

Aphrodite
and
Venus in

MYTH AND MIMESIS

Nora Clark



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PREFACE

Aphrodite and Venus in Myth and Mimesis came into being to fill a thematic niche as a flexible sourcebook for the literary exploration of the goddess myth. So much has been published on each divine being in commentaries, guidebooks and media, as well as literary criticism, theories and cultural studies, that it seemed timely to bring such material into an ambitious but convenient thematic and chronological sequence. This is not a book on mythology *per se* but more a recording of the impact and utility of Aphrodite and Venus on literary eras—surely an expansive perspective since the languages of mythology can often be in dynamic and lateral opposition. The content is also a platform for some of the earliest writers on record to the contemporary, whether in English or translation. Hence, the text is a parallel journey of comparative literature, with myths and texts in tandem for mutual exposure. Discussion pays attention to the prominent exponents on either goddess, also promoting lesser-known writers who have produced quite magical pieces—innovative, outrageous, and enticing in whole or in fragment.

While this text is by no means a global literary review of myth, it considers feminist literary criticism and renditions beyond the mainstream cultures of the West as important. It would be fair to say that the imaginative lyric genre takes prominence, since it was, for myth at least, the earliest and most encompassing literary mode, and in many cases still extant. Yet some of the best expressions on Aphrodite and Venus are rendered in prose, often from neglected commentaries. The book is not a text of history, politics or the archaeological sciences, but these disciplines do have a necessary “voice” from time to time, often in interaction with visual culture. In conclusion, the content affirms that mythology, rarely latent, can be recycled in enterprising, alternative modes, to inform, entertain and enliven Aphrodite and Venus as enduring cultural capital.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a handbook on comparative literature and religion as a companion guide to literary and cultural reflections on Aphrodite and Venus. These fabulous personalities of erotic presence held sway with a consistently pervasive identity in the ancient world and have continued to endure metaphorically ever since as textual, religious and cultural symbols. Significantly, representations of both entities have embraced and expressed mimesis in multiple forms, through the primary translations of classical literature to complex revisions in gender, worship modes and geo-spatial and collective reflections.

The re-telling of the goddess myth, from its earliest inception and documentation, cannot be a uniform narrative, but it can, even in reduction, be a timeless and fascinating one, embodying the predictable functions of the goddess but also stimulating connections and renditions across the old and the new worlds. Myth through mimesis is not confined to translation. Imaginative and stirring revisions of mythical episodes enrich the text, each coloured in tone by the time and the writer. Myth enjoys a seemingly endless capacity for adaptation in keeping with the goddess's earliest manifestations. The book records numerous alluring performances and interventions of the exemplary goddess herself, but mythical tradition also exposes the heterogeneous qualities of a flawed, personality and the petty subterfuge and theatrics of a very human entity.

Over successive literary eras the content reconstructs the ongoing reality and concerns of the goddess myth, subject to the ages in which it functions. Historical narratives, hegemonic texts and lyrical tributes sing of diverse roleplays and can be critical of both Aphrodite and Venus who, technically sharing parallel similarities, have been aligned within Graeco-Roman paganism, literary translations and cultural mores. There are other instances of collective anxieties or euphoria which are reworked or deflected onto surprising planes which may seem to venture beyond actual mimesis and, by default, are remote from the Olympian community.

Texts range from the highly personal to the global, from the Bronze Age and imperial to the contemporary. Undoubtedly, gradual mutation of the goddess icon was an obvious precondition imbedded within the vagaries of its mythic inception. Change, though, is good, and the book pursues literal destinations that reflect novel perceptions and scenarios of

Aphrodite and Venus who, over time, have “migrated” to countless foreign destinations.

