

Ganymede the Cup Bearer: Variations and Receptions of the Ganymede Myth

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Abstract

A beautiful young boy carried away by an eagle up and became a cup-bearer on Mount Olympus—this is the myth of Ganymede. But who is this young boy? And why is he carried away by an eagle? Interpreters, from mythographers in the late antiquity to historians still living today, have attempted to interpret this myth and to unveil the significance behind this young cup-bearer's abduction. The Ganymede myth is told differently by many myth tellers—from Homer to the tenth century Byzantine encyclopedia Suda—and interpreted differently by many interpreters. In this essay, I focus on how four different interpreters—Fulgentius, Natale Conti, Jan Bremmer, and Petra Affeld-Niemeyer—are interpreting differently the elements of Ganymede's abduction, the eagle which carries Ganymede away, and the liquid Ganymede is bearing in his cup. I argue that the four interpreters interpret the Ganymede myth differently because of their varying presumptions about the fundamental nature of the myth. They interpret the act of abduction differently because they have different presumptions about the creator of the myth, and they interpret the eagle and the liquid differently because they have different assumptions about the meaning of the myth.

Introduction

A beautiful young boy carried away by an eagle up and became a cup-bearer on Mount Olympus—this is the myth of Ganymede, a myth which has been told and retold by various myth tellers from Homer’s era to the middle ages. But who is this young boy? And why is he carried away by an eagle? Interpreters, from mythographers in the late antiquity to historians still living today, have attempted to interpret this myth and to unveil the significance behind this young cup-bearer’s abduction for thousands of years.

In this essay, my argument is that four different interpreters, Fulgentius, Natale Conti, Jan Bremmer, and Petra Affeld-Niemeyer, are interpreting the Ganymede myth differently because they have different presumptions about the nature of the myth. The reason why they read the abduction of the young boy differently is because they have different presumptions about the creator of the myth, and the reason why they read the significance of the eagle and the liquid in the young boy’s cup differently is because they have different assumptions about the meaning of the myth. Who is the creator of myth? What is the meaning of myth? Their different answers to these two questions are shaping the way in which they view the Ganymede myth as well as their approach to this myth.

As I go through the course of my argument, I will survey how the Ganymede myth is told and interpreted differently by myth tellers and interpreters throughout the ages. In the first section, I will survey the basic framework of the story of Ganymede, as well as the twenty-one variations (from Homer to the tenth century Byzantine encyclopedia *Suda*) of this story are different from each other regarding Ganymede’s identity, his abduction, his homosexual relationship with Zeus, as well as the aftermath of his abduction. In the second section, I will examine how four different interpreters (from Roman historian Fulgentius to contemporary historian Jan Bremmer) are treating three elements from the Ganymede myth differently: the abduction, the eagle, and the liquid Ganymede is bearing in his cup.

Section 1: Variations

The aim of this section is to examine different variations of the Ganymede myth and lay out its constitutive elements—the elements of which the interpreters interprets so differently—so as to lay foundation for the analysis of the reception of this myth in the next section of this essay. By the word “myth,” I intend to mean the telling of a traditional story, a definition proposed by Fritz Graf, and I assume that different telling of the same story can be seen as variations of a myth and that there are some elements in common across different variations that function as the basic framework of the story.¹

Before delving into the identification of the basic components of the Ganymede story, it may be useful to draw a distinction between plot and story under the narratological framework. According to the Russian Formalists, a story, or *fabula*, is the subject matter of the literary work, while the plot, or *syuzhet*, is the way in which the story is constructed.² Based on this distinction, I maintain that the main difference between variations of a myth lies not so much in the plot as in the story. The plot of the myth determines the sequence in which different elements of the myth

¹ Fritz Graf, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*, trans. Thomas Marier (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1.

² Paul Cobley, “Narratology” (The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism, n.d.), <https://litguide.press.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/view.cgi?eid=189&query=narratology>

are laid out, while the story of the myth determines which elements are employed or deserted in the myth. In this section, I'm focusing on how different variations of the Ganymede myth tell different stories, and on how different variations add in or throw away different elements to the Ganymede myth.

While different variations are employing different elements when telling the story of Ganymede, they are all preserving a basic framework of the story. It is this shared framework that enables me to identify any particular telling of the story as a version of the Ganymede myth. The basic framework of the Ganymede story consists of a young boy who is abducted at the behest of a divine being. The act of abduction constitutes the core of this story, whether it is narrated explicitly or not.³ Different versions of the Ganymede myth can be seen as variations on this basic framework. While the boy is abducted for the pleasure of Zeus in most cases, the way and the aftermath of this abduction can vary from version to version. The most recurrent pattern is that the boy is kidnapped by an eagle and then serves as a cup bearer for the gods. The liquid served in the cup is usually nectar or wine. The identity of the young boy also remains unfixed. While he is almost always named Ganymede and is said to be of Trojan origin, there is no absolute consensus on his parental lineage.

This section traces and analyzes the variations between different versions of the Ganymede myth, concerning the following issues: Ganymede's identity, Ganymede's abduction, elements of homosexuality and liquids, and the abduction's aftermath. I cover twenty-one versions of the Ganymede myth by, dating from eighth century B.C. through the middle ages.⁴ I also touch upon visual representations of the Ganymede myth to support my analysis of the variations. A chart arranging all twenty-one versions in relation to the variations in the myth can be found in the appendix (see Fig. 1 in Appendix).

