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Reconciling Aphrodite

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The Power of the 'Weakling' Goddess in Homer's *Iliad*

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The early Greek poetic tradition surrounding Aphrodite has been labelled 'contradictory': she is by turns vulnerable and venerable, silly and serious.[1] The mortal Diomedes recognises Aphrodite as a 'weakling goddess' and wounds her (*Il.* 5. 331, 335-40).[2] She flees to the comfort of Dione at Olympus, where Zeus tells her that deeds of war are not for her (*Il.* 5. 428). By extension, Zeus can be interpreted as implying that she does not belong in the martial *Iliad.*[3] Instead, Zeus says, she should to keep to 'the lovely works of marriage' (*Il.* 5. 429-30), namely love and sex, her domain of power. Yet, puzzlingly, we encounter several moments in the *Iliad* where erotic love is at issue, but Aphrodite's influence is omitted: for example, in the widespread blame of Paris and Helen for the Trojan War, and not Aphrodite, for causing their elopement.[4]

Mirroring the *Iliad*'s frequent omission of Aphrodite from her own domain of power, scholars have often emphasised Aphrodite's indignity and relative invisibility in Homeric epic, ahead of her fearsome divinity. Griffin has quipped that Aphrodite is 'anything but a favourite,' because she 'suffers personal indignity in both epics,' while Rosenzweig considers that Zeus in *Iliad* 5 is relegating Aphrodite's powers over love and sex to 'second class status' as compared with war.[5] Friedrich observes a corresponding dearth of Aphrodite in discussions of Greek myth and religion: scholars traditionally either avoided her as a topic, or dismissed her as a 'serious' religious and mythological figure.[6] This perhaps encourages Suter's view that Homer 'secularises' traditional religious narratives about Aphrodite for 'literary' purposes, framing the

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[1] Rosenzweig 2004: 1.

[2] Cf. *Il.* 21. 423-6, Aphrodite is wounded in battle again in the *Iliad*, though this time by fellow immortal, Athene.

[3] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 130-2. Cf. Boedeker 1974: 53-5, on Aphrodite's association with the chorus, and peacetime, rather than war.

[4] For the anthropocentric blame of Paris, see e.g. Hector (*Il.* 3. 87), Menelaus (*Il.* 3. 100); for the anthropocentric blame of Helen, see e.g. Helen (*Il.* 3. 128, 173, 6. 180; at *Il.* 6. 356, she blames herself and Paris) and the Trojan elders (*Il.* 3. 156-8).

[5] Griffin 1980: 156; Rosenzweig 2004: 8.

[6] Friedrich 1978: 1-2.

'literary' as divorced from religious belief.[7] How could the *Iliad*'s portrayal of a weakling goddess possibly be compatible with serious religious reverence for the goddess?[8]

Yet the *Iliad*'s portrayal of divine frivolity serves an important purpose in epic. Griffin has argued that the light-heartedness of the gods' affairs, deceptions and disagreements highlights the contrasting gravity of the equivalent behaviours among mortals, particularly in war.[9] Correspondingly, some scholarship has emphasised Aphrodite's 'unmistakable potency' ahead of her 'foolishness.'[10] Nonetheless, a path towards resolving the tension between Aphrodite's 'contradictory' portrayals in the *Iliad* has not been fully explored, especially in light of two developments in scholarship: firstly, the potential of metapoetic readings of Greek poetry to provide insights into how the poet self-consciously reflects in the text on their own poetics;[11] and secondly, Brillet-Dubois' consideration of the possibility of metapoetic mutual influence between the *Iliad* and the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite.*[12] The term 'metapoetic' designates poetry that self-referentially draws attention to the poetry-making process, or its own status as poetry. Correspondingly, the first section of this article will discuss, with particular reference to *Iliad* 3, how and why metapoetic episodes in the *Iliad* omit Aphrodite from her domain of power. Building on these insights, the second section will show how Homer self-consciously evokes the *Hymn*, along with its cultic value to the goddess. I shall thereby argue that Homer's simultaneous disregard, omission and acknowledgment of Aphrodite and her power are not so contradictory as some have surmised. It is precisely by omitting the goddess that Homer evokes a religious narrative that conspicuously praises her.

How could Homer evoke the *Hymn*'s narrative, given that the *Hymn* is usually dated later than the *Iliad*?[13] Their relative chronology is ultimately uncertain, and in any case, does not have to limit the possibility that each narrative influenced the other. I turn here to the work of Brillet-

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[7] Suter 1987: 57.

[8] This assumption that Homer's Aphrodite is not worth serious consideration reflects how the other Homeric gods have also been downplayed as a frivolous literary 'diversion' from the more serious anthropocentric plots of epic. Griffin 1980: 145-8; cf. Dietrich 1979: 129-30.

[9] Griffin 1980: 162; cf. Rinon 2006: 224; Golden 1990: 55-6. For scholarship that examines Homer's gods with a view to 'serious' theology, see e.g. Otto 1954; Dietrich 1979: 130, 151; Allan 2006.

[10] E.g. Friedrich 1978: 1 n. 1, 3; Cyrino 1993: 219; Breitenberger 2007: 78; Cyrino 2010: 32, 73, 79, 104.

[11] For metapoetic studies of Homer, see: Kennedy 1986; Goldhill 1991; Ledbetter 2003: 9-39; Rinon 2006; Halliwell 2011: 36-92. For similar metapoetic approaches to tragedy, see e.g. Ringer 1998; Wright 2010; Torrance 2013.

[12] Brillet-Dubois 2011, esp. 131.

[13] The consensus is that the *Hymn* is 'post-Homeric, but prior to the sixth century and the earliest of the *Hymns*' (Faulkner 2008: 47). However, ultimately, 'no certainty can be reached about absolute dating' (Brillet-Dubois 2011: 106). Some scholars have viewed the chronology of the *Iliad* and the *Hymn* as very close: on grounds of the linguistic, formulaic and content-related similarities between the *Iliad* and the *Hymn,* West (2003: 14-16) suggests that that they were composed within the space of one generation, while Reinhardt (1961: 507-21) argues that the two texts are by the same poet.

