

Preposterous Poetics and the Erotics of Death

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Preposterous Poetics

To enter the world of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, the greatest and most influential Greek poem of the fifth century CE, is to enter an echo chamber of Greek literature and engage with a swirling repertoire of mythic narratives. The erotic narratives of Dionysus and his entourage have to be read through this formative poetics – and so it is here, with poetics, that I will begin my travel towards one of ancient poetry's most bizarre scenes of lustful, fondling, inappropriate desire in action.

So, to take straightaway a paradigmatic moment of military conflict from the central and hugely long narrative of war between Dionysus and the Indians, with which I will be concerned in this article, Deriades, the Indian chief, as he summons his troops for the battle, boasts (*Dion.* 27.41-2):

ἔστι καὶ ἐνθάδε πόντος ἀπείριτος, ἀλλὰ θαλάσσης
Ἄρραβις μετὰ κύμα καὶ ἡμετέρη σε δεχέσθω.

An unlimited ocean exists here too; after the waves

Of the Arabian sea let now our sea receive you too.

Deriades taunts Dionysus with the god's previous ignominious flight beneath the waves of the Arabian sea, where, like Achilles withdrawn from battle, he was comforted by Thetis; and he threatens the god with death in the waters of the Indian ocean. His fighting rhetoric traces mythological story after mythological story to draw up the contest in his favour: line after line of literary tradition make up his battle-lines; mythic genealogy set against mythic genealogy... The Greek god may claim Zeus of thunder and lightning as a forebear, but Deriades has Phaethon as a grandfather, and a river as a father – thus both fire and water to quell the weapons of Dionysus (a form of elemental conflict announced at the beginning of the book 27. 8-18 and common throughout Nonnus' narrative). So his words here echo not only with Clytemnestra's celebrated hissing dismissal of Agamemnon's worries about stepping on the tapestries in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, ἔστιν θάλασσα. τίς δέ νιν κατασβέσσει, "The sea exists. Who can drain it?" (*Aga.* 958) – a threat of death that already expresses the future destruction of the hubristic speaker – but also with a whole host of passages where the act of literary composition is likened to the flow of the sea, or a narrative made analogous to a journey by sea. There does exist an unlimited flow of echoes of the sea; and the invitation is to drown oneself in it. Here too, here in this late Greek epic also, the sea keeps re-sounding: "we /Find also in the sound a thought,/Hearing it by this distant northern sea"¹... As many recent critics have begun to trace, the texture of Nonnus' poetry takes us back down towards the shifting sand of Homer and up again towards the jewelled light of contemporary stylistics².

So Deriades imagines Hephaestus' help for his cause (27.71-2):

Δεύομαι Ἡφαίστου τεχνήμονος, ὄφρα καὶ αὐτῶι
τεύχεα χαλκεύσειε πολύτροπα Δηριαδῆι.

I want the artist Hephaistus, so that for myself too,
Deriades, he may forge bronze armour of many turns.

The most famous armour made by Hephaestus is for Achilles – hence the word *kai* "too": as for Achilles, the best of the Greeks, so too for

1 — The quotation here is from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach", and the reason for citing this late version of hearing the sea's poetry will become evident. For the poetics of the sea, back to the archaic period, see e.g. Rosen 1990; Dougherty 2001; or for Ovid, Hinds 1985, or most recently on rivers and shields Feldherr 2014 – and, of course, many others on many other classical sources. The references in these footnotes will be kept intentionally to the bare minimum.

2 — See in particular Hopkinson ed 1994; Shorrock 2001; 2008; 2011; and most recently Spanoudakis ed 2014; and on this passage Agosti ed 2003. "Jewelled" is taken from the important Roberts 1989, focused on Latin though it is.

Deriades, warring against the forces of the West. The emphatic αὐτῶ, “himself”, (or “myself”, as I translated this self-reference) marks his gesture of self-assertion against the model of Achilles, the *aristos* of heroes. The shield of Achilles is a celebrated cosmological ecphrasis; so Deriades conceives of his battle against Dionysus in such elemental terms. As he continues (27. 73-4): “If Athena brandishes her father’s lightning, I have my father’s water” – son of the river Hydaspes against the daughter of the sky-god Zeus, a literalization familiar from Second Sophistic rhetoric, a constant source for Nonnus (e.g. Ach. Tat. 2.5.2; Quintus Smyrnaeus 2 412-29)³. The second programmatic preface of Book 25, which compares epic hero to epic hero (Perseus and Heracles to Dionysus), and Nonnus to Homer (epic poet to epic poet), provides a further poetic model for this rhetoric of contrasting and competing paradigms⁴. Yet πολύτροπος is the epithet that stands in for the very name of Odysseus since the first line of the *Odyssey*. The personal adjective of the *virum* is here applied to the *arma*. And, of course, we may recall that Odysseus also owned the armour of Achilles, in the post-Iliadic conflicts of status. Deriades’ demand or hope to capture the artist takes us back through the literary tradition to the foundational clash of heroes, Achilles and Odysseus, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, here as we are to start a battle, troped repeatedly as a clash of mythological models. The shield of Dionysus – itself a re-working of the Homeric shield, along with its epigonal ecphrastic models – also played a prominent role in Book 25 of the *Dionysiaca*, where it too was termed πολύτροπα (25.563): here Deriades imagines a counter-shield to that also (*kai*)⁵. The proem of the *Dionysiaca* made Proteus programmatically the muse of his poetics, and called him πολύτροπος (1.14)⁶. As the ecphrasis of a shield has been taken as an icon of the poet’s art since Homer, so here the armour demanded by Deriades echoes with the iconic self-description of Nonnus’ poetic style: the armour, like the poetry, is to be πολύτροπα. The language is indeed layered, turned in multiple directions, full of rhetorical poses: πολύτροπα, indeed.

Yet within this combination of battling mythological models, and recessive, rich literary texture, there is also a remarkable sort of typological reading, where one narrative always seems to have the capability of announcing another proleptically, as well as echoing another retrospectively. Shorrock calls this stylistic “interconnectedness”, Agosti, “una sorta

3 — Achilles’ reply here to Memnon (Quint. Smyrn. 2. 438-9) outlines the story of Dionysus taking refuge with Thetis from Lycurgus’ might, that is told at length in Nonnus book 20.