While writing the book I came to the conclusion that “Aphrodite” and “Venus” are more than expositions of the goddess myth with its customary appurtenances and paraphernalia. They are, in effect, *hypertexts* in a functioning open-ended domain where two legendary designations from Graeco-Roman cultures provide interactive links to much worthy literature beyond—one would have thought—the goddesses’ obvious domains of sexuality and fertility. And this dialectic is precisely what propels a momentum of inspired hermeneutical parameters, partnerships and locales which, in turn, sustain the original iconic image and discourse in a dynamic evolutionary process. “Aphrodite” and “Venus” are often presumed to be reciprocal. Yet, regardless of their personal differences, the book’s many and varied allusions demonstrate that designation can be determined by literary or historical tradition, linguistic preference and time and place. As such, many individuals come forward to detail quite graphically their subjective connection to the divine. Some talk about corporeal encounters, others spiritual, social or anti-social, and some talk about the goddess in terms of joy or despair, or life and death.

Within this shifting reception, mythology has been conducting its own pilgrimage across fragmented borders, literary genres and time-frames and has encountered real gems, many of which, regrettably, had to be left aside. To some extent, the book signifies an imagined society of creativity, memory and literary competence from the ninth century BC to 2014 AD. Where early ancients accommodated the goddess, the postmodern society has experienced a wider cultural diffusion of myth on various levels and channels. Secularism and individuality have largely replaced the search for the communal or divine ideal, yet Aphrodite and Venus as prototypes of visual beauty and desire remain stimulating contemporary personae, whether endearing or antipathetic. In effect, the “goddess,” by one name or another, has proved to be a handy readymade commodity, still conscious of a long-rooted affinity with its pagan and philosophical origins, but with its rarity now somewhat disseminated across global societies and cultures.

Chapter one surveys myth, history and epistemology through the early Greek forms and functions of the goddess, both timeless and temporal. Aphrodite’s location and function within belief systems, world views and gender myths are located at the intersection of culture and environment, ancient literature and her respective position within the environs of Antiquity and the Near East, from the Late Bronze Age onwards. The chapter presents, in turn, the comparative mythologies and genealogies of Greek and Roman mythos and mythopoeia, culture and religion, and

cosmology. Early writers of Greek or Latin pay lyrical homage to Aphrodite and Venus and their generative powers. Classical conceptions of style and mimesis, archetypes and hierarchies are legitimized through myth's collective memory and ethnicity. In this stage, both oral and didactic literatures portray the conceptual sublime through etymology and wordplay in definitive texts. Here, at the beginning, anthropomorphism, deification and theophany form part of this transcendent yet terrestrial depiction. The origins of the goddess myth and its gendered constructs of conventional and dissident sexuality set the tone for literary mimesis which will be encoded and endorsed, or dismissed and vilified, yet remain more than mere facsimile in the chapters that follow. Cultural signifiers and religious semiotics form part of this early tradition.

Chapter two on "Ovid and Place" is given to Ovidian narratives and their critical function within the dynamic lure of mythical landscapes. Ovid, as a prolific writer, has over centuries prompted the challenge of mimesis, the need to respond, to reproduce, to rewrite *ad infinitum*. He signifies a resilient source of myth, religion, habitat, culture and citizenship in the far-flung empire, from that time when a literate Roman people accessed his narrations. Storytelling and aetiology still matter and celebrated writers have embraced the challenge to translate, emulate or repudiate Ovidian verse. This dedicated chapter of Latin commentaries verifies Ovid's loud boast of immortality, rendering him nothing short of an oracle. The discussion focuses primarily on *Metamorphoses* and the cultural topography of myth and idyll in habitats actual, natural and imaginary. Since the Romans worshipped only "Venus," *Metamorphoses* effects a re-naming of divinities and understudies in Ovid's moralizing standpoint on Venus. The goddess's personal and political agenda in the ancient world is illustrated through key episodes and transgressions, delineating accounts such as those of Pygmalion, Myrrha and Venus and Adonis, as interlinked narratives of the eastern Mediterranean.