1.1 The Identity Of Ganymede

In all of the twenty-one versions, the name "Ganymede" is always mentioned. The significance of this name is proposed in Xenophon's *Symposium*, in which he asserts that the word "Ganymede" has its roots in *ganutai*, or joy, and *medea*, or thoughts.⁵ However, it is important to note that Xenophon's etymological accounts are just derivatives of his own telling of the Ganymede myth, in which he asserts that Ganymede is abducted by Zeus for his spiritual beauty. Alternate etymologies are also plausible. For example, the *-medes* portion of Ganymede's name can be seen as deriving from *mêdea*, or genitalia, rather than from *medea*, which is thoughts.⁶

When it comes to the issues of Ganymede's parental lineage, different versions diverge but within a reasonable scale—though the generation of Ganymede may be altered, the alterations are within a single family line. While not every version mentions the parental lineage of Ganymede explicitly, among the versions that do mention this issue, the most prevalent notion of parentage is that Ganymede is the son of Tros and the sibling of Illus and Assaracus, as in

³ Although the element of abduction is not explicitly mentioned in every version (Pindar, Plato and Diodorus Siculus don't narrate the act of abduction in their stories), this element is still generally assumed in each of the version I have collected.

⁴ A summary of the variations between these twenty-one versions can be found in Fig. 2 in the Appendix.

⁵ Xenophon of Athens, *Symposium*, 8.30.

⁶ Hesiod has made this word play on genitalia when he talks about Aphrodite; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 200.

Diodorus Siculus's *The Library of History*.⁷ However, Hyginus in his *Fabulae* proposes that Ganymede is the son of Assaracus.⁸ In both *Little Iliad* and Apollodorus's *Library*, Ganymede is the son of Laomedon, who is the grandson of Tros.⁹ In Quintus Smyrnaeus's *Fall of Troy*, Ganymede is the son of Priam, who is the son of Laomedon.¹⁰ In Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Ganymede is the son of Dardanus, who is the grandfather of Tros (1051).¹¹ All these different identifications of Ganymede's father take Ganymede as the descendent of Dardanus. This consistency of lineage within the Dardanian genealogy also corresponds to the variations on Ganymede's place of origin.

The fact that Ganymede is identified as the descendent of Dardanus—the founder of the city of Dardanus, which is at the foot of Mount Ida, southeast of the city of Troy—explains why most of the sources state that he is abducted on Mount Ida. Although, Quintus Smyrnaeus seems to suggest that Ganymede is leaving from Troy, not Mount Ida; but if we take into consideration that Quintus Smyrnaeus makes Ganymede the son of Priam and thus embedded the Ganymede myth into the narrative of the Trojan war, Quintus Smyrnaeus' slight modification becomes justifiable.¹² A larger modification of the place of abduction happens in Strabo's *Geography*: “On the boundary between the territory of Cyzicus and that of Priapus is a place called Harpagia, from which, according to some writers of myths, Ganymede was snatched, though others say that he was snatched in the neighbourhood of the Dardanian Promontory, near Dardanus.”¹³ Again, this modification is still within a reasonable scale, for we are still dealing with regions in the Anatolia. Interestingly, the tenth century lexicon *Suda* seems to reconcile between these variations: according to *Suda*, Ganymede is the son of the king of Troy, who lives in Dardanos and hunts at Harpagia; he is abducted at Harpagia.¹⁴

These variations concerning Ganymede's genealogical and geographical origin bring us to the issue of his status. In the versions in which Ganymede is of the royal Dardanian lineage, he is surely a prince. However, in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods*, in which Ganymede's parental lineage is not mentioned, he becomes a shepherd.¹⁵ On the other hand, in Nonnos's *Dionysiaca*, Ganymede becomes a cowherd—and in these pastoral versions of Ganymede's origin the place is still set on Mount Ida.¹⁶ In addition, it is worth noting the parallels for princes in pastoral settings, especially in the Anatolian region. Most notably, the Trojan prince Anchises is working as a shepherd on Mount Ida when he is visited by Aphrodite, and various tales have Paris Alexandros as a shepherd on Ida when he makes his judgment between the goddesses.¹⁷ Therefore, we can assert that the pastoral role of Ganymede is not necessarily at odds with his princely status.

⁷ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, 4.75.3.

⁸ Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 271.

⁹ *Little Iliad*, Fragment 6; Apollodorus, “Library,” 2.4.8-2.7.7.

¹⁰ Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Fall of Troy*, 14.323-326.

¹¹ Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 1051.

¹² Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Fall of Troy*, 8.427-445.

¹³ Strabo, *Geography*, 13.1.11.

¹⁴ *Suda*, s.v. Minos, mu 1092.

¹⁵ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 10, 209-212.

¹⁶ Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, 25.429-450.

¹⁷ Homeric Hymns, 5.45-55; Lucian, *The Judgement of the Goddesses*, 1.

1.2 The Abduction Of Ganymede

The means of the abduction of Ganymede also varies from source to source. The widely accepted image of Ganymede being abducted by an eagle does not appear in literary sources until Virgil's *Aeneid*, and this image is popularized by Virgil and especially by Ovid's versions of the Ganymede myth. No other earlier sources mention specifically the means by which Ganymede is abducted, except for the *Homeric Hymns*, which asserts that "the wild wind had blown [Ganymede] away."¹⁸ However, the imagery of Ganymede carried by an eagle does appear in artistic sources prior to Virgil: a terracotta relief vase from third century B.C., Vulci, Italy, depicts an eagle carrying Ganymede in the sky (see Fig. 2 in Appendix).¹⁹ Moreover, it is important to point out that the commonly assumed notion of Zeus transforming into an eagle to abduct Ganymede does not appear until Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.²⁰ Earlier sources like Virgil's *Aeneid* and Hyginus's *Astronomica* assert that Ganymede is kidnapped by Zeus's eagle, instead of by Zeus as an eagle.²¹ Most of the variations of the Ganymede myth after Ovid tend to tell this story through Ovid's filter, and they employ Ovid's element of eagle into their own telling of the story.