4 — See e.g. Hopkinson 1994: 12-13; Shorrock 2001: 67-70.

5 — See e.g. Hopkinson 1994: 22-4. πολύτροπος is a moderately common word in Nonnus, though clearly a marked term here. Euripides’ accounts of the shield of Achilles are in this mix, for sure: see Fantuzzi forthcoming.

6 — The most extensive study is Shorrock 2008, with further bibliography.

di sincronia atemporale”; Stella, “intertextual excesses”; Hardie, more sharply, comments “Proteus’ shapeshiftings are marked by the vocabulary of isotropy and imitation”⁷. So, in this book of exhortatory battle rhetoric, Deriades promises (27. 110-2) to burn alive “heavy-chained” Erechtheus, son of Hephaistus. The term βαρύδεσμος is perhaps proleptically used of an imagined punishment, and as such will be turned back against Deriades by Dionysus at 27. 200, but it also echoes in contrast the gossamer bonds of Erechtheus’ father, Hephaestus (δέσμοι/δέσματα *Od.* 8. 294; 298) – just as the description of Hephaestus here as “artist”, τεχνήμων, recalls his work on those bonds (τεχνήεντες/τέχνας *Od.* 8. 295; 327)⁸. In Book 24 of the *Dionysiaca*, the tale is told of Aphrodite taking up Athene’s task of weaving – a passage which takes the place of – and is intricately written through – the Odyssean lay of Aphrodite, and thus acts as a distant cue for such an echo⁹. Erechtheus, declares Deriades, carries the blood of Erichthonius, “whom Pallas the no-mother (ἀμήτωρ), the virgin enemy of the marriage-bed, nursed at her breast, secretly guarded by the unsleeping, shining (αἴθοπι 115) torch” (112-5)¹⁰. This typical rhetorical revelling in the potential of paradoxical juxtaposition – the breast of the no-mother, the child of the virgin, the nurse who hates the marriage bed – leads into an intricate death-taunt (27.116-7):

μιμνέτω Ἰνδῶνι κεκαλυμμένος αἴθοπι κίστηι
καὶ κενεῶι ζοφόνεντος ἐν ἔρκει παρθενῶνος

Let him remain hidden in a shining Indian casket,
In the empty enclosure of a darkling maiden-chamber.

Like Erichthonius, who was guarded by Athene in a casket, Erechtheus is imagined to be concealed – as ashes, presumably – in an Indian casket. The casket is “shiny”, αἴθοπι, like the torch that accompanies Athene (αἴθοπι, same metrical position in the previous line (115/6)). As the analogy becomes more extended, Deriades seems to picture the casket returned to Athens now to rest in a cenotaph in the maiden’s dark chamber – is this Parthenon *the* Parthenon, to be built centuries after the dramatic time of the poem? Or merely an imaged temple or chamber of the goddess?

7 — Shorrock 2011: 120; Agosti 2008: 22; Stella 2005: 139 (see also Spanoudakis 2012); Hardie 2005: 123.

8 — Vian 1990: 298 notes that βαρύδεσμος is proleptic and need not be emended, but does not take the reference any further.

9 — See Hopkinson 1994: 21-2.

10 — Shorrock 2011: 62 notes how this language recalls the virgin Mary. At 37.320 Erechtheus will duly pray to Athene ἀμήτωρ; and at the very end of the epic, Iacchus will be nursed by Athene who had previously nursed only Erechtheus 48.954-7. On the Christian/pagan links of the term “mother”, see Spanoudakis 2012.

The death-taunt depends both on the patterning of proleptic mythological narrative – as for Erichthonius, so for Erechtheus – and on a reading of inversion: Athene’s concealment for safety becomes the concealment of the grave; the shining of the torch the shining of the casket. Indeed, Erichthonius is called here ἐκείνου Ἐρεχθέος, “that Erechtheus” (27. 112-3). Now, it is possible that early Athenian myth has been confused by Nonnus, as earlier scholars usually have assumed (as if the differences between the two figures were always clear and distinct)¹¹. In 13. 171-9 where Erechtheus is introduced as the musterer of the Cecropidai, his birth is described with the narrative usually attached to Erichthonius. But here there are two generations, both now termed Erechtheus, as the typology becomes all-embracing: an overlap and repetition, not simply a confusion. There is a rhetorical drive behind the overlapping and intermingling of figures and stories.

The use of the proleptic analogy of such typology is even more striking. As Zeus, king of the Gods, summons his supporters, Hephaestus, Athene and Apollo, to aid Dionysus in the battle with Deriades, his rhetoric echoes with the *epitaphioi* of classical Athens. Athene is asked to remember – μνῶεο 285; cf 254, 263. But Zeus also refers to what has not yet happened, not merely in the chronology of myth – Icarus will not meet Dionysus until book 47 – but also in the chronology of history. She is asked to save Pan, “the future help in Attic battle; preserve (ρύεο) the preserver (ρύτῆρα) of shaken Marathon, the killer of Medes” (27. 299-300). As the *epitaphios* paradigmatically used Marathon and its Athenian warriors as a spur to military glory and as the great examples of the past for the present¹², so here Zeus uses Marathon and Pan’s role in it as a spur for Athene to fight and as an example of glory – but for the future: a typology that allows, indeed *insists* on the reversibility of chronology and a spreading of exemplarity, which melds story into story as exemplars or contrasts of each other.

This redrafting of linear chronology into a swirl of cross-referencing mythic narratives and literary paradigms, this wilful playfulness with temporal order, is what I am terming – with due attention to its etymology – Nonnus’ *preposterous poetics*¹³. Its inspirational and programmatic deity is Proteus, the shape-shifter god who only reveals the truth if you hang on in suspension as the form transmutes back eventually to itself through a repertoire of metamorphoses – a god who is πολύτοπος and ποίκιλον εἶδος ἔχων (1.14-5)¹⁴.

11 — See Kearns 2015 for the contamination between these two figures from the start.

12 — As discussed seminally by Loraux 1981.

13 — I was encouraged towards the word “preposterous” by Parker 1987.

