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Athena and Herakles a Divine Couple?
The Use Of Ancient Sexual Artistic Conventions In Context

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Athena and Herakles a Divine Couple?
The Use Of Ancient Sexual Artistic Conventions In Context

By

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Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2018

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This paper seeks to contextualize the representations of the relationship of Athena and Herakles in art within the established cultural and artistic practices and the artistic conventions employed to convey meaning. Artistic representations of Athena and Herakles repeatedly make use of sexually charged types in extant art, with Athena frequently reversing gender norms and seemingly establishing herself as a sexually dominant partner of Herakles. Such artistic representations appear at odds with extant literary sources, and may represent unknown narratives, or interpretations of extant myths. Possible readings of these sexualized representations of Athena and Herakles' relationship are potentially numerous, but they show that their relationship was considered to exceed that of the patron-hero relationship – if only in popular representation.

Athena holds an important role in the ancient world, not only as perhaps its most celebrated goddess (if not deity), but also as the most frequent patron of heroes depicted in both ancient life and myth. As a goddess of many crafts, from pottery and horse-bridles to shipbuilding and weaving, she played an integral role in both public and private life. She enjoys not only a role as the patron of many crafts, but also of cities – the most famous of which is Athens, serving as both its namesake and divine progenitor of its autochthonous peoples. Athena also serves as the patron goddess of many famous heroes such as Perseus, Bellerophon, Jason, and Odysseus. Her interventions in support of them are legendary, and is renowned for her gifts which range from the shield she provided Perseus with which he defeated Medusa, or the horse-bit with which Bellerophon tamed the Pegasus. She helped Jason and his fellow Argonauts to such an extent throughout their journey (including the construction of the Argo and the wooing of Medea) that they built a shrine to her on the island of Karpathos. She is famously generous, and infamously cruel, exemplified nowhere better than in her cunning exploits throughout the Epic Cycle and its auxiliary tales – which serve to catalog both the Trojan War and the extraneous exploits of its many heroes. She is the occasional companion, foil, and guide to Odysseus, aiding him in episodes such as the funerary competition for Achilles' armor as well as his eventual return to Ithaca, facilitating his reconciliation with Penelope and his defeat of and eventual peace with the infamous suitors. Meanwhile, she is the bitter opponent of heroes the likes of Ajax, Pandaros, and Hektor, plaguing them with her cunning and fatal cruelty in their most desperate moments. Athena even sends a storm to wreck and scatter the whole of the Achaean fleet in a rage after their sack of Troy in recompense for Ajax the Lesser's the impious violation of her sanctuary and the Palladion – all despite her having aided them in the war effort.¹

¹ Gantz 1993: 86

Her favors and whims form the backbone of many tales in ancient myth, and she proves to be friend or foe (or occasionally both) to many more prominent figures in ancient myth the likes of Achilles, Telemachus, Orestes, Arachne, and Theseus.

But of all the heroes she aided throughout the whole canon of ancient myth and legend, none of her heroes proved more famous, or were more beloved by her than her mighty Herakles. Nearly half of all surviving Greek mythological scenes before the 5th century BC feature Herakles – a ratio that far exceeds any other character.² Athena had a special affinity with Herakles, the paramount Grecian hero *par excellence*, proving to be his greatest ally and friend throughout his life. Their relationship is regularly considered as one of dependence and friendship.³ Herakles is the most famous hero of ancient myth, and his close relationship with its most famous deities are a given – beloved son of Zeus, foe of Hera, friend of Athena, drinking buddy of Dionysos, comrade to Hermes, thief of Apollo, dog-walker of Hades. While Herakles' exploits eventually lead him into confrontations alongside or against the whole of the Greek pantheon – and a few other pantheons to boot (here's looking at you, Bousiris) – no other deity with which is he more often associated or seen with in both ancient art and literature than bright-eyed Athena.

The goddess Athena and the deified hero Herakles are clearly among the most popular figures of ancient mythology as they are the featured subjects of countless works of ancient art and literature. Throughout Herakles' mortal life, from his birth to his death, Athena was there for him as a near constant protector, helper, and friend.⁴ She shielded him as a baby from Hera's

² Schefold and Giuliani 1992: 33-35

³ Deacy 2005: 40

⁴ Deacy 2005: 39

malevolence and aided him throughout his labors and extraneous exploits.⁵ The wealth of vase paintings and other artistic representations of Herakles' labors that also feature Athena is indicative of her integral role. The frequency with which Athena appears in the artistic renditions of Herakles' exploits, and the intimacy with which they are depicted leads us to question what is the ancient conception of Athena and Herakles' relationship? We shall see that their relationship is represented in art through the use of sexually charged types, gestures, and inscriptions. There seems to be a disparity between the artistic and literary traditions of Athena and Herakles' relationship, but by examining the extant art alongside the extant literature, we may be able to find an answer as to why that may be the case.

