THE HOMERIC CONTRACT AND AN OLYMPIC SCANDAL.

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The marriage of Hephaestus and Aphrodite, though indubitably made in Heaven, was not a happy one. And the fault — it must regretfully be admitted, was wholly on the lady’s side. How the injured husband found the guilty pair together, how he trapped them and bound them in adamantine shackles, how he called the gods to witness the discomfiture of the lovers, is told at length in the Eighth Book of the Odyssey, vss. 266—363. The passage is not recommended for general reading, especially because of the deplorable levity of at least two of the divine participants, Hermes and Apollo. It might have remained a scene of high comedy, but for the intervention of Poseidon, with whom there enters the cold and desiccating breath of the law, — under which the very laughter of the gods dies off in a meticulous examination of terms and procedure.

Let us briefly set forth the situation. Hephaestus announces that he will demand back from Father Zeus, the ἱδρυς, the marriage price he gave for Aphrodite 1). As to Ares, all the gods acknowledge that he owes μοιχάρας, the “adulterer’s ransom.” 2) He will therefore be bound until it is paid. It is at this point that Poseidon intervenes, and it is with the sixteen lines from 344 to 359 that we are primarily concerned. Ultimately, of course, we shall have to take refuge with the commentators. But before we call upon these learned gentlemen, perhaps we may glance at the dispute between the parties in the light

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1) Od. VIII, 318.
2) Od. VIII, 332.

οὐδὲ Ποσείδωνα γέλως ἦς λίθετο δὴ αἰτεῖ Ἡφαίστον κλυτοεργῆν, ὅπως λύσειν Ἄρης καὶ μην φωνήσας ἔπειτα περάσετα προσήφω. ἠδον ἤγὼ δὲ τοι αὐτῶν ὑπίσημα ὡς σὺ κελεύεις τίς ἅδικα πᾶντα μετ’ ἄθανάτωισι θεοῖσιν. τὸν δ’ αὕτε προσέπει περικλυτὸς ἄργηνης. μὴ χαὶ, Ποσείδων γαίης, τάντα κέλευε. δειλαὶ τοι δελὼν γε καὶ ἤγγεια ἤγγισαθαι. τῶς ἄν ἤγὼ σε δίωμι μετ’ ἄθανάτωισι θεοῖσιν εἰ κεν Ἄρης οὐχιότο χρέος καὶ δεσμὸν ἄλλαξας: τὸν δ’ αὕτε προσέπει Ποσείδων ἐνοπίγον Ἡφαίστε, εἰπεὶ γάρ μιᾶν Ἄρης χρείος ὑπολύμας οὔχι σωματοι ἵνα τοι γνῶ τάδε τίσω. τὸν δ’ ἡμύδεις ἐπιτα περικλυτὸς ἄργηνης τοῖς ἀπόκταις τῶν ἡμίσασθαι ὡς εἰπὼν δεσμὸν ἄνιε μένος Ἡφαίστεοι.

Poseidon twice urges Hephaestus to let his prisoner go. The first time he promises that Ares will pay all that is due, τὰ ἅδικα πᾶντα. The second time, he says that if Ares does not pay, he, Poseidon, will pay. The first time, Hephaestus is obdurate; the second time, he relents and releases Ares.

What shall we do with all this? It is perfectly possible that the two statements of Poseidon mean exactly the same thing, or very nearly the same. In that case, when Poseidon says, "Let him go", and Hephaestus declines, Poseidon simply repeats his entreaty, "Do, please do let him go", and Hephaestus yields to his sollicitation. That happens often in our own experience, and there is no reason why it should not have happened in Olympus.

Still, it sounds a little childish, a little more “primitive” than I choose to believe Homeric society was, on either side of the pearly gates. Most commentators, when they think of the matter at all, understand Poseidon’s second assurance to be something different from the first, at any rate to have different implications. In this, one may readily concur. For I should not like to take seriously the suggestion that Poseidon had to repeat an almost identical statement, because Hephaestus stupidly failed to understand him at first. Stupid is precisely what Hephaestus is not.

1) Od. VIII, 348.  
2) Od. VIII, 356.