Dubois, who outlines several ways of accounting for the well-established formulaic, thematic, linguistic and structural similarities, as well as verbatim repetitions, between the *Iliad* and the *Hymn*.[14] One traditional approach holds that the poet of the *Hymn* directly imitates Homer,[15] and therefore that the intertextual influence between the texts flows unidirectionally from the older *Iliad* to the newer *Hymn*. However, following studies of orality in the *Iliad* and the *Hymn*,[16] the similarities between the two texts have gained a broader range of explanations, attributable to 'independent [oral] composition within the same tradition, or conscious interaction with either the other poem or a common source.'[17] Brillet-Dubois, meanwhile, blends these approaches. She considers that the independent Iliadic and Aphroditean traditions behind each work, which each poet drew on, influenced the other. This enabled each poet to engage directly with the narrative tradition that informed the other's work.[18] Furthermore, it is possible that each oral narrative could have directly influenced the other, before each was written down and 'fixed' into a text.[19]

Taking this possibility of mutual influence seriously could be extremely helpful in considering the *Iliad*'s 'contradictory' portrayals of Aphrodite. As Brillet-Dubois suggests, Homer may metapoetically allude to the *Hymn*'s narrative tradition in order to define his own work against it.[20] She argues that the ejection of Aphrodite from epic by Zeus in *Iliad* 5 amounts to Homer self-consciously rejecting the Aphroditean themes of the *Hymn*: 'On a metapoetic level, it is as if we were witnessing the conflict between Aphroditean and Iliadic traditions about who belongs in what poem.'[21] Brillet-Dubois convincingly shows that 'the hymnic and the heroic traditions developed simultaneously in a fruitful dialogue, defining their themes and poetics in relation to each other.'[22] However, her reading of the *Iliad*'s evocation of the *Hymn*'s narrative tradition exacerbates a contradiction between epic presenting Aphrodite as a goddess who is too 'weak' to belong there, and epic presenting itself as a religiously authoritative genre, born of the divine inspiration of the Muses.[23] This tension is hard to resolve: could Homer really self-consciously reject Aphrodite from the *Iliad*, while also suggesting that his epic has legitimate religious authority?

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[14] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 106.

[15] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 106; Faulkner 2008: 31-4.

[16] E.g. Parry 1930 and 1932; Lord 1960; Preziosi 1966; Finkelberg 2000; Faulkner 2011: 3-7.

[17] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 106.

[18] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 109-11, 129-132.

[19] Cf. Faulkner 2011: 4-6.

[20] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 129-31.

[21] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 130; see also Richardson 2015 (e.g. 30), who emphasises the generic innovation of the *Homeric Hymns*.

[22] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 132.

[23] For discussions of how Homer metapoetically grounds the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the religious authority of the Muses, see Halliwell 2011: 58-68, and Goldhill 1991: 59, 69-70.

A broader recourse to metapoetic analysis can help to resolve this tension. Brillet-Dubois considers several moments in the *Iliad* which overtly recall the *Hymn* by means of formulaic, thematic and structural similarities, thereby calling attention to the self-aware process of composing poetry.[24] Yet there are other pertinent, illuminative metapoetic moments in the *Iliad*, when mortal characters, in parallel with Homer as poet-like figures, exclude Aphrodite even from the realm of desire. These episodes, especially in light of Aphrodite's intervention in *Iliad* 3, echo how the *Hymn* portrays Aphrodite's manipulation of mortal desire as initially beyond Anchises' perception. Building on Brillet-Dubois' insights, we can additionally consider the possibility that Homer evokes the *Hymn* not only to define his own genre agonistically against it, but also, collaboratively, in harmony with its religious respect for the goddess.

A broader metapoetic approach allows us to see how Homer imbues the *Iliad* with playful self-awareness surrounding its own theology regarding Aphrodite, thus contributing further to the insight of metapoetic approaches which uncover the relationship in Homer between epic poetics and theology.[25] This reading therefore aims to alleviate the tension between Homer's 'contradictory' portrayals of Aphrodite, by more cohesively accounting for how Homer has Zeus eject Aphrodite from epic in *Iliad* 5 in a way that does not snub, or secularise, but conspicuously honours the goddess.

'Overwriting' Aphrodite in the *Iliad*

Homer sets up metapoetic parallels between himself and two major mortal characters, Helen and Achilles. While Homer cumulatively displays an intimate grasp of the literary-theological tradition surrounding Aphrodite, Helen and Achilles display their relative short-sightedness in relation to the goddess. In parallel with Homer performing his poetry, Helen weaves images of battle, while Achilles sings of the 'glorious deeds of men' (*Il*. 3. 125-7; 9. 185-9):

> "[Iris] found Helen in the hall, where she was weaving a great purple web of double fold on which she was embroidering many battles of the horse-taming Trojans and the bronze-clad Achaeans…"

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[24] Brillet-Dubois (2011: 129-32) considers various examples from books 3, 5, 13, 20 and 24. See also her discussion of book 14 (pp. 109-12).

[25] Ledbetter 2003: 9-14. Halliwell (2011: 57) uses metapoetics to note a theologically relevant distinction between divine and mortal agency in the Muse-inspired production of poetry: 'The overall impression of the two epics is that, however vital the Muses may be (and however dangerous to claim independence of them, as Thamrys rashly did), their value to a singer never erases a human phenomenology of performative impulses, expertise, and memory.'

> "And [the embassy to Achilles] came to the huts and the ships of the Myrmidons, and [Achilles] they found delighting his mind with a clear-toned lyre, fair and elaborate, and on it was a bridge of silver; this he had taken from the spoil when he destroyed the city of Eëtion. With it he was delighting his heart, and he sang of the glorious deeds of warriors; and Patroclus alone sat opposite him in silence, waiting until Aeacus' grandson should cease from singing."