Our primary body of evidence for this study of the artistic representations of Athena and Herakles will be the abundance of vase paintings that feature the two of them together. Across the three volumes of the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (commonly referred to as the "LIMC") that catalog the depictions of Athena and Herakles (volumes II-2, IV-2, and V-2), there are 231 vases pictured that depict the two of them together, 68 of which I will contend that are sexually charged in nature. While the LIMC does not provide a complete survey of ancient art, and the images included in the volumes dedicated to photographs of some of the vases discussed are likewise only a partial survey of extant vases, they provide an invaluable starting point in the study of ancient figurative pottery and any interpretations thereof. However, no analysis of ancient pottery would be complete without at least a cursory discussion of the purpose of such pottery as an artistic but also commercial enterprise.⁶ The various types of figurative vases discussed within this paper and many others are known predominantly for their

⁵ Morford, Lenardon, and Sham 2014: 574-576

⁶ Lynch 2009: 161

use in the symposium, or elaborate drinking parties.⁷ As such, vases are predominantly used for the preparation, storage, serving, and drinking of wine.⁸ The images that adorn such earthenware commonly represent scenes of myth, providing the attendees of the symposium with any of a number of interpretive possibilities, ranging from representations of myth, a display of patriotism, the commemoration of a notable event, or even as simple as the expression of personal taste.⁹ Interpreting figurative vases therefore becomes a complicated matter, as these scenes must be treated with a deal of care to account for such variance in artistic and commercial intent, yet further complicated by the unknown demands of the thriving export markets, as discussed thoroughly elsewhere by a litany of scholars.¹⁰ These vases, while not quite representative of a canonical or homogenous interpretation of myth, are certainly representative of popular culture surrounding these stories that are very clearly near and dear to the hearts of the citizenry, the producer, or at the very least the owner of said vase. If we may judge the demand for artistic representations by the twofold means of the quantity and quality of the supply – even just by perusing those cataloged within the LIMC – figurative vases that depict Athena and Herakles proved to be an incredibly popular commodity.

What we do know for certain from both art and literature is that Athena and Herakles' relationship is one that lasts from start to finish – at least for Herakles. Attempting to nail down a chronological timeline for most any series of events in Greek myth is nigh impossible – with the birth of Athena as a prime example. Some versions of Athena's birth cast Hephaistos in the crucial role of midwife: whereby he provides the axe-blow-to-the-head to “alleviate” Zeus' headache, thus facilitating the birth to Athena. Meanwhile, some versions of Hephaistos' birth

⁷ Lynch 2014: 233-234

⁸ Ibid: 234-263

⁹ Lynch 2012: 536-539

¹⁰ Ibid: 540

tell us that Hera – jealous of Zeus birthing Athena allegedly by himself – gives birth to Hephaistos to spite Zeus, but this paradoxically is the very same Hephaistos who helps in the birth of Athena. It is not possible to impose a stringent chronology into Greek myth. However, in Herakles life we find an Athena who is present from start to finish. Athena shields Herakles not only from the wrath of Hera as an infant (in some versions, convincing Hera to suckle the newborn demigod), but also sides with him against her fellow gods, including Ares, Apollo, and Artemis, on the battlefield¹¹. Athena and Herakles are even featured maturing together in the metopes of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia (Figure 1, a reconstruction of 12 metopes from the Temple of Olympian Zeus, depicting the 12 canonical labors of Herakles, ca. 460 BC). Across the twelve metopes we witness the two of them at first depicted as a beardless boy and young girl subsequently transform together into a virile bearded hero and a fully arrayed warrior goddess.¹² Theirs is a deep, profound, life-long friendship, a relationship exemplified in Sophocles’ portrayal of Herakles crying out to Athena in his death thralls.¹³

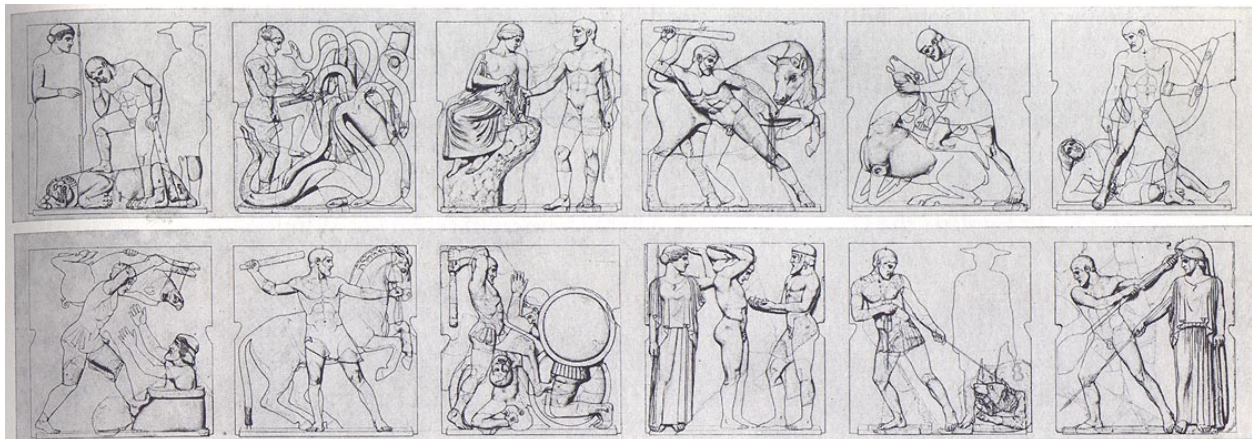


Figure 1

¹¹ Deacy 2005: 39

¹² Boardman 1985

¹³ Sophocles: Trachiniae 1030

The friendship of Athena and Herakles is further evidenced in Athena's vested interest in his deification. Athena's active involvement in his apotheosis cannot be ascribed to her on account of her patronage of Herakles, not only because so few of her chosen heroes embark on such a journey, but also because Herakles is the only of Athena's many heroes to have made the transition from mortal to immortal successfully. Renowned heroes such as Odysseus, Jason, and Perseus, who - like Herakles - were not only exemplars of heroism but also went so far as to even travel to the underworld and back – a feat reserved for only the greatest of heroes – still failed to achieve immortality (beyond that provided by song). Tydeus, one of the Seven Against Thebes (and featured in Aeschylus' play of the same name), is stated by Aeschylus to have been considered for deification by Athena, but in a fit of hubristic impiety Tydeus devours the grey matter of his slain foe, Melanippos – and for this reason Athena refuses to grant the mortally wounded Tydeus immortality.¹⁴ Such egregiously cannibalistic behavior is itself a bright line in terms of obviously and horrendously improper conduct that would naturally warrant the revocation of Athena's offer of immortality. But where all these other mortals, demigods, and otherwise divine-offspring ultimately failed in achieving for themselves immortality, Herakles' apotheosis succeeds on account of his unique combination of semi-divine nature, herculean labors, earthly suffering, and divine patronage, all of which combine to rightfully warrant his deification. There are 198 extant vase paintings known to depict Herakles' apotheosis in the Beazley Archives alone.

