

# HOMERIC HYMN TO APHRODITE

TRANSLATED BY GREGORY NAGY

Muse, tell me the things done by golden Aphrodite,  
the one from Cyprus, who arouses sweet desire for gods  
and who subdues the populations of mortal humans,  
and birds as well, who fly in the sky, as well as all beasts  
5 - all those that grow on both dry land and the sea [*pontos*].  
They all know the things done by the one with the beautiful garlands, the one from Cythera.<sup>1</sup>  
But there are three whose *phrenes* she cannot win over or deceive.  
The first is the daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus, bright-eyed Athena.  
For she takes no pleasure in the things done by golden Aphrodite.  
10 What does please her is wars and what is done by Ares,  
battles and fighting, as well as the preparation of splendid pieces of craftsmanship.  
For she was the first to teach mortal humans to be craftsmen  
in making war-chariots and other things on wheels, decorated with bronze.  
And she it is who teaches maidens, tender of skin, inside the palaces,  
15 the skill of making splendid pieces of craftsmanship, putting it  
firmly into each one's mind [*phrēn*].  
The second is the renowned Artemis, she of the golden shafts: never  
has she been subdued in lovemaking [*philotēs*] by Aphrodite, lover of smiles [to whom smiles are *phila*].  
For she takes pleasure in the bow and arrows, and the killing of wild beasts in the mountains,  
as well as lyres, groups of singing dancers, and high-pitched shouts of celebration.  
20 Also shaded groves and the city of *dikaioi* men.  
The third one not to take pleasure in the things done by Aphrodite is that young Maiden full of *aidōs*,  
Hestia,<sup>2</sup> who was the first-born child of Kronos, the one with the crooked *mētis*,  
as well as the last and youngest,<sup>3</sup> through the Will [*boulē*] of Zeus, holder of the aegis.  
She was the Lady who was wooed by Poseidon and Apollo.  
25 But she was quite unwilling, and she firmly refused.  
She had sworn a great oath, and what she said became what really happened.  
She swore, as she touched the head of her father Zeus, the aegis-bearer,<sup>4</sup>  
that she would be a virgin for all days to come, that illustrious goddess.  
And to her Father Zeus gave a beautiful honor, as a compensating substitute for marriage.  
30 She is seated in the middle of the house, getting the richest portion.<sup>5</sup>  
And in all the temples of the gods she has a share in the *timē*.  
Among all the mortals, she is the senior goddess.  
These are the three [goddesses] that she [Aphrodite] could not persuade in their *phrenes*.  
As for all the rest, there is nothing that has escaped Aphrodite:  
35 none of the blessed gods nor any of mortal humans.  
She even led astray the *noos* of Zeus, the one who delights in the thunder,  
the one who is the very greatest and the one who has the very greatest *timē* as his share.  
But even his well-formed *phrenes* are deceived by her, whenever she wants,

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<sup>1</sup> Cyprus and Cythera were both particularly famous for their cults of Aphrodite. This is acknowledged regularly, even on the pan-Hellenic level.

<sup>2</sup> *Hestia* [Ionic *Histiē*] means 'hearth, fireplace'.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to the myth, as we find it in the *Theogony* of Hesiod (495-497), that tells how Kronos swallowed his children, only to disgorge them later. The first-born Hestia was the first to be swallowed and the last to be disgorged. It is a common theme in the myths of many societies that fire is simultaneously very old and very young.

<sup>4</sup> This gesture reflects the custom of touching a *philon* part of a *philos* person in order to perform a *philon* act corresponding to the *phila* words addressed to that person.

