

The Sirens

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The sirens live both in Hades (Hammond) and along the Mediterranean coast of southern Italy (Grimal) on an island near Scylla and Charybdis (Hammond.) There they sit in a green field full of flowers (Homer 151) with a great heap of dead men's bones lying all around, with the flesh still rotting off them. (Homer 148)

They are remarkable musicians (Grimal 421) and have the power to quiet the winds, possibly with their song. (Hammond) They are omniscient (Hammond) and recognize Odysseus at sight, whereas other goddesses or divine beings, such as Circe and Polyphemus, for instance, fail to do so. The Sirens must really know what happened in Troy, if they know personally and recognize Odysseus. (Pucci 6)

They calm the seas when ships approach (Homer 151) and then sing to the passing sailors with honey-sweet voices full of praise for heroes and superior human knowledge of the past and future. Because knowledge was so highly valued by the Greeks, this was very tempting and ships would approach the rocky coast of the island, and thereby come to grief. (Grimal 421) The ships either crash on the coast or the men land and perish. (Hammond) The Sirens then devoured the imprudent sailors (Grimal 421) and may have had erotic designs on the heroes they mourned. (Dexter 107)

They also accompany the dead on their voyage to the lower world. (Hammond)

There are two sirens in the Homer (where they are first mentioned), but later traditions recognized three (Parthenope, Leucosia and Ligia) and four (Teles, Raedne, Molpe and Thelxiope.) (Grimal 421)

They are generally considered the offspring of a water god and a mother with great musical abilities or wisdom. (Lao 24) They were sometimes said to be the daughters of the Muse Melpomene and the river-god Achelous, and sometimes daughters of Achelous and Sterope. Occasionally their parents were said to be Achelous and the muse Terpsichore, or else Phorcys, the sea-god. Libanius related that they were born of the blood of Achelous when the latter was wounded by Heracles. (Grimal 421)

The sirens are sea demons, half woman and half bird (Grimal 421,) a fusion of the chthonic and the spiritual. Alone among winged female figures they are not of pure human form. A fusion of opposites, they embody contradictions. As water creatures, they embody its meaning and are dispensers of death and immortality. They are ambiguous and contradictory, (Lao 20) evoking simultaneous images of a flowering meadow and rotting flesh.

According to Grimal, there are a number of possible origins of the Sirens. They were once ordinary girls, companions of Persephone. When she was abducted by Hades, they asked the gods to give them wings to help them look for her. Others maintain that this transformation was a punishment inflicted on them by Demeter for not having prevented the abduction. It was also said that Aphrodite had deprived them of their beauty because they scorned the pleasures of love. (421) According to another version Parthenope was a beautiful girl who fell in love but did not wish to break her vow of chastity. She cut off her hair and went into voluntary exile in Campagna, where she dedicated herself to Dionysus. In anger Aphrodite turned her into a Siren. (426)

The Sirens death follows their defeat. According to Grimal, they hurled themselves into the sea and drowned following their failure with Odysseus (421.) Or it might have been the combination of the escape of Odysseus and Orpheus and their defeat by the muses. (Hammond) There is a monument to the sirens in Naples. (Grimal 346)

The Sirens had a singing contest with the Muses, who are frequently considered to include their mother. But it was not a friendly contest and the muses, to humiliate them, tore off their wings. While returning with the golden fleece, the Argonauts encountered the sirens, but Orpheus competed with them and sang so beautifully and loudly that no one hear and be tempted by them, except Butes, who jumped into the sea but was saved by Aphrodite. (Grimal 421) On his return home from Troy, Odysseus encountered the Sirens, but he had been forewarned by Circe that if he listened to them, he would be hopelessly drawn to them. She told him to put wax in his men's ears, lash himself to the boat's mast and forbid the men from letting him loose. (Homer 148) This he did, and as soon as he heard the Siren's voices, Odysseus felt an overwhelming desire to go to them, but was prevented by his companions.(Grimal 421)

Parthenope's Story

Everyone knows about the Sirens, the trailer trash of the ancient world. They never cleaned up after eating and just hung around hoping to lure hard working and industrious men from the straight and narrow. Their tricks might have worked with lesser men, but when they tried them on real men like Odysseus or Orpheus and the Argonauts, they were outwitted (Odysseus) or out done at their own game (Orpheus.) Shown for the losers they were, they killed themselves.