Chapter three responds to Ovid by advancing quite briskly the inevitable—the incipience of a novel deity and belief system and the ensuing realignment of the goddess myth. Resistance to Aphrodite and other Olympians becomes the product of early Christianity and its vigorous writers. Antithetical and carefully staged, the transition to monotheism at the turn of the eras sees partial accommodation of the Aphrodite myth in Hellenistic nuances and complementary key concepts of early Christian discourse. The scriptwriters of Patristics respond systematically to paganism. All the same, despite resistance on intellectual and aesthetic levels, medieval adaptations of the goddess myth fit quite nicely alongside important concerns of the Christian literary tradition. As

such, the “profane” is not entirely displaced and some writers of the early Italian renaissance, perceiving merit in the sacred performances of the pagan past, bind myth symbolically to the advance of Judeo-Christianity. This chapter highlights scholarly references to the goddess within Christian texts, adaptations of the utility of myth and gendered iconography and mimesis, and analytical contradictions with that other privileged feminine typology embodied in the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, the goddess in late antiquity assumes the role of counterpart and counter concept.

Chapter four on the “Early Modern” advances a refiguring of the goddess through appraisal of intertextuality and imitation of myth in European literary culture from ca.1300s–ca.1600s AD. The translation of classical texts in literal and creative modes forms much of the discussion within the late medieval worldview, humanism and early modern culture. The goddess is reflected in epic narrative, allegorical and mimetic literature, and Golden Age verse, linked to national interests and a wider application of popular literary forms.

Chapter five on “The Resonance of Myth” seeks the location and function of Aphrodite and Venus in the beliefs, practices, key movements and literary and cultural traditions of nineteenth-century Europe. Iterations and revisions of the goddess myth reside in literary movements and artistic outcomes, and culture is read as text, revival, reward and reminiscence of mythical narrative. The pan-European Romantic movement, along with symbolism, decadence and aestheticism, present revisions of gendered typology, while literary tourism revisits European myths’ cultural signifiers and heritage.

Chapter six is more than an update of “Contemporary Insights” on the goddesses, given that myth enjoys a sustainable energy, promising further allusions and glimpses of the divine persona. Representations and novel expressions of the goddess are framed within postmodern contexts of mimesis in the literary imagination, cultural theories and translation and reception of a transversal deployment of myth.

Comparative mythology can be open-ended but this book is not an exhaustive treatment of any goddess. Nevertheless, the time-honoured poem below is a good place to start the many-faceted odyssey:

“Peram”

To the Gods who Protect Lapethos in Every Month of a Year

I am Peram, son of Gerastart.

In Lapethos, land [of the holy temple]

I am the Holy Guide of those that worship the gods

and show the true path
to those who offer sacrifices in order to atone for their sins.

On the thirteenth day of the month Akram, the thirteenth year of our king
I erected this statue in the likeness
of my Lord Melkart who protects Narnaka,
so that our king Prakhippos
and king Demonikos from the royal house of Lapethos
will be always remembered by people who are alive.
Bless and protect all that I have, Oh Melkart!

In the month of Mattan, in the third year of our king Berekshemes
of Lapethos.

I, Peram, made an offering of exactly six silver cups
to my Lord Melkart.
Each cup is filled with half-weight mina coins
or fifty-five whole, and a quarter drachma.

And following, in the month of Karar
I, Peram, in my own temple at Lapethos,
This time for my Lord Osiris,
brought an offering of a gold lamp, weighing ten tebakim
and eight litres.

In the month of [early spring], in the year fifteen of the same king.
I, Peram, erected a bronze statue in the temple,
of the goddess of Astarte who protects Lapethos,
in my father's name, so that her face could be seen in her temple
and I dedicated it to my Lady, the beautiful Astarte.

[On ... day ... month, ... year]
Again, I made an offering to my Lady Astarte
a [gift] worked in gold weighing fifty-three litres,
and a silver [worked] cup,
and one thousand five hundred and fifty [denomination of coins].

And in the year [... last year of the same king].
I, Peram, erected memorials in Lapethos
dedicated memorials to the Babylonian gods
who inhabit the holy temple of Lapethos.¹

Translated by Alev Adil

¹ From Mehmet Yashin (ed.), *Step-Mother Tongue* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2000), 88–89. The original text of this dedication, in Phoenician, translated from the Hebrew alphabet, dates from the fourth century BC. It was translated from a Turkish version into English and first published as a poem by Mehmet Yashin in 1999.