<sup>5</sup> The hearth is the focus of sacrificial offerings.

as she mates him with mortal women with the greatest of ease,  
 40 unbeknownst to Hera, his sister and wife,  
 who is the best among all the immortal goddesses in her great beauty.  
 She was the most glorious [*kudos*-filled] female to be born to Kronos, the one with the crooked *mētis*,  
 and to her mother, Rhea. And Zeus, the one whose resources are inexhaustible [*a-phthi-ta*],  
 made her his honorable wife, one who knows the ways of affection.  
 45 But even upon her [Aphrodite] Zeus put sweet desire in her *thumos*  
 •desire to make love to a mortal man, so that  
 not even she may go without mortal lovemaking  
 and get a chance to gloat at all the other gods,  
 with her sweet laughter, Aphrodite, lover of smiles,  
 50 boasting that she can make the gods sleep with mortal women,  
 who then bear mortal sons to immortal fathers,  
 and how she can make the goddesses sleep with mortal men.  
 And so he [Zeus] put sweet desire in her *thumos* - desire for Anchises.  
 At that time, he [Anchises] was herding cattle at the steep peaks of Mount Ida, famous for its many  
 springs.  
 55 To look at him and the way he was shaped was like looking at the immortals.  
 When Aphrodite, lover of smiles, saw him,  
 she fell in love with him. A terrible desire seized her in her *phrenes*.  
 She went to Cyprus, entering her temple fragrant with incense,  
 to Paphos.<sup>6</sup> That is where her sacred precinct is, and her altar, fragrant with incense.  
 60 She went in and closed the shining doors.  
 Then the *Kharites* ['Graces'] bathed her and anointed her with oil  
 the kind that gives immortality, glistening on the complexion of the gods, who last for all time.  
 Immortal it was, giver of pleasures, and it had the fragrance of incense.  
 Then she wrapped all her beautiful clothes around her skin.  
 65 She was decked out in gold, Aphrodite, lover of smiles.  
 She rushed toward Troy, leaving behind fragrant Cyprus.  
 Making her way with the greatest of ease, high up among the clouds.  
 She arrived at Mount Ida, famous for its many springs, nurturing mother of beasts.  
 She went straight for the herdsmen's homestead, up over the mountain. Following her came  
 70 gray wolves and lions with fierce looks, fawning on her;  
 bears too, and nimble leopards, who cannot have their fill of devouring deer,  
 came along. Seeing them, she was delighted in her *thumos*, inside her *phrenes*,  
 and she put desire where their hearts were. So they all  
 went off in pairs and slept together in shaded nooks.  
 75 She in the meantime came to the well-built shelters  
 and found him [Anchises] left all alone at the herdsmen's homestead,  
 that hero [*hērōs*] Anchises, who had the beauty of the gods.  
 All the others [the other herdsmen] went after the herds, along the grassy pastures,  
 while he was left all alone at the herdsmen's homestead,  
 80 pacing back and forth, playing tunes on his lyre that pierce the inside.  
 She stood before him, the daughter of Zeus, Aphrodite,  
 looking like an unwed maiden in size of length<sup>7</sup> and appearance.  
 She did not want him to notice [verb of *noos*] her with his eyes and be frightened of her.  
 When Anchises saw her he was filled with wonder as he took note  
 85 of her appearance and size of length and splendid clothes.  
 For she wore a robe that was more resplendent than the brightness of fire.

<sup>6</sup> Paphos is a city on the island of Cyprus.

<sup>7</sup> Ordinarily, gods would be larger-than-life-size.