Another element to be explored in the variations of the Ganymede myth is Zeus's motive behind his abduction: why does Zeus make these efforts—by wind, by sending an eagle, or by transforming into an eagle—to abduct this young boy? In all versions of the abduction, Ganymede is abducted by or for the will of Zeus, except in the *Suda*, which rationalizes Zeus into the human king Minos.²² Most of the versions state that Zeus's desire to commit the abduction is due to, using Erastosthene's words, Ganymede's "unrivalled beauty."²³ The tradition of ascribing the element of beauty to Ganymede starts with the *Homeric Hymns*, in which it is asserted that "Zeus carried away golden-haired Ganymedes because of his beauty."²⁴ This element is then reiterated by later writers: Plato calls Ganymede "the good-looking boy;" Apollonios Rhodios notes that Zeus is "enamoured of [Ganymede's] beauty;" Hyginus connects his beauty to constellations.²⁵ Specifically, the characteristic of long hair is ascribed to Ganymede in Lucian's *Dialogues*, in which Hera calls him the "long-haired darling."²⁶ This motif of long hair recurs in Nonnos, who has describes Ganymede as the "long-haired cowdrover."²⁷

¹⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 5.252-256; *Homeric Hymns*, 5d.168-293.

¹⁹ *Relief Vase*, terra cotta, 3rd century B.C., Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, Paris. (*Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, n.d.), <https://www.limc-france.fr/objet/15815>.

²⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.129-187.

²¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 5.252-256; Hyginus. *Astronomica*, 2.16.

²² *Suda*, s.v. Minos, mu 1092.

²³ Erastosthenes, "Constellation Myths," 26 "Hydrochoos."

²⁴ *Homeric Hymns*, 5d.168-293.

²⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 254e; Apollonios Rhodios, *Argonautica*. 3.112; Hyginus, *Astronomica*, 2.29.

²⁶ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 8.213-216.

²⁷ Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, 8.90-95.

1.3 Homosexuality

Zeus's appreciation of Ganymede's beauty generally presumes a homosexual attraction, except in Xenophon's version. In most versions, Zeus abducts Ganymede because the latter's beauty excites his erotic desire, instead of for some purely aesthetic reasons. For example, in Hyginus's *Astronomica*, Ganymede is "[Zeus's] lover,"²⁸ and in Euripides, he is "the luxurious darling of Zeus's bed."²⁹ The most striking depiction of eroticism between Zeus and Ganymede can be found in Lucian. Besides recurrent emphasis on the notion that Ganymede's kiss is "sweeter than the nectar," Lucian's lively dialogue between Zeus and Ganymede points straightforwardly to the carnal relation between the couple:

[Ganymede] Where shall I sleep at night? With Eros, my playmate?
 [Zeus] No, that's why I carried you off up here; I want us to sleep together.
 [Ganymede] Can't you sleep alone? Will you prefer sleeping with me?
 [Zeus] Yes, when it's with a beautiful boy like you.
 [Ganymede] But how will you sleep better because of my beauty?
 [Zeus] It's sweet and soothing, and brings softer sleep.³⁰

Another indicator of homosexual relations can be found in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Here, Plato uses the story of Ganymede and Zeus as an example to illustrate how the "flowing stream" of desire between lovers works:

When the lover has been doing this for some time, and there has been physical contact between them at meetings in the gymnasium and elsewhere, then at last the flowing stream (which Zeus called "desire" when he was in love with Ganymede) pours down on the lover in such great quantities that while some of it sinks into him, the rest flows off outside as he fills up and brims over.³¹

Here, liquid served by Ganymede in his cup becomes connected to the metaphysical "flowing stream" of love. In contrast with these versions which employ the homosexual element, Xenophon's version completely denies the element of erotic homosexuality in the Ganymede myth. He insisted, by appealing to the etymological significance of Ganymede's name, that "Ganymede too was brought up to Olympus by Zeus not for his body but for his soul."³²

1.4 The Aftermath

Many sources associate Ganymede with the job of serving the gods after he is brought up to Mount Olympus by Zeus. Sometimes Ganymede works as a server in general, as in Pindar's *Olympian*; while in most cases, he is specifically assigned the job of serving liquid drinks.³³ The

²⁸ Hyginus. *Astronomica*, 2.16.

²⁹ Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 1051.

³⁰ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 10.211-212.

³¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 255c.

³² Xenophon of Athens, *Symposium*, 8.30.

³³ Pindar, "Olympian Odes," trans. Stephen M. Trzaskoma et al., in *Anthology of Classical Myth*, edited by Stephen M. Trzaskoma et al (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 1.43-45.

Homeric Hymns mentions Ganymede as the “cup bearer” without stating which specific liquid drinks he is serving, while many other variations of the story have explicitly mentioned this detail.³⁴ The liquid drink falls into three categories: it is either nectar, wine, or water. Ovid and Lucian have both mentioned nectar, the food which is shared by gods at the immortal symposium. While the former is describing Ganymede as mixing the nectar, and the latter has gone as far as describing the kisses of Ganymede being “sweeter than the nectar.”³⁵ Thus we can see that the nectar usually implies the sweetness of Ganymede, as well as his rising to become an immortal. In contrast, the element of wine, which is mentioned in Euripides as “wine”, in Pausanias as the “wine bearer”, and in Nonnos as the “wine pourer”, suggest a mortal symposium and has therefore a weaker implication of Ganymede’s rising to immortality.³⁶ In addition, the liquid can also be water, for example in Erastosthenes’s *Constellation Myths* and Hyginus’s *Astronomica*.³⁷ These two sources associate this element of water with Hydrochoos or Aquarius, which is the constellation of the water pourer, and identify Ganymede with this constellation.

Some sources mention the compensation given to Ganymede’s father after the abduction. That Ganymede’s father is granted with divine horses seems to be a popular motif mentioned in Homer, *Homeric Hymns*, Apollonios Rhodios, and Pausanias.³⁸ The *Little Iliad* offered an alternative version of the gift, in which Ganymede’s father is granted “golden vines” instead.³⁹ These gifts have a parallel social function to that of the bridal gifts granted to the young girl’s family for taking her into marriage. The compensation gifts for Ganymede’s family, like the bridal gifts, suggest Ganymede’s status as a family property waiting to be traded within a patriarchal society.