We get so used to heroes, it becomes difficult to question the very nature of heroism, and that's what the Sirens ask us to do. They are temptresses, trying to seduce us with the idea that a leap into the unknown is the way to eternal life. They know all about us and say we've done enough wonderful things. Now it's time for that life to end.

Nobody seems to have a good word for them, not even their own mothers! Are they as bad as they seem, or are they nice girls who were in the wrong place at the wrong time and then shamelessly manipulated? If so, how do they feel about those manipulators and what would they do if they had a chance to turn the tables?

The premise of this story is the latter. If they were with Persephone when Hades came for her, there was no way they could have stopped him even if they had been foolish enough to try. Demeter's anger at them was a projection of her own guilt. Or if it was Aphrodite's wrath, they were probably just in her field of vision when she got the idea that everyone should be boy crazy, even if they hadn't gotten there yet. We have no stories that actually tell of them killing sailors.

They were apparently at the wrong time in history as well, doomed to exemplify the triumph of the patriarchal over the matriarchal, knowledge over hope, power over mystery, the instrument over the flesh, Apollonian thinking over Dionysian sensation. The triumph of the muses over the Sirens is a triumph of terrestrial firmness over the feminine moistness of the aquatic. When the

Muses humiliated the Sirens, the mothers were turning against their daughters. Odysseus' triumph over the Sirens signals their ending omniscience. Although they knew his past, they were unaware that in the present he was bound to the ships mast and his mates could not hear them. They didn't understand the futility of their situation.(Pucci 8) Unlike Odysseus, who wanted to hear their song, Orpheus didn't value what they had to say. He competed with them. (Hammond) As sounder of the beat for the Argonauts, his triumph was a victory of order, competition, instruments and regularity.

Now, Parthenope is back, archetypically jolted into consciousness by centuries of accumulated Apollonian thinking, with the final straw being a Mel Gibson remake of the story of Odysseus, using material newly discovered by a pompous incarnation of Apollo to glorify reason at the expense of mystery and chaos. The latter insult has given Parthenope a powerful ally in the form of Eros, manifesting here in his intimate relationship to chaos. Now, she may be at the right place at the right time in history.

I, Parthenope, enjoy waking the others and telling them what's going on. Don't even start wondering how many of us there are. Counting is such a boy-thing. I'll give you a hint. We are somewhere between the two that Odysseus heard (we underestimated him and that traitor Circe) and the infinite hordes that your fathers and misguided mothers worry about.

Vengeance is sweet (Is that me talking? YES GIRL!) In the old days, we didn't take sides. When Hades came for Seph, we recognized destiny. If Demeter had her way, she'd be at home now in some gated community watching Sesame Street. Combine an angry mother with a pissed off, love struck airhead and you're in trouble. It's OK not to like boys in that gushy way as long as you like running around the forest shooting arrows. Then you get an Artemis t-shirt and she protects you. But if you like spending dreamy afternoons picking flowers in the fields, then you'd better want nothing more than a boyfriend. Or man crazy Aphrodite gets insulted.

We looked up to the gods and goddesses. But after Seph left and Demeter and Aphrodite couldn't understand how we could let her "desert" her mother for a man even though that has no appeal for us, we had the first of many second thoughts. Since I woke up I've been catching up (after all omniscience is our trademark.) It's amazing, based on what they know about genetics and early childhood, that those two can do anything but drool. Maybe I should feel sorry for Apollo being born into all that weirdness. Hush my mouth! It's amazing how uninhibited I feel with Eros on my side. But who's going to mess with him? I hear even Zeus gets nervous around Mr. Primordial.

Apollo's so funny. He goes around acting like Mr. Wisdom and Reason and then has a tantrum. He could have had Cassandra eventually. He's always wanted to have his way on earth and I can just imagine the little lights going off (and I emphasize little) after he saw that "Passion of Christ" movie. If it works with one god, why not with another? If it had been up to him, I'm sure it would have been called "The Passion of Apollo" instead of "Odysseus." I bet he loved the review in USA Today which observed that Odysseus was really the first true Apollonian hero and the precursor of modern times.

