

2017

The new Aphrodite

C.A.P. Ruck. 2017. "The New Aphrodite." *Sexus Journal*, Volume 1, Issue 4, pp. ? - ? (5).

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/42392>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

ISSN 2536-5185 (web)
ISSN 2536-5169 (print)Spring-2017 V:02; Issue:04, June 30th, 2017History • Mythology
Review

RUCK

The New Aphrodite

SexuS Journal 1 (4): 111-116, 2017, JUNE

The New Aphrodite

Carl Anton Paul Ruck

Abstract:

The tale of Eros and Psyche is known from its Latin version as Cupid and Psyche, encapsulated in the novel titled the *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass* (*Asinus Aureus*) of the second-century CE Apuleius from a Roman colony in northern Africa. It survived antiquity perhaps in a single manuscript and excited great interest in Florence of the Medici Renaissance because of its Neoplatonic motif of the transcendent mystical escape from the Cave of delusionary appearance. Apuleius was an initiate into the Egyptian Mystery religion of Isis, and probably also the great Mystery of Greek Eleusis. The tale had been told as well by his Syrian Greek contemporary Lucian and was already sacred in fourth century BCE Magna Graecia at certain cave sanctuaries where the promiscuously sexual love goddess Aphrodite was jointly worshipped with Demeter, the goddess of fertility, and her daughter Persephone, as patrons of the union between husbands and wives. The tale employs the peculiar monogamous mating of the butterfly and its metamorphosis within the cave-like excreted exoskeleton of its golden chrysalis. It is an allegory of the incarnation of spirit in physicality that produces a new version of sexuality as love, rewarded with immortality, and a superior version of beauty endowed with mortality.

KEY WORDS: Aphrodite, Greek Myths, Dionysus, Mystery religion

SexuS Journal • 2017 • 2 (4): 111-116

Although Eros or Cupid was universally recognized as the son of Aphrodite (Roman Venus), the identity of his father was unknown. Eros personified erotic attraction and came to be interpreted symbolically as a primordial cosmic force, the first-born origin of the universe and the conjoining magnetic linkage that held its elements together, and the deity of the ultimate truth as mystical 'revelation.' He could be replicated into a whole brotherhood of creatures performing this function. His mother could be similarly multiplied into a sisterhood representing the plurality of qualities that roused desire.

She was frequently depicted teaching her son the art of archery, shooting the poisoned arrow that would madden its recipient with an ecstatic ineluctable bond to whatever was the first object subsequently seen.

In his anthropomorphized deification, Eros was a matrilineal child, undoubtedly a bastard and certainly not conceived with his mother's husband Hephaestus (the Roman Vulcan). In both Greek and Latin, he provides the word for the 'volcano.' At the base of numerous sacred volcanic mountains throughout the Classical world, most notably that on the island of Lemnos, Hephaestus tended the fiery caldera, which was seen as a metallurgical forge. It was there presumably that Aphrodite slept with her husband. The smelting furnace is the locus of wizardry, symbolically a female's womb, administered by the deity's phallic henchmen, and its slag was its menses,

Corresponding Author: Carl Anton Paul Ruck

Address: Carl Ruck, Professor, Department of Classical Studies, School of Theology 754 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, Massachusetts, 02215, USA



blaise131@verizon.net

bacchus@bu.edu



so that whole alchemical procedure of elemental transmutation was sexual, but the secret domain of males, with the presence of women traditionally prohibited. Similarly, the intrusion of males upon the domain of the female's birthing was traditionally considered taboo. Males and females had separate domains of creativity. The objects forged by Hephaestus, although marvels of magical ingenuity, were always cursed, like a throne that would imprison its occupant, or a shield for a warrior destined to die, or mechanical automatons that could only imitate living creatures, like the eagle that gnawed upon the liver of the tormented Prometheus.

The marriage of Aphrodite to Hephaestus was neither happy nor fruitful. Although Hephaestus is credited with over ten offspring, his union with Aphrodite was without issue. There is firm mythological reason for this inadequacy, since they both can be traced back to a single sex, without union with its opposite, as enacted in the mono sexual phallic activities at the imitative womb of the forge with its artificial products. Hephaestus was produced by virgin birth without father as the son of Hera, which makes him the masculine member of a female. Aphrodite similarly had only a single parent. She emerged without mother from the spume that foamed in the sea around the testicles of her castrated father. This would make her, despite her obvious femininity, also basically phallic. Her father, moreover, was originally also just a feminized phallus. He was the sky Uranus, but parthenogenetic like Hephaestus, being the son of the earth Gaia alone without mate, before she began creating thereafter through heterosexual concourse with him. Even these creatures of the first ge-

neration of heterosexuality were monsters and cursed, the race of Titans and Giants.

The erection of the penis is the most visible external indication of sexual arousal, and both Aphrodite, as the patron of sexuality, and her husband Hephaestus share the motif of the erotic generative principle as symbolized by the phallus, although ascribed to a female. The clitoris is subject to the same arousal as the penis, although less noticeable. Hephaestus, furthermore, was characterized by his limp, his maimed feet, and difficulty in ambulation was a thematic condition in comedy occasioned by the too strenuously erected penis. Such inevitably would be his constant state whenever in the presence of his overwhelmingly beautiful wife, but he was derided as a cuckold among the other deities for thinking that the matrimonial rite could ever restrain her adultery. The goddess and her many analogues throughout the neighboring cultures was notoriously polyandrous and often responsible for the death of her sexual partner. In the myths about Aphrodite, such was the fate of her beloved Adonis.