Juno’s reaction is occasionally mentioned in antique Latin sources. Lucian devotes a whole dialogue between Juno and Jupiter quarrelling over the abduction of Ganymede.⁴⁰ Statius mentioned Juno’s resentment towards Ganymede, while Virgil refers to her anger about the abduction.⁴¹ The jealousy of Juno implies Ganymede’s homosexual relationship with Zeus, at whom she gets jealous just as she so famously does with Zeus’s other bedmates.

Another sporadically mentioned goddess in the Ganymede myth is Hebe. Nonnos speaks of Ganymede as “usurping the untouched cup of heavenly Hebe” and “handing the cups which were the lot of virgin Hebe.”⁴² In Lucian, Hera is grumbling towards Zeus that “[Was he] so badly in need of wine-waiters? Have Hebe and Hephaestus, then, gone on strike?”⁴³ This comparison between Ganymede and Hebe implies the parallel of their marginalized social status at the gods’ feast—both the young boy and the young girl are only subordinate servers at the symposium, and they are excluded from the elite circle which is consisted mostly of male deities.

³⁴ *Homeric Hymns*, 5d.168-293.

³⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.129-187; Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 8.213.

³⁶ Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 1051; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.24.5; Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, 10.310-320.

³⁷ Erastosthenes, *Constellation Myths*, 26 “Hydrochoos;” Hyginus, *Astronomica*, 2.29.

³⁸ Homer, *Illiad*, 5.260-265; *Homeric Hymns*, 5d.168-293; Apollonios Rhodios, *Argonautica*, 3.112; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.24.5.

³⁹ *Little Iliad*, Fragment 6.

⁴⁰ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 8.213-216.

⁴¹ Statius, *Silvae*, 3.4.13-16; Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.25-28.

⁴² Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, 8.90-95; *Ibid.*, 25.429-450.

⁴³ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 8.213-216.

Concerning the variations of the Ganymede myth, there are three conclusions we can draw so far on the basic framework of the story of this myth. First, regarding Ganymede's identity, he is seen as a royal prince of Dardanian lineage in some versions of the myth, while he can also be a herdsman in other versions. In both cases, Ganymede is always of Anatolian origin. Second, considering the abduction of Ganymede, he is almost always abducted by or for the good of Zeus. Specifically, Ganymede's being carried away by an eagle is a later invention in the development of transmitting of this myth. Third, the reason for Zeus's abduction of Ganymede is always implied, if not explicitly stated, as for the outstanding beauty of Ganymede. This element of beauty is usually associated with the homosexual love between Zeus and Ganymede. Finally, after the abduction, Ganymede is usually associated with the job of a cup-bearer. The drink he serves can be nectar, wine, or water, but always a liquid drink. He is usually granted with immortality at the end of the story, and sometimes he is even transformed into a constellation.

Section 2: **Receptions**

After having laid out the variants of the Ganymede myth in the last section, I shall now examine how four interpreters are treating differently these variants, specifically their treatment of the act of abduction, the eagle that carries Ganymede away, and the liquid which Ganymede bears. The aim of my examination is to determine what is it that makes them treat these variants differently. I argue that the reason why they interpret the act of abduction differently is because they have different presumptions about who is the creator of the myth, and that the reason why they interpret the eagle and the liquid differently is because they have different assumptions about what is the meaning of the myth.

Before examining the four interpreters' treatment of the variants, I shall first briefly introduce my interpreters: Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, a Roman mythographer in late antiquity, Natale Conti, an Italian Renaissance allegorist, Jan Bremmer, a contemporary Dutch historian, and Petra Affeld-Niemeyer, a contemporary German psychologist. These four interpreters have very different presumptions regarding the basic aspects of the nature of myth: its creator, its meaning, and its audience. Fulgentius presumes that myth is created by Calliope the Epic Muse in order to record actual facts about ancient Greece, specifically historical facts about the war. The people who receive the myth are the Romans, who are Fulgentius's contemporaries.⁴⁴ The second interpreter, Conti, presumes that myth is created by wise ancient men who have hidden divine, educational truth in the myth.⁴⁵ Myth is received by two kinds of audience: those who are aware of this divine truth, and those who are not. While Bremmer, the third interpreter, never explicitly states the creator of the myth, he nevertheless implies that myth is the creation of the culture and traditions of ancient Greece. For Bremmer, the meaning of myth is about social customs and rites in ancient Greece, and this meaning is received by the Greek people as a paradigm for social behaviors.⁴⁶ Finally, according to Affeld-Niemeyer, our last interpreter, myth is created by the ancients who wants to record instinctual emotional reactions. The meaning of myth generally involves the human psyche, and, for the Ganymede myth in particular, it is about the "psychic states of victims of incestuous abuse" and can be seen as an example of

⁴⁴ Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, *Mythologies*, 1.0.

⁴⁵ Natale Conti, *Mythologiae*, trans. John Mulryan and Steven Brown (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 2.

⁴⁶ Jan Bremmer, "An Enigmatic Indo-European Rite: Paederasty," *Arethusa* 13 (1980) 2: 279-298.

childhood sexual trauma.⁴⁷ Unlike the other three interpreters who use classical texts, Affeld-Niemeyer chooses a relatively modern and non-textual version of the Ganymede myth as the primary source as the basis for his interpretation. The version he deploys is Rembrandt van Rijn's painting *The Rape of Ganymede* (see Fig. 3 in Appendix).⁴⁸ Affeld-Niemeyer presumes that the Ganymede myth is about a common feeling within children's psyche. This presumption frees him from the burden of dealing with historical facts (since he is mainly concerned with mental activities, instead of historical ones) and justifies his choice of Rembrandt, since Rembrandt's depiction of the frightened Ganymede is, from this standpoint, satisfactory to provide ample psychological evidence for him.

