

Hubris & Nemesis: A Correlational Analysis

Part I: Defining Hubris & Nemesis; Thesis & Blueprint

Prior to analyzing the notions hubris and nemesis, it is important that one understands their meaning. As Dr. Daniel James Thornton has outlined, hubris is exemplified when an individual’s (human or divine) self-confidence overcomes them to a point where they challenge the gods.\(^1\) It is the excessive pride that personifies the character as being insolent.\(^2\) Babrius warns of the fate of those who cross Polemos’ wife Hubris: “He loved her excessively…follows her everywhere she goes. So may Hubris never come upon nations or cities of men…since War (Polemos) will come immediately after her.”\(^3\) Through Babrius’ poem, Polemos can be understood as one of many interpretations of nemesis.

Nemesis is personified as the idea of retribution. It has been applied as both a consequence and a concept throughout divine myths. For example, in Critias’ myth of Sisyphos, he relates the nemesis idea to punitive justice to those who display signs of hubris.\(^4\) In a conceptual fashion, Hesiod states that Nemesis is the daughter of night. Nonetheless, the common ground between all the interpretations of nemesis suggests that it causes “more misery for mortals” than good.\(^5\)

The notion of pride maintains great significance in Greek mythology. Hubris is the foundation of didactic myths since it is often the catalyst that leads to the protagonist’s doomed

\(^1\) Daniel James Thornton, (Essay Outline, CLA 204H5S, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2 August 2011).
\(^3\) Babrius, Fables ll.70:4-8 (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 62).
\(^4\) Critias, Sisyphos ll. 5-7 (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 92).
\(^5\) Hesiod, Theogony ll. 223-4 (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 138).
fate. This paper will analyze the correlation between the severity of the *hubris* and the punitive measures of the *nemesis*. Furthermore, it will examine whether or not the punishments of the gods fit the crimes committed. A proposed ‘*hubris* formula’: \( A + B = C \) is comprised of three criterion: the *hubris*’ severity (A), based on its relation to the god’s competence or epithets (B), and the punitive nature of the *nemesis* (C). This approach will be utilized as an analytical tool to both justify whether the treatment of the gods was ‘fair’, and whether the *nemesis* reflects the *hubris*.

**Part II: Analyzing the Myths of Arachne, Niobe, Phaethon, & Lycaon**

1. The Myth of Arachne & Athena

   In this divine myth, a young woman of Lydia, Arachne, boasted that her weaving skills were equal to, if not better, than Athena’s. Her talent was so incredible that even the divine “nymphs would abandon the vineyards on the slopes of Tmolus, [and] the Naiads would leave Pactolus’ waters” to not only see the cloth that will be produced, but watching her weave was a pleasure.⁶ Though she was an expert at her craft, Arachne’s *hubris* became evident when she indignantly scoffed to Athena, “if she is so good she could teach me, maybe she’d dare compete; if I lose, I shall pay her a forfeit, anything she demand.”⁷

   Not only did Athena (disguised as an old woman) recognize that Arachne was a great human weaver, but she also gave her a chance to repent for forgiveness for her *hubris*.⁸ Rejecting the chance, Arachne even went so far as to state that Athena feared her competition. Athena immediately revealed her true identity and accepted Arachne’s challenge as a pair of looms was

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set up. When the competition ended, Athena attacked Arachne with a shuttle of boxwood for producing such flawless work. Arachne refused to be shamed and attempted to hang herself. Taking pity on her, Athena used one of Hecate’s poisons to turn Arachne into a spider.

1A. Formula Application & Analysis

The ‘hubris formula’ will now be applied to this myth to see whether there is a balance between the hubris and nemesis. Hubris (A), on behalf of Arachne, is evident in two cases. The first is when Arachne sarcastically dares Athena to compete. The second sign of hubris can be seen when she refused to repent for forgiveness and further claimed that Athena feared her talent. As for Athena’s competence (B) of practical knowledge, it was challenged in the form of a weaving competition. In fact, this reflects Athena’s epithet as the protectress of crafts and arts in classical Athens.11 The nemesis (C) can be interpreted in two different respects. Primarily, there is the obvious transformation of Arachne into a spider. Prior to this, there is also the first time Athena attacked Arachne by slashing her face multiple times with a shuttle of boxwood.

