *Iph. Aulis* 1308). Desire forms cultures, shatters bodies and generates literature. Thus the messenger relates, “It was love alone that bewitched him into this violence” against Eurytus and Oechalia (WT 354-368). The constant cultural theme is “Cypris the beguiling,” she “who crushes with desire” (*Iph. Aulis* 1302-03). In WT, the desire she embodies circulates like poison binding all the personae together as the spectacle in the *theatron* (“viewing place”) of Dionysus united Athenians in seeing (*idein*) tragedies of possession, displacement and dissolution of identity into the mask, of life into the image and, then, the collapse of images and gods into human wreckage and social ruin. Desire and its work is the primal “it” (id) and its transformative dynamics link Aphrodite to Dionysus as forces of poiesis that drive apocalyptic and elegiac dramas of tragic rapture. Life’s imperative was enactment.

The play allows one to be plainer: the god-beast or id at the root of identity invades *the bed*, the fulcrum of theurgic demonism and site of ambiguity, treacherous words and murderous confusion. Erotic desire is “that thing” (id), the identity of Herakles and his dark identical, Nessus. Deianeira is the vector of their powers and site of their and Aphrodite’s full manifestation in the trauma of the marriage bed (506-16; 913-35). The artist in ‘everyman,’ the goddess reproduces the quality of her own genesis.

Aphrodite embodies and prompts erotic traumas, generating the somber elegance of image work. The link between poison, poeisis and art make *the Women of Trachis* an emblematic cultural product. Theurgic poeisis reflects or doubles character, an imaging in which divine presence or decree dissolves or transforms identities. Thus Jokasta curses the “infamous double bond” in which she “she brought forth husband by her husband,” that is, in which the identities of son and husband melted together, an alchemy wrought by the riddles of gods and beasts. Thus Oedipus, raving like a bull god and “bellowing terribly” curses his mother’s womb as “this field of double sowing” (OT 1241-61). The sexual source and site of exchange, like the Celtic “Cauldron of Plenty” is an erotic grail hosting and, as it were, consuming its host; a “garden of fertility” and source of magike tekne: one eats and is eaten. This nexus of desire, horror and transformation has a magical and violent quality that defeats purity and distinctions; its metamorphic base obliterates boundaries and demands for its play a radical antinomian freedom. “For she is terrible, and blows on all there is, and like a bee she flits” (*Hippolytus* 562-4). In WT these metamorphoses invert and expose as futile, self-negating, even delusional the hero’s purifying war against beasts: his various lusts, including the perverse situation with Omphale, destroy him, commingling his passion with the murderous desires of those same beasts, lusts which ultimately derive from a “silent handmaiden” whose allure takes form in the envenomed semen of a centaur. Aphrodite’s ‘honey’ is like Coleridge’s nightmare: “desire with loathing strangely mixed.” The arrows with which Herakles slew the Hydra, dipping their tips in its poison, and then slew Nessus as it sought to rape Dejanira comes back to him as her gift, the robe, an intended love-charm, soaked with the Centaur’s toxic blood and semen: (*Sophocles II* 67). The circulation through the play of the Centaur’s fluids establishes an intriguing tetrad of horror and suggests the shifty, transformative power encoded in Aphrodite’s genesis in Hesiod’s and Homer’s versions. (In Homer, her birth from Zeus and “Dione,” genitive form of Zeus is a figure of auto-eroticism). The gift of the envenomed robe (a displaced venomous embrace) is one that Herakles, through his lust for Iole in effect sends himself; the origin of his drama, rooted in the sexual - emotional play and spite of the highest gods, takes form for Sophocles in a loving wife’s weaving: the charmed robe, embodying Aphrodite’s power, is a meta-figure of *magike tekne* and the pastoral – apocalyptic – elegiac trajectory it initiates.

Deianeira as much as Nessus, Herakles and Aphrodite circulates the hydra’s venom, the lethal side of Aphrodite’s honey, a transmuted semen potent with self-negating power surging, lunging and consuming. All is suffused with the imperatives of “the goddess of love’s bed” (516). Love doesn’t just transform: it doubles, negates and exposes, all the powers of imagery.

Deianeira sends the love-charm because Herakles sends his beautiful captive Iole home to adorn his bed: his desire triggers the poison. Iole goes under the marital sheets; the robe enwraps Herakles. The “husbandless bed” is reflected in the dual, suicidal sacrifices of husband and wife. “Strong is the victory the Cyprian goddess always wins” (WT 106-10, 499). Upon their love, as on the shimmering surface of the shield of Herakles is erotic terror, Perseus fleeing the gorgons. For Hellas, the imperatives of the bed and of Aphrodite are victories of erotic trauma, its attendant displacements and changes. This is the fecund pit of Western poeisis, the source of its most characteristic and fierce imagery and its residue of horror, of individual and cultural collapse; the place or trope where its concept of the divine, now appropriated by the State intersects the host on which it feeds.

The essence of image-work, the idealization of identity, the purification of ambiguity by fictions is dramatic, and drama, regardless the genre or art form is the essential mode of a project of idealization which carries the seeds of self-splitting (the reflection of meiosis in poeisis merits scrutiny), alienation and death. The self-generating drama of the West carries over Hellenism’s main site for horrific commingling, the marital bed by making it into a theurgic cultural ‘bed.’ This occurred via the forced joining of the radically different civilizations of which the West constructed itself. The ‘rape’ or appropriation of Jewish ethics, historical narratives and concepts of Providence and divine compassion to Greco-Roman political, mythic and ideological forms, the metamorphic substrate of its worldview and pantheism was and is intrinsically unstable. This forced union launched compulsions to confess, reveal, purify and idealize, to expose and simultaneously reject the unwilling alien partner or captive host of a goddess cult. (Nietzsche’s comments on the Greeks as a people eager to be inseminated and the Jews as a seminal race {BGE 8.248} are intriguing here). In doing so it strengthened the implicit dynamics of poeisis as a path from idyll (conceiving the new or ideal self), apocalypse (separation of image from host; exposure of the delusive aspects of the idyll), and elegy for the ruined image-ideal and those from whom it was generated. Drama is apocalyptic or “revelatory” action in that it always is in part confession and exposure of traumatic material in an “artifice of eternity” arising from myriad forms of cultural disembodiment (mutilation). Beginning with Symbolism this is shown with obsessive force.

Emerging at the onset of the early modern period, Symbolism uses realist precision to depict the primitive and irrational. It foregrounds eroticism and a giddy delight in the exotic and violent, especially decapitation of the prophetic or lyrical voice. An elegiac seduction emerges from works like those of J.W. Waterhouse as if he and his confreres were painting counterparts to *the Women of Trachis* which foregrounds the horrors of the marital bed; the banishment of the father from bed (given full expression via modern “family law” and in vitro techniques) and, finally, in the Jesus cult, of the bed itself, idealization of the Queen and reduction of the husband to a surrogate as is typical in Greek myths of mortal women inseminated by Zeus with the role of father belatedly taken by a mortal man (“son of Laertes but seed of Zeus, resourceful Odysseus”).

The motifs focused by Symbolism bring central Western themes and topics to a climax. Conception is magical, describable only as a figure, — a white hart jumping “through a glass window that neither perished was nor broken” (Malory 17:9, Baines 433) and, thus, must be enforced as dogma; by aesthetic or institutional fiat the fiction gains de facto reality; the meta-figure of Western poesis, the Grail is a nightmare confounding of blood and purity, of maimed ‘thighs’ from which human beings pray for redemption. The War on/of Terror is its ultimate trope: emasculation of memory and refraction of reality in a bed of envenomed imagery.

In Hellenism the disembodied soul is an image, a terrible “shade” of life as seen in book eleven of *the Odyssey* where the shade lives on the blood of life. Drinking blood and worshipping imagery are forbidden by Judaism (Leviticus 17:10-14) but in the West’s cult of aesthetics the image drains and feeds on the body of life: like the Castle of Maidens, poesis is vampiric. At the end, “everyone is surrounded by his own words [images, reflections or shadows] as with a wall of mirrors” (Kundera 92) and “nothing is but what is not.”

This pattern is satirized wittily by Kundera who calls the idealized image “fate”: “Fate had no intention of lifting a finger for Mirek (for his happiness, security, his good spirits, his health) whereas Mirek is ready to do everything for his destiny (for its grandeur, its clarity, its beauty, its style)” [Kundera 11, *passim*].