The metanarratives created by Helen and Achilles overlap with Homer's own subject matter, inviting parallelisation between Helen and Achilles as internal poet-like figures, and Homer as external poet: Helen weaves images of the warriors whom she goes on to observe and discuss in the *teichoscopia*,[26] while Achilles sings of 'glorious deeds of warriors,' recalling the glorious deeds of battle that he himself has withdrawn from;[27] meanwhile, Homer sings of all of these things. Following Kennedy and Halliwell, we might take these metapoetic parallels as carrying over into these characters' interactions that immediately follow in the *teichoscopia* and speech to the embassy respectively, where Helen and Achilles can still be understood as in parallel with Homer.[28] Yet while their metanarratives converge with Homer's narrative, there is an important difference between theirs and Homer's artistic visions (*Il.* 3. 126-8; 9. 337-43):

> "…[Helen] was embroidering many battles of the horse-taming Trojans and the bronze-clad Achaeans which for her sake they had endured at the hands of Ares."

> "[Achilles:] But why must the Argives wage war against the Trojans? Why has he gathered and led here an army, this son of Atreus? Was it not for fair-haired Helen's sake? Do they then alone of mortal men love (φιλέουσ', *phileous'*) their wives, these sons of Atreus? Whoever is a true man, and sound of mind, loves (φιλέει, *phileei*) his own and cherishes her, just as I too loved (φίλεον, *phileon*) her with all my heart, though she was but the captive of my spear."

Helen attributes the cause of the men's fighting to herself and Ares, through the Greek prepositions εἵνεκ', *heinek'* ('for the sake of') and ὑπ', *hup'* ('at the hands of'). Achilles also uses ἕνεκ', *henek'* ('for the sake of') to ascribe the war's cause to Helen. In using active verbs

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[26] Kennedy 1986: 8-10. N.B. The *teichoscopia* is the episode in which Helen, Priam and the Trojan elders watch the battle from the walls of Troy.
[27] Halliwell 2011: 37, 76.
[28] Kennedy 1986: 9-10; Halliwell 2011: 76.

(*phileous'*, 'men love,' *phileei*, 'loves,' *phileon*, 'I... loved') to express the desires of the Atreidae, the hypothetical 'true man,' and himself, Achilles shows that he thinks of mortals having agency over their own love for their women.

These perspectives omit Aphrodite's power over erotic desire, by attributing erotic agency to mortals, rather than to Aphrodite. The limitations of these perspectives become especially evident towards the end of *Iliad* 3, when we see the goddess exert her control over Paris and Helen by engineering an erotic scene between them. Is Aphrodite not just as important an explanation for why the men are fighting as those posited by Helen and Achilles during and after their metapoetic interludes? Why does the goddess allow her intervention to go unacknowledged? After all, it is clear in other mythology that mortals risk their wellbeing and even their lives if they do not honour her in the right way.[29] This being the case, why are these incomplete mortal perspectives privileged by Homer, by virtue of the metapoetic parallel between these characters, as 'internal poets,' with Homer, as 'external poet'? Aphrodite's appearances throughout *Iliad* 3 shed some crucial light on this question, over the course of which we observe the goddess both escaping and entering the perception and acknowledgement of mortals. It emerges that Aphrodite not only permits mortals to refrain from acknowledging her power, but she is actively complicit in their frequent inability to perceive her.

We see this firstly when Aphrodite intervenes in Paris and Menelaus' duel (*Il.* 3. 373-5, 380-3):

> "And now would Menelaus have dragged him away, and won boundless glory, had not Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, been quick to notice, and broken the strap, cut from the hide of a slaughtered ox… But him Aphrodite snatched up, very easily as a goddess can, and shrouded him in thick mist, and set him down in his fragrant, vaulted chamber, and then herself went to summon Helen."

Aphrodite's intervention in removing Paris from battle is made clear to Homer's audience, but whether Paris is aware of it is initially left unaddressed: we see the goddess' agency over Paris, but not whether she hides it from Paris and the onlooking warriors. Paris' later words to Helen imply that he misunderstands what has happened to him (*Il.* 3. 439-40): 'For now has Menelaus vanquished me with Athene's aid, but another time will I vanquish him.' Paris' only explicit

[29] E.g. Eur. *Hipp*. 12-14, 21-2: Aphrodite kills Hippolytus not only for his active disrespect in calling her 'the worst of deities,' but for his more passive, evasive transgression: avoiding sex and marriage, Aphrodite's domain(s) of divine power. Cf. *Hom. Hymn Ven.* 185-90: after unwittingly sleeping with Aphrodite, Anchises expresses his fear that the goddess will leave him as a 'living invalid' and pleads with her not to.

acknowledgement of the goddess precedes her intervention, in response to Hectors' mistaken warning (*Il.* 3. 54) that the 'gifts of Aphrodite' will not help him in battle (*Il.* 3. 63-6):

> "…cast not in my teeth the lovely gifts of golden Aphrodite. Not to be flung aside are the glorious gifts of the gods, whatever they themselves give, but of his own will would no man choose them."

Paris' anticipatory acknowledgement of Aphrodite's gifts is vague and lacking in specific theological insight, however: what these divine gifts actually are is left unsaid; he falls short of predicting that the goddess will intervene in the duel and save him; and he immediately moves on from Aphrodite to generalising about the gods more broadly. Paris' implied inability to perceive the workings of the goddess in more meaningful detail mirrors his lack of verbal acknowledgement of Aphrodite's intervention after it happens. Yet Aphrodite is happy to remain unseen and unacknowledged by Paris, who nonetheless remains a favourite of hers.

Aphrodite more actively contributes to her own omission from mortal perspectives when she deceives Helen. In the disguise of an old woman, Aphrodite says to Helen (*Il.* 3. 390-2):

> "Come here; Alexander [i.e. Paris] calls you to go home. There he is in his chamber and on his inlaid bed, gleaming with beauty and garments."