The first mentioned nemesis of transformation justified. The hubris of weaving combined with Athena’s competence of ‘knowledge’ (specifically of this craft), resulted in a nemesis that will forever have Arachne weaving. Evidently, when the variables are inserted into the equation, the nemesis seems very balanced with the hubris. Because she boasted about her weaving skills, Arachne will forever be trapped weaving. Although this primary nemesis seems to reflect the hubris, this begs the question of why Athena initially attacked Arachne after Arachne had

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9 Ibid., ll. 51-4.
10 Ibid., ll. 135-143.
11 Powell, Classical Mythology, 215.
12 Ovid, Metamorphoses ll. 131-132 (Powell, 218).
already finished her flawless weave. This attack seems very brutal and irrational. Because the myth does not clearly specify that Arachne lost to Athena, it leaves room for interpretation.

This ambiguity offers the possibility that Arachne’s weave may have in fact, been better: “when Arachne had finished her work, not Athena, not Envy itself, could find a fault in the weaving. The furious golden-haired goddess tore off the robe with its pictures…seizing a shuttle of boxwood…slashed it across the face of Arachne.”13 It is strange that Athena would lash out this way. She displays mortal conditions in the sense that her attack could have been an irrational act of jealousy. Ironically, Athena’s knowledge is that which protects humans from the arbitrary violence of the natural world of beasts.14 It is also interesting to note how her actions reflect Ares’ brutality, when she is supposed to be the rational and disciplined strategist. Moreover, she represents “reason’s control over elemental force.”15 Competition aside, the primary focus of this myth is not necessarily the truth of Arachne’s flawless skills, but the act of boasting itself that resulted in Athena’s retribution. In this sense, the nemesis is justifiable and reflects Arachne’s hubris act of weaving.

2. The Myth of Niobe, Artemis & Apollo

In the divine myth of ‘Niobe, Artemis, and Apollo’, the wife of Amphion, Niobe, boasted to Leto of her superiority as she conceived six (some versions seven) sons and daughters while Leto only gave birth to twins. Artemis and Apollo, Leto’s two children, took bloody revenge by shooting down Niobe’s children: “the sons were shot by Apollo with shafts of the

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13 Ibid., ll. 128-132.
14 Powell, 216.
15 Ibid.
silver bow; while Artemis, lover of arrows, brought down all Niobe’s daughters.”\textsuperscript{16} The females were shot down in their house while the males were killed together on Mount Cithairon while they were out hunting.\textsuperscript{17} As for Niobe, she ran to her father in Sipylos where she prayed to Zeus who then turned her into a stone figure that cried both night and day.\textsuperscript{18}

2A. Formula Application & Analysis

The ‘\textit{hubris} formula’ will vary from the previous example since Leto’s competence is not covered. Niobe’s \textit{hubris} (A) was that she proclaimed that she was more fertile than the Leto. Leto is recognized as the mother-goddess (B) of the divine twins who are always prepared to defend her honor.\textsuperscript{19} This leads to the \textit{nemesis} (C), which can be seen in two respects. The primary \textit{nemesis} is clear when Artemis and Apollo kill all of Niobe’s children. The second \textit{nemesis} is when Zeus turned Niobe into stone at Mount Sipylos.

The argument that justifies the primary \textit{nemesis} is related to all three characters – Niobe, Artemis, and Apollo – competences and epithets. Niobe is recognized as a maternal figure. Offending her ability to bear children directly undermines her capability of being more fertile than Niobe. As for Apollo, he is the god of reason and an archer.\textsuperscript{20} From a literal stance, it is reasonable for him, a son, to defend his mother. With his renowned archery skills, it makes perfect sense for Apollo to shoot and take away Niobe’s maternity (i.e. her children) which she boasted about. Being a child of Leto and a mother-goddess herself, it would make sense for

\textsuperscript{16} Homer, \textit{Iliad} ll. 604-5 (Powell, 210).
\textsuperscript{17} Apollodorus, \textit{Library} ll. M5 (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 49).
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Powell, 157.
\textsuperscript{20} Trzaskoma, Smith, and Brunet, 489-490.
Artemis to defend her mother’s honour who, like her brother Apollo, also possesses flawless hunting skills.