14 — See Hopkinson 1994: 9-12; Harries 1994: 78-9; Agosti 1996; Gigli Piccardi (ed.) 2003

Now, many modern readers have indeed found Nonnus' exuberant, expansive, self-conscious rhetorical verse no more than preposterous. But I use the term rather to mark the constitutive link between his rhetorical style and the temporality of narrative, a link, I suggest, that goes to the heart of the interplay of theology and poetics in Nonnus.

There are no direct references to Jesus or to Christianity in the *Dionysiaca*; there is, however, as we will see, language that at least resounds with Christian imagery; and the connection between Dionysus and Jesus has often been seen as a particularly fertile site for considering the interactions between Christianity and classicizing religion and poetry – for which the *Christus Patiens*, a rewriting of Euripides' *Bacchae* to tell the story of Jesus, remains the literary paradigm. Nonnus' own *Paraphrase* of the Gospel of St John adopts and adapts Dionysiac language in intricate and significant ways, echoing the *Dionysiaca*. Within such a recognized matrix, critics have argued at length about the degree to which Nonnus can be termed a Christian author in the *Dionysiaca*, a case always made in contrast with the *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel, Nonnus' most evidently Christianizing composition¹⁵. It is now widely accepted that the polemical opposition of Christian and pagan (in ancient or modern writers) is wholly inadequate to understand the complexities and assimilations of later antique communities and individuals – and that finding a place for Nonnus requires particular nuance. The first suggestion of this article is that the connection between theology and poetics should be explored at a deeper level than it has been by scholars so far, and specifically through the poem's engagement with myth and temporality.

So, to conclude the first and introductory section of this article, I want to look very briefly at a different matrix of late antique writing for understanding this preposterous poetics. Now, typology – a device to close the temporal gap between old and new testaments in Christian thinking by making each an analogy of the other – has a long history, back to the beginnings of allegorical reading in one genealogy, and also, perhaps more pointedly, back to Philo's Platonizing conception of the Hebrew Bible, which forms the basis of so much of Clement's thinking, through which it becomes a central plank of Christian argumentation¹⁶.

ad loc.; Shorrock 2008.

15 — See Shorrock 2011: 49-78, based on the detailed commentaries of Livrea et al in Italian and Vian et al in French, the two most significant contributions to Nonnian scholarship in recent decades. Cameron 2000; 2007; 2010; Bowersock 1994; Spanoudakis ed 2014 – for the current state of play. Bowersock 1990; Chuvin 2009 [1990]; MacMullen 1992; Brown 1998 (and for an earlier period Schott 2008 and Kahlos 2007) provide key introductions to the necessary general background; Cavero 2008, the specific Panopolis scene; and for the violence associated with religion in this period, see the outstanding study of Shaw 2011.

16 — See Dawson 1992; Struck 2004; Niehoff 2001; 2011; and specifically for Nonnus, Agosti 2005, though this is very introductory.

So, when the Israelites arrive at the Grove of Elim (Exodus 15. 27), where there are twelve springs, the history of the reading of these verses reveals a shift from Alexandrian models into later antique, theologically-informed interpretations. Philo (*Moses* 1.188), and Ezekiel's *Exagoge* describe Elim in lavish, Utopian terms – for Ezekiel it is the home of the Phoenix; Josephus (*AJ* 3.9) imagines the feeding of the people from such sandy soil and brackish water as a miracle. But for both the later Jewish midrashic writers and for Christians such idealizing readings become a more directed typological understanding. In midrash, the springs are taken to betoken the twelve tribes of Israel, and the water as the nourishing intellectual and spiritual waters of the Torah¹⁷. For Prudentius, however, (*Dittochaion* 14) the grove is mystic (*mysticus lucus*) and it depicts (*pinxit*) the twelve apostles. The story of the Hebrew Bible is to find fulfilment in the Christian bible through his scriptural reading. The water which nourishes the palms slips easily thus into the symbolic expressivity of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, and his promise of living water in John 4. 10. The grove images (*pinxit*) what in chronological terms would be the far future, but what in theological understanding is always already present. The text of Exodus is already replete with its future embodiment in the language of the Gospels. Such a poetics of typology is one frame for understanding Nonnus' use of analogy, proleptic and retrospective figuration.

The rabbinical writings of the Talmud, supplemented by the *tosefta* and *midrashim*, offer, as I have discussed elsewhere, a profoundly unThucydidean sense of historical narrative, where a religious identity for a defeated and fragmented people of the Roman empire is constructed through a fragmented collection of localized stories and debates¹⁸. This unparalleled narrative form – aggressively dismissed by many Christian and modern readers as preposterous – allows conversations between figures who lived centuries apart, confuses emperors, projects a rabbinical past with disregard for any empirical history, and overlaps and intertwines separate historical events in a continuing revelation of providence. Its theology takes shape in a narrative and rhetorical form which eschews linear and sequential chronology, for all that it is obsessed with counting years and ordering a sacred calendar and marking out the day in ritual time. Rabbinical writing too, from its different perspective, displays a preposterous poetics.

17 — *Numbers Rabbah* 1.2 – and further sources are cited by Jacobson 1983: 152-66.

18 — Goldhill 2016; see also Gafni 1996; Yerushalmi 1982. For the interaction of communities in the later antique see Eshleman 2012; Sandwell 2007.

The fullest theoretical expression of the grounding of such a poetics, however, is to be found in Augustine's *Confessions*¹⁹. The *Confessions*, as a narrative of conversion, is committed to re-writing the past in a teleological vector towards the revelation of a new life. But within this journey, Augustine, especially in Book xi, brilliantly explores the role of time, memory and narrative in the construction of a self and of self-understanding. The inability to dwell in the present because of the slippage of time, a slippage which makes memory and its narratives constitutive of self-perception, is explored as an integral element of human experience, and specifically of change. The very time it takes to read a Psalm is analysed as part of the production of meaning for human readers. But against such intricate understanding of human experience of human time stands divinity. God, argues Augustine, by virtue of his immortality and omniscience, is not in or of time, but atemporal. Thus the foundational sentence of the creator – Let there be Light – cannot be articulated as in human language, which, like a Psalm, takes time to say. “Let there be light” thus must always already have been spoken. For Augustine's searching and brilliantly expressed theology, to conceptualize divinity is to attempt from within time to conceptualize a being without time.