She had twisted brooches, and shiny earrings in the shape of flowers.  
 Around her tender throat were the most beautiful necklaces.  
 It [her robe] was a thing of beauty, golden, decorated with every sort of design. Like the moon  
 90 it glowed all around her tender breasts, a marvel to behold.  
 Seized with love, Anchises said to her:  
 “Hail, my Lady, you who come here to this home, whichever of the blessed ones you are,  
 Artemis or Leto or golden Aphrodite  
 or Themis of noble birth or bright-eyed Athena.  
 95 Or perhaps you are one of the *Kharites*, you who have come here. They are the ones  
 who keep company with all the gods and are called immortal.  
 Or you are one of those Nymphs who range over beautiful groves,  
 or one of those Nymphs who inhabit this beautiful mountain,  
 and the fountainheads of rivers and grassy meadows.  
 100 For you, on some high peak, in a spot with a view going all round,  
 I will set up an altar, and I will perform for you beautiful sacrifices  
 every year as the season [*hōra*] comes round. And I wish that you in turn may have a kindly-disposed  
*thumos* towards me.  
 Grant that I become a man who is distinguished among the Trojans.  
 Make the genealogy that comes after me become a flourishing one. And make me  
 105 live a very long life and see the light of the sun,  
 blessed [*olbios*] in the midst of the people. And let me arrive at the threshold of old age.”<sup>8</sup>  
 Then Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, answered him:  
 “Anchises, most glorious of earth-born men!  
 I am no goddess. Why do you liken me to the female immortals?  
 110 No, I am a mortal. The mother that bore me was a woman.  
 My father is Otреus, famed for his name.<sup>9</sup> Maybe you have heard of him.  
 He rules over all of Phrygia, with its strong-walled fortresses.  
 But I know your language as well as my own.<sup>10</sup>  
 The nursemaid who brought me up in the palace was a Trojan.<sup>11</sup> Ever since I was a small child,  
 115 she brought me up, having taken me from my *philē* mother.  
 That is why I know your language as well as my own.  
 But then, the one with the golden wand, the Argos-killer [Hermes], abducted me,  
 taking me from a festival of song and dance in honor of Artemis, the one with the golden arrows.  
 There were many of us nymphs there, maidens worth many cattle as bride-price.  
 120 We were having a good time, and a crowd so large that you couldn’t count them was standing around  
 us in a circle.  
 Then it was that the one with the golden wand, the Argos-killer, abducted me.  
 He carried me over many fields of mortal humans  
 and over vast stretches of land unclaimed and unsettled, where wild beasts,  
 eaters of raw flesh, roam about, in and out of their shaded lairs.  
 125 I thought that my feet would never again touch the earth, grower of grain.  
 And he [Hermes] said that I, in your bed, the bed of Anchises, would be called your  
 lawfully-wedded wife, and that I would give you splendid children.  
 But once he [Hermes] pointed this out and made note of it, straightaway  
 he went back, that powerful Argos-killer, to that separate group, the immortals.  
 130 I in the meantime reached you here, and there is an overpowering compulsion that I have in me.  
 In the name of Zeus, in the name of your parents, I appeal to you as I touch your knees.

<sup>8</sup> Anchises may be formulating his request in an “incorrect” order of preference.

<sup>9</sup> The name seems to mean: “he who impels, he who gives impulse.”

<sup>10</sup> The Phrygian tongue would be foreign to Greeks.

<sup>11</sup> From the standpoint of this poem, it seems that Trojans are “Greeks.”