The ancient Greeks, Homer, Hesiod and the tragedians provide abundant images of traumatic ambiguity, usually erotic and its magical or bloody transformations. They are less interested in, or discount the magical transposition of these horrors into (mainly) pastoral images as typify the stories of Ovid and Romance. Early on, the Greek focus is on erotic trauma, pollution and atonement by death for errors provoked by gods who also are ruled by Love with its primal mixing of wrath, spite, ‘gender war’ and unnatural transformation. Closely linked, beast and god combine to drive and destroy the human, a process von Kleist, a harbinger of regression, heralded as a path to grace. When Deianira hears the true reason for her husband’s sack of “high-towered Oechalia,” that “it was Love alone that bewitched him into this violence,” she comments understandingly:

How foolish one would be to climb into the ring  
With Love, and try to trade blows with him, like a boxer.  
For he rules even the gods as he pleases, and  
He rules me—why not another woman like me?  
...I would be altogether mad  
To blame my husband because he suffers from this sickness,  
Or that woman: She has been guilty of nothing shameful... (WT 333-60, 441-7)

As in the love of Iphis for Ianthe in *Metamorphoses* Book 9, or its magical fulfillment, Deianira sees no shame in the affair of Herakles and Iole for human beings are free only to improvise within the roles scripted for them by the gods. They feel intensely, — grief, joy, lust or rage but know they are not fully or mainly responsible for passions whose traumatic compulsion is theurgic, the essence of their art, especially in

that all-conquering goddess, born of horror who through her masculine noun-concept (“Eros”) “rules even the gods.” The core of Greek poesis in the West is a process of projection, alienation and submission to irrational compulsion: of the possession of man by woman and his worship of her powers, the consummate change agent, host of poesis and passion of the “Maimed King” (Baines 427 *inter alia*), a sequel to Herakles, Oedipus and many others.

Aphrodite embodies the ambiguous horror, “the sweetness and deception” of the West’s cult of aesthetics, the beautiful female form made of disembodied male parts: the image, like the sankgreall, idealizes a horrible hybrid matter. The process itself is horror: possession and displacement of the original host, body or culture, source of myriad body snatcher or zombie films. Her increasing dominance in the imagery of the modern West and diffusion through pop culture indicates the Greek substrate asserting and exposing itself, sloughing off its Judaic ethics, their original forms and as they were re-formatted by the Church. The latter’s aesthetics, rooted in magical transformations emphasizing blood communion and mystical ‘semen’ testified to the dominance of a Dionysian aesthetic and ontological model, nurtured it and eventually disintegrates and dominates through it till, in the end, shadows live everywhere in what is termed, “virtual reality” or, as Macbeth says in his self-negating affinity with the witches, “nothing is but what is not.” *Macbeth*, too, is about things “twice done and then done double” (1.6.14-15), an extended trope of poesis, its doublings and disintegration of the host dressed, and then dressing himself “in borrowed robes.”

As noted briefly above, even the main alternate version of the genesis of Aphrodite contains erotic and identity confusion and magical aspects. *The Iliad* identifies Aphrodite as the daughter of Zeus and the Titaness, Dione, a prophetess at the sacred oak in Dodona (Book 5 *passim*). Dione, who comforts her “laughter-loving” daughter after Diomedes wounds her, bears a name that simply means “female divinity”: a female Zeus who presides over Zeus’s oak, her name hints at the birth of Aphrodite, the power that rules mortals and immortals out of an erotic and image-making (prophetic) encounter of dios with himself or his ‘female self’ (Dione). But Dione is the genitive of Zeus: she is a figure of his self-insemination just as the gestation of Dionysus, the form dissolver, in his ‘thigh’ expresses the doubled aspect of Zeus’s nature: his hermaphroditic generative powers express the doublings of image-work. In his female form, Dione-Zeus presides over his ‘oak’ in a type of his incorporation of his wife Metis so he can give birth to a fully grown virgin warrior, Athena, a complement to the Cyprian, diverse warriors that show what Zeus has got within. Homer’s epithet for Aphrodite, “laughter loving” alludes to the giddy displacements her power engenders, one of them being the physical, erotic confusion by which Zeus ‘begets’ her, a type of the overtly horrible confusion by which his father, Kronos began her formation or by which Dionysus ‘begets’ himself upon Pentheus. The auto-erotic and castrative aspects of the myth suggest a powerful anti-generative or idealizing aspect. So the handmaiden, mistress of the bed and its desires is essential poesis: the image displaces life by sexual lability and lust. The magical erotic transformation and trauma over which she presides define her nature in

each main mythic source and root them in the highest gods. Ancient Greek religion was a traumatic theurgic poesis that mocked nature: desire produces sterility not abundance.

The bed is the scene of the primordial rebellion against the god of heaven in the Greek *Theogony*, a site of gender and generational war startlingly resurgent in the era we term postmodern. This term is apt because its emphasis on self-construction and artifice exposes the culture's core dynamics, as does its related insistence on inauthenticity and grand Statist projects imposed in the name of "compassion," a quality denoted by Hyllus as a divine fraud and paraded today by the therapeutic state as it was asserted by inquisitors in centuries past. Similarly Nietzsche associates diplomats, women, actors and poses (*GS* 5.361-8); gestures and slogans to be seen not understood. But Hyllus' remark, at the end of the drama came six centuries before the stirrings of the Greco-Roman project to suppress and appropriate Judaism into a new dispensation whose ideological terrors, in the veil of professed compassion, in an aura of 'renovated' ancient truth, could absorb and dominate all cults. Its pagan fudging of the matter of the bed chamber (disguising the sex and violence), its eventual emphasis on chastity concomitant with an increasing veneration for "the Queen of Heaven" (climaxing in the dogma of the "Immaculate Conception" just as the West began to bring forth Symbolism) indicates that the cultural graft was unstable and that the Hellenic fork disbranch, disfigure, repeatedly attack and disentwine from its Jewish root, generating an infinite regress of refracted fictions of violent eroticism presenting an alternate, compelling world: a virtual reality of dazzling imagery concentrated in the myriad spectacles of the electronic age, the global *theatron* tending, inexorably to Caesarism and Dionysian collapse (*GS* 1.23; *TSZ* "On the New Idol") in a cold pastoral of visual erotics. Some may be having fun but the fission and terrors proceed. One might well counsel, "as little State as possible" and avoid the apocalypse and elegant elegiac ruin of poesis (*TD* 179 in *TPN* 82-3) of our culture of terror.

Eros – Aphrodite is a beast that goads to horror. Her drama demands the bed as site, exposing its origin. Hence *Women of Trachis* is at the core of the Hellenic material in the West, perhaps at the juncture of poesis and meiosis, and its immense, transformative and disintegrative power. The fire of the play's final apocalyptic image feeds on blood like the shades in Hades and communion of the faithful in mystical rapture. The demonic and tragic union of the characters in desire's venom was transformed into the ostensibly comedic union of the Eucharist, a cultural cleansing and idealization that steadily loses its suasion even as it proliferates electronic forms in the vulgate.

Haunted by Aphrodite as well as Hera, Herakles sends Iole ahead like RNA that will bind him to Centaur and Hydra. Deianeira shares her concerns with the Chorus and cries out for sympathy in the "sickness" from which they all suffer:

So now the two of us lie under one sheet waiting for his embrace...when he is sick, as he so often is with this same sickness, I am incapable of anger. But to live in the same house with her, to share the same marriage...I am afraid that he may be called my husband but be the younger woman's man. (WT 539-51)

Deianeira is anguished but not enraged; after all, Herakles saved her from the centaur when she was his newly betrothed wife; still earlier he had saved her from Achelous, figure of the turbulent erotic core of metamorphosis. She learned the terror of Aphrodite-Eros when she was a maiden and "conceived an agonizing fear of marriage" not because of any unnatural aversion; on the contrary, because the grotesque, violent metamorphoses the Hellenes understood as love came to her as a monstrously protean potential husband:

For my suitor was the river Achelous  
Who used to come and ask my father for my hand,  
Taking three forms – first, clearly a bull, and then  
A serpent with shimmering coils, then a man's body  
But a bull's face...and in my unhappiness I constantly prayed for death  
Before I should ever come to his marriage bed! (WT 7-17)

But to her "joy there came the famous Herakles, son of Alcmene and Zeus" perhaps as part of his ridding Hellas from "beasts" perhaps because the beast of passion drove him to the maiden, — the material suggests it will be one beast or another: desire will have its way and will not be fulfilled until it burns the blood and flesh of the humans it possesses and consumes. The entire tragedy suggests that one cannot disentangle eros from beasts for Herakles is enmeshed in both: in fighting beasts he fights the poison in himself that at length must be burned out in the hot, lethal communion that links all the key players. The Hellenes saw a cosmos driven by Eros and consisting of beasts fighting in tangled erotic unions as if Aphrodite was the other face of the hydra. Greek image-work is thus a celebration of the thrilling horror of generative energy; again the id of identity. Its protean nature appears in the ninth labor when Herakles is sent to take the "belt" from the Amazon, Hippolyta ("unbridled mare") whose nature figures in shaping the identity and doom of Hippolytus, unbridled in his rejection of Aphrodite and at length bridled in the reins of death that assert his name and fate.