2.1 The Abduction

In this section, I examine how the aforementioned four interpreters are viewing the Zeus's abduction of Ganymede. Can the abduction be considered as a "rape", or can it be something else? For Conti, the abduction cannot be literally understood as a rape, while for the other three interpreters, the abduction surely is a rape.⁴⁹ I show how the four interpreters' answer to this question is derived from their presumptions about the creator of the myth. Is myth created by the Muse, by the man, or by the society? But what makes Conti determine that the abduction is not a rape? For Conti, myths are the creation of ancient wise men—they created the myths as a safe way to disseminate truth so that they can "stop ordinary men from gaining access to such remarkable subjects."⁵⁰ However, the truth which the ancient men have hidden in myths is not historical truth about the ancient world—rather, this truth is about the divine and is educational for people who are still living today. For Conti, an interpretation of the meaning of myth is legitimate only if it "emphasized the idea of virtue to future generations," for this was the wise ancient myth creator's original intention⁵¹ Regarding the Ganymede myth, specifically, Conti assumes that this myth is about the relationship between God and his people.⁵²

From this perspective, Conti criticizes historical interpreters of the Ganymede myth like Echemenes the Cyprian, who attributes the abduction of Ganymede to an actual rape perpetrated by Minos the King of Crete.⁵³ He might as well speak against Fulgentius's interpretation that Ganymede is abducted and raped by a historical king named Zeus, or Bremmer's notion that such rapes actually happened in the history. The historical approach to the Ganymede myth is labeled by Conti as false because "we have to measure up to the gods, not they to us."⁵⁴ It is

⁴⁷ Petra Affeld-Niemeyer, "Trauma and Symbol: Instinct and Reality Perception in Therapeutic Work with Victims of Incest," trans. Barbara Wharton, *Journal of Analytical Psychology* (1995) 40: 27.

⁴⁸ Rembrandt, *The Abduction of Ganymede*, oil on canvas, 1635, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Dresden.

⁴⁹ Conti, *Mythologiae*, bk. 1, ch. 1, 2; Fulgentius, *Mythologies*, 1.20; Jan Bremmer, "An Enigmatic Indo-European Rite: Paederasty," 279-298; Affeld-Niemeyer, "Trauma and Symbol: Instinct and Reality Perception in Therapeutic Work with Victims of Incest," 27.

⁵⁰ Natale Conti, *Mythologiae*, trans. John Mulryan and Steven Brown (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), bk. 1, ch. 1, 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, bk. 9, ch. 13, 864.

⁵² *Ibid.*, bk. 10, 933.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, bk. 9, ch. 13, 863.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, bk. 9, ch. 13, 864.

inappropriate in Conti's view to rationalize Zeus's abduction of Ganymede in terms of human activities, for this kind of interpretation has disobeyed the wise ancient men's intention.

Based on these presumptions, Conti interprets the Ganymede myth as an allusion to "a prudent man who always exercises good judgment" and who is beloved by God.⁵⁵ The abduction cannot be taken literally as a rape, but simply as a metaphor that Ganymede is a man beloved by God—a metaphor which the ancient wise men has created to hide the divine truth. Conti interprets Ganymede as the human soul, and Zeus, accordingly, as the Christian God. That Zeus has abducted Ganymede for his beauty is twisted by Conti into a metaphor that the God is pleased with the virtue of prudence in the human soul. Conti interprets Ganymede's beauty as the prudence of human soul: "God takes that soul into His confidence because of its marvelous prudence...Any soul that escapes most of the contamination that derives from human weakness...has to be extraordinarily beautiful."⁵⁶ Accordingly, the homosexual love between Ganymede and Zeus implied by Zeus's attraction to Ganymede's beauty also must not be taken literally. For Conti, Zeus is attracted by Ganymede and carries him off is because human soul with virtue is "close to the divine nature."⁵⁷ By being "close to the divine nature", Conti means being similar to God or *imitatio Dei*. Thus, the homosexual rape is allegorized by Conti as a metaphor that prudent and wise human "all seek to possess divine goodness" or to imitate God.⁵⁸

This interpretation of the Ganymede myth makes many historical details of the abduction unnecessary and irrelevant for Conti—while these details are important for Fulgentius and Bremmer, as we shall see later in this section. While he does acknowledge the divergence on the place of Ganymede's abduction—whether it is at Harpagia according to Strabo, or at Phrygia according to Virgil—he views this obsession with the specific geographical place with contempt, because the abduction, for him, is not a single incident but is an eternal metaphor about human soul and God.⁵⁹

In contrast to Conti, Fulgentius, Bremmer, and Affeld-Niemeyer all understand the abduction as a literal rape. Fulgentius's assertion that the abduction is a rape that has historically happened is based on his presumption that the myth is created by Calliope the Epic Muse in order to record historical events in ancient Greece. Specifically, the Ganymede myth is presumed to take place during the war between Zeus and the Titans. When Fulgentius refers to Zeus and the Titans, he does not understand them as gods but rather as human beings who have existed in the past: Zeus is the grandson of Syrophanes of Egypt and brother of Saturn, while the Titans are the sons of Titan who is also Saturn's brother.⁶⁰ Building upon this presumption about the creator of myth, Fulgentius interprets Zeus's abduction of Ganymede as an episode which happened during this war. Ganymede is carried off by an army legion as spoils for the commander, who is Zeus. The rape is not explicitly specified but nevertheless implied by Fulgentius because, in context of war, such sexual assault is taken for granted as part of the normal order of social customs. Ganymede's beauty is implied as Zeus's motive for abducting him, for Fulgentius compares Ganymede to Europa, whom Zeus also abducted. For Fulgentius,

⁵⁵ Ibid., bk. 10, 933.

⁵⁶ Ibid., bk. 9, ch. 13, 864.

⁵⁷ Ibid., bk. 9, ch. 13, 864.

⁵⁸ Ibid., bk. 9, ch. 13, 865.

⁵⁹ Ibid., bk. 9, ch. 13, 863.

⁶⁰ Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, *Mythologies*, trans. Leslie George Whitbread (Theoi, n.d.), 1.1-2, <https://www.theoi.com/Text/FulgentiusMythologies1.html>; Ibid., 1.20.

