



INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MYTH OF GANYMEDE

This story indeed illustrates succinctly and powerfully the wide variation of interpretation and reinterpretation that all myths are capable of inspiring—a principal reason for their immortality. The *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* tells a simple and beautiful story of how wise Zeus singled out handsome Ganymede to grace Olympus as cupbearer and live there forever, immortal, like a god. Its ecstatic spirituality emerges with sublimity in the poem “Ganymede” by Goethe (especially in its musical settings by Schubert and Wolf). The incident is seen from the point of view of a devoted Ganymede. In a passionate yet spiritual aura, amidst the glowing sun, beloved spring, and burning love, Ganymede ecstatically cries to the descending clouds to carry him aloft: “In your lap, upwards, embracing, embraced. Upwards to your breast, loving father.” For a different artist, the homosexuality latent in the myth may offer amoral or nonmoral testimony to the fact of a physical relationship, and not a religious calling. Another may tell the story to prove a divine vindication of male relationships. Yet another may vehemently identify the myth as a horrifying Rape of Ganymede by Zeus—accusing God of this brutal sin, an idea inconceivable to the poet and philosopher Xenophanes (see p. 140). The tale may even become (as in the case of the Greek writer Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods* 4 [10 in Loeb ed.]) a divinely amusing, urbane, satiric jest. So is this a myth about a religious experience, a summoning by God to heaven, a rape, or is it merely a joke? It depends on how the story is told and how it is interpreted; many are the possible variations. There is, of course, no single “correct” interpretation of a great myth. Myth is protean by nature, most gratifying because it forever changes through the personality and genius of each and every artist, in any medium at any time, to provide pleasure and enlightenment in our search to find in the work of art our own individual meaning and enrichment.

The myth of Zeus and Ganymede is similar to the story of how Poseidon fell in love with Pelops and brought him up to Olympus (see p. 440).