While she watched the battle for her maidenhood, Deianeira sank, "overwhelmed with terror" but then rejoiced for "Zeus of the contests made the end good, if it has been good" (WT 24-6). In the fear and doubt of her conditional is the irony that haunts and finally overwhelms the play. When the chorus recounts the initial battle, beginning by affirming "how strong is the victory the Cyprian goddess always wins," they remind us that part of the ancestry of Herakles is in Bacchic Thebes, site of myriad possessions, pollution and breaking of social roles. They remind us, too that the contest between the metamorphic river god and the hero was refereed by Aphrodite herself, in short that from the outset there was no escape from the tragedy of lust and trauma of the marriage bed. The bond of Odysseus and Penelope is an exception to a literature – mythos in which Helen and Paris, Jason and Medea, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Semele and Zeus, even Dionysus and Pentheus are closer to the norm of sexual compulsion and human sacrifice.

As an example of this confusion of identity and boundaries, when the Chorus speaks in regard to Lichas's equivocations, they also refer implicitly to Nessus and Herakles (351-68):

Damn all scoundrels, but damn him most of all  
Who practices a secret, degrading villainy [383-4]

By implication of the action, themes and vocabulary (“secret”) Aphrodite and Hera are included in the circle of degradation and eventual ruin. Iole too is included as the source of Herakles’ assault on Oechalia and as the “secret enemy” of Deianira (376). Thus, even marginal comments reinforce the circuit of venom unifying the drama: “strong is the victory the Cyprian goddess always wins” (498). The “contorted grappling” and “groaning on both sides” when Herakles fought Achelous also images back the matter of “love’s bed” (508-22). Wrestling was an erotic, dialectic and athletic term.

The aesthetic products of ancient Hellas did not propose in the Western sense to utterly transform and sanitize demonic material. That was the project for which Hellenism via late Roman heterodoxy appropriated Jewish material and launched a mystery of salvation in the spirit, leaving behind the body they saw as hopelessly corrupt. They developed a new queen of heaven, a powerful but peaceful Athena, miraculously conceived and blended with a beautiful and loving but not lustful, indeed a chaste, Aphrodite, merciful in the Jewish pattern (the root of the Hebrew “merciful,” *rachum* is “womb,” *rechem*), not merciless as in the Greek. The resulting hybrid was a compelling composite whose ambiguities and core energy may be seen in works like Bernini’s “St Theresa” or in the tension between the name and act of Madonna. These taut contradictions form our beings and shape our deeds.

Sophocles keeps at the margins of his play the sojourn of Herakles in Lydia, as a cross-dressing slave of the ‘barbarian’ Queen, Omphale of the interesting name, but its theme of sexual passion and confusion (WT 70-2, 248-54, 432-3; see Apollodorus and Lucian “Dialogs of the gods”) flows into the mainstream of the action that begins with the surging tri-form Achelous, carries into the persistent surging of the Hydra’s venom, of the centaur’s lust and hatred and the substantively similar desires of Herakles, Dejanira and Iole all goaded by Aphrodite. It is fate, the order of things: “her own beauty has destroyed her... against her will” (434). The thematic and ontological centrality of the battle with the protean and terrifying Achelous attests the supremacy of Aphrodite and the possession that is her power and that of Dionysus, like Herakles a son of Zeus and vector of erotic frenzy and transformations of identity and substance:

One was a strong river with the look of a high-horned bull...  
The other came from the Thebes of Bacchus, the son of Zeus.  
They came together then, in the middle, desiring her bed.  
Alone in the middle with them, their referee,  
Cypris, goddess of love’s bed... (506-16, emphasis added)

Aphrodite, the result and embodiment of love’s “contorted grappling” is in her element, amid the waters, mediating changes. Then Deianira learns definitively what has delayed Herakles to the time appointed by the prophecies:

For the sake of this girl Herakles destroyed Eurytus... it was  
Love alone who bewitched him into this violence –  
Not his laborious service in Lydia for Omphale...

It was Love... to give him the child for his secret bed...

And has sent her here, and not to be a slave. (WT 352-67, emphasis added)

She understands; it is the “sickness” of Love “that rules even the gods,” and her too. She accepts and remembers the Centaur’s gift and the magical garment she wove to bring her joy through the power of Aphrodite, a secret charm in service to the silent handmaiden. “Send for the lady to the Sagittary... it is something from Cyprus, a business of some heat” (*Othello* 1.3.135; 1.2.46-7 *passim*). A hyper-trope, a centaur figures commingling.

So in words that Shakespeare echoes in Laertes’ “I bought an unction of a mountebank” Deianeira explains that she long has kept “hidden in a copper urn... a gift of a centaur... hairy-chested Nessus as he was dying” (*Hamlet* 4.7.141-8; WT 551-8). The beau ideal of Laertes exposes his character and draws on the Greek archetype: Lamord, death as a centaur, “incorpsed and demi-natured with his beast.” So too in Sophocles, the gift of the beast carries lust and revenge; when Nessus, carrying Deianeira across a flooded river, “touched her lustfully,” Herakles shot him, a reflex of the lustful touch. The arrow was tipped with the Hydra’s blood. The liminality of the river crossing was picked up by Dante and the “bellowing of a bull” is an archetype reaching from the doom of Oedipus and Hippolytus to Picasso’s Minotauremochy series. The “high-horned bull” surging in metamorphic rapine and the “filly of Oechalia” keep the paradigm at the edges of this spectacle of erotic contest and death.

“If you listen to me you will have great profit,” Nessus, trope of lust and poiesis told her, providing a version of the “deceits” of Aphrodite. “Take in your hands this blood, clotted in my wounds” with the poison of the Hydra “and you will have a charm over the heart of Herakles so that he will never look at another woman and love her more than you.” This is “the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth” (*Macbeth* 5.5.43-4). The maiden followed his “lie like truth,” his fiction and later sends the “long fine-woven robe” to Herakles for him to don when he “stands, conspicuous before all” an emblem of ironic piety (WT 568-613). The sentence may have been echoed by Euripides in the scene when Dionysus, lord of the city from which Herakles derived, charms Pentheus with treacherous words and a long dress for a transfigurative passion in which he too will be an emblem of theurgic poesis and its doubling (*The Bacchae* 811-40, 912-58). Dionysus initiates his cousin Pentheus making him his sacrificial double; the double of Herakles is the beast he slays, becomes and is slain by.

The key points for this study are the pervasive horrors of metamorphosis and the presentation of Herakles as their emblem, not idealized but an image such as the Symbolists might have used: the great hero, the killer of beasts killed by the beast in circumstances when his inner beast exposes its own “murderous confusion,” the words of Nessus also being an apt epithet for Cyprian Aphrodite, the “modest lovely goddess”: This phrase perhaps more than any epitomizes the irony, dissembling and horror at the core of the West’s cult of aesthetics and romantic love.

The surging poison of desire that unites all the players in this traumatic tetrad recalls the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Gnosticism and the ‘orthodox’ cult that absorbed

it in the focus on magic transmission of knowledge as communal fluid: Jesus said, 'I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out.... He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am: I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him' (Nag Hammadi, *GT* 35, 50). Demonic possession and mystical union are constants from the ancient world but the sexual aspects, once acknowledged openly and embodied in the "Cyprian goddess" became dissembled, esoteric, aesthetic and perhaps even farther from rationality. Gnosticism is a coyly flaunted, artful denial of erotic matter. During church formation, Gnostic matter suppressed Hebraic and the trend accelerates.

Too late Deianeira thinks to ask, "this same poison which seeped black and bloody from the wounds of Nessus, how can it fail to kill Herakles, too?" The love charm may be lethal as lust is lethal in this drama of Hellenic poesis. "It is precisely from the vile and repulsive that the most potent magic comes" Jameson suggests, succinctly stating the trajectory of the image project: from the wasteland to heal and restore it with magic and artifice that leads back to a wasteland. The Parthenon and Greek drama give beautiful form to the horror of the bed they reveal; the statue of the virgin redeemer fronts the passion of the whore and Dionysian, the magic circle of poesis, Circe's mirror and wine. Sophocles knew the charm of art did not work without poison: the dogma of "pure love" was a self-consuming fraud at Camelot and its ensuing cultural shadows: "the "British invasion" and chant "all you need is love" and so "the fair maid of Astolat" dies for her love, as do thousands of knights and eventually the realm. Pushing these cultural poetics is the force of Aphrodite, the thing itself. Her glamorous veneer became even more perversely confused in the chivalry of the Christian era, as Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* and Tennyson's disastrous tournaments repeatedly suggest; a panoply of "lost innocents" that destroys Camelot and exposes the link between goddess worship and the culture-disintegrating desire it encodes. The epitome of Romance and chivalry, the Grail myth, highlights the unnatural confusion of the Christ-cult: "the Glorious Father who made his daughter his mother" (Chretien, 386, 420, 424, 469, inter alia). As in *the Women of Trachis* and Hesiod, confusions of identity center on the marital bed which the church both exalts and negates, transforming it into symbol and fiction, into erasure (or degradation) of the father by the beast-god till he is a specter, a "dearth father."