A common composition for scenes of Herakles' apotheosis is that of Athena taking him by the wrist in what is known as the *cheir' epi karpo*, or "hand-on-wrist" gesture.¹⁵ While one may find some similar scenes featuring Hermes with Herakles (though none are known to the

¹⁴ Gantz 1993: 518

¹⁵ Clark 2003: 133

author to depict the hand-on-wrist gesture), Athena is by far the more common figure to accompany Herakles during his apotheosis.¹⁶ One such example is that of the famous black-figure cup, now in London, that features Zeus, Herakles, and Athena (Figure 2, LIMC: Athena 429, ABV 168). The unbelievably small yet intricate scene has a rather dynamic composition, with Athena clasping by the wrist a seemingly (and uncharacteristically) passive Herakles, who lags behind and is drawn forward, while Zeus remains seated.¹⁷ This composition and this gesture of Athena, her dragging Herakles by the wrist, is a typical formulaic composition commonplace in many abduction scenes.¹⁸ This formula, which usually features a male who grabs and pulls the wrist of a female, is common throughout Archaic and Classic depictions of abductions, evidenced in scenes such as those of Paris and Helen, Zeus and Ganymede, or Hades and Persephone.¹⁹ Let us consider this scene, featuring the *cheir' epi karpo* formula, in context with others of its type.



Figure 2

¹⁶ Gantz 1993: 461

¹⁷ Schefold and Giuliani 1992: 37, 41

¹⁸ McNiven 2000: 128

¹⁹ Deacy 2005: 42

There is no abduction tale more famous to the Greeks than that of Helen of Troy. The story of “the face that launched a thousand ships” and the ensuing consequences is easily the most important story to the ancient Greeks, because the Epic Cycle (of which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are but a part) proved to be absolutely foundational to a unified ancient Greek language, culture, religion, history, and identity. On the following red-figure crater (Figure 3, LIMC: Helene 166) we find Helen being abducted by the Trojan prince, Paris, while flanked by attendants. Helen is crowned by a winged Eros, a common attendant in wedding scenes whereby he signifies or bestows erotic desire.²⁰ This scene clearly follows the *cheir’ epi karpo* schema, with the proper hand-on-wrist gesture and composition.



Figure 3

On the next red-figured Attic column crater, now in Geneva (Figure 4, LIMC: Herakles 1691) we find Herakles again, but instead of him being led on by the wrist by Athena, he is now leading his wife-to-be Deianira. Again we find the pair flanked by attendants with torches which further mark this scene as a wedding procession. The presence of attendants as indicative of marriage is also applicable in the previous scene showing the abduction of Helen by Paris.

²⁰ Oakley and Sinos: 31

Again, the formula is followed, with the bridegroom leading his bride-to-be by the wrist. In fact, this hand-on-wrist gesture has been described as “a conventional way to indicate future or present sexual intimacy between women and men”.²¹

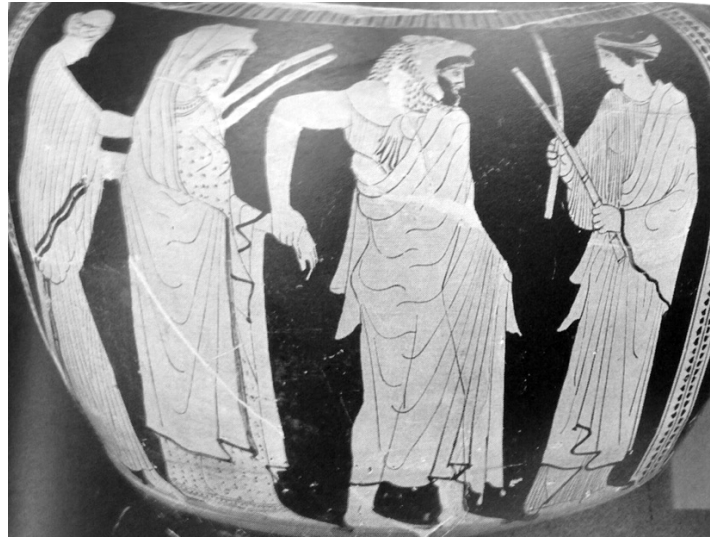


Figure 4

In the last of our scenes analyzing the use of this gesture as indicative of abduction, we find yet another example of Athena leading Herakles on by the wrist, in much the same composition as the last two scenes. On this red-figure Attic stamnos from Vulci (Figure 5, LIMC: Herakles 2873, ARV: 217), we find the central figures of Athena and Herakles again flanked by torch-bearing attendants – attendants which signaled in the previous two scenes that such a scene was a marital scene – while Athena, again, leads Herakles on by the wrist towards Zeus, who stands at the left with his arm outstretched. The presence of these marriage-signaling attendants in this scene of Athena and Herakles is curious, or perhaps the use of this composition that has been used to denote marital abductions to represent Herakles’ apotheosis by means of Athena is what we should be curious about. Opposed to the scenes of Helen and Paris or