Your parents must be noble, for base ones could never have conceived such a one as you.<sup>12</sup>  
 Take me, virgin that I am, inexperienced in making love [*philotēs*],  
 and show me to your father and to your caring mother  
 135 and to your brothers, those born from the same parents.  
 I will not be an unseemly in-law for them, but a seemly one indeed.  
 And send a messenger quickly to the Phrygians, trainers of swift horses,  
 to tell my father and my mother, however much she grieves.  
 They will send you plenty of gold, and woven clothing as well.  
 140 Take these abundant and splendid things as dowry.  
 After you have done so, prepare a lovely wedding-feast  
 that gives *timē* to both humans and immortals.”  
 After she said these things, she put sweet desire in his *thumos*,  
 and Anchises was seized with love. He said these words, calling out to her:  
 145 “If you are mortal, and if a woman was the mother who gave birth to you,  
 and if Otreus is your father, famed for his name, as you say he is,  
 and if you have come here because of the Immortal Conductor [of *psukhai*],  
 Hermes, and if you are to be called my wife for all days to come,  
 then it is impossible for any god or any mortal human  
 150 to hold me back, right here, from joining with you in making love [*philotēs*],  
 right now, on the spot - not even if the one who shoots from afar, Apollo himself,  
 takes aim from his silver bow and shoots his arrows that bring misery.  
 Then, O Lady who looks like the gods, I would willingly,  
 once I have been in your bed, go down into the palace of Hadēs below.”  
 155 So saying, he took her by the hand. And Aphrodite, lover of smiles,  
 went along, with her face turned away and her eyes downcast,  
 towards the bed, all nicely made, which had already been arranged for the lord,<sup>13</sup>  
 all nicely made with soft covers.<sup>14</sup> And on top lay skins of  
 bears and lions, who roar with their deep voices,  
 160 which he himself had killed on the lofty mountainsides.  
 And when they went up into the sturdy bed,  
 he first took off the jewelry shining on the surface of her body  
 the twisted brooches and the shiny earrings in the shape of flowers.  
 Then he undid her waistband and her resplendent garments.  
 165 He stripped them off and put them on a silver-studded stool,  
 Anchises did. And then, by the will of the gods and by fate [*aisa*],  
 he lay next to the immortal female, mortal male that he was. He did not know what he was really  
 doing.  
 But when the time comes for herdsmen to drive back to the fold  
 their cattle and sturdy sheep, back from the flowery pastures,  
 170 then it was that she [Aphrodite] poured sweet sleep over Anchises,  
 sweet and pleasurable. She in the meantime put back on her beautiful clothes, which covered again the  
 surface of her body.  
 Now that her skin was again beautifully covered over, the resplendent goddess  
 stood by the bed, and the well-built roof-beam  
 - her head reached that high up.<sup>15</sup> And beauty shone forth from her cheeks

<sup>12</sup> By implication, the disguised Aphrodite is saying that Anchises surely must have some divine ancestry himself. She almost gives herself away here.

<sup>13</sup> The epithet *anax* ‘lord’ is appropriate both to persons of royal ancestry and to cult-heroes.

<sup>14</sup> The word *khlaina* ‘cloak, cover’ seems to be used consistently in contexts where an *ainos* is at work.

<sup>15</sup> The goddess here resumes her divine dimensions.

175 - an immortal beauty, the kind that marks the one with the beautiful garlands, the goddess from  
Cythera.  
Then she woke him from his sleep and called out to him, saying:  
“Rise up, son of Dardanos! Why do you sleep such a sleep without awakening?  
See if I look like  
what you noticed [verb of *noos*] when you first saw me with your eyes.”  
180 So she spoke, and he, fresh out of his sleep, straightaway heeded her word.  
As soon as he saw the neck and the beautiful eyes of Aphrodite,  
he was filled with fright and he turned his eyes away, in another direction.  
Then he hid his beautiful face with a cloak [*khlaina*],  
and, praying to her, addressed her with winged words:  
185 “The first time I ever laid eyes on you, goddess,  
I knew you were a god. But you did not speak to me accurately.  
Now I appeal to you by touching your knees, in the name of Zeus the holder of the aegis,  
don’t let me become disabled [without *menos*],<sup>16</sup> don’t let me live on like that among humans!  
Please, take pity! I know that no man is full of life, able,<sup>17</sup>  
190 if he sleeps with immortal goddesses.”  
He was answered by the daughter of Zeus, Aphrodite:  
“Anchises, most glorious of mortal humans!  
Take heart, and do not be too afraid in your *phrenes*.  
You should have no fear of that I would do any kind of bad thing to you,  
195 or that any of the other blessed ones would. For you are *philos* indeed to the gods.  
And you will have a *philos* son, who will be king among the Trojans.  
And following him will be generations after generations for all time to come.  
His name will be Aineias [Aeneas], since it was an unspeakable [*ainos*]<sup>18</sup> *akhos* that took hold of me -  
grief that I had fallen into the bed of a mortal man.  
200 And yet, of all mortal humans, the closest to the gods by far  
are those who come from your family line,<sup>19</sup> both in looks and in constitution.<sup>20</sup>  
Why, there was golden-haired Ganymede, whom Zeus the master of *mētis*  
abducted on account of his beauty, so that he may be together with the immortal ones,  
as wine-pourer for the gods in the palace of Zeus,<sup>21</sup>  
205 a wonder to behold, given his share of *timē* by all the immortals,  
pouring red nectar from a golden mixing-bowl.  
Tros [Ganymede’s father] was gripped in his *phrenes* by a *penthos* that is beyond forgetting. He did not  
know  
where the miraculous gust of wind took his *philos* son, abducting him.  
He [Tros] mourned him [Ganymede] without pause, for all days,  
210 and Zeus took pity on him: he gave him a compensation for his son,  
a set of high-stepping horses whom the gods use for their travels.  
These horses he [Zeus] gave him [Tros] as a gift to keep. And he [Tros] was told all the details of what  
happened,