Across later antique theologically-informed writing, then, from poems to be placed as titles under pictures in church to the most profound philosophical reflections, there is a varied and intense engagement with temporality and narrative: with reflecting on how divine rule is embodied in a temporal world, and how the narratives of providence, or human understanding of such narratives, relate to a divine order and its temporality. Theology in-forms narrative's time. Nonnus' poetics with his proleptic and retrospective figuration which links and fragments the corpus of mythic narratives into interlocking and overlapping versions of each other, need to be set within this framework. The question of how Christian Nonnus is has constantly vexed scholars. It seems to me that the theological underpinnings of his narrative style in the *Dionysiaca*, despite the *Paraphrase*, have been consistently underexplored. His preposterous poetics needs to be comprehended within the theologically-inflected discourse of temporality and narrative within the later antique.

The Erotics of Death

Within such a context, and within such a poetics, I intend in the second section of this article to look at one single extraordinary passage as a test-case, where Nonnus' preposterous poetics takes on an unpleasantly grotesque erotic shaping in a scene of gendered sexual violence. I have

19 — See the particularly influential Ricoeur 1984, from a vast bibliography.

chosen this passage first because the episode is explicitly likened by the narrator to the mythic paradigm of Achilles and Penthesileia, a story yet to happen, though long familiar in the literary tradition: in this sense, it is a straightforward example of preposterous poetics in its mixture of prolepsis and analogy. But, secondly, the passage also tests the limits of such a poetics. Its dynamics of analogy becomes increasingly complex and increasingly strained as the story becomes a vivid representation of necrophiliac desire. Third, because the passage is about the control and expression of erotic desire, and perverted desire at that, it is a scene where the tensions between Christian and classicizing traditions might be expected to be most directly insistent.

Dionysus has a special relationship with Aphrodite in Greek mythic thinking – party gods both, and equally oppressive, *durus uterque deus*, as Propertius laments mockingly of Amor and Liber (1.3.14) – and throughout the *Dionysiaca* there is a sexual licence that has made modern readers worry about Nonnus' commitment to Christian sexual values. As recent critics have sharply discussed, the god commits four rapes in the poem, often after drugging his prey with alcohol, and the final victim, Aura, whose story closes the *Dionysiaca*, ends up, after an excruciatingly protracted labour, going mad and killing one of her children before the other is spirited away for safety²⁰. In each case, however much the act of coition is imaged as a divine mystery where the natural world celebrates fecundity, the response of the victims is increasingly brutalized and distressed.

But there are other significant narratives that run through the epic which have not yet received the attention of the rapes. Books 33-35, in the centre of the Indian war, focus, for example, on the story of Morrheus and his desire for the nymph, Chalcomede. It is a paradigmatically intricate story, both in its telling and its layering of literary models. Charis, the handmaiden of Aphrodite, is distressed in part by the suffering of her father Dionysus at the hands of the Indians – the Graces are sired by Dionysus in Nonnus – but also by the beauty of Chalcomede, who, she enviously thinks, would compete with Aphrodite for loveliness. So she flees back to Aphrodite, and with deceptive grief, gets the goddess to support her concealed plan. The goddess summons Eros, who agrees to make Morrheus, the leading warrior of Deriades' army, fall in love with Chalcomede (which thus satisfies both parts of Charis' own desire to discomfort both the enemies of Dionysus and the rival of Aphrodite). Morrheus, wracked by lust, pursues Chalcomede, although she is his military enemy; and although he is admonished by his trusty companion and

20 — See especially, with full bibliography, Hadjitofi 2008. Also Lightfoot 1998.

upbraided by his wife, he chases her unrelentingly until he finally corners her on a beach. She deceptively gets him to take off his armour and wash before coming to her. As he does so, Aphrodite, watching the warrior disarmed, taunts Ares how much greater her strength is than his – as the interplay of warrior and alluring nymph is immediately replayed at a level of divine myth between warrior god and the goddess of sexual allure, itself a replay of stories and images back to *Odyssey* 8. The unarmed Morrheus finally approaches Chalcomede in lust, while she turns her chaste eyes away from his nakedness – and a snake emerges from her corselet hissing death, and from her breasts and hair and loins snakes emerge to protect her chastity. And that is where the story ends – although later Morrheus' wife, after the Indian defeat, laments his lack of fidelity in a wild distortion of the mourning at the end of the *Iliad*, blaming the Indian defeat on Morrheus' misplaced passion (40. 167-93). The warrior's lust defeated by a miracle of chastity, embodied in snakes, seems to mix promiscuously the language and imagery of the classical tradition and a Christian sense of sin.

This story takes some three books to unfurl and in its course, through its scenes of the *praeceptor amoris*; the angry wife; the deceptive and cunning girl; the failed poetry of seduction; the warrior's erotic undoing; the meeting between naked warrior and beautiful girl on a beach where marriage is in the air; a host of literary and mythological paradigms from epic, comedy, the novel and erotic verse are explicitly and allusively manipulated. What's more, the manipulation itself is part of the story. Chalcomede, teasing and deceiving the warrior, tells him the story of how Daphne fled Apollo – a story familiar from Nonnus elsewhere and from a string of Greek and Latin erotic texts and images, not least from the first book of Achilles Tatius, a novel frequently echoed in Nonnus: the *exemplum* multiplies in significance by echoing its repetitions and retellings. Morrheus, never the best of readers, jumps for joy at the tale (ἀνεπάλλετο χάρματι 33.216), but then worries that the god did not get to ravish Daphne, and so he too might not get to have Chalcomede; but, blaming Apollo for being too slow and the earth for swallowing the nymph, he continues his pursuit anyway... Even when the literary significance of the exemplum is appreciated, longing leads to a compulsion to repeat it. As the love story runs towards its frustrated climax, how a mythic tale manipulates a reader's desire is both the subject and the form of the narrative.