Peram (Pi-Ram or Parem, (370–ca.310 BC) is known as the “poet” of the text which may not be exclusively his. He was a priest at the temple of Lapethos (Larnax-tes-Lapethou) in the north east of Cyprus. Peram refers to Melqart, supreme god of the Phoenician city of Tyre, a god analogous with Hercules, but venerated across the Mediterranean. The goddess or “my lady the beautiful Astarte” has several references in the following chapters as the equivalent or forerunner of Aphrodite. Peram’s diligent routine of devotion, sacrifice, feast days and dedicated gifts testifies to a Babylonian pantheon which would give way to successive Greek models.

CHAPTER ONE

APHRODITE AND VENUS: MYTH TIMELESS AND TEMPORAL

This first chapter reviews the representation of Aphrodite and Venus as mythical personalities through their consistent metaphorical presence in the literature, cultures and socio-politics of the ancient world. Generally, such delineations have embraced mimesis in its multiple forms, from verse or prose translations of classical literature to complex revisions of gender and religion. Writers have responded variously, conforming to traditional versions of myth or espousing more subjective perceptions of goddess history. Inevitably, the nuances of poetry, as an expressive tool, play a major role in this early period of recorded and oral language. The mythical legacy is bequeathed to later eras when “translators” comment on and reconstruct goddess iconography in line with personal vision, collective and even far-flung identities, and the reading and location of myth within historical, humanist, theoretical and hegemonic narratives.

Aphrodite

Aphrodite has endured over time and place. She is a major personification of a belief system and worldview at the intersection of culture and environment within ancient literary history, and the classical tradition of Graeco-antiquity and the Near East, from the Late Bronze Age onwards. Luminous personifications of Aphrodite became recurring objects of desire, echoed in the lyrical tributes of the earliest extant fragments down to contemporary literature and cultural studies. These textual or visual responses can range from ekphrastic ritual to praxes of demystification, but in all such scenarios Aphrodite remains the focus of customary or innovative discourse.¹ In one such episode in the *Odyssey*

¹ Part of this chapter is drawn from the author’s essay in Suzanne Bray, Adrienne Gavin & Peter Merchant (eds.), *Re-Embroidering the Robe* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

(Book IV), King Menelaus parties and brags in his palace at Lacedaemon, noting that “among mankind it may be well that few or none can rival me in possessions ... I endured much and I wandered far, but in the eighth year after Troy I brought my ships home ... I passed through Cyprus, Phoenicia, Egypt.”² Cyprus, too, had always been a metatext as a historical, cultural and religious crossroads, an island that had never been insular. From the third millennium BC it had gained renown as a place of pilgrimage where the full gamut of human passions was enacted repeatedly in the Aphrodisia festivals, introduced to the island by Phoenician colonists. “Unquestionably, Cyprus was, very early, settled by Greeks. It had, even earlier, been occupied by the Phoenicians; from whom it derived that worship of the goddess Venus, originally a Syrian goddess, for which it became early, and continued long, remarkable”³ Aphrodite, then, was a significant outcome of oriental contact among Assyrians, Phoenicians and Cypriots, so unsurprisingly, hypostasis reflected the character and worship of the goddess.

Stasinus and the *Kypria Epi* of the Trojan cycle

Legendary first poets on Aphrodite included the Cyclic poets of very early Greek epics from the seventh to the fifth centuries BC, obviously writing after Troy. Their poems were, like Homer’s, oral compositions. According to ancient authorities, Stasinus of Cyprus, a semi-legendary early Greek Cyclic poet, was the author of the eleven-book *Kypria*, a work in dactylic hexameter verse, and one of the poems belonging to the Epic Cycle that narrated the War of Troy. The epic has been variously ascribed to Hegesias of Salamis or even to Homer, who may have written it as a wedding gift for his son-in-law, Stasinus.