Having masked her appearance with a mortal disguise, she fittingly masks her own agency here: she pretends that Paris calls Helen. This deception is unsuccessful, however, since unlike Paris, Helen discerns the goddess' identity from her neck, bosom, and eyes (*Il.* 3. 396-7). She shatters the goddess' attempt at keeping herself and her agency in erotic matters hidden (*Il.* 3. 399-405):

> "Strange goddess, why is your heart set on deceiving me in this way? Will you lead me (ἄξεις, *axeis*) still further on to one of the well-peopled cities of Phrygia or lovely Maeonia, if there too there is someone of mortal men who is dear to you, because now Menelaus has defeated noble Alexander and is minded to lead hateful me to his home? It is for this reason that you have now come here with guileful thought."

Helen points out Aphrodite's misrepresentation of her own involvement through her accusation of guilefulness, and makes clear, via the active second-person verb *axeis* ('will you lead...'), that she knows that the goddess is driving the imminent erotic scene between Paris and Helen. Where before, it was initially unclear whether Paris knew of Aphrodite's intervention, it is now clear that Helen has seen through Aphrodite's attempts at self-concealment, at least partially: Helen also believes that Menelaus has defeated Paris, which he technically has not, due to Aphrodite's

removal of Paris from battle. It seems that Aphrodite's influence is hard to detect, and even when a mortal does detect it, they are likely to miss the complete picture.[30]

However, does the fact that mortals can sometimes see through Aphrodite's disguise not diminish the goddess' power over mortals? This is a mistake that Helen makes, and is made to regret. She dares to challenge the goddess' status and power, telling her (*Il.* 3. 406-12):

> "Go, sit by his [Paris'] side, and abandon the way of the gods, and turn not your feet back to Olympus; but ever be anxious for him, and guard him, until he makes you his wife, or maybe even his slave. There I will not go—it would be shameful—to share that man's bed; all the women of Troy will blame me afterwards; and I have measureless griefs at heart."

Helen asserts her own agency and rationale, explaining that she does not want to join Paris because she would be ashamed and judged for doing so.[31] She thereby catastrophically attempts to reduce the goddess' agency over events by telling her what to do, and accordingly, reduce the goddess' status as a divinity, such that she would abandon the ways of the gods and become a wife or a slave to the mortal Paris. Far worse than simply failing to mention the goddess, as she does earlier when weaving images of battle, Helen's words now misrepresent Aphrodite's status as lower than Helen's, constituting 'remarkable… irreverence.'[32]

Aphrodite is angry and, in no uncertain terms, re-establishes her power over Helen (*Il.* 3. 414-17):

> "Provoke me not, hard woman, lest I desert you (σε μεθείω, *se metheio*) in anger, and hate you (σ᾽ἀπεχθήρω, *s'apechthero*), just as now I love you exceedingly, and lest I devise grievous hatred of you from both sides, Trojans and Danaans alike; then would you perish of an evil fate."

She reasserts the rightful balance of power with a prohibition against Helen's insubordination. This is marked especially through her self-positioning as grammatical subject with Helen as the

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[30] *Iliad* 5 hints that mortals cannot usually perceive the gods due to a mist that blocks their vision: Diomedes can only clearly perceive gods in battle after Athene removes the mist from his vision at *Il*. 5. 127-8. Even when mortals can perceive the gods, they frequently misunderstand what they see: see, e.g. García (2002: 20) who observes the frequent disconnect in Greek epic and hymns between mortals seeing a god and understanding their godhead.

[31] Cf. Roisman 2006: 18-20; Blondell 2010: 14.

[32] Friedrich 1978: 60.

accusative second-person object, unambiguously reasserting her agency over Helen (*se metheio*, 'I desert you,' *s'apechthero*, 'I hate you'). Thus Helen, in fear (3. 418), obeys the goddess.[33] Yet the immediately following phrase obscures how unmediated Aphrodite's influence over Helen is: ἦρχε δὲ δαίμων, *erche de daimon* (3. 420: 'the goddess [or, the goddess' divine power] led the way') is ambiguous, even as Aphrodite's power over Helen prevails. Is it the goddess herself, or some divine power external to herself, that is leading Helen?[34]

Helen's acquiescence aptly summarises how the *Iliad* portrays Aphrodite in relation to her own power: as long as the goddess' will is brought about, she is happy for her direct influence to be obscured, whether by being omitted from mortal perspectives, or having her power over Helen summarised by Homer in an ambiguous phrase. The culmination of Aphrodite's intervention further underscores this (*Il.* 3. 438-47). Paris beseeches Helen:

> "Reproach not my heart, lady, with hard reviling words. For now has Menelaus vanquished me with Athene's aid, but another time will I vanquish him; on our side too there are gods. But come now, let us take our joy, bedded together in love; for never yet has desire so encompassed my mind—not even when I first snatched you (ἁρπάξας, *harpaxas*) from lovely Lacedaemon and sailed (ἔπλεον, *epleon*) with you on my seafaring ships, and on the isle of Cranae slept with you on the bed of love—as now I love you (σεο νῦν ἔραμαι, *seo nun eramai*), and sweet desire seizes me.' He spoke, and led the way to the bed (ἄρχε λέχοσδε, *arche lechosde*), and with him followed his wife."

Paris inaccurately mentions Athene's supposed aid of Menelaus, despite Aphrodite having withdrawn Paris from battle, and despite Athene not having intervened in the duel between Paris and Menelaus (*Il.* 3. 340-82). He mentions also the protective presence of the gods in Helen and Paris' lives: he is vague, albeit correct, in this generalisation. Compounding his weak grasp on the reality of divine influence on events, he expresses his present and past experiences of desire without reference to Aphrodite's (to us, clear) agency over erotic events. On the one hand, his mind and self are passive objects of desire ('...desire... encompassed my mind,' 'sweet desire seizes me,'),[35] but on the other, he himself has agency in expressing and enacting his own desire, as conveyed by the first-person verbs and nominative participle (*epleon harpaxas*, 'I sailed having seized...', *seo nun eramai*, 'now I love you'). Where before, Aphrodite, or her divine power, 'led

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[33] Roisman (2006: 19 n. 37) notes that Helen's fear motivates her, and therefore is distinct from emotions of the goddess' domain, love and desire. This allows her own motivation to remain independent from the goddess.

[34] Either interpretative possibility remains open (Breitenberger 2007: 70).