In the course of this erotic tale, the battle between the female followers of Dionysus and the Indian army continues – it is the necessary context for Morrheus' love of his enemy. Because it is a war between the Indian army and maenads, however, the Indian chief Deriades has commanded

that no warrior should rape any enemy lest they become distracted from battle – a command that Morrheus would be all too keen to disobey. It is within this context, that the scene I wish to discuss, takes place: framed by Morrheus’ story of unattained erotic pursuit, framed by an injunction from Deriades to avoid sexual violence, framed by the god’s sexual violence and sexual mishaps. It is a scene also specifically set up in a flamboyantly constructed theatrical frame. As the battle takes place, the “old men watch [έσκοπίαζεν] from the precipitous towers” (35. 11-2) – like the old men in the *teichoskopia* of *Iliad* 3; women watch (έθηήσαντο) the thyrsus-carrying maenads (35. 13), as Andromache who also watched from the wall in *Iliad* 6 will run out “like a maenad” after the death of Hector; and “a dragging-robed maiden with her nurse” watches (έδέρκετο) the war, like Antigone and her nurse at the beginning of Euripides’ *Phoenissae* (35. 14-6)²¹.

As all these figures watch, a girl, rolling dead in the dust is bared. Her robes are pulled asunder, and her beauty overwhelms with desire the man who has stabbed and killed her. It is this strange scene of looking – the warrior looking, the crowds looking, us looking – that I wish to explore as an example of how Nonnus’ preposterous poetics restructures a celebrated scene of erotic desire. For as the unnamed soldier is overtaken by desire for the dead woman, and struggles with his erotic feelings, the scene is explicitly modelled on Achilles and Penthesileia, a redraft of an old epic moment from a time yet to come. It makes for one of the weirdest scenes in the epic.

The short scene is simply structured into an introductory narrative (35. 21-36) which describes the soldier’s feelings, and then a speech in which the soldier expresses and responds to his own feelings (35. 37-78). This structure is integral to the scene’s significance, as we will see.

The narrator’s description begins with a familiar paradox of the *mil-itat omnis amans* repertoire: the wounder wounded, οὔτασεν οὔτηθείσα (35. 24), expanded through “her form was a weapon, and dying she conquered” (35. 24-5)²². But the rhetoric of paradox and the narrative gaze immediately and transgressively scans down the woman’s whole body (35.25-6): κατ’ ἀντιβίοιο δὲ γυμνοὶ μηροὶ έθωρήχθησαν, οἰστευτήρες

21 — I am not fully persuaded by Verhelst 2013, who singles out the Homeric background to Nonnus here. The Greek novel, and especially Heliodorus, as Froma Zeitlin has analyzed in her as yet unpublished Sather Lectures, is obsessed with the construction of such scenes of theatrical visibility. The novel is a major influence on Nonnus, as Frangoulis 2014 has discussed: as Shorrock 2001: 194 puts it, the novel is “an ancestral home of the Dionysiac poetic”.

22 — Ovid *Am* 1.9. For the clichés of Nonnus’ erotic vocabulary see Gigli Piccardi 1985: 45-63; on the wounds see Frangoulis 2014: 67-72. For the military use of the wounder wounded trope see Quint. Smyrn. III 312-3.

Ἐρώτων, 'Against her enemy, her naked thighs were armour, bowmen of desire'. And the mythic paradigm is explicitly articulated (35. 27-8):

Καὶ νύ κε νεκρὸν ἔχων πόθον ἄπνοον, ὡς περ Ἀχιλλεύς
 ἄλλην Πενθεσίλειαν ὑπὲρ δαπέδοιο δοκεύων
 ψυχρὰ κονιομένης προσπτύξατο χεῖλεα νύμφης,
 εἰ μὴ Δηριάδῃος ἐδείδιεν ὄγκον ἀπειλῆς

He would have had a longing for a breathless corpse, like Achilles
 Seeing another Penthesileia on the ground;
 He would have kissed the cold lips of dust-covered girl
 If he had not feared the weight of the threat of Deriades.

It is only the fear of his commander's anger that prevents the soldier desiring and kissing the dead maenad, like Achilles with another Penthesileia. The reference to the epic cycle and its later versions is explicit, though the story is in the far future from the story time of this epic. Achilles, as far as we can tell from the fragmentary remains of the *Aethiopis*, took off the helmet of the dead Penthesileia and was captivated by her beauty. According to Proclus's summary, Thersites mocked Achilles later in the camp for his erotic feelings, and Achilles killed him, and consequently had to seek purification on Lesbos. For Propertius (3.11 15-6) and for Quintus of Smyrna (1. 657-61), it is precisely the revelation of the Amazon's face that is the crucial moment. Lycophron, in his more ghoulishly violent turning of the story (*Al.* 999-1001), has Thersites gouge out an eye of the Amazon, and is killed by Achilles because of this desecration of the body²³. Here, however, the baring of the girl's thighs leads not just to an admiring or eroticized gaze but a wish to kiss her cold lips. Desire is not repressed by Deriades' threats. Indeed, the narrative proceeds not just to strip the girl's body naked, but to have the soldier fondle her breasts and limbs (35. 31-4): "He kept looking [σκοπίαζεν] at the flesh of the naked girl forbidden to him, and he stared [δόκευε] at her white ankles, and at the cleft [πτύχα] of her uncovered [ἀσκεπέων] thighs, and he touched her limbs, and repeatedly handled her swelling, rosy breast, which was still like an apple"²⁴. Unlike Achilles, to whom he has been likened, it is not the face as an embodiment of beauty that arouses this warrior. The repetition of words of seeing (σκοπίαζεν, δόκευε – with a pun in ἀσκεπέων) – as the scene of viewing had been introduced with multiple perspectives of viewing (ἐσκοπίαζον 12; ἐθήρησαντο 13; ἐδέρεκτο 15) – and the repetition of words of touch (ἔψαυσε, ἤψατο),

23 — These passages are collected and discussed by Fantuzzi 2012: 279-86. I first read this passage together with Marco Fantuzzi in 2010: thanks to him for now years of discussion, including of this article.

24 — For the importance of the scopophilic gaze in the novel see Morales 2004.

slow down the man's visual and tactile engagement with the body, itself described in prurient detail, from the flesh, to the ankles, to the thighs and genitals (πτύχα μῆρων), and, with most attention, the breast. (The adjectives and simile are clichés of erotic verse – rosy, swelling, the apple – and the word *eiseti*, “still” indicates not just its attractiveness continuing in death, but also the continuity of such clichés in the language of desire). The rhetorical ideal of *enargeia* – to make insistently visible for the listener or reader – is performed for the circles of viewers (including us, implicated in such a leering gaze), as the girl's body is uncovered, and fondled, verbally as well as by his hands, in the imagination of the reader²⁵. Indeed, the text goes a step further even than his fondling (35.35):

ἦθελε καὶ φιλότῃτι μιγήμεναί...
 He wanted even to have sex with her...