The *Kypria*, even if informed by the content of the Homeric epic, confined itself to the preparatory stages of the *Iliad*. For instance, it contained an account of the Judgement of Paris, the rape of Helen, the Achaean landing in Asia, and the first engagement before Troy. It is possible that Homer’s famous lists, such as the Catalogue of Ships, and of the Trojans and their allies, could have been adapted from the *Kypria*. The epic of Cypriot literature was known in the classical period (1200–445AD) in a received text, subsequently lost. Chronologically, this text comes at the beginning of the cycle, followed by the *Iliad*. Yet the composition dates seem to be in reverse

² Homer, *The Odyssey*, Walter Shewring (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 37.

³ John Murray, *A Classical Manual* (London: John Murray, 1833).

with the *Iliad* written in advance. A probable composition date of the *Kypria*, in the form in which it was known in classical Greece, is the late-seventh century BC. Walter Burkert draws attention to the proto-attic ewer of ca. 640 BC called the “Chigi” vase, found in an Etruscan tomb in 1881. This is what Burkert says of the era and the timeframe:

The remarkable little *Kypria* can be understood only as a reference to the island of Cyprus, however skeptical we may be about the later information that makes Stasinus of Cyprus the author of the poem. An indication that perhaps the main contents of the *Kypria* were at least known around 650 B.C. is provided by the representation of the Judgment of Paris on the Chigi vase. However, these observations must point to that epoch when Cyprus, though rich and powerful, was still formally under Assyrian domination. The flavor of this period on Cyprus appears to be a mixture of eastern luxury and Homeric life style.⁴

On the vase the Trojan prince is “Alexandros,” as in the *Kypria*, and, more significantly, it portrays mythological scenes peripheral to Paris’s Judgment. This is the earliest visual confirmation of Aphrodite’s triumph over wisdom and wealth at the beauty contest on Ida and her subsequent alignment with the Near Eastern kingdom. The *Kypria* also delineated her advisory roles: facilitating the Helen-Paris relationship; supporting Achilles; persuading Paris to build a navy; and dispatching Aeneas to accompany the Trojan. In summary, the *Kypria* is a preface to the *Iliad*. The first account is Zeus’s teleological rationale on war, the need for ethnic cleansing and retention of power. The third extant stanza on purgation records Father Zeus’s cleansing of an over-populated planet:

3.

There came a time when the countless descendants of man
though they were scattered and the earth was broad
became a burden on her. And Zeus, sorry to see
the all-bearing earth’s plight, wisely
decided to relieve her of so many people
by provoking the great enmity of the Trojan War
and thus the heavy death toll would lift the burden.
Men died, so many heroes died in Troy
for Zeus to have his way.⁵

⁴ Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 103.

⁵ Stasinus, “*Kypria Epi*” (3). T. Kougiialis, *Twenty-Seven Centuries of Cypriot Poetry* (Nicosia: Cyprus PEN, 1983), 15.

Along with Burkett and Karl Kerényi, Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928), British classical scholar, linguist and feminist activist, pioneered modern studies in Greek mythology. She applied herself to the application of anthropology within classical Greek art and ritual. The *Prolegomena* (1882) gives priority to ritual as the guide to interpretation of myth through her studies of Greek festivals. Examples under scrutiny included the Athens festival of the *Anthesteria*, honouring Dionysius in February, and the May-time *Targelia* for Apollo and Diana. The *Plynteria* celebrated the Athenian goddess Athena with a secret ritual of the washing of the goddess statue. The *Thesmophoria* festival of Proserpine denoted active and complex rituality with free-born women, in white robes under strict chastity, making a pilgrimage to Eleusis, abstaining from pomegranates and garlands, and sprinkling anti-libidinous herbs to ward off desire.⁶

More recently, Connelly reminds us that the Greeks managed their religious beliefs without a “sacred book” or a centralized “church” authority: “Religion was embedded in everything. And it was wholly a local enterprise, dependent on the traditions of tightly knit family groups across many generations.”⁷