[35] This translation accurately reflects the grammar of the Greek text, as follows: ἔρως φρένας ἀμφεκάλυψεν, *eros phrenas amphekalupsen* (*Il*. 3. 442); με γλυκὺς ἵμερος αἱρεῖ, *me glukus himeros hairei* (*Il.* 3. 446).

Helen' (*Il.* 3. 420: *erche de daimon*), Paris now leads 'her to bed' (*arche lechosde*, as above): the theocentric narrative has been replaced with an anthropocentric rendering of events, as hallmarked by the use of the same verb, *erche*/ *arche* ('to lead'). Seemingly, this omission of Aphrodite's involvement comes with the goddess' full approval, since she has presided over this erotic scene.

Returning to the question of why Helen and Achilles, in their anthropocentric poet-like visions of erotic culpability for the Trojan War, are not guilty of offending the goddess, this scene is illuminative. We have seen that Aphrodite misrepresents her own agency in events.[36] It is not being noticed and mentioned by mortals, *per se*, that matters to the goddess, but the enactment of her will pertaining to erotic desire. The realisation of Aphrodite's desired outcome for Helen and Paris' lovemaking is compatible with Paris' omission of Aphrodite's role in events: as such, she is happy to be 'written out' of the scene from Paris' perspective. Mortals can be ignorant of and silent about Aphrodite's involvement in a way that does not displease her.[37]

Iliad 3 therefore contextualises Achilles' later omission of the goddess in his speech to the embassy. Presumably, the goddess tacitly approves of his anthropocentric views of desire and would be happy with his plans being brought about (*Il.* 9. 393-400):

> "For if the gods preserve me and I reach home, Peleus indeed will then himself seek (μάσσεται, *massetai*) a wife for me. Many Achaean maidens there are throughout Hellas and Phthia, daughters of chief men who guard the cities; of these whichever I choose (τάων ἥν κ᾽ ἐθέλωμι, *taon hen k' ethelomi*) I shall make my dear wife (φίλην ποιήσομ᾽ ἄκοιτιν, *philen poiesom' akoitin*). Very often was my gallant heart eager to take there a wedded wife, a fitting bride, and to have joy of the possessions that the old man Peleus had won."[38]

Achilles attributes agency in his future marriage to Peleus (*massetai*, 'will seek') and himself (*philen poiesom' akoitin*, 'I shall make my dear wife'), the phrase *taon hen k' ethelomi* ('of these

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[36] N.B. This corresponds with Aphrodite's association with deception in Greek poetry (e.g. Friedrich 1978: 14, 111; Cyrino 2010: 49), as well as with a broader tendency of gods to disguise themselves when encountering mortals, e.g. Athene disguises herself as Mentes (*Od.* 1. 104-5); Demeter disguises herself as an old woman (*Hom. Hymn Dem.* 101-4).

[37] Cf. *Il.* 3. 390-2, 424-46.

[38] Although Achilles mentions Aphrodite shortly before the quotation begins, he does so to compare Agamemnon's daughter to the goddess in terms of beauty (*Il.* 9. 389): he would reject her as a wife even if she rivalled the goddess in beauty, thus rhetorically strengthening his rejection of Agamemnon's attempt at reconciliation. Achilles' brief mention of the goddess earlier in this speech therefore does not indicate a direct perception of Aphrodite's agency over erotic affairs in his life.

whichever I choose') emphasising his perceived personal freedom over these deeds of marriage, despite Zeus specifically having relegated these to Aphrodite's domain in *Iliad* 5 (428-30).

Since Aphrodite is conditionally happy with anthropocentric views of love and desire, why does Homer include Aphrodite in his epic at all, especially given the implication in *Iliad* 5 that she does not really belong there (see above)? *Iliad* 3 helps us here also. We have also seen that mortals can perceive and respond to the goddess' intervention in a way that very much displeases her. Aphrodite is angered when Helen attempts to control the goddess' agency and lower her status from divinity to Paris' wife or slave. If mortals perceive the goddess, they must respond to her in a way that duly acknowledges her power. The metapoetic parallel between Helen and Homer is troubling, then. Like Helen, Homer can apparently see through the goddess' disguise, since he includes her in his narrative: but, as García notes, mortal perception of the gods is frequently couched in misunderstanding of their godhead, and how to respond to that god appropriately.[39] In parallel with Helen, does Homer not also risk misunderstanding how to respond to her divinity, as Helen initially does? Homer takes a theological risk in this metapoetic parallel, unless he makes sure to clarify that, unlike Helen, he appropriately honours her divine status and power. Homer mitigates this risk by evoking the piety of the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite.*

'Rewriting' the Aphrodite of the Homeric Hymn

Brillet-Dubois has argued that Homer moulds his epic through contrast with the Aphroditean tradition that underpins the *Hymn*. By 'borrowing… dictional elements firmly related to specific contexts,' in this case hymnic contexts, and reintegrating them into a new epic context, Homer defines his epic against the genre and religious context of the *Hymn*.[40] Conversely, here I consider how Homer self-consciously incorporates the contextual significance and authority of the *Hymn*'s piety,[41] via the *Iliad*'s similarities with the *Hymn*, to complement the limited metapoetic visions of desire advanced by Helen and Achilles, and to mitigate the risk that his own poetic vision of Aphrodite might also be limited. This interaction between the *Hymn* and the *Iliad* further

[39] García 2002: 20.

[40] Brillet-Dubois 2011: 131.