The confusions of romance, of magical Eros climax when Dejanira hears from her son that the embrace of her robe is killing the husband whose love, and lust, she meant to secure; that he writhes

Groaning again and again, damning the mismatching  
In your wretched bed, the whole marriage that he  
Had won... (WT 791-3)

Similarly there was "groaning on both sides" when Herakles battled Achelous with "Cypris, goddess of love's bed in the middle with them, their referee" (514-22). The marital bed is the core of transformations; its magic intrinsic to poesis and death. Thus seeing that "she had done unwittingly the will of the beast" she goes "rushing into the bedchamber of Herakles...casting sheets and spreading them upon the bed of

Herakles...and sat there in the middle of her marriage bed" weeping "torrents of hot tears" and crying, "O my bed, oh my bridal chamber, farewell..."(913-35, emphases added).

This horror led Hellenists to banish a real bridal chamber from their new cult while retaining the Queen of Heaven motif and its displacement of the father. The Gnostics carried forward this pattern with their hatred of "the Demiurge" they also called *Saklas* (the Fool). Their asceticism and hatred of the body that decays and suffers (hence cremation, not burial for matter's wreck must be consumed by the blaze of imagery) was present in Greek tragedy. Centuries later "many central traditions in Christian theology came as reflections and shadows of its confrontation with the Gnosis" (*the Nag Hammadi Library*; Cecil, *NC* 53-5). For the ancient Hellenes, the material of "love" was real and terrible. Possession and transposition, the stuff of poesis was not abstract but located in the passions that activated all parts of the physical world and centered on the bed, of gods and humans alike. Like Dionysus, it was essentially transgressive, as in the tale of Cinyras and Myrrha, and magical, as for Iphis and Ianthe. Later, metamorphosis became an ideological ideal and theological dogma of transfiguration and mystical communion. Perhaps it is but a small overstatement that "aesthetics is nothing but a kind of applied physiology" (Nietzsche *TPN* 664), a process of splitting, doubling and idealization.

The bed is the site of the demon lover's possession of Christabel, the site where the maniac in "Julian and Maddalo" was ruined by the curses and scorn of his former beloved; the de facto site where Usher's sister-spirit and identical, Madeline re-claimed him to consummate the morbidity of their family's art cult with its emphasis on "the intricacies" (modulations, transformations) of music. The bed is the site of the erotic triumphs, pride and lament of Millay: initially, the site where Gaia and Kronos planned the deed that construed Aphrodite whom Sophocles, drawing on his culture's transformative sensibility presents as the beast of beasts, a meta-figure of erotic deceit whose essence links all the beasts of the Herakles myth in one horrible communion that inverts and refracts, through idyll, apocalypse and elegy, his quest (a pattern also seen in Euripides' treatment of the myth). The poison of Nessus, the poison of the Hydra and the 'poison' of Herakles that comes from Cyprian Aphrodite returns in the robe of his wife, woven so that she could secure for herself the "sickness," the transformative compulsion of Aphrodite's liminal image-work. This is the root of the West's all consuming emphasis on "love" sanitized by transposing to itself the life-giving love of the "compassionate Father" (*Av HaRachaman*) of Judaism, its laws of marital purity (including sexual joy but not with centaurs or bulls, etc) and, perhaps not least, its stance against magic and rites that "capture the eyes and steal the mind" as Maimonides explained in Negative commandment 32; its condemnation of the adulterate and hybrid later explained as the essence of pollution (Mary Douglas 41-57 passim). The adulterate hybrid that is Aphrodite (and her types, the centaur and hydra) is "the filthy thing that eats" Herakles. It is brutally ironic and harshly just. The gods of the Hellenes, in addition to being petty, capricious and cruel also could be strictly, brutally just, the quality with which churches, beginning with the Hellenic Gnostics have slandered and re-defined the Jews and the

Creator. In Judaism He is defined as a merciful G-d. “Merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, and great in loving-kindness and truth; preserver of kindness for thousands of generations; Forgiver of iniquity, willful sin and mistakes and who cleanses. . .” (Exodus 34:5-7, Numbers 14:17-18, etc). Compassion and salvation are not instantaneous, not by magic tricks because ‘He’ presides over a world of laws and meaning, a world where human actions, thoughts and words have consequences which teach science, habits of responsibility and reassure even those in pain with the logic of creation. There are no hydras, centaurs or maenads in this world, no river gods, Aphrodite and Artemis; deities do not duel using human puppets to settle their quarrels; Hera does not avenge on humans the liaisons of Zeus with “the daughters of man” (Genesis 6:2-4). The queen of heaven, polytheism or image cult, all related, Judaism proscribes as soul and society-corroding fictions (e.g. Jeremiah 44:15-26).

“These Greeks have a lot on their conscience, — falsification was their true trade; the whole of European psychology is sick with Greek superficiality” (Nietzsche *TPN* 454-5) or one would say, sick with the idealization of raw or hybrid cultural matter whose glorious image inevitably collapses as Sophocles displays in *WT*; as the gods themselves at last collapse; apocalypse and elegy are the future of all illusion, all theurgic poesis, not least that of the State, “the cold monster” that thrives on illusion and contrived apocalypse in an era when “lying is a universal principle” (Nietzsche *TPN* 160-3).

“O ungrateful Greeks,” Herakles cries in his anguish, “Where are you for whom I destroyed myself, purging so many beasts” (1011-12). We have noted the irony in this assertion: the hero carries the poison of his quest and of his foes, the magical changes and, at last the drive for purity by fire, erasing desire by boosting its heat to glorious incandescence. The Greeks strove to master the trauma and nightmares of the erotic-metamorphic drive in poesis by burning in its dazzling glare. In medieval terms derived from this process: the image quest arises from the savagery of the Wasteland and, after dazzling in prismatic colors around its god-king, descends to ruin and flight from the world via the “black ship” paradigm. The magical violence of Greek myth and its successor-culture surges toward the cleansed and perfect artifice: the blood contained in the bejeweled cup or dripping from the spear tip; the possessed host (Israel, ironically, and later his trope), a disguised paradigm of image-work; a god-man who is entirely pure, uncontaminated by seed which in Judaism is holy but which the Greeks associated with gender war, lust, monsters and poison: “a savage, unapproachable sickness” (*WT* 1030). As if to emphasize the cultural divide, Herakles calls for “the beneficial fire” and the last demand and project of his labors is to command his son and best friend, Philoctetes to build and place him on it. To Judaism cremation is forbidden though it was the main means of the purists of the third Reich, the social epitome of the image-project and its appropriations of the original host. The last stage of its petrification takes geopolitical and economic forms that sell purity as fake peace (the erasure of Israel, the burial of the genuine original by the imperial fraud). This occurs amid the pervasive and mundane pollution of the mass media’s glare and false fire, a sankgreall on the cheap that will end as badly, or worse, than the Grail Quest did in Tennyson’s Camelot. The

illusion will collapse onto the enervated culture that projected it as a substitute for memory. “And of this stuff, the car’s creative ray cast all the busy phantoms that were there, as the sun shapes the clouds. . . mask after mask fell from the form and countenance of all” (Shelley 519-20). The apocalyptic and elegiac phases of this disillusionment have pervaded pop culture, finance, economics and geopolitics.

In a point we will return to in Part II of this essay, note that Herakles was sold to Omphale because his host, Eurytus mocked his archery, claiming his own sons were superior. Herakles threw one of them, Iphitis from a cliff. For this act, “Olympian Zeus had him sold and sent out of the country” to Lydia and three years of slavery embodied in gender reversal, a very literal poesis and the gist of Aphrodite who rules this play’s main themes and subordinate narratives (*WT* 248-80 contrast 355, *supra*). The bow of Herakles was mocked prompting murder and re-doubled mockery via gender reversal: imitation is a form of doubling as by a distorted mirror. His bow and his archery saved Deianeira and killed the Centaur who later would kill them both through “murderous confusion” of his bow, a type of what he suffered with Omphale. Mockery of his bow is a transfigurative trope and centers the trauma of poesis and its shifty erotic essence. Though it was not the explicit reason he sacked Oechalia (“Love alone bewitched him to this violence”) it was the symbol of his virility by which he took Iole, prompting Deianira to send the robe envenomed with the matter from his arrows. Finally, it is his friend, the hero and great archer, Philoctetes that lights his pyre, a death for which he too, also poisoned by a snake, will scream. Apollo, successor to and absorber of Pythian powers is lord of the lyre and bow; doubling, it both heals and kills. He also was the ‘tutor,’ implicitly the *erastes* of Orpheus. So Orpheus, embodiment of threshold crossing and martyr of image work links to the bloody ambiguities and compulsions of Aphrodite and thus to Herakles and Philoctetes: his songs are their arrows of desire, the trope of imagination intuited by Blake. What Blake did not understand and greatly advanced was the consuming cultural vampirism of image work that, by the Greek paradigm, “makes a woman” of culture and man and invests eros in the drive to idealize. The trauma of the silent handmaiden unites the Greek heroes in forms of sexual confusion and martyrdom. The transformative elements in the story show that Apollo is not the antithesis but a complement to Dionysus and Aphrodite to whom all forces align. “Love rules even the gods as he pleases, and he rules me.”