²¹ Clark 2003: 136

Herakles and Deianira, in the first and last of these scenes which feature Athena and Herakles we see an inversion of standard gender norms with Athena, a woman (albeit a goddess), abducting Herakles, a man. It has been suggested that the use of this composition seemingly casts Herakles as the victim of rape and Athena as the rapist.²² Although it should be clarified that the use of such an abduction schema is not limited to non-consensual unions, but also to consensual unions as well.²³



Figure 5

While the use of this abduction trope for marital scenes and ceremonies has been well established elsewhere, the use of such a schema to depict Herakles' apotheosis seems appropriate here too, since apotheosis stories themselves and the depictions thereof are often erotic in nature. For example, Ganymede, the handsome Trojan boy, was abducted by the eagle of Zeus and subsequently deified that he might become the immortal cupbearer of Olympus and the sexual plaything of Zeus. Hylas - Herakles' own effeminate erotic boy companion and fellow Argonaut

²² Deacy 2005: 41

²³ Oakley and Sinos 1993: 32

– found immortality through abduction when he was seized by water nymphs as the Argonauts were en route to find the Golden Fleece, and thus became the nymphs’ erotic companion presumably for eternity. The road to immortality for mortals is often fraught with sexual peril, and in such scenes it seems even mighty Herakles can be seen as subject to similar peril at the hand of his abductor, much like Ganymede and Hylas. But casting Herakles as the victim of Athena’s sexual advances is curious given that Athena is the premier virgin goddess of Greek mythology and Herakles its hero *par excellence*, and yet these two scenes are far from the only depictions that may imply a sexual aspect to the relationship between Athena and Herakles.

Not only might a viewer infer Athena’s sexual dominance over Herakles by means of their adherence to the formulaic composition (as we have seen in Figures 2 and 5) but the viewer may also rightly assume Athena’s sexual aggression towards Herakles as seen on the following red-figure neck amphora, now residing in London (Figure 6, LIMC: 3094, ARV²: 670, BM: E 321), where Athena chases after Herakles with spear drawn.²⁴ Herakles flees from her whilst



Figure 6

²⁴ Deacy 2005: 43

covering his otherwise exposed genitalia with his club. The abundance of phallic symbolism in the scene are hard to miss. This scene is like many other rape scenes wherein we usually see an armed man, an erect satyr, or lustful god pursuing a frightened woman or nymph fleeing their oft unwanted advances.²⁵ This is yet another formulaic scene, that is used to capture the moment before the predator overtakes the prey. In such scenes, the formula is that the pursuer usually extends a phallic symbol, the pursued frequently extends their arms in an attempt to flee, whilst the two of them make eye contact – which signifies the moment before the prey is overtaken by the predator.²⁶ Again, we will consider this scene in context with its type.



Figure 7

Much as the abduction myth of Helen by Paris is famous in ancient Greece, so too is the abduction of Persephone by Hades. This particular abduction myth is more frequently depicted by means of a much more dramatic composition, with Hades in his chariot sweeping Persephone off her feet by grabbing her round the waist – leaving her upper torso flying backwards flailing

²⁵ Deacy 2005: 44

²⁶ McNiven 2000: 127

wildly and desperately in the air as she calls for help. But on this red-figure amphora in Naples (Figure 7, LIMC: Hades 77, ARV²: 647) the abduction is represented instead through the use of our second formula of gesture and phallic symbolism that denote the *Liebesverfolgung*, or “love-chase.”²⁷ Hades chases down Persephone, both with the formulaic animated gestures, but Hades is also replete with both rod and cornucopia – the horn of which forms a very conspicuous phallus. Meanwhile, returning once more to the Helen and Paris narrative, on the following red-figure crater, now in New York (Figure 8, LIMC: Helene 52) we find an almost identical composition to that of our first example of this *Liebesverfolgung* love-chase formula, where we saw Athena chase after Herakles with her spear, but we now see Paris chasing Helen with his javelins, which also conspicuously protrude from Paris’ pelvis through Helen’s.



Figure 8

Our last example of this love-chase formula is indicative of the fluidity of both gender and sexual orientation in such scenes. On this red-figure neck amphora at Oxford (Figure 9, LIMC: Ganymedes 20), we see Ganymede’s abduction by Zeus play out before our eyes, a scene which makes use of the same composition as the other examples of its type. Zeus bears down on

²⁷ LIMC Vol V-I: 380

Ganymede with his phallic rod protruding. Between the four love-chase scenes that we have surveyed we have now seen a woman pursue a man, men pursue women, and a man pursue a man. Such scenes show that the sex of the predator and the prey are fluid, while instead the gendered roles are paramount, as seen here and in the various scenes featuring Athena and Herakles.²⁸ While that is not to say that these scenes are employed equally across the sexes, as there are many more depictions that make use of this formula that cast a biologically-male as the predator and a biologically-female as the prey than the other way around, as is the case with the Athena and Herakles love-chase scenes.