The Epigrammatic Tradition

Any scholar researching the significance of myth for ancient communities relies on the extant texts and writers of that time. The sub-genre of the “epigram” revitalizes the voices of the common people and poets who needed to intercede with the gods as a standard routine. Being an inscription in verse, the epigram does more than pay tribute, and can be summarizing, intercessional or elegiac in tone. *The Greek Anthology (The Gathering of Flowers)*, in its title alone and its hundreds of entries, reminds us of the beauty of lyrical verse. Indeed, across the sequence of volumes the anthology is a treasure house of wondrous statements of human emotion by citizens speaking through ancient poets. The epigrams to Aphrodite demonstrate a celebratory, fervent and often childlike quality. A handful of collections were amalgamated from the first century BC. Constantinus Cephalas organized the epigrams into fifteen books in the tenth century and these are preserved as a single manuscript in the Palatine

⁶ Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁷ See Joan Breton Connelly, *The Parthenon Enigma—A Journey into Legend* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2014), 253–4.

Library, Heidelberg. The monk Maximus Planudes rearranged the collection and added some missing epigrams in the fourteenth century. LOEB's *The Greek Anthology* has rearranged the Palatine format to present classical Greek literature in bilingual translation. What follows is a small sampling of supplications and dedications to Aphrodite, translated by Walter Paton, an Aberdeen author and translator of ancient Greek literature, particularly of this Greek anthology.⁸

Epigrams 18 and 19 (Volume VI) establish a dual communion in tandem with Aphrodite. *On Lais's Mirror* depicts the celebrated courtesan feeling her age, and presenting Aphrodite with a votive offering of a mandatory female accessory. Julianus, Prefect of Egypt, plays the interlocutor, sympathetic to the plaintiff's wrinkled beauty: "Receive, Cytherea, the circle, the companion of youth, since thy beauty dreads not time." Epigram 19, *On the Same*, is Lais's response as donor of the mirror: "Thou grantest beauty, Cytherea, but creeping time withers thy gift, my Queen."⁹ The trope of the "mirror" will accompany the goddess right through to post-modern literature.

In Epigram 190 the petitioner-poet Leonidas is either hard-up or tight-fisted in showing gratitude for Venus's cure of his disease. Gaetulicus writes of one whose meagre offering, strikingly visualized, is conditional—some scraps of food and a drop of wine, literally the dregs at the bottom of the cup! As a postscript, Leonidas petitions a cure from poverty, promising, *if* the goddess is compliant, "a fat goat."¹⁰ This lean offering contrasts with No. 206 by Antipater of Sidon who presents colourful insight from Naucratis on adolescent friendship's interface with religion by offering five prized possessions *To Aphrodite the Heavenly*. We might well ask whether used goods are fit for the most radiant goddess. Absolutely, Antipater implies, as the girls offer up their dainty sandals and trinkets.¹¹ In No. 209 an insecure woman seeks divine reassurance of marital fidelity, but this time Antipater has the sculpture speak for her, suggesting the petitioner's delicate situation: "BITHYNIAN CYTHERE dedicated me to thee, Cypris ... she asks no more than that her husband may be of one heart and soul with her."¹²

⁸ Paton married a Greek girl from Kalymnos and they lived on Chios, Lesbos and Samos, where he died in 1921.

⁹ *The Greek Anthology*, G. P. Gould (ed.). Books I–VI W. R. Paton (trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 307.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Vol. VI, 397.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 405.

¹² *Ibid.*, 407.

Other epigrams throughout the multi-volume *Anthology*, by classic poets like Mnasalcas, Agathias Scholasticus and Lucilius, pay tribute to Aphrodite's maritime dimension as both patron of sailors and shining sea-born goddess deserving of honourable worship. Several epigrams refer to votive gold statues of the goddess in her coastal temples, often gifts from prominent courtesans like Polyarchis, while others tell tales on thieves who steal these icons. Epigrammatic poets also give attention to the Judgement of Paris and Aphrodite's winning nudity within that scenario, thus indirectly condoning Praxiteles's Cnidian sculpture.