Like the previous example of Arachne and Athena, there are also forms of irony that go against Artemis’ nature. The fact that she too is a mother-goddess, one could argue that she would take pity over Niobe since they both share that maternal quality. Specifically speaking, Artemis is also the protectress of the young, animal and human, making all of nature fertile. So the irony is quite evident; she kills that of which she is responsible to protect. Overall, this theme of irony is what connects this myth with the previous one. Although it is not in Athena’s nature to irrationally attack Arachne or for Artemis to murder Niobe’s children, it offers an explanation that hones in on why the nemesis exists. The unusually fatal acts of these gods are the basis of such didactic myths. Therefore, the argument these myths are that gods can, and will, go beyond their nature to seek retribution if mere mortals dare to offend them. To conclude, the nemesis in this myth is also justifiable and reflects the hubris. Niobe boasted that she is more fruitful. The gods take away that which makes her so, and all that is left is a balance.

3. The Myth of Phaethon, Helius & Zeus

In this divine myth, Phaethon doubted his mother Clymene (an Oceanid) that his true father (some versions: grandfather) was the sun god Helius. To prove that she was telling the truth, Clymene urged him to journey to the house of Helius and to present himself to his father. To prove to Phaethon that he was his father, Helius would grant him any wish he desired. To Helius’ horror, Phaethon asked to be granted the permission to drive the ‘chariot of the sun’

21 Powell, 208.
22 Ibid., 82.
Helius warned Phaethon of the danger of using such a powerful device, but he could not go back on his promise. As warned, Phaethon panicked and lost control of the chariot. The four horses sensed his unsure hand on the reins, leaped from their accustomed path to heaven, and nearly set the world ablaze. To save earth, Zeus hurled a thunderbolt that blasted and killed Phaethon sending him from the chariot into the river Eridanus.

Hyginus’ *Fabulae* also offers a Roman variation of this myth that continues the myth that shows a dark side of Zeus. To justify killing the entire race of mortals, Jupiter (Zeus) acted like he wanted to put out the flames: “he flooded every stream and river, and the entire race of mortals perished except for Pyrrha and Deucalion who took refuge on Mount Aetna.” As for Phaethon’s seven sisters, – who hitched the horses to the chariot without their father’s permission – they were changed into poplar trees whose tears hardened into amber as they wept over their brother’s death.

### 3A. Formula Application & Analysis

In this myth, the *hubris* is not an explicit outcry towards a god, but it is still expressed. It is evident through Phaethon’s actions, a mortal (some versions, a demi-god) attempting to perform godly activities. When applying this myth to the ‘*hubris* formula’, the *hubris* *(A)* is when Phaethon’s self-confidence led him to believe he had the ability to fly Helius’ chariot. Though Phaethon did not directly offend Helius’ competence or epithet, his loss of control of the chariot was an act of disobedience *(B)* to the sun god who warned Phaethon of the dangers.

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27 Hyginus, *Stories* ll. 152a. (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 263).
28 Homeric Hymns, *To Helios* ll. 31. (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 209).
Although the chariot belonged to Helius, it is Zeus who carried out the *nemesis* (C) by striking Phaethon with a thunderbolt.

Incorporating Zeus as a third party and an additional variable, this myth presents multiple complexities for the application of the ‘*hubris* formula’. For example, it raises the question of why Helius did not commit the *nemesis* himself. One could argue there are three explanations for this. The first and foremost reason is that Helius felt obligated to honour Phaethon’s wish. Unfortunately for Helius, the sun god who sees all, he did not have the gift of foresight to prevent the mistake of offering Phaethon any wish he desired. The second explanation could be that the paternal relationship he shares with Phaethon prevented him from punishing his own son. This explanation can be supported by the didactic myth of Arge. Helius turned her into a stag when the huntress stated she could out run and capture a deer that ran as fast as Helius himself. The myth of Arge clearly shows that Helius is capable of punishment but shows signs of hesitation when dealing with his own son. With Helius as variable (B), the formula does not apply.

After thoroughly analyzing Zeus’ competence and epithets in relevance to the myth, there are some strong yet conflicting similarities between him and Phaethon that fit the ‘*hubris* formula’ more appropriately. A small, but important, conflicting epithet Zeus and Phaethon share is that they are both known as the “shining.” Zeus is also known as “father sky” and the “storm.” When Phaethon set the earth ablaze, it may have offended Zeus since it is his thunderbolts that cause the raging fires in the mortal world. This is not the only time when Zeus

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29 Powell, 176.
30 Hyginus, *Stories* II. 205 (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 276).
31 Powell, 694, 689.
punished those who crossed Helius. In one such example, Zeus set fire to Ulysses’ ship with a thunderbolt after he had seized Helius’ herd.32