[41] Although the *Hymn* has frequently been interpreted as humiliating the goddess, Decker (2019: 41) suggests reading the text as praising the goddess, by serving as 'an exhibition of the goddess' awesome works and methods,' in keeping with the function of the other *Homeric Hymns*. Here, I build on this reading of the *Hymn* as conventionally pious.

exemplifies the self-aware construction of Homer's poetic voice and authority within a contemporary religious framework.[42]

Several linguistic and thematic features of the *Iliad*'s portrayal of Aphrodite resonate with, and thereby can be read as evoking, those of the *Hymn.*[43] Here I focus on four theologically significant features in the *Hymn*, which Homer incorporates into the *Iliad* to evoke the associated piety of the *Hymn*. The first is that, like Homer, the *Hymn* designates Aphrodite's power over erotic desire, only to obscure her agency in erotic situations. This is achieved both through Zeus' involvement in the plot, and through use of language. The *Hymn*'s opening specifies Aphrodite's domain (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 1-6):

> "Muse, tell me of the doings of Aphrodite rich in gold, the Cyprian goddess, who sends sweet longing upon the gods, and overcomes the peoples of mortal kind, and the birds that fly in heaven, and all the numerous creatures that the land and sea foster: all of them are concerned with the doings of fair-garlanded Cytherea."

As in the *Iliad*, here Aphrodite's domain of divine power encompasses 'sweet longing' (γλυκὺν ἵμερον, *glukun himeron*).[44] This formulaic phrase appears also in the *Iliad*, when Paris experiences desire as a result of the goddess' coercion of Helen to join him (*Il.* 3. 446).[45] Like in *Iliad* 5 (see above), so in the *Hymn*, Zeus oversees the demarcation of Aphrodite's domain (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 45-52), as the most powerful member of the pantheon. However, his designation retains some flexibility, since Zeus, enabled by his position as chief god of the pantheon, appropriates this power over desire without her knowledge.[46] He makes Aphrodite fall in love with the mortal Anchises, so that she will no longer humiliate the other gods with such undignified passions for mortals.[47]

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[42] Cf. Goldhill 1991: ix.

[43] The linguistic similarities pertain to vocabulary and formulae shared between the two works: see, e.g. Heitsch 1965: 23; Preziosi 1966; Janko 1982; Faulkner 2008: 26-7; Faulkner 2015. The thematic similarities include the birth of Aeneas; divine seductions (e.g. *Iliad* 14); the humorous treatment of Aphrodite (e.g. *Iliad* 5 and 21, when Aphrodite is wounded) (Richardson 2010: 29).

[44] E.g. *Il.* 5. 428-30, 14. 198-9, 214-31.

[45] For a thorough survey of identical formulae in the *Iliad* and *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, see Preziosi 1966: 172-82; cf. Faulkner 2008: 23-34.

[46] This ambiguity surrounding how exclusive Aphrodite's powers are to herself also colours *Il.* 14.197-223, when Hera asks Aphrodite for 'love and desire.' Aphrodite gives Hera her belt, which allows Hera to control love and desire independently from Aphrodite while she wears it. Furthermore, in the *Hymn*, Athene, Artemis and Hestia are immune to Aphrodite's capacity to 'persuade or outwit,' indicating some limitations on her powers (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 7-33).

[47] *Hom. Hymn Ven.* 45-52. In other words, the *Hymn* portrays a 'critical moment... in the evolution of the Olympian order and thus fill[s] the gap between the other two [i.e. theogonic and heroic] genres of *epos*' (Clay 1989: 169-70).

Echoing how Aphrodite's control over desire is intermittently taken over by Zeus, the narrative intermittently obscures how directly Aphrodite influences desire. For example, the narrative's expression is clear that she directly induces desire in Anchises (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 143):

> "With these words the goddess cast sweet longing into his heart."[48]

Yet desire is also portrayed as having its own agency independent from the gods (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 91, 56-7):

> "Desire seized Anchises…"[49]

> "Thereupon smile-loving Aphrodite fell in love with him at sight, and immoderate longing seized her mind."

The inconsistency of the language's attribution of agency, whether to Aphrodite, Zeus or desire itself, further obscures the goddess' agency over desire. The ascription of agency to desire itself also echoes Paris' words at *Il*. 3. 446, after Aphrodite has forced Helen to sleep with him (see above): 'sweet desire seizes me.' Notably, the same idiom is used in both works, which places desire, rather than the divine force that has ignited this desire, as the nominative subject of the sentence. In the same way that divine influence over desire is overwritten in the *Iliad*, so it is in the *Hymn*.

Yet despite Aphrodite's lapse in control over desire, and despite the linguistic obscuring of her agency, her power is nonetheless to be honoured by mortals in the *Hymn*: Aphrodite spares Anchises from punishment for sleeping with her because he is 'dear to the gods' (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 195). He is favoured by the gods, despite his failure to resist her seduction, because he models pious responses to the goddess: he offers to build her an altar on a hilltop when initially he suspects her divinity; and he averts his gaze when he realises that she is a goddess (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 92-106*,* 182-3). It is Anchises' persistent piety, and his successful placation of Aphrodite despite the narrative's obscurity surrounding the exclusivity and agency behind the goddess' power, that I suggest Homer is tacitly evoking. Underscoring this piety, Homer also evokes the associated religious context of the *Hymn* as an invocation of and offering to Aphrodite.[50]

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[48] This phrase echoes Zeus' direct inducement of desire in Aphrodite: *Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 45-6, 53.

[49] I have adapted this line of West's translation ('Anchises was seized by desire') to reflect the Greek text (Ἀγχίσην δ' ἔρος εἷλεν, *Anchisen d'eros heilen*), which renders Anchises as the accusative object and desire as the nominative subject.

[50] Cf. Calame 2011: 336-7.

The second theologically illuminative similarity between the *Hymn* and the *Iliad* is the goddess' portrayal as deceptive,[51] and as such, fully complicit in her agency over desire being obscured in both works. Recalling how Aphrodite disguises herself as a mortal and misrepresents her own agency when appearing to Helen at *Il.* 3. 390-2 (see above), she also disguises herself as a mortal virgin when appearing to Anchises (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 130-6):

> "…while I have come to you [Anchises], forced by necessity. Now I beseech you by Zeus and your noble parents (no humble people would have produced such a child as you): take me, a virgin with no experience of love, and show me to your father and your dutiful mother, and your brothers born of the same stock; I shall not be an unfitting daughter-in-law for them, but a fit one."

Not only is Aphrodite's agency obscured by Zeus' appropriation of her control, and by the narrative's obscuring idioms: she herself obscures her own (and Zeus') divine agency over desire, through her disguise, and her claim that she is driven by necessity.