Cythera

Cythera is a strategic island near Laconia on the southeastern coast of the Peloponnese. Being sacred to Aphrodite, it was named "Cytherea" for the goddess who, the islanders believed, rose from the surrounding waves. Here, there is a fine sequential distinction between Aphrodite surfacing in the waters of Cythera but *not* proceeding to step ashore and reside there, as in the Paphos landing. In Book One, Herodotus of Halicarnassus refers to the Scythians' robbery of Aphrodite Urania's temple at Ascalon: "... the most ancient, I am told, of all the temples of this goddess. The one in Cyprus the Cyprians themselves admit was derived from it, and the one in Cythera was built by the Phoenicians, who belong to this part of Syria."¹³ Herodotus, indirectly, is confirming the transfer of the cult of the eastern goddess Astarte to the Greek mainland.

In the first book of the *Aeneid*, Venus despairs at the tribulations of the Trojan exiles outside Carthage and wonders if their westward journey will ever be realized. She rails at Jupiter who, she believes, has taken offence with her son Aeneas and his fellow Trojans: "Lightly he kissed his daughter, and then spoke: 'Spare your fears, Cytherean. You have your people's destiny still, and it shall not be disturbed. You shall see your city, see Lavinium's walls, for I have promised them. And you shall exalt to the stars of heaven your son Aeneas, the great of heart. There is no thought changing my will'."¹⁴

The Cythereans also embraced the Spartan pantheon of the Dioscuri, Poseidon and Hercules, but were absorbed by the Eastern Roman Empire from 395 BC. The island however remained a topos of mythical legends and innuendos of the legendary Trojan warrior. The alternative Odyssean

¹³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, Aubrey de Sélincourt (trans.) (London: Penguin, 1996), 44.

¹⁴ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, W. F. Jackson Knight (trans.) (London: Penguin, 1958), 35.

myth, in which the hero departs Ithaca to travel once more, is a version acknowledged by Dante and numerous other poets long after. Film director Theo Angelopoulos (1935–2012) in his *Voyage to Cythera* (1989) depicts an elderly, disillusioned “Spyros” choosing to drift far away on a raft, suggestive of a recycled romantic, mythical history.

Herodotus’s Book Two continues his research on the deeds displayed by the ancient Greeks and their neighbours. He notes, for instance, how the Pelasgians—whose ancients worshipped at Dordona, then the sole oracle in Greece—honoured a handful of undifferentiated divinities before bequeathing Egyptian designations of their gods to the Greeks:

But it was only—if I may so put it—the day before yesterday that the Greeks came to know the origin and form of the various gods, and whether or not all of them had always existed; for Homer and Hesiod were the first poets to bestow epithets on the gods, to allot them their several theogonies, and described the gods for the Greeks, giving them all their appropriate titles, offices, and powers, and they lived, as I believe, no more than four hundred years ago.¹⁵

In fact, Herodotus associated Aphrodite’s origins with Ishtar-Astarte, an ancient Semitic love goddess, by identifying practices common to both Phoenicia and Paphos, such as public prostitution.

Relations on Olympus

Hesiod (ca. 700 BC) was a Boeotian farmer who turned poet after the Muses converted him to literature. He was one of the earliest European writers on myth (after the poets Orpheus and Musaeus) living in the first stage of the Classical Greek Period. Unlike his seafaring father, Hesiod chose to dwell below Mount Helicon, near the Temple of the Muses and the fountain Hippocrene, a territory often regarded as wild and illiterate yet also home to Pindar and Plutarch. Various accounts of his demise include homicide, with dolphins tending his corpse back to shore. Hesiod presents the prelude to his enduring history of the families of Olympian gods by addressing, over ninety lines, these Muses of Helicon and their aesthetic gifts. In the *Theogony*, which ends with the dominance of Zeus, Hesiod sets down the genealogies of the pagan gods to explain the origin of the universe.

However, classicist Peter Toohey rules out the *Theogony* as didactic verse:

¹⁵ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 106.

... it lacks even the most generalized of applied addressees (such as one might detect through the use of second-person verb forms). A persistent feature of didactic epic is the evocation, in however generalized a manner ... the *Theogony* is less a piece of overt instruction than it is an hymnic celebration of the triumph of the justice or the *dikê*, of Zeus.¹⁶

Toohey, though, goes on to show how Hesiod's *Works and Days* functions much better as a didactic epic.