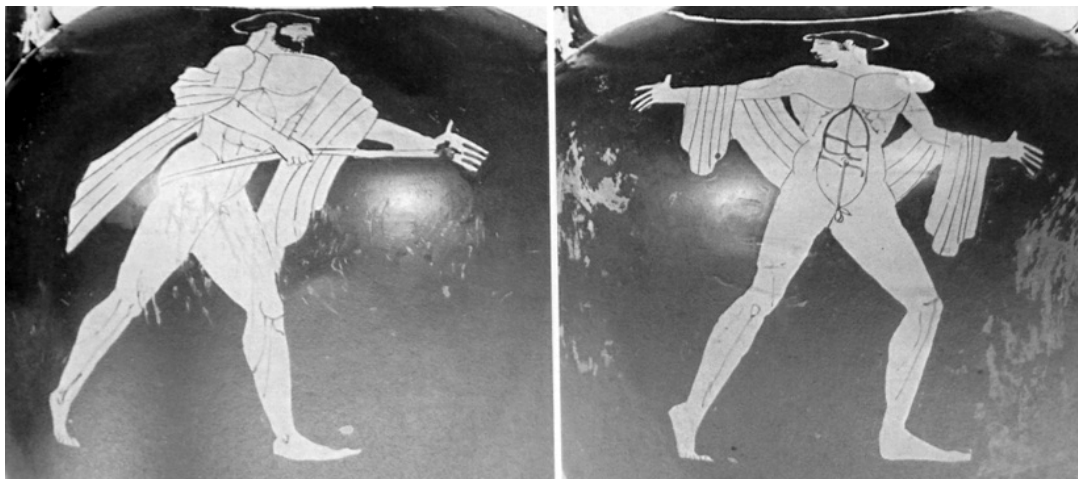


Figure 9

In fact, the abduction and subsequent rape of an unmarried woman has been interpreted as a means of domestication or taming that serves as a kind of twisted prelude to matrimony, as an unmarried woman was regarded as being a “wild thing that must be tamed by marriage”.²⁹ The “taming” of a woman before marriage is a common trope in Greek myth, such as when Zeus gave the hero Peleus permission to marry the goddess Thetis, or when Zeus granted Hades permission to wed Persephone, the only requirement was that they must physically dominate

²⁸ Deacy 2005: 41

²⁹ McNiven 2000: 127

their respective woman by means of successfully subduing them. Hephaistos made such a pass at Athena after having received permission from Zeus in recompense for Zeus' throwing Hephaistos off Olympus, but Hephaistos proved ineffectual in "taming" Athena.³⁰ Athena became the object of Hephaistos' desire when she went to Hephaistos to ask him to fashion for her a new weapon, when he suddenly assaulted her and attempted unsuccessfully to rape her, resulting in his premature ejaculation onto her leg. Athena wipes Hephaistos' semen off onto the ground, which causes a child to spring forth from it resulting in the creation of Erechthonios – a kind of joint offspring of Hephaistos, Athena, and Gaia, who eventually becomes a legendary king of Athens and autochthonous ancestor of Athenians.³¹

Abduction is thereby integral to the marital process in ancient myth, whereby the abduction or ritual imitation thereof serve as a show of physical, sexual, and masculine dominance over the abductee.³² The inversion of this gendered paradigm with Athena abducting Herakles is noteworthy not so much in the novelty of Athena behaving like a man - as she often self-identifies.³³ Nor is it a novelty in and of itself for Herakles' to behave like a woman – as he has also identified himself, especially when considering his year of effeminate servitude to Omphale.³⁴ What is striking is the implication that Athena – the virgin goddess *par excellence* – is sexually active in the taming and deification of Herakles.

While the potential implications for such depictions of Athena and Herakles may be up for debate, this next vase actually explicitly depicts Herakles and Athena embarking on a wedding procession. Beginning in the mid 6th century B.C., coinciding with the Peisistratid

³⁰ Gantz 1993: 77

³¹ Gantz 1993: 77, 235-239

³² McNiven: 127-129

³³ Aeschylus. *Oresteia*. 737-739

³⁴ Sophocles. *Trachinae*. 1062, 1071; Gantz 1993: 439-442

period, the depiction of Herakles' apotheosis shifted from the *cheir' epi karpou* abduction type typical of depictions from the Archaic period to showing the marital celebration itself in the ensuing Classical period.³⁵ This type becomes relatively more common thereafter, showing Herakles as he readies the team of horses for Athena's chariot in preparation for the imminent procession, the two of them in the chariot together, or Herakles lifting Athena up into the chariot, as seen on the following black-figure Attic amphora ascribed to the Priam Painter that is now residing in Oxford (Figure 10, LIMC: Herakles 1423, CVA: Great Britain 409 5 (212), ABV: 331). These compositions are yet another set of types used to convey marriage celebrations. While marriage and abduction scenes have been shown to be useful for also showing apotheosis scenes, this scene is complicated by an inscription transposed in the negative space above and between Athena and Herakles' heads- one that has previously proven "difficult" for scholars.



Figure 10

³⁵ Boardman 1972: 59-61

The inscription reads “Herakleous Kore”, and has inspired ongoing debate.³⁶ Beazley contends that the two words “Herakleous” and “Kore” ought not be read together - despite their composition and grammatical forms - because the translation when read together would be “Herakles’ girl”.³⁷ Boardman quotes Beazley as saying that the “only possible explanation [for the inscription] is that the painter is copying an original in which Athena was styled not” thereby suggesting this is a copy of another vase that Athena was not intended to be depicted in – though the abundance of such types explicitly depicting Athena with Herakles seems to counter such a claim.³⁸ Boardman, meanwhile, contends that the inscription very clearly should be read together as “Herakles’ girl,” not only on account of the composition of the inscription and its grammar - which suggests that it be read together - but also because he proposes that it is a probable reference to the events that culminated in the tyrant Peisistratos’ (second) rise to power in Athens circa 556 BC – a suggestion that has not won supporters.³⁹ Boardman credits the majority of Herakles’ apotheosis scenes wherein Herakles is accompanying Athena in or beside a chariot as evocative of how Peisistratos, accompanied by a beautiful woman dressed as Athena, paraded through Athens up to the Parthenon to declare himself as the rightful ruler of Athens after he had been previously exiled for earlier attempts at establishing a tyranny in Athens.⁴⁰ Alan Shapiro, however, disagrees with Boardman’s inference that Peisistratos and this historical event were so influential on not only the art of his time but also long afterwards when this type was still in use, noting that such apotheosis scenes of Herakles appeared both before and after the reign of the Peisistratids and as such were therefore unaffected by Boardman’s suggested Peisistratid