A third explanation for why Helius did not commit the nemesis himself is that Zeus (Polieus), is the protector of the city and upholder of justice (Dikanios).33 By striking down Phaethon, Zeus upholds his responsibility of protecting the people of earth. As for the great flood that killed the human race, an explanation will be offered when analyzing the next myth regarding Lycaon and his hubris. Nonetheless, by combining these new explanations while utilizing Zeus as a variable (B), the formula equation now shows a greater balance. For Zeus’ nemesis, he killed Phaethon with a thunderbolt (fire) after Phaethon lit the world ablaze. In this sense, the nemesis reflects the hubris: fighting fire with fire. Evidently, it is important to note that exhibiting hubris is not confined to outward boasting, but extends to those who are over-confident through action.

4. The Myth of Lycaon & Zeus

Hearing that all men were vicious and corrupt, Zeus descended among the mortals disguised as an ordinary man.34 The most despicable among the mortals was the tyrant king of Arcadia, Lycaon, who practiced human sacrifice and cannibalism. As Zeus revealed himself, his people began to worship him, but Lycaon just laughed at the pious prayers they murmured, and boasted: “I soon shall discover if this is a god or a mortal, by a sure and certain test; no shadow of doubt will remain.”35 Lycaon cut the throat of a hostage, cut up his half-dead remains, and

32 Hyginus, Stories ll. 125 (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 254).
33 Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 517.
34 Powell, 128.
35 Ovid, Metamorphoses ll. 220-3 (Powell, 128).
attempted to feed Zeus the human flesh.\textsuperscript{36} As Lycaon attempted to speak, Zeus’ \textit{nemesis} had already begun. Only a howl came out as Lycaon’s “face [became] wet with the froth of his madness…his royal robe turned shaggy, his arms [formed into] animal forepaws… and his grisly craving for murder was turned against cattle and sheep.”\textsuperscript{37} As for the rest, Zeus downed all of mankind in a great flood for their immorality.

\textbf{4A. Formula Application and Analysis}

By applying the ‘\textit{hubris} formula’, one can discover whether or not Zeus’ \textit{nemesis}’ is justifiable. The two \textit{hubris}’ (A) are Lycaon’s doubt of Zeus’ presence and his attempt to feed him human flesh. There are two interrelated competences (B) that could have offended Zeus: \textit{xenia} and \textit{dike}. Like previously mentioned myths, this myth also has a two-part \textit{nemesis} (C). The first is a direct punishment to Lycaon by turning him into a wolf. The second is the great flood that drowned all of mankind.

This first \textit{nemesis}, that transformed Lycaon, is justifiable and reflects the \textit{hubris}. Ovid’s myth explicitly states that it was a hostage who was used as the human sacrifice. \textit{Xenia}, Zeus’ most protected custom, is a formal institution of friendship with an ideological base of reciprocal hospitality.\textsuperscript{38} The beastly actions of capturing hostages and eating them reflects none other than the nature of wolves. One could argue that this is why Lycaon was turned into a wolf as opposed to a different animal. The second epithet involves the idea of \textit{dike}. The principle of \textit{Dike} was that

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, ll. 226-7.  
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, ll. 234-6.  
\textsuperscript{38} Powell, 138-9.
those who acted illegally or unjustly, also acted against Zeus.\textsuperscript{39} It is closely related with xenia since it encompasses the social and moral code of justice of which the ancient Greeks lived.

As for the great flood, one could argue that it is unlike Zeus Dikanios to kill all of mankind based on the actions of a tyrant king. After all, when Zeus revealed himself, his people that were present worshiped. This act of obedience showed that many were still loyal to him. A possible explanation could be that one of Zeus’ epithets is panhellenios (of all the Greeks).\textsuperscript{40} Through a combined interpretation of Zeus Panhellenios, where and if Zeus’ conception of mortals is unified, it would make sense that the actions of one represent all. Furthermore, it was the actions of a king, though a tyrant, who represented an entire polis. It is also important to note that this is not the only time where Zeus Panhellenios has killed many mortals. During the Trojan War, he approved of Troy’s destruction, despite his love for the city.\textsuperscript{41} Overall, the relationship between Lycaon’s hubris and Zeus’ nemesis is both reflective and justifiable. One who acts like an animal, is turned into one. The great flood, on the other hand, involves greater analysis in order to justify the nemesis and is not a clear reflection of the apparent hubris.