The earliest account of the legendary sea birth engineered by Kronos singles out Aphrodite as a uniquely conceived child among Uranus's numerous offspring. The *Theogony* aims to bring order to chaos by presenting early divine interactions with the human race. A brief account romanticizes much of the post-chaotic past as bygone, while not discounting the human ability to recapture something tangible of times past. West, in his translation of the ten-part *Theogony*, comments that Hesiod probably invented the names of his Muses, but also calculates that the catalogue of gods compiled by Hesiod "contains some three hundred names."¹⁷

In the beginning, the Muses of Helicon in the misty mountain nights sing of the gods, including "Aphrodite of curling lashes ... and the rest of the holy family of immortals who are forever." Minding his sheep on Helicon, Hesiod too is instructed to sing of immortal gods.¹⁸ According to his account, the Earth (Gaia) is determined to punish her husband Uranus (the Sky) for confining her children below ground. Aphrodite's chaotic origin is derived from this sinister family feud which leads to the son assaulting his father to appease his mother. Apart from this castration engendering the goddess birth, Cronus devowed his children to safeguard his rule but one son Zeus engineered his siblings' return. Yet Hesiod's task is so much broader than articulating the inception of a sea-born goddess. He tells of the Chasm, the firmaments, the birth of the gods, their distribution of their privileges and their territorial locations on Earth, Heaven and Sea. Aphrodite's son Eros is singled out as "the most handsome among the immortal gods, dissolver of flesh, who overcomes the reason and purpose in the breasts of all gods and all men."¹⁹

¹⁶ Peter Toohey, *Epic Lessons: An Introduction to Didactic Poetry* (Oxford: Routledge, 1996), 21.

¹⁷ *Theogony, Works and Days*, M. L. West (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), x.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

Euhemerus of Messina, an ancient historian of the third century BC, also argued that the Olympian gods had lived on earth, based on his persona's claim to wide Near-Eastern travels and perusal of monuments and temple records. His lost historical account apparently featured royal gods like Jupiter, living and warring on earth. Such a stance, along with a supposed sighting of a registry of the deaths of gods, would later accommodate Patristic arguments, obviously advancing the *non*-divinity of the pagan gods.

The Birth of Aphrodite in the Succession Myth

All writers on this subject of the succession line, from Heaven to "crooked schemer Kronos" and Zeus, face the challenge of describing sequentially the genesis of a rare goddess through a bizarre process which makes no biological sense whatsoever. Nor does the birth of Athena, featured on the east pediment of the Parthenon, but at least there is a closer affinity between the fractured skull of Zeus and the intellectual wisdom of his new-born daughter. Nor can we talk of sublime aesthetics in the irregular birth of Dionysus; Semele, deceived by Juno, is consumed by Jupiter's fire and the foetus is embedded in Zeus's thigh until delivery, an example of the concept of the "pregnant male" assuming maternity prior to unnatural birth. Kronos, always the activist, is one of the many frightening children of Earth and Heaven, and he and his son Zeus endured a mutual loathing. He castrates the father, throwing the genitals into the sea in what serves as a micro-prehistoric reflection on the wider socialisation of the Olympian community. Hesiod records the ensuing miracle:

... a white foam grew from the immortal flesh, and in it a girl formed. First she approached holy Cythera; then from there she came to seagirt Cyprus. And out stepped a modest and beautiful goddess, and the grass began to grow all round beneath her slender feet. Gods and men called her Aphrodite, because she was formed in foam, and Cytherea, because she approached Cythera, and Cyprus-born, because she was born in wave-washed Cyprus, and "genial," because she appeared out of genitals.²⁰

William Doty, Professor of Religious Studies, notes:

While Hesiod and the much later Orphic writers develop *religious* cosmogonies in their accounts of the origins of everything, most Greek philosophers paid little attention to religious aspects of the gods, yet felt

²⁰ Ibid.

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