³⁶ Schefold and Giuliani 1992: 40

³⁷ Boardman 1972: 64-65

³⁸ Ibid: 65

³⁹ Ibid: 65-68

⁴⁰ Herodotus: 1:59-60

propaganda machinations.⁴¹ Yet another explanation for such an inscription could be the illiteracy of the painter, though such an explanation seems unlikely.⁴²

Meanwhile, Susan Deacy, like Shapiro, concurs with Boardman's assessment that the inscription ought to be read together and also agrees with Shapiro in his dismissal of Boardman's Peisistratid connection, citing yet another vase on which there is a similar scene of Athena and Herakles that also bears the same inscription "Herakles' girl".⁴³ Schefold, Boardman, and Beazley find such an inscription troublesome not only on account of Herakles' name being in the genitive (implying possession) but also because within the context of a marital scene the translation would not only be "Herakles' girl" but in such a context "kore" would translate as "bride."⁴⁴ The inscription therefore, when taken together and in this context would translate as "Herakles' bride." A difficult inscription indeed. In fact "Herakles" in the genitive (and thus implying possession of Athena) is scandal enough for Beazley – and rightfully so. But even if such a translation may prove troublesome by defying our preconceptions of these characters, it exists nonetheless and ought not be ignored. Given the sexually charged depictions of Athena and Herakles, the composition of the scene, the grammar of the inscription, and the existence of others like it, I contend that the inscription must be read as "Herakles' bride" even if it defies convention, or perhaps even because of its defiance of convention. But we have "about twenty-five examples" of this type showing Athena and Herakles (though sometimes also with Hermes) to represent Herakles' apotheosis.⁴⁵ While the possibility remains that such depictions could be private commissions, whereby the bride and groom are depicted as idealized characters from

⁴¹ Shapiro 1989: 162

⁴² Kilmer Develin 2001: 30

⁴³ Deacy 2005: 45

⁴⁴ Schefold and Giuliani 1992: 40; Liddell and Scott 1977: 388

⁴⁵ Gantz 1993: 461

myth, such a choice would still betray the idea that Athena and Herakles are a divine couple, the likes of Zeus and Hera, Dionysios and Ariadne, Peleus and Thetis, or any other such couples that a bride and groom would choose to have themselves represented as in such a commemoration of their union.⁴⁶



Figure 11

As we have seen, Athena and Herakles' relationship is significantly more complicated than has previously been established. Shapiro notes that given the existence of so many scenes depicting the two at rest we find "Herakles joined with Athena in dexiosis... illustrates a certain parity: Athena accepts and welcomes Herakles not just as a protégé but an equal".⁴⁷ Intimate and tender scenes depicting them at rest, rather than just scenes of their exploits, are familiar in ancient art, such as this famous red-figure cup from Vulci now in Munich (Figure 11, LIMC: Athena 187, ARV²: 972), showing Athena and Herakles – their instruments of war set aside – at

⁴⁶ Lynch 2012: 538-539

⁴⁷ Shapiro 1989: 160

rest, Athena pouring Herakles a drink. This and the following scenes (Figures 11-15), proving to be particularly touching pieces of the two in a very well earned state of rest and relaxation. The Beazley Archive's Pottery Database lists at least 33 scenes they have identified that represent Athena and Herakles at rest, ranging from them playing instruments together to singing and sharing wine.



Figure 12

The next two scenes are from a bilingual Attic amphora from Vulci and now in Munich, featuring not only a black-figure scene but also a red-figure scene by the Andokides Painter of Athena and Herakles at rest (Figures 12 and 13, respectively, LIMC: Athena 523b, ABV: 255). What makes this beautifully adorned bilingual vase of particular interest to us is not only the tenderness of the scenes, but also the sensuality. On both sides of Andokides' bilingual amphora, Herakles lies in repose, suggestively positioned with drink in hand, his sword and bow hung up, his mantle cast aside. On the black-figure side, drooping clusters of grapes suggestively form phallic clusters; one especially evocative grape cluster droops as to point towards Herakles'

loins. Herakles and Athena share a smile. On the red-figure side Athena and Herakles are alone, and she extends a flower to him. This small gesture, the extension of a flower, is a powerful erotic motif in ancient art, whereby the *erastes*, or lover, extends a flower to his or her beloved *eromenos*.⁴⁸ This scene shows a level of intimacy “that exceeds any other of Athena’s relationships”.⁴⁹ We find that the exchange of flowers in this *erastes-eromenos* relationship is used with some frequency to depict the relationship between Herakles and Athena, as seen again on this black-figure oinochoe, now in Paris (Figure 14, LIMC: Herakles 3109, ABV: 230), Athena again extending flowers to Herakles, with Hermes behind him, while Herakles’ club droops conspicuously out in front of him. This giving of flowers seems to be reciprocal, sometimes with Athena as the *erastes* presenting the flowers, sometimes with Herakles. This fluidity is indicative of Shapiro’s claim that Herakles has ceased to be the mere beneficiary of Athena’s benevolent patronage and instead has become her equal. Not only does this scene



Figure 13

⁴⁸ Lissarrague 2001: 46-52

⁴⁹ Deacy 2008: 67



Figure 14

display an *erastes-eromenos* relationship between Athena and Herakles, but the bilingual vase by the Andokides Painter (Figures 12 and 13) seemingly presents the two of them in the *thalamos*, or the bridal chamber, with Hermes serving (in Figure 12) as their *thyroros*, or guard of the bedchamber to protect the lovers from disruption during the consummation of their nuptial union.⁵⁰

In this final red-figure scene on the following bell crater currently in London (Figure 15, LIMC: Herakles 3409, ARV²: 1448), we find Athena and Herakles again at rest, now accompanied by a number of unidentified revelers. The two are presented extremely close, locked in an intimate stare, while a winged Eros presides above. This winged Eros is of profound interest for our purposes, Eros being the ancient symbol of divine incarnation of love, and as seen with the earlier scene with Helen and Paris, imparts erotic desire. While we understand from extant literature that Athena does not employ the crafts of Aphrodite, ancient artists make frequent use of these sexual conventions to represent Athena and Herakles together. To what end

⁵⁰ Oakley Sinos 1993: 35-37

does it serve to portray Athena, the virgin goddess par excellence, as sexually aggressive to Herakles? Why present her as sexualized at all?