A consequence of the goddess' penchant for deceiving mortals is the unreliable ability of mortals to perceive her as she intervenes in mortal affairs. This corresponds with mortals' inability to understand who they are perceiving, and therefore how they should behave in response. This constitutes the third feature of theological significance shared by the *Iliad* and the *Hymn*. Anchises partially detects the goddess through her disguise, recognising her divinity through her neck and eyes (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 181), again echoing how Helen recognises Aphrodite in the *Iliad* (see above). His consequent fear of the goddess (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 182) recalls Helen's fear on fully apprehending Aphrodite's power over her (*Il.* 3. 396-7, 418). Yet Anchises is unreliable in his ability to perceive the goddess. Initially Anchises suspects, on seeing the goddess in disguise, that she is divine, and offers an appropriately pious response, but he cannot tell which goddess she is (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 92-5, 100-2):

> "Hail, Lady, whichever of the blessed ones you are that arrive at this dwelling, Artemis or Leto or golden Aphrodite, high-born Themis or steely-eyed Athena… I will build you an altar on a hilltop, in a conspicuous place, and make goodly sacrifices to you at every due season."

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[51] Friedrich 1978: 14, 111; Cyrino 2010: 49.

Anchises' vagueness in identifying his interlocutor as divine recalls Paris' vagueness in discussing the goddess' gifts and in interpreting her intervention in the duel (see above). Accompanying his vagueness is his inconsistency in sticking to this identification. Following the goddess' deceptive speech, in which she misrepresents herself as a mortal virgin, he conditionally accepts her story (145: 'if you are mortal...') and sleeps with her (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 166-7), entirely in keeping with divine will:

> "And then Anchises by divine will and destiny lay with the immortal goddess, the mortal, not knowing the truth of it."

Like Helen, Anchises fails to treat the goddess as she should be treated, despite having some limited ability to see through her disguise. He sleeps with her, which like Helen's attempt to diminish the goddess' status above, comes at great risk to himself: as he later notes, mortals who sleep with gods risk losing their vitality (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 189-90), and Aphrodite mentions other mortals who have slept with gods to their great detriment, such as Tithonus (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 218-38). Yet, in both works, the faulty ability of mortals to perceive and respond to the goddess in adequately pious ways is ultimately acceptable to the gods, so long as it happens 'by divine will.'

If mortals so often fail to detect the workings of the goddess, what gives the poet, who is also mortal, superior insight? Is invoking the Muses enough?[52] I suggest that it is not, since both works provide further assurance that their poets have superior insight. In the same way that Homer creates a metapoetic parallel between himself and Helen, the poet of the *Hymn* creates one between himself and Anchises. In so doing, each poet casts himself as superior to the mortal characters. Not only can each poet recognise the gods and their power more fully than the mortals in their poems, but they can also adequately evoke literary and generic conventions that praise the gods. This is the fourth theologically significant similarity between the two works.

We encounter Anchises' partial vision of the divine in close proximity to the depiction of him playing a cithara. This musical moment metapoetically reflects the musical performance of the *Hymn* itself (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 78-83):[53]

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[52] *Il.* 2. 484-93; *Hom. Hymn Ven.* 1.

[53] Cf. Calame 2011: 336-7.

> "…the others were all following the cattle over the grassy pastures, while [Anchises], left all alone in the steading, was going about this way and that, playing loudly on a lyre. Zeus' daughter Aphrodite stood before him, like an unmarried girl in stature and appearance, so that he should not be afraid when his eyes fell on her."

Aphrodite's successful deception and seduction of Anchises follows directly after we encounter him playing a cithara, implying that anything he might be singing is coloured by his unreliable vision of the divine. Further creating a metapoetic parallel between Anchises and the poet of the *Hymn*, Anchises' first address to the goddess directly mirrors the poet's own final address to the goddess (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 92, 292: 'hail,' χαῖρε, *chaire*).[54] Yet they display contrasting ability to perceive the goddess: Anchises' perception is vague, calling the goddess 'queen' or 'lady' (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 92: ἄνασσ', *anass'*), which could refer to a goddess or a mortal. The poet of the *Hymn* is more precise, addressing her as 'goddess' (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 292: θεά, *thea*). This metapoetic parallelisation recalls Helen and Achilles' limited anthropocentric perceptions of Aphrodite in the *Iliad*, as well as the contrast between their limited visions and Homer's broader blending of anthropocentric with theocentric perspectives.

As Achilles and Helen can be compared with Homer at their metapoetic moments (see above), Anchises contrasts with the poet who is performing the narrative of the *Hymn*. The poet demonstrates a comparatively fuller understanding of the workings of the gods by invoking the goddess, her domain, and its limitations thoroughly and precisely; by demonstrating the complex relationship between human and divine agency in desire; and by showing the contrasting ways that divine agency in erotic events is obscured, misrepresented, experienced and misunderstood. These theological insights are legitimated in real-life religious terms, through the invocation of the Muse's authority (*Hom. Hymn Ven.* 1), and by the offering of this poetic insight to the goddess as part of a hymn directly addressed to her, thus summoning her presence and bidding her farewell (*Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 292-3):[55]

> "I salute you (*chaire*), goddess (*thea*), queen of well-cultivated Cyprus. After beginning from you, I will pass over to another song."

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[54] Clay 2011: 236.

[55] García 2002: 6; Clay 2011: 236.

This reflexive ending is formulaic: it conspicuously situates the *Hymn* within the genre of *Homeric Hymns* and praise poetry,[56] although other *Homeric Hymns* offer more overt prayers and praise to the gods through this (or a similar) formulaic ending.[57] Accordingly, Breitenberger perceives the *Hymn* as 'not encomiastically compliment[ing]' Aphrodite as much as it might be expected to, through its paradoxical presentation of the goddess as overcome by her own domain of power.[58] However, this reinforces that the goddess' domain is so powerful that even she bows to its power.[59] Moreover, this more covert mode of praise is highly fitting for honouring a goddess whose own methods are covert and deceptive.