## Part II

The first part of this essay identified *the Women of Trachis* as a tragedy of the marriage bed and, as such, a paradigm of ancient Greek poesis as embedded in the formation and nature of Aphrodite, “the silent handmaiden” who conquers everyone: “great is the victory the Cyprian goddess always wins” (499). She rules the action from the first, in the midst of the waters of the tri-form shape-changing Achelous as he battles Herakles. I sought to show how events and vocabulary establish a startling congruity between the “modest lovely goddess” and the hydra. Her desire and its venom, the mesmeric, potent and lethal fluid of the id, the dyad of the bed, coition and

even meiosis link Herakles, Nessus, Deianira and Iole in a tetrad of trauma contending around the marriage bed. Part I suggests that this tetrad, an archetypal dramatic structure encloses an effectual dyad in which Nessus is the shadow or inner beast of Herakles and Iole, won by war, as the shadow and potential displacement of the faithful but fearful wife, Deianira. The tetrad telescopes into an erotic dyad and this architecture of characters is balanced and symbolically mirrored by the play's essential sites: the river, the marital bed, the pyre and the mountain-tower of Oechalia, all transformative sites of erotic contention or consummation. Against this symbolic and metaphysical ontology are other startling formations: the bond of Aphrodite and the hydra as sources of surging "sickness," an intriguing dyad in that Aphrodite is "a male in a female hid" or a male (Ouranos) displaced and embodied in a female; and of the de facto and astonishing tetrad of beasts: Herakles, Nessus, the hydra and the Cyprian whose power constrains and borders the lives of the two women, or dual-phased woman, Deianira-Iole, "the filly of Oechalia" destroyed by the "beast with the laughing face," the bull god Dionysus of rapturous and violent transformation. Herakles hails from his town (*WT* 511) and Dionysus, like the ambiguous Omphale shadows the edges of the play. Aphrodite, Dionysus and the archer Apollo, fused in Herakles find a new relationship through this drama and the implication of its themes and idiom. Joining them in a tetrad of deities that use human beings is the "defender" or queen of heaven the name of whose "renown" Herakles bears.

The reticulations of the drama show that Herakles and Aphrodite are images of each other in their substance and transformative nature: both are archers (*Hippolytus* 530-2, the "arrows of desire" trope is ancient); Herakles bears the vengeful labors of the Queen and Aphrodite incorporates and disseminates in her honey ("like a bee she flits") the potency of the King, Ouranos, the original and incestuous dyad of the culture of metamorphic possession, displacement and death, of a divine-beast's idealized image and its consumed host. To adduce Nietzsche's remark that aesthetics projects physiology, these two great figures become tropes of the zygote and meiosis splitting and consuming Herakles to produce the dyad of a younger generation, Hyllus-Iole whose splitting need not be detailed in part because it is weaker and traumatized by the archetype and paradigm.

In a point we will return to below, note that Herakles was sold to Omphale because his host, Eurytus mocked his archery, claiming his own sons were superior. Herakles threw one of them, Iphitis from a cliff. For this act, "Olympian Zeus had him sold and sent out of the country" to Lydia and three years of slavery embodied in gender reversal, a literal poesis and the gist of Aphrodite who rules this play's main themes and subordinate narratives (*WT* 248-80 contrast 355, *supra*). The challenge to identity, rebuffed, prompts an inversion of identity. The bow of Herakles was mocked prompting murder and re-doubled mockery via gender reversal: imitation is a form of doubling as by a distorted mirror. His bow and his archery saved Deianeira and killed the Centaur who later would kill them both through "murderous confusion" of desire and bow, a type of what he suffered with Omphale. Mockery of his bow is a transfigurative trope

and centers the trauma of poesis and its shifty erotic essence. As his identity and desire, it was the implicit if not explicit reason he sacked Oechalia ("Love alone bewitched him to this violence"); it was the symbol of virility by which he took Iole, prompting Deianira to send the robe envenomed with the matter from his arrows. Extending the tropes, his friend, the hero and great archer, Philoctetes receives the bow and venomous bite of a god-snake and screams for a similar fiery death, a death he suffers in life. Apollo, successor to and absorber of Pythian powers is lord of the lyre and bow, both to heal and kill. He also was the 'tutor,' implicitly the *erastes* of Orpheus. So Orpheus, embodiment of threshold crossing and martyr of image-work links to the bloody ambiguities and compulsions of Aphrodite, Apollo and thus to Herakles and Philoctetes (Humphries 216; in Ovid, the pyre is made and the bow and quiver taken directly by Philoctetes): his songs are their arrows of desire, the trope of imagination intuited by Blake. What Blake did not understand, though he greatly advanced it, was the consuming cultural vampirism of image work that, by the Greek paradigm, "makes a woman" of culture and man and invests eros in the drive to idealize. Thus the trauma of the silent handmaiden as elaborated by Sophocles unites key figures of Greek myth in forms of sexual confusion and martyrdom. The play shows how the mythos of glorious death and eros are embedded in the West. The transformative elements in the story show that Apollo is not the antithesis but a complement to Dionysus and Aphrodite to whom all forces align. "Love rules even the gods as he pleases..." Their theurgy is the vampiric shadow that consumes its source, the mockery that the image reflects on its hosts and generators.

The drama's primary tetrad of traumatic pollution: Iole- Herakles – Deianira – Nessus is a vehicle for Aphrodite who enters through each vector, — with the hydra her obverse or even the bestial version of her demonic beauty. One could speak of a triad, Herakles – Deianeira – Nessus, the last being the 'dark' form or specter of Herakles that forms the main conflict and suffer her "sickness." In his contention for Deianeira Nessus doubles Achelous and his poison is one face of a beast that includes the hydra and Aphrodite (though it may be a topos, both Achelous and the hydra are "shimmering"). Most basically, one discerns the dyad of the marriage bed as the core generator of trauma and image-work with Iole doubling Deianira ("the two of us under one sheet") and Nessus, Herakles. As a centaur, Nessus exposes the handmaiden's ambiguous, perverse inner form: his "treacherous words" that create "murderous confusion" replicate the manner of her magical 'birth' with its paradoxical "penalties and pleasures" as Homer writes; her "deceptions and sweetnesss" (Hesiod 205-6). Born from generative act despoiled in a bed of horror, her power drives further carnage, reflecting the terrible paradox of the play and, with Nessus, re-producing the horror of the primal 'divine' bed of the *Theogony* in that of Herakles and Deianeira. Transformed into 'a woman' by agony (1075), Herakles becomes a trope of Orpheus and the apocalyptic separation of the image from its mortal core, begging Hyllus, "cut away my head from my miserable body" (1014-15) evoking myriad Symbolist paintings, mockeries of a culture "sick with desire," confused by its hybrid nature and entranced by the 'authenticity' and raw eros of regression. The Sphinx was their icon – inner core.

Speaking of monsters and double vision, before explicating the play further it is instructive to look at how differently Ovid handles the account of the transfiguration and ascension of Herakles stressing not the demonic horror and ambiguities of image-work but its idealizing phase. Ovid presents a sanitized form of the myth, emphasizing the idyllic and elegiac while moderating the apocalyptic horror rooted in the human dynamics. The physical torment of the poison, emphasized in Sophocles becomes an indictment of Juno that serves mainly to summarize the labors. Ovid lets Achelous and Nessus relate much of the agon (Humphries 209-10; 212-13, “which would you rather be,” Achelous asks Hercules, “a liar or a bastard”) while the gods (except for Juno) presented by Ovid’s own narrative are figures of pity. This is part of the sublimation that eventually produced the Church. It also results from Ovid writing four hundred and twenty-five years after Sophocles and showing significant familiarity with Jewish material which was not uncommon for Romans in his times (P. Schafer; M. Williams).