Figure 15

A sexualized Athena may be novel to us, but representing a “sexy” Athena was seemingly not taboo in the ancient mind, as evidenced by her representations in art as subject to the changing fashions which themselves represent shifting erogenous zones, the inherent allure of virginity, her participation in the Judgment of Paris, and various innuendos made at her expense in ancient literature.⁵¹ Even in myth we have another encounter in addition to Hephaistos’ assault whereby Athena was the object of desire, this time by the famous seer Tiresias. Tiresias was the foremost among the sages of ancient myth (so valued as to be sought for his supernatural wisdom even in death), and was so famed not only for his wisdom, but also for his divine (mis)adventures, which stem predominantly from him being drawn into petty

⁵¹ Llewellyn-Jones: 246; Irwin: 16; Gantz 1993: 86; Discussed at length in Carl A. Anderson’s 2008 essay, “Athena’s Big Finger: An Unnoticed Sexual Joke in Aristophanes’ Knights”

conflicts between Zeus and Hera (and other times on account of his intense, irrational, and insatiable hate of snakes).⁵² But the most decidedly important of his misadventures is whereby he gains his wisdom at the expense of his sight. In one telling of the story, Tiresias loses his sight as punishment for witnessing Athena bathing, who in turn takes his sight for the transgression but gives him supernatural insight as a concession to his mother, the nymph Chariclo, with whom she was bathing.⁵³ Meanwhile, in Kallimakhos we find this very scene of Athena and Chariclo bathing used to depict what is seemingly a homo-erotic relationship shown between the goddess and the nymph.⁵⁴ As such we may infer that the subject of Athena's sexuality was far from taboo.

A possible explanation for the sexual aggression of Athena towards Herakles in the figurative vases we have surveyed may prove to be an emphasis of her gender identity. The conceptualization of virginity has been a cultural construct designed predominantly to regulate the sexuality of young women in the liminal transitory period from that of childhood to married woman within patriarchal systems.⁵⁵ As we have observed and discussed throughout our analysis of these sexually charged scenes, sexual dominance is likewise a highly gendered while biological sex proves to be fluid in such representations.⁵⁶ Athena is thereby decidedly "unpossessed" as exemplified by her rejection of Hephaestus' advances. While the female is conquered and subsequently loses her virginity, no such loss occurs for the male, who merely has penetrative sex for the first time (presumably of many). As such, displaying Athena not only as unconquered but casting her as a conqueror (a conqueror of conquerors, no less, through casting

⁵² Gantz 1993: 529

⁵³ Gantz 1993: 530

⁵⁴ Hadjittofi 2008:13

⁵⁵ Virginité Revisited 2007: 3-5

⁵⁶ Irwin 2007: 13-17

Herakles as sexually subservient to her) further solidifies her aforementioned self-identification as male. Readings of these scenes could become further complicated by the possibility that Athena may be a stand in for the city of Athens.⁵⁷ Representations of a dominant Athena could in such cases need not even concern Athena herself, but the representation of Athena could serve as a symbolic representation of the city-state. But such a readings would require papers of their own to more fully discuss and explore.

While these and a host of other readings of such scenes are surely possible, it is likewise possible that such scenes are representative of alternative narratives yet unknown to modern readers. While we do not know what may have been contained within the host of lost works, we do know that within extant literary works that Athena and Herakles are not married, instead he is married to Hebe as a means to make peace with Hera in order for him to join the gods in Olympus. If any literature alluded to a relationship between Herakles and Athena that extends beyond that of hero-patron and into that of *erastes-eromenos* it has not survived, though this is hardly surprising as even the Twelve Labors of Herakles did not survive, despite being a constant source of artistic inspiration. We do learn from other literary sources that Athena, much like Artemis and Hestia, allegedly has no interest in the arts of Aphrodite – which is precisely what makes this body of work so fascinating. While other explanations may be found for any or all of the works we have studied, dismissing the possibility that these works shed light on yet unknown narratives would be as much a mistake as disregarding them wholesale.

So how can we make sense of the apparent disparity between artistic and literary representations without dismissing one for the other? For we know from literature that Athena is Parthenos *par excellence* and we know from literature that Herakles married Hebe upon his

⁵⁷ Rosenstock 1994: 368

apotheosis and not Athena. Herakles and his divine marriage to Hebe is largely thought to be a late addition to Herakles' death and apotheosis, with anecdotes concerning their marriage found in both the *Theogony* and the *Odyssey* thought to be later interpolations into the earlier texts in which Herakles is not married to Hebe.⁵⁸ In fact, Herakles' apotheosis is itself a story that developed after Homer during the late 7th century, evidenced by Achilles' mourning the mortal death of Herakles in the *Iliad*, and Odysseus' encounter in the *Odyssey* with an improbably cogent Herakles in Hades – an encounter which itself is largely considered to be a 6th century interpolation.⁵⁹ Hebe, however, does not figure into scenes of Herakles' apotheosis after the mid 6th century with the *chier' epi karmo* types of her and Herakles dropping out in favor of the other types featuring Athena.⁶⁰ Hebe's disappearance from the artistic representations of the apotheosis narrative in favor of Athena, and the overt sexual themes at play in the artistic representations of Athena and Herakles seems to be a glaring disconnect between the now established narrative of Herakles apotheosis and how it is depicted in art. One of the many possible explanations for this apparent disconnect between their literary and artistic representations may be found in the *Iliad*.

