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Author:

[Sofield, David](#)

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The Poetry of Place: Chapman's Homer, *The Iliad*

David Sofield

Perhaps the first widely known evocation of place in Western poetry occurs in *The Iliad*. There are, of course, dozens of place names in the poem, and a number of those named places are described more or less routinely, Homer's primary focus being on what his characters do and say. The "place" at hand is on Mount Ida, overlooking Troy and the plain on which the great battles are fought. One puts the word in quotes because the poet invests the local flora with such powers as render it semimagical and therefore distinct from actual places one might visit, even though the mountain on which the events in question take place is very much there, *in place*, today. We are in Book XIV. The Greeks are rallying, Poseidon has undertaken to inspire them, and Hera wishes to distract her husband, Zeus, long enough for the Greeks to get the upper hand before he notices what is happening. She will seduce him. In Homeric epic, though, a seduction practiced by the principal goddess requires subsidiary actions, requires the aid of lesser gods. So Hera, called like all the characters by her Latin names in the first and arguably still the most vivid English translation of the poem, the 1611 version by George Chapman, requests from Aphrodite a charm that will make her irresistible to Zeus. Before visiting Aphrodite,

. . . took she chamber, which her son, the god of ferrary,
With firm doors made, being joined close and with a privy key
That no god could command but Jove. (141–143)

About certain architectural details, then, Homer does care, even if for a moment it looks as though what's on his mind is only that very modern problem, building security. In her chamber, Hera anoints her body with ambrosia and "sacred oil." Having, in the next forty lines, received from Aphrodite the sought-for band of fabric figured with "all enticements to delight," she

. . . straight stooping from heaven's height,
Pieria and Emathia (those countries of delight)
Soon reached, and, to the snowy mounts where Thracian soldiers dwell
Approaching, passed their tops untouched. From Athos then she fell
Past all the broad sea and arrived in Lemnos, at the towers
Of god-like Thoas, where she met the prince of all men's powers,
Death's brother, Sleep. . . . (189–195)

A little festival of place names, if not quite of places. On Lemnos, Hera promises Somnus, God of Sleep, *his* desire, Pasithae, if he will come with her to the Troad, there to cast Zeus into a lengthy slumber after the king and queen of the gods have taken their pleasure. Agreement is immediate, and the two proceed to Mount Ida, where Somnus secrets himself in a tall pine tree to watch and wait until his services are needed. As soon as Hera is in the presence of Zeus, he asks why she is there (she replies, falsely, that she is off to reconcile

Oceanus and Tethys, the Titanic couple who helped bring her up and who “have been/Long time at discord”), and he invites her, if that is the phrase, to make love then and there. His invitation is phrased, we might think, curiously, for he tells her he desires her more than he desired Ixion’s wife, who bore him Pirithous, and the other many goddesses and humans who produced some of his notable offspring. Hera appears to be less upset by his ritual boasting, having no doubt heard it before, than by the prospect of being observed in a compromised position by other gods. In the nineteen lines here reproduced, she questions him, failing—and not seriously intending—to change his mind, whereupon Homer composes what has become the archetypal *locus amoenus* in our literature. It is one that will echo through Latin epic and through the narrative poems of Renaissance Italy, France, and England. More than two millennia later, for example, Milton will attempt, and achieve, a particularly elaborate imitation in *Paradise Lost*. It may be fair to say that no “place” in any literature has had a longer and more imitated afterlife. I have modernized spelling and punctuation while not otherwise altering Chapman’s words. Chapman writes in quite strict iambic meter, fourteen syllables to the line, which requires the following small adjustments: “unsufferable” is five syllables, “heaven” one, “heavenly” two, and “flower” one.

The cunning dame seemed much

incensed, and said: “What words are these,
 Unsufferable Saturn’s son? What? Here? In Ida’s height?
 Desir’st thou this? How fits it us? Or what if in the sight
 Of any god thy will were pleased, that he the rest might bring
 To witness thy incontinence? T’were a dishonored thing.
 I would not show my face in heaven, and rise from such a bed.
 But if love be so dear to thee, thou hast a chamber sted
 Which Vulcan purposely contrived with all fit secrecy;
 There sleep at pleasure.” He replied: “I fear not if the eye
 Of either god or man observe; so thick a cloud of gold
 I’ll cast about us that the Sun, who furthest can behold,
 Shall never find us.” This resolved, into his kind embrace
 He took his wife. Beneath them both fair Tellus strewed the place
 With fresh-sprung herbs, so soft and thick that up aloft it bore
 Their heavenly bodies; with his leaves did dew Lotus store
 Th’Elysian mountain; saffron flowers and hyacinths helped make
 The sacred bed; and there they slept—when suddenly there brake
 A golden vapor out of air, whence shining dews did fall,
 In which they wrapped them close, and slept till Jove was tamed withal. (280–298)

The lushest herbal carpet, a bed of (literal) flowers, and golden-vapor walls, so close-fitting as to suggest the prenatal room to which it still

seems natural to want to return, a room where one’s thoughts and desires are tamed. For all of its fancifulness and brevity, Homer has written and Chapman has rendered the perfect modern dream place.