It is this necrophiliac desire that prompts him – finally as he exhausted himself (ὄψε δὲ κάμνων 35) – to speak out.

His speech, the second part of the scene, begins with the same tropes of paradox that the narrator had offered (37-8): “Rosy-armed maiden, wounded you have wounded (οὐτασας οὐταμένη 38 cf οὐτασεν οὐτηθεῖσα 24) your love-sick slayer; in death (φθιμένη 38 cf φθιμένη 25) you tame the living”. He repeats all the terms of the introductory narrative, and augments them. Her breasts, he declares, are ὀστεινῆρες Ἐρώτων, “bowmen of desire” (a memorable phrase used [26] of her thighs), which (now) “win a greater prize in battle than arrows”. Where the narrator suggests he “would have held a longing for a breathless corpse” (27), now the warrior himself says (46) ἄπνοος οἴστρος ἔχει με τὸν ἔμπνοον, “a breathless goad has me who breathes”. (I translated ἄπνοον with νεκρὸν in 27, although in terms of word order it could more easily have been taken with πόθον, and here the soldier applies ἄπνοος το οἴστρος suggesting that in 27 that ἄπνοον could at least be construed with either noun.) Where the narrator had stated simply that she “conquered” (νίκησε 25), now, expanded, ἔγχος ἐνικήθη σέο κάλλει, “The sword has been conquered (ἐνικήθη) by your beauty” (40). Where the narrator declared that “her form was a weapon” (24), the soldier expands (40-2), “The flashes from your face drive me in confusion like the points of javelins; you hold your breast like a bow...”. The soldier confirms and expands the narrator's description with a self-description of his feelings.

25 — On the importance of *enargeia* in Nonnus, see Agosti 2005.

This is a very striking stylistic device. Homer, of course, can repeat a message to be given and a message delivered word for word; he also plays with such repetition when, for example, Odysseus in *Iliad* 9 carefully does not repeat Agamemnon's boastfulness to Achilles, whom he wishes to persuade to relent²⁶. The narrator's voice in Homer too can be briefly but significantly echoed in the direct speech of his characters: Nausicaa is likened to Artemis in the framing narrative, and then by the manipulative Odysseus as he sets out to persuade her to help him, when they meet on the beach of Scherie²⁷. It may not be by chance that both these particularly vivid examples of such manipulation involve πολὺμητις Odysseus. But in previous epic from Homer through the Hellenistic period there is no example – certainly at such length and complexity – of this technique of extended repetition between a framing narrative and a character's speech, such as Nonnus displays here. Nonnus' theological poetics is fully committed to the Paraphrase, for sure – the poetic re-presentation of even the word of God²⁸. But why does Nonnus first describe the soldier's reaction, and then dramatize the soldier's reaction in such similar but carefully varied terms? Why does Nonnus paraphrase Nonnus?

The play of presentation and then first-person re-presentation demonstrates, first of all, the self-conscious flair of *poikilia*, a term which “suggests intricacy, complexity and variety as well as bright, variegated, and multi-coloured ornamentation”²⁹. Nonnus' treatment of Homer and the tradition of poetry stemming from Homer has been increasingly appreciated as a brilliant stylistic manipulation of the formulas and formulations of expectation. Here we see Nonnus varying, manipulating, rewriting *his own* verse, as the narrator's description is expanded and redrafted in the character's account of the same scene. The repetition allows a significant change of perspective. The first version is replayed now in a different voice and with increased expressiveness, as the self-representation of necrophiliac desire is imagined. The bizarre lust for a dead and shockingly uncovered naked girl is gone over with an increasingly self-aware discomfort (44): ξῆνον ἔχω καὶ ἄπιστον πόθον, reflects the soldier, “I have” – ἔχω, again, as in 27 and 46 – “a strange and unbelievable longing”. His desire is indeed strange and specified as such by the lover himself – remember when Daphnis in Longus' novel *Daphnis and Chloe*

26 — The best discussion remains Lynn-George 1987.

27 — As discussed in Goldhill 1991: 66-8.

28 — Roberts 1985, though almost entirely on Latin texts, is useful on the history of the Paraphrase as a form. Paraphrase always comes with a hint of uselessness: Theon 62 10 writes that “Paraphrase is not, as some people have said or opined, useless”. Quintillian 10. 5.9. notes the usefulness of paraphrasing oneself as an exercise in *copia* and *variatio*. But the paraphrase, as discussed by such a rhetorical tradition, is in prose, and either of prose or of verse.

29 — Hopkinson 1994: 10.

finally has sexual intercourse with Lycainion, he does precisely οὐδὲν ξενόν, “nothing strange”, as “nature” takes over his education; and the term ἄπιστον links the soldier’s desire into the genre of paradoxology, like an anecdote from Aelian, as if the lover knows he will become not just ἀοιδιμός, as Helen recognizes for herself and Paris as lovers, but a paradigm of the incredible for poets to come, an anecdote from the distant and strange land of India, where unbelievable things are to be found³⁰. His desire is “strange and unbelievable” most pressingly, however, because the familiar clichés of erotic frustration apply but only in a perverse way to the forbidden love for a dead maenad. The grotesqueness of the scene is precisely located in the all too easy application of such familiar tropes to such an unfamiliar and unpleasant desire – introduced as if it were no more than another case of the paradigmatic Achilles and Penthesilea, not strange and unbelievable, but a well-known scene of epic convention.