In *Iliad* 8.335-488, we find that Zeus has imposed a cessation of hostilities between the gods in the Trojan War, commanding both sides to desist in the fighting. Athena, enraged by Zeus' commanded armistice, defies Zeus and sets out to do battle when she is intercepted first by Hera, to whom she rants to about Zeus' forgetting her having aided his son Herakles' in his labors. Athena sets off again to the battlefield at Troy to strike down Hektor when Zeus intercepts her, sending her back to Olympus with a harsh rebuke, resulting in a sulking Athena having "savage anger took ahold of her," an anger which remains unresolved for the rest of the

⁵⁸ Gantz 1993: 82, 460-461

⁵⁹ Ibid: 460-463

⁶⁰ Ibid: 461

epic.⁶¹ Not only does this episode represent the assertion of Athena's personal agency (as opposed to assertions made repeatedly even by herself that she is merely and wholly complicit with the will of Zeus), but also the supreme yet fragile authority of Zeus, while also leaving us asking – what was she so angry about? What were these “high-hopes” of hers in aiding Herakles that were crossed by Zeus?⁶² There are no indications of what such a reward may have been within the Iliad itself, leaving us with mere speculation. But if anything may be gleaned from popular representation of Athena, Herakles, and his apotheosis, it may be that the ancient Greeks may have filled in such a details themselves with speculation of their own as to Athena's vested interest in the matter.

But such discrepancies between literary and artistic representations of Athena and Herakles may speak more to the different demands of these two very different mediums of representation— art and literature. In the literary accounts we may be told that such an event, such as Herakles apotheosis, happens and is carried out in part or in whole with the help of Athena, but in art such an event must be shown. Artistic representations must not only account for the happening of an action but must also show how such an action is carried out, and the “how” of such action becomes paramount. Artists must decide how to express such deeds and events, and this is where the artistic conventions discussed throughout come into play, be it the hand-on-wrist, the love-chase, the wedding procession, and so on. These types serve a similar and integral function in the telling of a story as Dactylic hexameter is for epic poetry, they become the conventions of communication. As such, the decision to depict the apotheosis of Herakles through sexualized types becomes clearer on account of their ability to express these transitional moments and the relationships that define such crossovers from one state of being to another,

⁶¹ Iliad trans Lattimore 2011: 8.460

⁶² Ibid: 8.361

with marriage or abduction serving as a close cognate to deification, but that is a topic for another paper. The decision, however, to show Athena as the one who abducts, marries, or is otherwise sexually dominant to Herakles is a decision that is less easily understood, given how sharp the divide is between these artistic representations and what we can understand to be the canonical belief system surrounding her status as virgin goddess, though displaying her as the conqueror rather than as the conquest may alleviate some of the trouble in claiming that Athena is sexually active in any shape or form.

Athena and Herakles' close relationship may prove to be more intimate than previously thought by scholars if judged by the popular art of the period. Literary evidence for such intimacy as implied in these artistic representations may prove to be limited at best, but given how few of these stories in written form have survived the ensuing millennia – leaving us wholly without a single primary text of any of Herakles' labors, his apotheosis, sources which may have shed light on his relationship with Athena, despite their roaring popularity as judged by the frequency of these scenes being depicted in extant art – it may be too much to ask for such topics to be addressed in literature. Fortunately for us, art on this topic has proven to be quite rich. We possess a number of notable pieces that challenge our understanding of Athena and her relationship with Herakles. It is hard to tell why artists chose to depict Athena and Herakles' relationship in such a way, and to what extent that the private tastes and public demand for such products influenced painters in their artistic decisions.⁶³ The personal use of these sympotic vessels have been well established, and our readings of such works should account for both the artist and client's personal taste.⁶⁴ Yet the question remains as to why Athena and Herakles' relationship as depicted by these ancient Greeks exceeds that of hero and patron, or even that of

⁶³ Lynch 2012: 540

⁶⁴ Ibid: 538 -539

intimate friendship, and is portrayed as that of lovers. Their interactions have repeatedly been portrayed by means of sexually charged types in extant art, with Athena frequently reversing gender norms and establishing herself as a sexually dominant partner of Herakles, much like that of Aphrodite and Anchises. Athena's interest in Herakles' successful apotheosis seems to have some sexual, marital, and perhaps political motivations that have not been thought appropriate to apply to Athena, although common in other abduction and apotheosis myths. The use of these very particular formulaic compositions and gestures to express their relationship was obviously an intentional and frequent decision made by these artists, and cannot be chalked up to error. We are meant to intuit the nature of their relationship by means of these extremely prevalent and charged compositions. Why these artistic conventions that carry such sexually charged imagery are used to depict the virgin goddess par excellence and the fundamental role she played in the apotheosis of the supermale hero par excellence is baffling. Whether these scenes represent literary narratives that have not survived, are apocryphal, or if they were perhaps just tongue-in-cheek may never be known. A variety of interpretations as to why Herakles' apotheosis by means of Athena has been depicted in terms of abduction and marriage are certainly possible, and beyond the scope of this paper. What we do know is that the scenes exist, are numerous, and are very sexually charged in nature. With this analysis of artistic representations of the relationship shared by Athena and Herakles that cross the conventional platonic line and plunge into sexuality, this essay should warrant further examination as to ascertain why this is a popular conception of Athena, Herakles, and their relationship.

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