\textbf{Part III: Conclusion & Overview}

In addition to deciphering the relationship between the hubris and the nemesis, the formula provided also helps categorize the myths. For example, the myth of Niobe would presents ‘legend’ qualities regarding basic interaction between mortals and gods. As for the other three myths, they present ‘etiological’ qualities that offer an explanation for why things are, the

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{40} Daniel James Thornton, “Myths of the gods,” (lecture, CLA 204H5S, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 12 July 2011).
\textsuperscript{41} Powell, 139.
way they are.\textsuperscript{42} The myth of Arachne explains why spiders weave webs. The myth of Phaethon explains how the fire from the chariot scorched Libya into its desert form and how the Ethiopians were “burned black.”\textsuperscript{43} Finally, the myth of Lycaon explains origins for the deluge and why wolves attack humans, especially lone travellers.

This paper analyzed the correlation between the severity of the \textit{hubris} and the punitive measures of the \textit{nemesis}. Furthermore, it examined whether or not the punishments of the gods fit the crimes committed. The proposed \textit{‘hubris formula’} is comprised of three criterion: the \textit{hubris}’ severity (A), based on its relation to the god’s competence or epithets (B), and the punitive nature of the \textit{nemesis} (C) – A + B = C. This approach will be utilized as an analytical tool to both justify whether the treatment of the gods was ‘fair’, and whether the \textit{nemesis} reflects the \textit{hubris}.

This method gives the reader a different option when studying didactic myths. The most obvious method is locating the \textit{hubris} (A) and \textit{nemesis} (C) and concluding that (A) leads to (C). The suggested \textit{‘hubris formula’} offers possible arguments that explain how certain elements of a given \textit{hubris} specifically offend which competences or epithets of any given god. It also explains why the \textit{nemesis} was carried out a certain way. What can be understood after applying this formula is that some myths are easier to decipher than others. As the relationship between the \textit{hubris} and \textit{nemesis} becomes less clear, it takes deeper analysis and a greater interpretation in attempt to find the connection, if it all there is any.

\textsuperscript{42} Daniel James Thornton, “\textit{What is myth, and why is myth?}” (lecture, CLA 204H5S, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 5 July 2011).
\textsuperscript{43} Powell, 82.
Aside from justifying and analyzing the relationship between the *hubris* and *nemesis*, an overview tying all the major themes, of the discussed myths, will be offered. This will be done by reiterating what has been extracted from the ‘*hubris* formula’ after it has been applied to each myth. There are multiple lessons to be learned in the first myth involving Athena and Arachne. When a god offers a chance for forgiveness, it is best advised to not let one’s ego to get in the way and to repent. Even with the possibility that Arachne’s weave was better than Athena’s, it evidently did not waive the initial *hubris*. What can be learned is that no *hubris* goes unpunished.

Finally, though Athena is nature’s ‘reason’, she went beyond her epithet as she lashed out irrationally. The myth of Niobe and Leto showed that gods, in this case Artemis and Apollo, can carry out a *nemesis* on behalf of other gods. Once again, a god has stepped beyond the boundaries of their epithet. Artemis is a protector of the young and a mother-goddess yet she kills Niobe’s children. The myth of Phaethon also shares a similar theme.

Though the *hubris*, carried out by Phaethon, is an act of disobedience towards Helius, it is Zeus who carries out the *nemesis*. What can also be taken from that myth is that *hubris* does not have to be explicitly outspoken but can expressed through action. In this case, Helius’ warned Phaethon of the dangers of using the chariot. Inevitably, Phaethon lost control causing a fire that threatened mortal lives. The threat to humans reflects Zeus’ epithet: *panhellenios*. What can be taken away from this myth is that Zeus Panhellenios will kill one (Phaethon) to save many – upholding his responsibility as protector of the people.

For the last myth, involving Lycaon and Zeus, the ‘*hubris* formula’ can only be applied in certain contexts. Within this myth, there are instances where the *hubris* will reflect one *nemesis* but not another. For example, unlike Zeus Panhellenios from the previous myth, in the Lycaon myth Zeus floods all of mankind because of a single individual’s actions. A recurring theme that
has appeared in a majority of the examples is ‘irony’. In many cases, the *nemesis*’ conducted have gone against the competences and epithets of the reviewed gods; but, it is for this reason why mortals should fear them. Consequently, this may very well be the foundation of what *nemesis* really is. Gods can and will go against their nature to do the irrational, unthinkable, and unimaginable if offended. Maybe these ironies that keep appearing in these myths are not so ironic after all.
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