Ganymede, like Europa, is part of Zeus's war trophies, and is selected by Zeus because of his good looks.⁶¹

While Fulgentius sees the Ganymede myth as created by the Muse to record a particular battle, Bremmer sees the myth as the creation of ancient Greek culture, not a particular rape event in history, but rather a general and repetitive social practice of raping young boys in ancient Greece—specifically the custom of paederasty among the ancient Dorians. Bremmer defined paederasty as “an affair between adults and boys.”⁶² It is an initiatory rite in which the transition of young boy from adolescent to adulthood is marked by a love affair with a designated elder lover. During this love affair, the boy “offers a token resistance,” but this resistance would finally result in *andreion* (ἀνδρείον), or a men's symposium.⁶³ Based on his presumption that the Ganymede myth was created by cultural practices of ancient Greek people, Bremmer focuses on the place in which the abduction of Ganymede occurs, employing Strabo's version locating the abduction happens in Harpagia. The name of “Harpagia” is significant for Bremmer in that it not only adds credibility to the historical truth of this myth, but is also etymologically rooted in the word *harpagai*, or capture.⁶⁴ *Harpagai* points to the violent way in which the elder lover gets hold of the boy in the ancient tradition of paederasty, and this connotation substantiates Bremmer's notion that the abduction is an actual rape.

Bremmer has explicitly affirmed the sexual aspect of the rape of Ganymede by interpreting the rape in terms of Dorian paederastic traditions. Bremmer argues against Xenophon's notion that the love between men in Sparta is purely spiritual and maintains that “the existence of anal copulation can hardly be doubted” and that it has “a connection with initiation.”⁶⁵ This carnal relationship also exists, according to Bremmer, between Zeus and Ganymede as a reflection of the Dorian social tradition.

While Bremmer reads the coital rape of Ganymede as necessary in the process of Dorian initiatory rites and as beneficial for the young boy's admission into adulthood, Affeld-Niemeyer sees the rape not as something socially affirming, but rather as something personally traumatic. For him, the myth is not about initiations but about pedophilia and incest. The divergence between Bremmer and Affeld-Niemeyer's attitude towards homosexual relations in the Ganymede myth is built upon their different presumptions about the creator of the myth. Since Bremmer presumes that the Ganymede myth is a creation of the ancient Greek culture, he interprets the rape in terms of its cultural significance while ignoring the possible psychological effects that it might have on an individual young boy. Affeld-Niemeyer, on the other hand, presumes that the Ganymede myth is created by the ancients who want to record instinctual emotional reactions to incest and who are “commenting with bitter irony on the treatment of children who are conditioned to satisfy the needs of adults.”⁶⁶ In other words, the creators of the myth are carrying on a political agenda to speak for the abused children. It is from this perspective that Affeld-Niemeyer asserts that the Ganymede myth is a faithful documentary of a child's reaction to a real pedophilic and incestuous rape.

⁶¹ Fulgentius, *Mythologies*, 1.20.

⁶² Bremmer, “An Enigmatic Indo-European Rite: Paederasty,” 279.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 284-286.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁶⁶ Affeld-Niemeyer, “Trauma and Symbol: Instinct and Reality Perception in Therapeutic Work with Victims of Incest,” 27.

2.2 The Eagle

Who is the eagle? In this section, I will examine how the four interpreters are interpreting the eagle which carried Ganymede differently. For Conti, the eagle is Zeus's messenger; for Affeld-Niemeyer, the eagle is Zeus himself; for Fulgentius, the eagle is Zeus's war standard. While, for Bremmer, the eagle seems so irrelevant to his idea of myth that he has not even included this element into his interpretation. The four interpreters' treatment of the element of the eagle is based on their presumptions about the meaning of myth in general.

Conti presumes that the Ganymede myth is about divine truth, and, specifically, about God's relationship with his people and about God's attitude towards human virtue. Based on this presumption, Conti interprets Ganymede as the virtuous human soul and the eagle as an allegory that "God always comes to the aid of wisdom."⁶⁷ The eagle is seen by Conti as God's messenger, or an angel which guides and protects prudent and wise human beings.

In contrast to Conti's assertion that the eagle is a salvific figure, Affeld-Niemeyer interprets the eagle as at once salvific and threatening. While Conti presumes that the Ganymede myth is about the relationship between God and his people, Affeld-Niemeyer presumes that the myth reflects how children feel when they have been sexually abused, and, building on Carl Jung's theory of archetypes, he calls this feeling "the archaic identity as prey."⁶⁸ Affeld-Niemeyer defines the universal feeling of being preyed upon as "a state of ambiguity about life and death, killing and saving."⁶⁹ The eagle in the Ganymede myth is, for Affeld-Niemeyer, the key element in this traumatic feeling of the abused children. He interprets the eagle as Zeus himself, which stands for the fatherly figure in the incestuous relationship with the victim children. This fatherly figure of the eagle embodies the double nature of killing and saving. While the eagle can be seen as a saving angel which brings Ganymede up to heaven among the stars and protects him like a father, it is also a death-threatening predator which preys on the young boy. The act of rape in the Ganymede myth is interpreted as the "killing" part in this dram that evokes the identity of prey. Ganymede's screaming face depicted in Rembrandt's painting is seen by Affeld-Niemeyer as a paradigmatic reaction of a child who is experiencing a death-like feeling during sexual abuse. On the other hand, Ganymede's transformation into the constellation corresponds to the "saving" part in the identity of prey. Affeld-Niemeyer interprets the shining Aquarius as "a symbolic pointer to the spark of life, of hope."⁷⁰ In this at once threatening and protecting fatherly figure of the eagle, the abused children experiences the duality of life and death in the archaic identity as prey, and this interpretation of the eagle is based on Affeld-Niemeyer's presumption that the Ganymede myth is about children's feeling of being preyed upon in incestuous sexual abuse.

Fulgentius also pays particular attention on the eagle that carries Ganymede away—an element which appears in Virgil's *Aeneid*.⁷¹ However, in contrast to the interpretations of Conti and of Affeld-Niemeyer, Fulgentius reads the eagle not as a literal eagle but as an eagle which Zeus, the historical king, has made out of gold for his war standards.⁷² This interpretation is

⁶⁷ Conti, *Mythologies*, bk. 9, ch. 13, 865.