Just for the record. I was there and the ropes really didn't cut into Odysseus. And that scene at the end of the earth, where he dramatically summons up all that willpower and calls on Apollo to help him conquer the evil chaos of the primitive god Eros is absolute nonsense. When I showed that to Eros, he was furious. It may have made Apollo a hit with the raging hormone crowd, but it sealed his fate. I just needed a plan. So I found this place on the web called "Harvard Business Review Online" and learned about strategy. Apollo may have been the first great strategic thinker (just look at the real Odysseus) but he's stuck in the car chase mentality of Scylla and Charybdis.

Some things change, and some things don't, thankfully. It was such fun to get that laptop prototype from those guys at Apple for my church. I was probably the first half-naked nymph

playing a guitar and singing suggestive songs who ever got into the corporate HQ! Half the corporate finance team resigned before I left. It was funny to hear them try to agree on exactly what it was they heard in my songs.

I don't know how Dion learned about that new technology, but it's just what we need for the opening. What a guy!. Eros did great in his first human incarnation. Being a rock and roll musician is a perfect form for him. And he's so, well, erotic. Of course Eros would be erotic, but I guess I never really understood what that could mean. But when Dion looks me in the eyes, well...I understand why people wanted to jump ship when they heard us.

I was a little concerned when they first met that Apollo would sense his divinity. But he's so full of himself, he just gave that idiotic smile and said "Please, don't call me Mr. Apollo. My friends call me Lajeek."

Dion was great! He had "Lajeek" eating out of his hand and babbling. "Yes, the family name IS a tribute to the god of Wisdom...A monument to reason is a WONDERFUL idea...I'd be honored to be the honorary chair and oversee its construction." If I hadn't been there, I think "Lajeek" would have been trying to eat out more than just Dion's hand. It almost would have been worth it to have him try to spit in Dion's mouth when he got spurned. I wonder what the inside of Eros' mouth looks like. Probably makes the Dementors look like advertisements for whiter teeth.

We went to see Hades about bringing Cassandra back so she could come. It helped having Eros along. He's a superstar and threw everyone into a tizzy. When Cerberus saw him, he started chasing his tail! And Charon got so flustered he forgot which side of the river was which. He thought we had snuck over and demanded we get into his boat so he could take us "back."

Hades kind of figures he owes us for not making trouble when he came for Persephone. And Seph! She's so grateful, it's almost embarrassing. They had some good mother-in-law jokes. The one about a loose cyst cracked us both up.

Of course I had to sing for him. I got a kick when Seph told me I was better than Orpheus, who she described as “all three tenors singing at the top of their lungs.” And I was “a nightingale of the heavens.” But of course, who gets the PBS specials? It may have been my imagination, but I think that if Seph hadn’t had her arms wrapped around him, Hades might have really gone for me.

Then Hades had to do that “you can’t look behind you until you reach the surface or she will disappear” stuff. Of course, I didn’t look back. I know Hades wouldn’t bother lying to me.

Tomorrow’s the big day. The grand opening of the “Museum of Logic,” the most comprehensive tribute to reason and wisdom ever constructed. Everyone who is anyone will be there. Including all his new friends from Hollywood and those political bosses who think an Odysseus character (and who better than “Lajeek?”) could be the next Arnold Schwarzenegger.

It’s been so funny watching “Lajeek.” Everything has gone smoothly, thanks to Eros sucking out all the chaos, so “Lajeek,” just as we planned, has just gotten more and more ambitious. He almost had a fit when he saw them setting up in the meadow next door for the punk rock music festival. He had no idea he was looking at his future.

And that sweet little girl who’ll be in charge of the systems console at the opening is finally getting her wish tonight. She’s going to bed sweet Dion and get her brains scrambled by mighty Eros.

We have wonderful seats. I know “Lajeek” won’t give up easily. It will be such fun.

Being a siren is going to be a lot more fun this time around. Times may be a changin’.

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