In the second part of his speech (47-53), the soldier goes on to imagine what the girl herself would say. After Nonnus dramatizes the self-representation of the necrophiliac, he has the necrophiliac dramatize how his beloved would respond to him. He splits his response, imagining his desire viewed from the perspective of its object, dramatizing his own desire from elsewhere. Again, this is a grotesque inversion of the *topoi* of erotic poetry, for all that male poets love to put words into their women’s mouths. As Propertius imagines how Cynthia rises from the dead to upbraid him for not lamenting her adequately at her funeral, itself a rewrite of his drunken return to her asleep in bed – like a maenad, in his eyes³¹ –, so here the girl in the soldier’s *prosopeia* rejects his advances and demands that he not touch her clothes, and not “fondle [ἄμφαφόων, often of weapons but also of Hector’s dead body in *Iliad* 22. 373] my wound, which you made” (53). Usually, the language of wounding is used to articulate the trauma of desire, the emotional piercing by Eros’ weapons; here the language of wounding is physical and military, and precisely embodied in the verb, “fondle” – and yet also still a projection of the lover’s frustration. What makes the scene so grotesque is not merely the desire to fondle the dead body with erotic intent, but also the way in which the clichés of desire are literalized, and thus not merely defamiliarized, but also made discomfiting. Even in perversion, it seems to say, desire is always a cliché; even perversion can sound like a familiar classicism.

30 — On the ξενόν in *Daphnis and Chloe*, see Goldhill 1995: 25-45; on Helen as ἀοιδιμός, see *Il.* 6. 358; on ἄπιστα, see Antonius Diogenes *Ta Huper Thulen Apista*; or Lucian’s *Veræ Historiæ*; or Aelian’s announcement of *paradoxa* to come *Hist Anim.* 1.1, the importance of which theme for later antiquity is now well discussed by Ni-Mheallaigh 2014.

31 — Lively 2010; Janan 2001.

Yet touch her he still does: ἀλλὰ ποθοβλήτοιο τεοῦ χροδὸς ἔλκος ἀφάσσω, “As I trace the wound on your strikingly desirable flesh...”. As his language spirals into the familiar wish-laden counterfactual laments of the rhetoric of the death-bed, he throws aside his spear and masculine bravery, hopes to find some cure for the girl from Cheiron the centaur, or from Apollo the healer; hopes to find a magic drug to bring her back to life³²; so that he could assuage her “lovely wound”, ἐπήρατον ἔλκος (71). The physical wound, which has taken the place of – or become an icon of – the wound of love, has now become the “lovely wound”, a wound to stimulate *eros*. The wound itself becomes the metonymic object of desire.

And after this last outburst, the still unnamed warrior passes by, νέκυν πόθον ἐν φρεσὶ κεύθων (78), “Hiding his desire for a corpse in his heart”, and disappears into the background of the narrative³³. This last phrase echoes the beginning of the story: “he would have had a desire for a breathless corpse”. The hesitant optative at the start has been seen to be misplaced, as his desire has crossed the boundary of hesitation, though still barred from its complete physical fulfillment. The narrative, framed in this way as an inset story of πόθος, has no further consequence in the *Dionysiaca*. It is a story of an “as if” – he would have had a desire; as if he were Achilles; she would have replied; if only Cheiron could bring her back to life... surrounding the moment of his eroticized touching of her breasts and body with telling disavowals (it is too strange a story to tell otherwise, without the “as if”: what is being normalized here?). Yet the story continues to echo semantically in the narrative of the *Dionysiaca*, not just at Morrheus continues in his divinely inspired pursuit of Chalcomede towards its inevitable frustration, but also, for example, as Dionysus rapes the drunken, unconscious, and bound Aura, who, when she awakes, sees to her shock (48.655) “her bared breasts and the cleft of her uncovered thigh”, στήθεα γυμνώθεντα καὶ ἄσκεπέος πτύχα μηροῦ. Dionysus’ rape is disturbingly allowed to echo with the perversion of the not quite raped dead maenad³⁴.

This story of barely repressed necrophilia is certainly grotesque and unparalleled as an expression of *eros* in Greek or Latin literature. It is in literary terms *xenon*: unexampled in its oddity³⁵. The story and its

32 — On scenes of resurrection and their Christianizing discourse, see Shorrock 2011: 97-100.

33 — The Greek is odd in both opening and closing phrases. Either Nonnus is using πόθον ἔχων and πόθον κεύθων as if they were the verb ποθέω, or πόθον is in apposition to νέκυν: “having a corpse as a desire”, as in 35. 45 where νέκρον is in apposition to ἔρωτα.

34 — See also Nonnus *Dion.* xv 228 of Hymnos’ desire for Nicaia.

35 — Herodotus 5. 92 claims in passing that Periander had slept with his wife after she had died, though this is a slur, and an exemplification of the horror of the tyrant (cf 2.89 for Egyptian anxiety about embalmers and beautiful corpses). Parthenius 31, a truly bizarre text, summarizes the story of Thymoetes who is punished for revealing his wife’s incest, by falling in love with a woman washed up on the beach and having sex with the corpse, stopping only when she becomes too rotten.

context find strange echoes with at least one important Christian text – the *Acts of John*, where the dead body of Drusiana – like Chalcomede’s live body – is prevented from sexual desecration by the supernatural appearance of a snake, before she is miraculously resurrected (*Acts of John* 63-88)³⁶. Nonnus explicitly aligns the story, however, with a celebrated mythic paradigm from art and literature – Achilles and Penthesileia. This is a paradigm from the future in terms of the story time of the *Dionysiaca*, but from the deep past in terms of the time of the composition of the *Dionysiaca*, and from the margins of the Homeric canon. It takes up the paradigm that interweaves love and the moment of death. This appears to have been an archetypal expression of Achilles as a figure of loss – he must always lose his φίλτατος as he is destined to lose his own young life – combined with Achilles as a figure of κάλλος, whose role as ἄριστος of the heroes inevitably links him into a series of stories of desire, as Marco Fantuzzi has beautifully shown³⁷. In this noble tradition, Achilles feels his remorseful desire at the moment that Penthesileia’s face is revealed from her helmet. For Nonnus’ anonymous soldier, however (and the namelessness must express the significant contrast with the immortal glory of Achilles’ name), the desire is fully and shockingly physicalized: it is her body, her naked body, that he desires; and unlike Achilles, he both touches the body erotically, and wishes even to have sex with it. He can imagine her negative response – externalizing the sense of transgression – but this does not prevent him from continuing to fondle her flesh. It is primarily fear of his commander, Deriades, that stops him from consummating his desire.