Zeus, called by Ovid “Jove” per Roman custom (perhaps a Latinized corruption of the Tetragrammaton), is very different from the remote, mute observer of his son’s torment and grandson’s prayers as portrayed by Sophocles. In Ovid’s tale, “Hercules, Nessus, and Deianeira” Philoctetes, the great archer lights the pyre and receives the arms that will take Troy (see also Grene 252-4). But the significant difference lies in the attitude and intervention of Jove as he mandates the transformation of Hercules, his son and seed into an immortal spirit, a god among the gods.

...and the gods were troubled for earth’s champion.

As Jove with joyful voice addressed them: ‘Gods,

This fear of yours delights my heart...

that your favor guards my son.

He has earned that favor by his deeds, and I

Am under obligation for that favor... Only his mother’s heritage,

His mortal part will feel the fire; that part

Which comes from me no flames will ever master,

It will live always, safe from death and burning

And I shall take it to the shores of Heaven.. (Metamorphoses IX, Humphries 216-17)

One notes the joyful mood of Jove in mediating the passage from life to immortal life, an implicit rejection of life for eternity that the Church carried forward from the Greeks. Per the link, cremation is the means of triumph. Flame is the element of images and the spectacle, as Yeats (“Byzantium”) understood. It symbolizes the superhuman discharge of energy that displaces the human, “life in death” being the obverse of “death in life,” the horrible ‘gift’ of the Greek pantheon which Ovid prettifies and which the heroes of classical tragedy suffer. For him the gods are still plural, an assembly of superheroes of whom Jove is chief but unlike the Zeus of Euripides, they are concerned for mankind, at least the greatest among them is. Similarly, Seleucid and Roman emperors proclaimed themselves to be “friends” and “saviors” of mankind on their coins, adopting titles like “Soter” (“savior”), “Theos” (“god”), or Epiphanes (“god manifest”: Antiochus I *Soter*, 281-61 bce; Antiochus II *Theos*, 261-46; Seleucus III *Soter* 225-21; Antiochus

*Epiphanes*, 175-64 bce). The Alexandrian age was a watershed for the passage from classical apocalypse to late Hellenistic idylls and a sweetening of the eidolon which later emerged in claims of absolute mercy and an ability to affirm faith by declaration alone, a kind of lyric assertion of deity.

This study’s concern is the transmutation of Herakles from suffering and flawed hero to demi-god. But in Ovid Herakles is not flawed; there is no mention of his lusts, no Omphale (whom might have been expected to interest Ovid); no symbolic relation to hydra or centaur though the latter is mentioned and Nessus has his own piece of narrative. Nessus is the bad guy; Iole appears only via “Rumor the tattletale, who makes big things out of little ones,” disturbing Deianeira and setting the tragic wheel rolling as she sends off the envenomed robe. The desire of Herakles for Iole becomes doubtful; Deianeira a foolish woman who “gives way to tears” and self-pity rather than a clear-eyed confronter of the power of the goddess and the erotic power whose “sickness” her husband shares with most mortals. The pathos of the marriage bed as a trope for poesis and its traumatic changes is elided. The demonic matter closely linked to the liminal bed of death and sex is absent. The role of Aphrodite, repeatedly emphasized in Sophocles, indeed that rules the action does not appear, surprising in a work that contains “Venus and Adonis” and myriad examples of love natural and unnatural. Ovid’s emphasis rather is on the transformation of Herakles from struggling savior into a star above the storm, “a proof of Jove” as if he was a photographic print, an etching or image of the god, a perfect reflection and type of his father for idealization here works both axes of human-divine. The basis for a later cult of aesthetics that fuses father and son, preparing the former’s displacement is being laid. After the pyre consumes the poisoned flesh,

There was nothing left, a form,

A shape, not to be recognized, of Hercules,

With nothing human about it, only spirit,

The proof of Jove, shining... and Jove raised him

Through hollow clouds to the bright stars... (Metamorphoses IX)

So Hercules returns to his father. One thinks of Yeats’ lines in “Byzantium” citing “images that yet fresh images beget” leaving behind “the fury and the mire of human veins” the obverse of how the falcon leaves the falconer: a splitting of nature and artifice, or of natural and human by radical idealizing whose complement is regression. Yeats’ form of magike-tekne’s apocalypse is figured in the ambiguity of the slouching sphinx, a demonic image detached from and stalking the human, ready to consume whatever survived the drowning of the “ceremony of innocence” itself an idealization ready, like Christabel for possession, displacement and degradation (“the Second Coming”). Yeats’ myth-making and fascination with iconic power was akin to the syncretic, boundary-effacing mythologies of late classical times as, in the Greco-Roman world, apocalypse gave way to idyll, romance and elegy as forms of its passion play. His rather strained infatuation with apocalypse and the “life-in-death” of images, a development from first generation Symbolism, epitomized the century from which he emerged and the one he helped form.

In Ovid the Orphic project appears in pure form: the composite hero, half man, half god, an ambiguous and unstable substance has been idealized into spirit, an image of Jove to dwell among the stars, a prototype for Shelley's "splendors of the firmament of time" ("Adonais" 388-90 passim) or simply part of a Greek-derived Western archetype. More broadly, the glimmerings of the construction of the West appear via Ovid's borrowings from neo-Platonism, Jewish ontology and account of the creation in the space – time unity that Ovid adopts at the very beginning of his work, a vision of earth filled with "rivers of milk and honey" (Humphries 6), the famous description of the promised Land that recurs as a leitmotif in the Books of Moses.

It is instructive to compare Ovid's close tracking of Genesis to the account of Hesiod, six centuries earlier that shows some borrowings from Torah confused with several versions of genesis via anthropomorphic beings and various magical births.

Ovid begins his compendium of Greek material, *Metamorphoses* with a strikingly Jewish account of "Creation," the first word and heading of his text. In the beginning, "before ocean was, or earth or heaven, nature was all alike... a shapelessness of rude and lumpy matter... confusion" (Humphries 3, Ovid 1:6-9). The state of total ambiguity and lack of borders is a state that the metamorphic impulse of the Greeks made the substance of their world. It is antithetical to the Hebraic view of creation and life as a process of discrimination and separation into integral objects and beings; a sensibility in which letters (*otiot*) embody a science of causes (etiology, a borrowed term) that also is the basis of math, music and narrative; not the muses' hypnotic enraptured songs but precise articulation from the roots of speech (psalm 19). The creation in Genesis, engraved by letters, an expression of DAN is an implicit negation of the incestuous emphases of Hellenist myth. Confused and rude, lumpy matter is the essence of metamorphosis so at the outset of his work, by his account of beginnings Ovid carries forward Greek material in a blend that foreshadows the hybrid culture that would begin to emerge in the centuries after him, a hybrid whose strains generate increased idealization and burial of the Jewish 'host.'

Echoes and near quotation of the "pre-Socratics, especially Heraclitus and Empedocles are present but these Ovid resolves by adopting a narrative that closely follows Genesis. First he draws on Empedocles, Greek formulator of elemental dialectic to describe the "confusion in which discordant atoms warred" prior to creation:

Land on which no man could stand and water  
 No man could swim in, air no man could breathe,  
 Air without light; substance forever changing,  
 Forever at war...  
 Heat fought with cold, wet fought with dry, the hard  
 Fought with the soft, things having weight contended  
 With weightless things; (Ovid I: 8-9, 15-21)

For this study, what is most pertinent is that Ovid, amid his paradoxography of magical changes (including the Herakles - Dejanira tale) emphasizes not only the "confusion" of the primordial state and its endless metamorphosis, a Hellenic view

expects in his text, including naming "war" as the animating principle, but elaborates with Jewish content that shows the first European powers absorbing cultural material which would form the West as an art work, an artifice of eternity.

Here are the four elements Empedocles posited but not in the state of original harmony ruled by love (*philia*) but resembling the *tohu va vohu* of Genesis translated into Greek as "chaos" for example by Simplicius, *Physics* 157-9, Fragment B17 and Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* x:15. The Hebrew phrase often translated "empty and void" is shown by Nachmanides to mean "potential was in it," unformed energy, *hyla* before it was made the stuff of creation (Ramban on Genesis I). The dialectic of love and strife (*neikos*) kept everything in turmoil (Empedocles in Fragment B35, B26, Simplicius, *Physics*, 31-4). The emphasis on endless strife amid the confusion sounds more like Heraclitus (or like ancient Greece and Rome) who asserted that war was the essence of all becoming. "Everything flows and nothing abides" Heraclitus said, a doctrine of pervasive metamorphosis that would appeal to Ovid. "Cool things become warm, the warm grows cool; the moist dries, the parched becomes moist" (Heraclitus fragments 91, 126; reflecting this antithesis, Hesiod has Ares and Aphrodite consort to bring forth "Panic and Terror"). More pertinent is his dogma that "war is both father and king of all... war is the common condition, strife is justice and all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife" (fragment 53). This is the essence of ancient Hellas: "the wrath of Achilles" (not to mention savagery) and violent hate of Gaia, Kronos and other gods ("the dogs of war" Homer calls them) join in the sources of all Greek literature: metamorphosis and trauma as in *WT*. Or, rather, the sources are the turbulent chafing at boundaries and drive to transformation that result from erotic trauma and generate theurgic poesis.