⁶⁸ Affeld-Niemeyer, "Trauma and Symbol: Instinct and Reality Perception in Therapeutic Work with Victims of Incest," 27.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷¹ Fulgentius is an attentive reader of Virgil and has written scholarly works on his *Aeneid*.

⁷² Fulgentius, *Mythologies*, 1.20.

made possible because of his presumption that the Ganymede myth is about a historical battle that happened in ancient Rome. His focus on the element of eagle also reflects his attempt to fit this story into a larger Roman cultural history. By the phrase “golden eagle,” Fulgentius is referring to special standards or poles with a golden statue of an eagle on top of them, which is served as the symbol of military power of a certain Roman legion. Accordingly, Ganymede is seized among the war standards during a battle by Zeus’s legion.⁷³ Furthermore, Fulgentius also reads the eagle as a protective figure, but it is protective in a different sense. The eagle is made by Zeus to “consecrate it to the might of [Zeus’s] protection.”⁷⁴ The eagle is neither protective of the human soul, as is asserted by Conti, nor protective of the child Ganymede, as is asserted by Affeld-Niemeyer, but is instead protective of Zeus’s legion. This interpretation is founded on Fulgentius assertion that the Ganymede myth is a historical record of a Roman battle, and, since it is customary for military leaders to make sacrifices to gods in a battle, it appears natural for Fulgentius to interpret the eagle in terms of war sacrifices in such context.

Unlike the other three interpreters, Bremmer does not include the element of the eagle into his interpretation of the Ganymede myth. However, the protective aspect of the eagle is maintained in another form by Bremmer. In his interpretation, Bremmer alludes to the Cretan tradition in which a young boy of noble birth is paired by a warrior during the warrior’s fights.⁷⁵ The warrior is protective of his young lover, and, for Bremmer, this protective love in the Cretan tradition is mirrored in the relationship between Zeus and Ganymede. Bremmer chooses not to use to the element of the eagle to express the notion of protectiveness in the abduction of Ganymede, for the eagle is not so relevant to his presumption that myth is about social customs, but he chooses instead to put the Ganymede myth in a larger cultural background to reveal the protective nature of the rape.

2.3 The Liquid

In this section I examine how the four interpreters hold different ideas about what exactly is the liquid which Ganymede is bearing in his cup, and what the significance is of this particular liquid. For Conti, Ganymede is bearing sweet nectar, which symbolizes the sweetness of human wisdom. Affeld-Niemeyer imagines Ganymede as bearing water, which is associated with his rising up into a constellation. For Bremmer, Ganymede is bearing wine, which serves as the status symbol of adult male in ancient Greek society, whereas, for Fulgentius, the element of liquid does not seem relevant enough for his idea of myth to discuss it in his interpretation yet. Each of these four different treatment of the element of liquid is based on the four interpreters’ different presumptions about the meaning of myth.

Conti interprets the liquid that Ganymede is bearing as a metaphor of human virtue based on his presumption that the myth is about divine truth. He chooses nectar as the liquid instead of wine or water, and he asserts that the nectar Ganymede serves is a metaphor for human wisdom, “for nothing is more pleasant for a man than to be wise.”⁷⁶ Accordingly, Ganymede offering sweet nectar to Zeus can be seen as an allegory of men pleasing God with their sweet wisdom. The reason why Conti chooses nectar instead of other liquid drinks is because that the characteristic sweetness of nectar makes it fit perfectly into Conti’s theory about the liquid as a

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1.20.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.20.

⁷⁵ Jan Bremmer, “An Enigmatic Indo-European Rite: Paederasty,” 287.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 864.

metaphor for human virtue and makes it in accordance with Conti's presumption that the myth is about the relationship between God and human souls.

While Conti chooses the element of nectar so as to argue that human virtue is pleasant for God, Bremmer chooses the element of wine so as to fit this element into the social custom of wine drinking in ancient Greece. For Bremmer, Ganymede's serving at the gods' feast resonates with the practice of the *andreion*, or men's symposium, in the pattern of Dorian initiatory rites. This interpretation is based on his presumption that the Ganymede myth is about social customs and traditions in ancient Greek society. Building on this presumption, Bremmer interprets Ganymede's drink-serving in terms of the social structure implied in the tradition of pederasty. He proposes that Ganymede's role as a server is a mythical counterpart of young Greek boys who "had to pour out the wine but were not allowed to drink it [which] stressed the difference of status between them and the adult men."⁷⁷ Drink-serving in the Ganymede myth thus can be seen as a status symbol which marks the distinction between whole citizenship of the adult male and the young boys who are waiting to be admitted into official citizenship.

Unlike Conti or Bremmer, Affeld-Niemeyer sees the liquid drink that Ganymede is bearing as water. By asserting Ganymede specifically as a water-bearer, Affeld-Niemeyer is able to make the connotation that Ganymede transforms into the constellation Aquarius.⁷⁸ For Affeld-Niemeyer this catasterism can be seen as part of the double feature of saving and killing of Zeus or the fatherly figure, which makes this interpretation in accordance with his presumption that the myth is about sexual abuse of children. Catasterism makes Ganymede into a star, something which, like a stone, is immune to assault or harm. The star also connotes "a symbolic pointer to the spark of life, of hope, and of self-consciousness," which suggest the mental state as being "the opposite archetypal pole to the deathly experience of sexual abuse."⁷⁹ However, Affeld-Niemeyer urges us to focus not on the fact that Ganymede becomes a shining star at the end of the story, but on how baby Ganymede "urinates in fright" in Rembrandt's depiction.⁸⁰ Ganymede's liquid urine stands in sharp contrast here to the water he is bearing. The urine is the darker double of the water, suggesting the abductive and killing part of Zeus. Affeld-Niemeyer's juxtaposition of the water and the urine illustrate how the child experiences the double state of killing and saving in the incestuous fatherly figure; this illustration is made possible by the presumption that the Ganymede myth is about the internal world of children, or "the inner images of the incest victims."⁸¹

Conclusion

The four interpreters' interpretations of the Ganymede myth are focusing on different elements of the Ganymede myth: Fulgentius, Conti, and Affeld-Niemeyer inquire into the eagle that carries Ganymede away, while Conti, Bremmer, and Affeld-Niemeyer explore the importance of liquid drinks that Ganymede serves. The ways in which these four interpreters treat these elements of the Ganymede myth is also different: the act of abduction is interpreted by

⁷⁷ Bremmer, "An Enigmatic Indo-European Rite: Pederasty," 286.