Yet the scene is constructed first as the description of his feelings by the narrator, and then as the dramatized expression of those feelings. The speech of the soldier paraphrases the narrator’s account in a more expansive manner, increasingly self-aware, and more floridly rhetorical in its wishfulness. The soldier rehearses his description – just as his language rehearses so many of the *topoi* of erotic narrative – with a twist. (Eroticism is always a performance and a recognition of the language of repetition: οὐχ ἄμῃν...μόνοις, ‘Not for us alone...’, as Theocritus begins his tale of Hylas and Heracles (9.1) – or introduces his playful redeployment of the clichés of desire in the mouth of the young Cyclops of old epic, ‘one of

He commits suicide. In Xenophon of Ephesus 5, Aigialeus still sleeps with his embalmed wife, but there is no sex mentioned (although the humour may depend on its suggestion). But there is nothing in our extant sources to match the picturing of necrophiliac desire in this passage. See Gourevich 1982 (who does not cite Nonnus or the *Acts of John*, however).

36 — The story of Drusiana has recently been discussed by Moretti 2012 and the parallel with Chalcomede noted also by Giraudet 2012. The most recent and most detailed discussion, however, is Accorinti 2015 (which, however, does not cite Moretti or Giraudet).

37 — Fantuzzi 2012.

us', ὁ παρ' αὐτῶν (11.7). *Da mi basia milia...*). The soldier performs so many of the familiar verbal gestures of the frustrated lover with all the expected paradoxes of reversal – yet these clichés become defamiliarized in the scene of necrophilia. The wound of love is here a physical wound; his frustration is because she is dead, not because she has shut him out of her house; her coldness is not the coldness of rejection but the coldness of a corpse. If Latin lovers can say 'ut vidi, ut perii, or 'et vidi et perii'³⁸, here death on sight has become an inverted and perverted trope.

The grotesque nature of the scene is formed thus in the tension between the clichés of erotic rhetoric and the 'strange and unbelievable' perversity of the desire they are applied to. The analogy set up with Homeric myth provokes one set of questions: is necrophilia really 'just like' Achilles? Is necrophilia another love story to be articulated in the tropes of erotic poetry? How like a love story is this? How like grim perversity are the clichés of desire? But the repetition with a difference between the narrator's description of the lover's desire and the lover's description of his desire adds a further precise question, however, that captures the cultural tension between a Christianizing and classicizing tradition: what does it now mean to repeat the words of the classical tradition of erotics? How different is a paraphrase? The two sets of questions are interrelated. If Nonnus' narrative poetics engages us in a swirl of mythic paradigms, analogies of each other, in an active reading of the classical tradition, this scene of perverse desire, staged and restaged, also asks what is at stake when such a tradition is paraphrased, repeated, assimilated. This is, perhaps, the most pressing question for a classicizing Christianizing writer.

The paradigm of Achilles, a hero not yet born and already the oldest model of love and death, redrafted into a distorted version of itself, and allowed to echo through the framing narrative, as it turns into the expression of a perverse necrophiliac desire, captures something telling, then, about the limits of the preposterous poetics of Nonnus. Nonnus writes in conscious competition with the past and future – νέοισι καὶ ἀρχεγόνοισιν ἐρίζων, "contending with new and with old" (25. 27) – and the figure of the Trojan war and its heroes echoes throughout his writing in the performance of such a contest. Here the explicit exemplum of a future Achilles is exaggerated, twisted, exposed – written through, put under erasure as it is deployed, *disfigured*. The female body, othered as "another Penthesileia", as it manhandled by the soldier, is marshaled by the text's martial language into a perversely eroticized object – which draws the reader too into an uncomfortable relation with the *topoi* of

38 — Vergil *Ecl* 8.41; Ovid *Her.* 12. 35.

desire, the metaphors by which we love. Preposterous poetics here challenges both the performance of exemplarity and the positioning of the reader.

The erotics of the gaze, the erotics of the gaze at the scene of martyrdom, the erotics of the gaze at the tortured and wounded body of Jesus, the dead body that is beyond death, are a source of intense anxiety and discussion for Christians from the beginnings of Christianity³⁹. Perpetua, who dreams of being stripped naked and becoming a man to wrestle with the devil, is led naked with Felicitas into the arena. The crowd is so shocked to see the young girl and the recent mother, milk still dripping from her breasts, that they demand that they are covered up before they face the beasts. So too Thecla is stripped naked, and then, partially covered, her beauty dismays the crowd. Many a saint's story plays with the erotics of display of the body – Pelagia or Mary of Egypt, say. Contemplation of the martyrs is to embrace such imagery with the arms of the mind, as Augustine puts it, but, normatively, without the damage of erotic (as opposed to positive, spiritual) stimulation. Should, then, the grotesque language of the soldier here in Nonnus be related more precisely to the differently inverted language of Christianity? When the unnamed soldier talks of the 'lovely wound', and handles the wound in the side of the object of his desire, do we hear anything of the new valuation of the dead and wounded body of Christ? I do not mean to suggest that the 'lovely wound', the 'wound in the side', the 'unnamed soldier' reflecting on the wound, is language designed to be some sort of parody or contrast or even recognition of any aspect of the Crucifixion narrative. Rather, I think it might well be worth exploring at greater length how the discourse of the tortured body and the erotic or fixed gaze at the tortured body in later antiquity becomes articulated between the Roman world of the games and the Christian re-appropriation of such imagery, and how therefore the language of sexual violence in the *Dionysiaca* might be comprehended within the changing discourse of later antique religion. Is, for example, the explicit analogy with Achilles designed to produce a narrative of the classical tradition that constructs its sexuality as perverse? Does a paraphrase of the inherited language of desire prevent or mitigate complicity with it?

The scene of necrophilia in Book 35 of the *Dionysiaca* is deeply unpleasant and disturbing to modern readers, and unparalleled in our extant ancient texts, full though they are of forms of sexual violence towards women. As an initial critical move, I have tried here to read this scene within the context of Nonnus' particular poetics, not least to

39 — Brown 1988 remains seminal, and has seeded a large subsequent bibliography, including Castelli 2004, especially 104-53; Burrus 2004; 2008; Cohen 1998; Cooper 1998.

explore how the expression of gender and desire is shaped by poetics. But we still need a full-scale reading of later antique writing that can appreciate in greater depth how the shifting discourse of the erotics of death and the display of the body is integrally part of the language of the time, a discourse where the interplay between classicizing and Christianizing traditions produces a particularly fertile and febrile space of the imaginary⁴⁰.

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