Perhaps surprisingly, Ovid asserts that this warring metamorphosis of disorder lasted

Till God, or kindlier Nature,  
 Settled all argument and separated  
 Heaven from earth, water from land, our air  
 From the high stratosphere, a liberation  
 So things evolved, and out of blind confusion  
 Found each its place, bound in eternal order. (Ovid 1:20-5)

This blending of Lucretius with Judaism tracks the Genesis account of a liberating, life-enabling order brought from confusion, particularly the first three days (which, since time is relative to gravity and speed literally are days from the 'point' of creation, "the big bang" while from our perspective the six days are about 16 billion years) [Schroeder].

Ovid is too much the Roman patrician to acknowledge Jewish wisdom (Isaac Newton was a rare exception in such matters), not explicitly at the outset of so Hellenistic a book, so he takes an accommodating view on the Designer "who out of chaos brought order to the universe and gave it division" in verses that sound like he is leaning on Genesis and Psalms (e.g. 104). He relates that "the Lord of all Creation" marked out the boundaries of land and water, "banked the river channels" and created the elements, no

one of which “by the Creator’s order held general dominion.” He returns to a Heraclitean note: despite the Creator’s distinctions, still, the elements “come near tearing the universe apart” as “they brawl and quarrel” like “brothers” in Greek myth. Still, with “these boundaries given” the stars, fish and beasts of the earth are created and take their dwelling place. “But *something else was needed, a finer being...a sage, a ruler, so Man was born, it may be, in God’s image*” (Ovid 148-76, emphasis added; Genesis 1:26-30). Nietzsche’s comments (*BG & E* 248-51) that the Jews are a seminal and the Greeks a receptive people are apposite to the synthesis Ovid makes. The sequence of living things and above all the creation of man as a sage and ruler “in God’s image” clearly borrow from the Hebrew Scriptures. The attack of “the Giants” (he does not write Titans though the analogy is clear, as is the action, “piling Pelion upon Ossa”) is from Hesiod and the even more bizarre bringing forth of violent men from the blood of the Giants that fell on earth harks back to the Ouranos myth and the blood bringing Furies from earth, along with Pegasus, a trope of imaginative aspiration and transfiguration, of an image leaving earth or the body. The parallels to the “sons of the powers” being men of violence and “contemptuous of gods” draws from both the Hebraic tradition of the state of violent lawlessness just before the flood and from other sources. Similarly, the Deucalion and Pyrrha story draws a bit from that of Noah and Genesis 2 but the trappings are solidly in the world of Greco-Roman theology and geography: Neptune, Triton, Nereids, Boeotian fields and Mt. Parnassus (Ovid *I*:252-456). The tale is a classic of displacement as one culture assimilates and buries another, as Nessus the specter possessed and consumed Herakles: the dead or culturally moribund consume the living.

This cultural “confusion” and syncretism that characterizes the Greco-Roman or imperial system ironically embeds the Wasteland of “chaos” in the new order Ovid celebrates. It is a pattern repeated throughout the cultural works of the West and here it appears as a sort of preface foreshadowing Victorian pre-modernism as lamented by Arnold and, differently, by Browning, Tennyson and others like Wagner or Khnopff who sought different paths to “purification” and resolution of the problem of a hybrid culture, a way that follows naturally from Luther’s last work, “On the Jews.” Wagner sought this ‘purification,’ this idealizing by imagery in the total art work; itself is a grand synthesis of cultural definition. It was a resurgence of the impulse of the West’s pagan substrate, culture and the world as art-ideal like Hesiod’s *Shield of Herakles*, a paradigm of poesis that inheres in Chateaubriand’s thesis that the truth of Christianity is in the excellence of its aesthetics.

With Hesiod, six centuries earlier than Ovid, confusion about first things is extensive, almost pre-rational. “First of all came Chaos” and after him came Gaia...and Tartaros the foggy pit...and Eros who is love...who breaks the limbs’ strength, who in all gods, in all human beings overpowers the intelligence in the breast and all their shrewd planning” (*Theogony* 116-22). Here is the source for “Eros, tyrant of men, the holder of the keys to Aphrodite’s dearest inner chamber” with Aphrodite being chief among archers and “destroyers of mortals” (*Hippolytus* 530-42, Esposito 115). Hesiod also states “that from Chaos was born Erebus, the dark and black Night” and then gives

a sequence of beings brought forth from Night (ibid 123-6); the Chaos-Night sequence catches something of Genesis as Thales (634-546 bce), first of the pre-Socratics clearly borrowed the creation sequence: “evening is older than morning”; water (“the deep”) precedes land and “of all things the most ancient is God for He is uncreated” (Diogenes Laertius; Plato, “Phaedrus” 245 d1-6 quotes Thales, whose name is formed on a Hebrew root (“dew”), saying “that which is divine has neither beginning nor end”). But Hesiod’s focus is on magical transformations, unnatural beings and conflicts. It is not an account of articulation of a soundless scientific precision in nature, inscribed like words (Psalm 19) but “a cult of the untrue” in which one has “the sense of carrying a goddess across a river of becoming” a trope particularly relevant to the poesis of *WT* (Nietzsche *GS* 163).

The difference set forth in Psalm 19 shows the alternative it presents to Greek poesis, particularly given the famous metaphor in its midst, “the sun which is like a groom emerging from his bridal chamber; it rejoices like a powerful warrior to run the course” (Danziger 5-6):

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament tells of His handiwork. Day following day utters speech and night following night declares knowledge. There is no speech and there are no words; their sound is not heard, but their precision goes forth throughout the earth, and their words reach the end of the inhabited world. (19:2-5)

The word, *chavah* translated as “declares” also means “states” or “pronounces” which emphasizes the stress on soundless articulation; a precise elaboration of architectonic logic, natural law or DNA. From this view of universal order, the basis of the praise (literal translation of the word rendered in English as “psalm,” a Hellenization) arises the famous metaphor of the sun as groom or warrior. Distinguishing the Hebraic worldview is the orderly, phonetic and linguistic structure of creation and the refusal to let a vivid metaphor achieve hypostasis and become an object of veneration. The Tehillim (“psalm”) emphasizes this point by turning from its depiction of the sun’s magnificent circuit and heat to praise of the Torah, the articulating words of the Creator embodied in the heavens. Nothing escapes the sun’s heat; nothing and no one escape Aphrodite but the latter, with Eros the force channeled through her, is a magical being that rules human beings amid a world subject to shattering and irrational transformations. These antithetical viewpoints, the creation of eidolon and prohibition of such worship were fused to assemble the West giving it, along with the core Hellenic emphasis on transmutation, displacement, perhaps denial the fissionable quality that has generated its dynamism and set it, a cultural poesis on the path from idyll (fiction, illusion) to apocalypse and elegy.

These magical emphases dominate Hesiod, so different than the Hebrew material that Ovid partly accommodates. Gaia takes the creative role as in some postmodern theory. In one of his several creation sequences, Hesiod makes Night and Eros co-eternal to Gaia who both brings forth Ouranos, “without any act of love” and takes him as a husband with consequences essential to discussion of *the Woman of Trachis*. The

members (Aphrodite) and blood (Furies and Giants) of Ouranos also are represented as creative powers; so too the blood of Medusa which brings forth Geryon a monster Dante wrote into his epic as an embodiment of violence (*Inferno*, cantos 16-17; on Nessus 12-17). Together Gaia, earth, and Ouranos, “the starry heavens” generate by coitus the Titans including Kronos. Hesiod’s confusion, a precursor of the confusions in WT reflects a sensibility immersed in magical metamorphoses. The trauma that its instability induces brims in his lengthy invocation of the Muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne whom he extols and asks to sing through him. Again, the human is a vehicle for fiction and the creation of fictions which he presents as theurgy. In Sophocles, the god-work is lethal.