<sup>16</sup> A euphemism, replacing words that are clearly better left unsaid.

<sup>17</sup> Again, a matter of euphemism.

<sup>18</sup> This is the adjective *ainos* [‘unspeakable, causing nervousness, fear, terror, terrible’], not the noun *ainos* [designates a mode of discourse that contains within it more than one message, and where only one of the messages is true]. What we see here is a “folk etymology”: Aphrodite is deriving the name Aineias [Aeneas] from *ainos*.

<sup>19</sup> This reflects, I think, on the name Ankhisēs, which I take to be a conflation of the epithets *ankhitheos* ‘close to the gods’ and *isothéos* ‘equal to the gods’. Both of these epithets reflect the theme of god-hero antagonism.

<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is in these two respects that Anchises and the other males in his family line come closest to the gods.

<sup>21</sup> So the gods too, like the Greeks, have wine-pourers; as we shall now see, however, what is poured for the gods is not exactly wine.

at the behest of Zeus, by the Argos-killer, the Conductor [of *psukhai*].  
 He was told that he [Ganymede] would be immortal and ageless, just like the gods.  
 215 And when he [Tros] heard the message of Zeus,  
 he no longer lamented but was happy within his *phrenes*,  
 and merrily did he ride around, in a chariot drawn by horses with feet swift as a gust of wind,  
 In much the same way was Tithonos abducted by Eos [the Dawn Goddess], she of the golden pattern-  
 weave.<sup>22</sup>  
 He too belonged to your family line, looking like the immortal ones.  
 220 Then she went with a request to the Son of Kronos [Zeus], him of the dark clouds,  
 asking that he [Tithonos] become immortal and live for all days to come.<sup>23</sup>  
 Zeus nodded yes to her and brought to fulfillment the words of her wish.  
 Too bad that her thinking was disconnected! The Lady Eos did not notice [verb of *noos*] in her *phrenes*  
 that she should have asked for adolescence [*hēbē*] and a stripping away of baneful old age.  
 225 Well, for a while he [Tithonos] held on to adolescence [*hēbē*],  
 enjoying Eos, the one with the gold pattern-weave,<sup>24</sup> the one early-born.  
 He lived at the streams of the Okeanos, and the ends of the earth.  
 But when the first strands of gray hair started growing  
 from his beautiful head and his noble chin,  
 230 then the Lady Eos stopped coming to his bed.  
 But she nourished him, keeping him in her palace,  
 with grain and ambrosia. And she gave him beautiful clothes.  
 But when hateful old age was pressing hard on him, with all its might,  
 and he couldn't move his limbs, much less lift them up,  
 235 then in her *thumos* she thought up this plan, a very good one indeed:  
 she put him in her chamber, and she closed the shining doors over him.  
 From there his voice pours out - it seems never to end - and he has no strength at all,  
 the kind he used to have in his limbs when they could still bend.  
 I would not choose that you [Anchises] be that way, amongst the immortal ones,  
 240 immortal and living for all days to come.<sup>25</sup>  
 If you could only stay the way you are, in looks and constitution,  
 staying alive as my lawfully-wedded husband,  
 then *akhos* would not have to envelop me and my sturdy *phrenes*.<sup>26</sup>  
 But now wretched old age will envelop you,  
 245 pitilessly, just as it catches up with every man.  
 It is baneful, it wears you down, and even the gods shrink back from it.  
 As for me, I will have a great disgrace [*oneidos*], in the eyes of the immortal ones,  
 a disgrace that will last for all days to come, without end, all on account of you.  
 My trysts and stratagems [*mētis* pl.] with which I used to get all  
 250 the immortal gods mated with mortal women,  
 used to be feared by them [the gods]. For my power of *noos* used to subdue all of them.  
 But now my mouth can never again boast  
 about this among the immortals. I have gone very far off the track,  
 in a wretched and inexcusable way. I have strayed from my *noos*.  
 255 I got myself a child beneath my waistband, having slept with a male mortal.  
 As for him [the child], the moment he sees the light of the sun,  
 Nymphs, living in the mountains and wearing low-slung waistbands, will raise him