⁷⁸ Affeld-Niemeyer, "Trauma and Symbol: Instinct and Reality Perception in Therapeutic Work with Victims of Incest," 27.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁰ Affeld-Niemeyer, "Trauma and Symbol: Instinct and Reality Perception in Therapeutic Work with Victims of Incest," 27.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 23-28.

Conti as a metaphor for God's favor of prudent men, while the abduction is interpreted by the other three interpreters as a literal rape; Conti interprets the eagle as a protective angel, while Affeld-Niemeyer interprets it as the protective and threatening double nature of Zeus as fatherly figure, and Fulgentius interprets it as a war standard symbolizing military power; Conti interprets the liquid Ganymede is bearing as nectar which is a metaphor for human virtue, while Affeld-Niemeyer interprets it as water and relates it to Ganymede's rising into a star, and Bremmer interprets it as wine which functions as a symbol of social status.⁸² I argue that these four interpreters are interpreting the Ganymede myth differently because they have different presumptions about the nature of the myth—the reason why they interpret the act of abduction differently is because they have different presumptions about who is the creator of the myth, and that the reason why they interpret the eagle and the liquid differently is because they have different assumptions about what is the meaning of the myth.

This is the magical power of narrative discourse. The same story can be presented differently by different story-tellers, and various elements can be added or removed from the story. As we have seen in the first section of this essay, a variety of props are embroidered into the Ganymede myth—a simple story about a young cup-bearer—throughout thousands of years. Furthermore, discourses or interpretations concerning this same story can also be greatly diversified, depending on the particular point-of-views in which these discourses are situated, as is shown in the second section of this essay. Gazing at the panorama of these variations and receptions of the Ganymede myth, we are left to wonder—how far can discourses go within the few inches of the cup beared by Ganymede?

⁸² Conti, *Mythologiae*, bk. 9, ch. 13, 863-864; Affeld-Niemeyer, "Trauma and Symbol: Instinct and Reality Perception in Therapeutic Work with Victims of Incest," 27; Fulgentius, *Mythologies*, 1.20; Jan Bremmer, "An Enigmatic Indo-European Rite: Paederasty," 279-298.

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Appendix

	Identity of Ganymede	Abduction	Elements of Love	Elements of Liquid	Aftermath of Abduction
Hom. <i>Il.</i> 5.260-265	Son of Tros	For Zeus	/	/	/
Hom. <i>Hymn.</i> 5.168-293	Son of Tros	By Wild Wind; For Zeus	/	/	Immortal Cup Bearer
<i>Little Iliad.</i> 6.	Son of Laomedon	For Zeus	/	/	Compensated with Golden Vine
Pind. <i>Ol.</i> 1.43-45	/	/	/	/	Server
Eur. <i>IA.</i> 1050-1054	Son of Dardanus	For Zeus	“Darling of Zeus’s Bed”	Wine	/
Pl. <i>Phdr.</i> 254e-255c.	/	/	Flowing Stream of Love	Flowing Stream of Love	/
Xen. <i>Symp.</i> 8.30	/	For Zeus	Spiritual Love	/	/
Ap. Rhod. <i>Argon.</i> 3.112.	/	For Zeus	/	/	Immortal
Erastosth. <i>Constellation Myths.</i> 26.	/	For Zeus	/	Water and Nectar	Aquarius (Constellation)

Diod. Sic. <i>The Library of History.</i> 4.75.3	Son of Tros	/	/	/	/
Verg. <i>Aen.</i> 1.25-28, 5.252-256.	From Mount Ida	By Zeus's eagle	/	/	Exalted; Juno's Anger
Hyg. <i>Fab.</i> 224, 271; <i>Astr.</i> 2.16, 2.29	Son of Assaracus	By Zeus's eagle	"Whom Jove Loved"	Water	Aquarius (Constellation)
Strabo. <i>Geography.</i> 13.1.11.	From Harpagia	For Zeus	/	/	/
Ov. <i>Met.</i> 10.129-187.	From Troy	By Zeus as an Eagle	/	Nectar	/
Stat. <i>Silv.</i> 3.4.13-16.	From Mount Ida	For Zeus	/	/	Juno's Jealousy
Apollodorus. <i>Library.</i> 2.4.8-2.7.7	Son of Laomedon	For Zeus	/	/	/
Paus. <i>Description of Greece.</i> 5.24.5.	Son of Tros	For Zeus	/	/	Wine Bearer
Luc. <i>Dial. D.</i> 8.213-216, 10. 209-212.	From Mount Ida; Shepherd	By Zeus as an Eagle	Kisses, Sleeping Together	Wine and Nectar	Immortal Wine Waiter; Juno's Anger; Taking Hebe's job

Nonnus, <i>Dion.</i> 8.90-95, 10.310-320, 25.429-450.	From Mount Ida; Cowherd	By Zeus as an Eagle	/	Wine	Wine Pouer; Taking Hebe's Job
Quint. Smyrn. <i>Fall of Troy.</i> 8.427-445, 14.323-326.	Son of Priam	For Zeus	/	/	Immortal
Suda. s.v. Minos. mu 1092	Son of Tros	By Ship; For Minos	/	/	Server

Figure.1



Figure 2



Figure 3