The ultimate truth for Herakles in *the Women of Trachis* lies in the fiction, Cyprian Aphrodite onto whose powers human beings project their desires and surrender their will. The confusion of integral self with the flux of impulse, sensation and emotion combining in a culture of traumatic transfiguration is expiated in brutal fashion that severs the gods, who are deeply involved in the pollution, from any claim to moral or natural order. Greek *idein* and *magike tekne* are not a “science of causes,” of letters engraved as DNA in the articulate, purposeful substance of creation. Rather, the play shows us a culture destroying itself by its commitment to myths of traumatic eroticism and resulting unnatural metamorphoses that a stoic heroism can only endure by paradox, as “an unwanted, welcome task” like life itself. The centaurs and Geryon, punishers of self-destruction were aptly chosen by Dante from the blood of Greece’s primal scene and its ensuing poison, not least that of lust’s “sickness.” Their realm is one of self-poisoned blood and fire, the dominant facts and motif in Sophocles as they are in *Agamemnon* also a tragedy of the marital bed with its tetrad of personae enmeshed in violence and sweet deceptions. Like them, Herakles rules and suffers the brutish violence he fought. In this respect, he is, like Geryon and the Centaurs, a result of primal erotic traumas embodying violent fraud not of his own volition but of impulse: in this way he is god-like. His connection to the realm of beasts is vivid in his last words: “set a steel bit in my mouth, hold back the shriek, and make an end of this unwanted, welcome task” (1261-3), the words summing up his entire life of glory. But his agony conducts, via inquiry to that deeper cultural level, as Geryon, amid “fire and wailings” conducted Dante to the eighth circle with “everything lost to sight except the beast” whose portrait emphasizes the twinned motifs of hidden poison and arrows (*Inferno* 17:113-22). In Hesiod, Herakles slays Geryon, grandson of the blood of Medusa (a typological cousin of Aphrodite and Pegasus, blood unlocks poeisis) which ramifies the self-destructive aspects of the mythic material (*Theogony* 280-300). Hera “nourished” the Lernaen hydra and Geryon’s sister, Echidna bore Cerberus that Herakles dragged from the underworld (ibid 304-19 cf. Ovid 9.185)). Sophocles builds this mesh of allusions into dramatic ironies: the final agonies and immolation of Herakles are forms of suicide and murder, the apocalyptic pattern and trajectory of the Hellenic bases of the West, the culture and self-splitting idealizations that lead to the Wasteland.

The anagnorisis of *Women of Trachis* is the revelation of a series of paradoxes all of them rooted in and prefigured by the primal crime of the Greek pantheon, the

dismembering of Ouranos and the embodiment of his members into Aphrodite who rules this drama about the horrors of the marriage bed. “It lunges, lunges again, the vile thing is destroying me” Herakles shouts in his pain: he might as well, like Hippolytus (*H* 106-13), be condemning the goddess. The beautiful merges with the horrible: the divine with the beast. Sophocles already has told us that the “sickness” is sent by Aphrodite. Thus, the horrible “lunge” of “the vile thing” connotes the hydra, sexual desire and even the phallus that Aphrodite, and Omphale whom Herakles served, embodies (*WT* 1038-40, 446). This demonic, bisexual substrate doubles the irony in the hero’s raging against his wife and women, before he knows how his own desire is implicated:

Not all

The lands I came to purify could ever do this.

A woman, a female, in no way like a man,

She alone, even without a sword has brought me down. (1060-3)

The chorus knows how true this is and that the “woman” is not mortal. The poison, sickness, lunging and surging is in the purification, within his relation to the gods as emphasized when his sacrificial offering causes the robe to melt into his flesh. In his war against the beasts, the bed is protected, for a moment but its “murderous confusion” is multiplied to Hera’s “glory” whose true horror he embodies. Herakles, like the gods whose vector he is becomes the image of the beast, the tormented hero absorbed in the matter he would purify as Marlow becomes absorbed in the “gorgeous eloquence” of Kurtz. Similar is the tragic error of Deianeira, both selfish and true to marriage. “When he is sick, as he so often is, with this same sickness” she says, “I am incapable of anger.” So “in all that she did wrong, she had intended good” for like Herakles, ruled by Cyprian Aphrodite, “she had done unwittingly the will of the beast” and expiates her error by the final passion of her marriage bed, dedicated to the same “silent handmaiden,” exposing her left side for the eviscerating blow (1136, 934-5, 912-33) as if to provide an image and echo for Coleridge to boost from horror to demonic terror in “Christabel” (“behold her bosom and half her side... a sight to dream of, not to tell!”), a demonic version of the creation of Eve in which the plurality of the gods is a sign for their malice.

Recognition of the uncanny, bestial handiwork of Aphrodite reveals the fulfillment of theurgic poeisis, the innards of Greek prophecy. All Herakles’ triumphs over beasts have been involved and are at last consumed in the triumph of the beast working internally; the beast inherited from the divine father, “nourished” by Hera and activated by love; the legend brands the hero with the name of his torturer as if he were her tortured clone, the body of which she is the punitive overmastering aura. The tragedy of this poeisis is fulfilled in death, a negation built into the quest from its source. In addition to revealing Aphrodite as the epitome of traumatic bed-work, of pollution with a glittering surface, is the related message that the dead kill the living, through desire, just as the artifice or image possess and consume their hosts and creators; as virtual reality consumes life:

Long ago my father revealed  
 To me that I should die by nothing that draws breath  
 But by someone dead, an inhabitant of Hell.  
 This was that beast, the centaur, who in death has killed me  
 Alive, even as it had been divinely revealed. (1159-73, cf. 161-74)

Killed by the dead; it is like the phantoms, “dim forms” and “shadows of shadows” of desire and imagination that return to quench the fire of life, beauty and hope that emitted them in “the Triumph of Life” whose irony is as fierce as that of this great play. The *id* of *idein* that links *identity* to *identical*, life to image is “the beast” which in Shelley’s poem also is given a prominent place in a self-consuming triumph over its devotees: “that fierce spirit whose unholy leisure was soothed by mischief since the world begun” as the chariot drives over and transforms them to ghastly phantoms, “following in the dance with limbs decayed” and sinking from fire into darkness and frost (Shelley 510-11). The ‘beast’ is the idealizing process of poesis, its generation of images and inevitable collapse of the ideal: “from every firmest limb and fairest face, the strength and freshness fell like dust and left the action and the shape without the grace of life” (Shelley 519-20). This self-consuming quality may be the strongest bond between the tragic recognition of the drama and the image-work of the West per se: phantoms return to kill the living; the act of purification, of transfiguration into aesthetics is disembodiment, is suicide, “an encircling net” that returns the glory of idealized identity to the Wasteland of trauma, disillusionment and confusion. It is the essential seventh circle whose guides, in Dante, are the Centaurs, principally Nessus: “*Quelli e Nesso, che mori per la bella Deianira, e fe di se la vendetta elli stesso*” – “who himself avenged himself” (*Inferno* 12:67-9). Underscoring the point, Herakles activates the poison as he lights a fire of purification and sacrifice: the tragic nature of theurgic poesis may be seen in a purifying act or image that is the ultimate self-destroying pollution, the recognition of the inner beast within the savior; of death within the image.

Throughout these trauma, “that silent handmaiden, Cyprian Aphrodite is revealed; it is her work” in collaboration with a lord of the bow whose divine prototype injected a polluting ambiguity into Orpheus that generated murderous jealousy, so similar to the engine of *WT*, that led to his dismemberment, a ‘purified’ singer whose eloquent head is worshipped by his murderers, a lyrical object of love and source of art. As if to foreshadow the unswerving adherence of the West to its aesthetic-geopolitical projects, its proprietary sense that the poison is its own, Herakles orders Hyllus to marry Iole: no one else can share the glorious pollution and martyrdom the project of purification, or its modern idealization grasps as its own. The culture’s “worst enemy” must be claimed in image-work’s incestuous rite, as the Roman Empire did, for the marriage bed from which artifice is churned (*WT* 1225-7, 1233-37): the defeated and colonized culture-giver becomes the host in a double sense, transfigured into a further weapon against its living beings. In the same way, the “Quartet,” a veiled sestet that includes, through its “special envoy,” the British Commonwealth and the Vatican, clasps and smothers its own negation and unwilling spouse, Israel. Blake’s *Jerusalem: Emanation of the Giant*

*Albion* is a startlingly precise prototype for this late stage geopolitical poesis as Jerusalem is pressed into the loins and chest of Albion, the original subsumed by the image reified in a world empire (Blake 116, plate 99).

The “agonies are many and strange... and there is nothing here which is not Zeus” (1277-78). State banners still proclaim the imperial eagle’s might as the media, forged to globalize fictions disseminate the image cult and its shimmering, alluring, perverse and destroying precursor, Aphrodite, embodiment of violent pollution and boundary erasure. Today she flaunts her open-mouthed, hypnotic charms from millions of billboards and billions of screens, triumphant in world-girdling imagery and “wandering fires,” Queen of a worldwide wasteland, dazzled, drunk and drained by images sterile as “holy virgins in their ecstasies” (*Idylls*, “the Holy Grail” 887, 864). The great passions and full-bodied trauma of Herakles and Deianira are lost in the past, living as caricature in a lingering, two – dimensional elegy that wears the mask of laughing Aphrodite.

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 Eugene E. Narrett drafted this essay while teaching Literature at Hannam University in Daejeon, South Korea. He currently is an independent scholar.