<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, 'she of the golden throne'.

<sup>23</sup> Eos botches the wording of her request. As we shall now see, the ruined formula produces ruinous results.

<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, 'her of the golden throne'.

<sup>25</sup> Aphrodite repeats the botched formula of Eos.

<sup>26</sup> But, as she has already said, Aphrodite *will* have sorrow from this affair.

Nymphs that live on this great and fertile mountain.  
 They associate neither with mortals nor with immortals,  
 260 they live for a long time, and they eat immortal food.  
 They put on a beautiful song and dance, even by the standards of the immortals.  
 They mate with Seilēnoi<sup>27</sup> or with the sharp-sighted Argos-killer,  
 making love [*philotēs*] in the recesses of lovely caves.  
 When they are born, firs and oaks with lofty boughs  
 265 spring out of the earth, that nurturer of men.  
 Beautiful trees, flourishing on high mountains,  
 they stand there pointing to the sky, and people call them the sacred places  
 of the immortal ones. Mortals may not cut them down with iron.  
 But when the fate [*moira*] of death is at hand for them,  
 270 these beautiful trees become dry, to start with,  
 and then their bark wastes away, and then the branches drop off,  
 and, at the same time, the *psukhē* goes out of them, as it leaves the light of the sun.  
 These [the Nymphs] will raise my son, keeping him in their company.  
 And when adolescence [*hēbē*], full of loveliness, first takes hold of him,<sup>28</sup>  
 275 the goddesses [the Nymphs] will take him here to you and show you your child.  
 As for you, in order that I may tell you in the proper order everything that I have in my *phrenes*,  
 I too will come back to you as the fifth anniversary approaches, bringing you your son.  
 And the moment you see this young seedling [Aineias/Aeneas] with your eyes,  
 you will be happy to look at him. For he will be very godlike.  
 280 And straightaway you shall take him to windy Ilion.  
 And if any mortal human asks you  
 what mother got your *philos* son beneath her waistband,  
 keep in mind [root *mnē-*] to tell him as I command you.  
 Say that he is the offspring of one of the flower-faced Nymphs  
 285 who live on this beautiful mountain, shaded over by forests.  
 But if you say out loud and boast, with a *thumos* bereft of *phrenes*,  
 that you made love [*philotēs*] to the Lady of Cythera, the one with the beautiful garlands,  
 then Zeus in his anger will smite you with a smoking thunderbolt.  
 Now then, everything has been said to you. You take note [verb of *noos*] in your *phrenes*.  
 290 And refrain from naming me. Avoid the *mēnis* of the gods.”  
 So saying, she bolted away towards the windy sky.  
 I wish you *kharis* [‘I wish you pleasure and happiness from our relationship, starting now’], goddess,  
 you who rule over beautifully-colonized Cyprus.  
 Having started with you, I will now go on to the rest of my performance.

<sup>27</sup> These are satyr-like beings.

<sup>28</sup> What seems to be meant is the very first signs that differentiate pre-adolescents from children.