Thus, the theologically significant portrayals of Aphrodite in relation to mortals, her own misrepresentation of her agency in erotic events, and her subjugation by Zeus, are all legitimised in real-life religious terms by the conventional generic marking of the narrative as a religious text addressed directly to the goddess. For the poet performing the *Hymn*, the 'contradictory' aspects of Aphrodite's theology, namely her humiliation by Zeus and the by turns overt and covert representation of her agency in erotic events, are shown to be completely compatible with, and in fact, constitutive of reverent interaction with the goddess. They illuminate and elevate her domain of power, and thus venerate her.[60]

These four theological insights about the goddess in the *Hymn* all find parallels in the *Iliad*, which also demonstrates: Aphrodite's dominion over desire, including the obscurity of her power and its limitations;[61] the goddess' deceptive complicity in this misrepresentation of her agency; mortals' unreliable perceptions of the goddess, and concomitant misunderstandings of how they should respond to her; and finally, the poet's use of metapoetic parallelisation to demonstrate superior theological insight to his mortal characters. However, the *Iliad* differs from the *Hymn* by omitting to praise the goddess and function as an offering to the goddess, at least explicitly. We can reasonably speculate that Homer 'rewrites' these theological insights of the *Hymn* to evoke its associated reverence. Thereby Homer pre-emptively placates the goddess whom his epic playfully ejects in *Iliad* 5.

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[56] Clay 2011: 236; Calame 2011: 334; Faulkner and Hodkinson 2015: 9.

[57] E.g. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* offers prayer and praise to the goddess in its final lines preceding its similar formulaic final line (*Hom. Hymn Dem.* 480-95); Calame 2011: 334.

[58] Breitenberger 2007: 64. Cf. Bergren 1989: 1; Faulkner 2008: 3-4.

[59] Breitenberger 2007: 64. Cf. Decker 2019: 41.

[60] Decker 2019: 41.

[61] Regarding the limitations of Aphrodite's power, Homer calls into question how exclusive these powers are to the goddess herself when Hera temporarily appropriates them at *Il.* 14. 197-223. This echoes Zeus' temporary appropriation of the goddess' powers at *Hom. Hymn Ven.* 45-52.

On this reading, therefore, Homer's portrayal of Aphrodite evokes a religious narrative genre that praises the goddess' power. Each poet sets up a competitive relationship between himself and his characters, in keeping with the reflexive and competitive culture that drove oral performance in archaic Greece.[62] Each poet emerges victorious in this self-wrought metapoetic 'competition,' as well as sufficiently pious, by providing theologically superior perspectives that interweave both anthropocentric and theocentric perspectives on erotic activity.

Aphrodite Reconciled: Empowering the 'Weakling' Goddess

This reading of the intertextual relationship between the *Iliad* and the *Hymn* has significant consequences for how we understand Homer's reflexive construction of his own genre as theologically engaged, and yet simultaneously anthropocentric. In contrast with arguments which simplistically characterise Homer's gods as 'literary,' as falsely opposed to being seriously theological,[63] we can infer that Homer takes the business of placating and revering Aphrodite seriously. Homer circumnavigates any risk of offending the goddess, born of his sometimes anthropocentric, and therefore, partial, depictions of desire, as well as by the potential for his own mortal perception (like Anchises', Helen's and Achilles') to be lacking when it comes to perceiving the workings of the gods. The goddess is pre-emptively placated by Homer's evocation of her hymnal narrative, and its associated reverence and cultic value to the goddess.

This reading also contextualises the anthropocentricity of the epic genre as Homer moulds it. Having placated Aphrodite, Homer is free to craft Helen and Achilles' anthropocentric perspectives (metapoetically in parallel with his own) in a way that centralises their own mortal agency in desire as distinct from divine agency, without erasing Aphrodite's crucial role. The narrative's emphasis on the independent agency of these characters proves essential to the epic characterisation and motivation of each. Helen's view of herself as blameworthy, rather than under the control of Aphrodite, contributes to Homer's sympathetic characterisation of her as appropriately sensitive to what constitutes shameful behaviour for women and the consequent judgement of the Trojan women.[64] Helen thereby reinforces heroic values, which compounds the view that Helen is worth fighting for.[65] Meanwhile, Achilles, in his speech to the embassy, capitalises on the idea that he is free to respond to desire as he wishes, both in responding angrily

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[62] References to poetic competitions are found in both *Homeric Hymns* and epic: the shorter *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* ends with a prayer for 'victory in this contest' (*Hom. Hymn* 6.19-20, cf. Clay 2011: 236-7); Hesiod boasts of victory in a poetic contest (Hes. *Op*. 650-62).

[63] E.g. Suter 1987.

[64] Roisman 2006: 18-20; Blondell 2010: 10, 14.

[65] Roisman 2006: 19; Blondell 2010: 9.

to the loss of his purportedly beloved Briseis by withdrawing from battle (*Il.* 9. 335-43), and by deciding to return home so that Peleus and he can choose him a wife (*Il.* 9. 393-400). His anthropocentric vision of desire means that he can make these arguments forcefully: he is free from Aphrodite's control, and free to pursue either of the two fateful paths that have been revealed to him by Thetis (*Il.* 9. 410-29).

Homer intertwines the pious theocentricity of the *Hymn* with the anthropocentric perspectives of Helen and Achilles, thereby creating a distinctively epic worldview in which mortal agency is central,[66] but the gods' power is still to be taken seriously.[67] Contrary to dismissive comments about 'foolish' Aphrodite and the view that her portrayal is 'contradictory,'[68] it emerges that the *Iliad* aligns with perceptions of the goddess as 'great,' 'universal' and powerful.[69] Homer's evocation of the *Hymn* ensures that Aphrodite is honoured as she should be.

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[66] Cf. Williams 1993: 75-102.
[67] Cf. Griffin 1980: 162.
[68] Friedrich 1978: 1-2; Rosenzweig 2004: 1.
[69] Friedrich 1978: 4; Cyrino 1993: 219; Cyrino 2010: 32, 104.

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