Priapism was personified as the deity Priapus, who, despite his enormous erection, never consummated a sexual liaison, and the overly erect penis was considered risible, unseemly, and bestial. The mule, with its generally immense penis, does not have a scientific Latin nomenclature since it is not a species, inasmuch as it does not reproduce, hence in urban slang a 'mule dick' indicates wasted effort, and the ass even in antiquity indicated not only a fool but the obscene and nonproductive backside, an anally receptive beast of burden. The metaphor underlies Shakespeare's portrayal of the unfortunate Athenian weaver named Bottom, who is the first thing that the fairy queen Tita-



nia sees upon awakening in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

It was while Hephaestus pursued his sterile subterranean craft at the forge that Aphrodite indulged in her amorous affairs. Eros was the result of one of these, most people assumed from her notorious relationship that she openly flaunted with Ares, the Roman Mars, the god of War. He was the only Olympian child that Hera managed to have with her famously unfaithful and inattentive husband Zeus, and as the personification of war, he offers an obvious comment on the felicity of his parents' union. Hera even had to borrow the menstrual belt of Aphrodite when she plotted on occasion to rouse her husband. The belt was another one of the magical artifacts that Hephaestus forged in his volcanic smithy. Although no one was sure that Ares was the father of Eros, the adulterous couple also produced an acknowledged daughter, Harmonia or 'harmony.' Hephaestus forged another artifact for her as a wedding gift. This was the necklace that cursed any wife who wore it. The symbolism of the necklace is the same as the belt. It matters little where the circlet is worn since it always implies the entrance for intercourse.

Harmonia represents the negotiated strife implicate in the marital union of opposites and Eros is the compulsive force that drives those opposites together. Ares and Aphrodite are linked in the motif of ecstatic loss of control in the fields running with blood, both menstrual and that flowing from the corpses of slaughtered enemies. The erotic arousal of the penis, moreover, is a natural physiological reflex of aggression, and warriors are characterized by the codpiece or penis sheath, which is not intended as protective armament, but to focus attention to the genitals. The rout of the defeated city in

myth is completed by the rape of its captured inhabitants. Love and death are inextricably joined in mythical traditions, and female deities commonly function as leaders of the army or recipients of those slain on the battlefield. Ares and Aphrodite are further linked in the evening star Venus, which marks the time for copulation, inasmuch as it disappears from the western evening sky for a period to reappear as the morning star at the eastern horizon at dawn, where it was long not recognized as the same planet, but as masculine instead, marking the time for the warrior to set out for battle. As devotees of Aphrodite, the female Amazons were equally dedicated as warriors to the god of war and death. In the language of amorous poetry, an Amazon was considered the ultimate sexual conquest, being a totally female society and using the men of neighboring tribes only for sexual insemination and killing any resultant male offspring.

It is only in the next generation that the hostile standoff of the opposing sexes is resolved in the mythical tradition. The tale was overheard by an ass imprisoned in a cave, a transmogrified man cursed by a sorceress, on his pathway to spiritual transcendence. It is best known from the second-century CE Latin novel of Apuleius titled the *Golden Ass*, but it had earlier versions in Greek going back to the Classical Age.

There was born to a king and queen of some unnamed city a daughter of such surpassing beauty that people began to neglect the worship of the old love goddess and claim that she was the new Aphrodite. Her name was Psyche, with means the 'breath of soul.' It departs the body upon death as the final exhalation. In jealousy, Aphrodite sent her son Eros to shoot her with his arrow as she slept so



that she would fall in love upon awakening with some beastly bottom, but suddenly she awoke, looking into his eyes straight through him since he was invisible to her, and he, startled by her beauty, pricked himself with his own toxic arrow. Eros, now irrevocably smitten, flees, wounded and sickened back to his mother. He refuses to pursue his task of spreading eroticism throughout the world. This is a crisis of cosmic significance. Aphrodite was furious and placed a curse upon Psyche. Although she is as beautiful as ever, there is something uncanny that keeps suitors at bay, perhaps some repugnant aura or scent. Her two sisters have found marriages, but Psyche remains single, leading her parents to consult guidance from an oracle. She must be sacrificed, they learn, in a marriage to death.

Psyche, attired in a funeral shroud, is abandoned to die atop a cliff on a mountain, but a wind transports her over the edge to a paradisiacal valley with a marvelous palace attended by invisible servants. She is escorted to the bridal chamber, where her husband in the darkness of night unseen consummates the marriage. The event is repeated many times, much to her liking, but always in darkness, with her mate prohibiting the lighting of any lamp and departing unseen. Eventually, Psyche became pregnant with Eros' child.

She is allowed to visit her sisters. Although they, too, are married, although not to their liking, they are jealous of their sister's happiness and convince her that her lover must be hiding his hideous bestiality in darkness. Psyche awaits the next visitation, ready with lamp and dagger to dispatch her lover while he sleeps. The lamp, however, reveals a male of startling beauty and she accidentally pricks herself with one of the arrows from his quiver

and inadvertently awakens him with a drop of hot oil from her burning lamp. He flies away, deserting her, although they both now are bound by the arrows' toxin. Abandoned, she is found by the ithyphallic Pan, a creature of the primordial wilderness, whose phallic sexual divinity she acknowledges and then sets out in search of her lover.

Psyche first visits her sisters, both envious of their sister's passion for her husband. She convinces each that it is really they whom Eros loves, and each in turn goes to the mountaintop, offering themselves to their supposed lover by leaping from the cliff into his expectant arms, only to fall to their deaths. Traditionally women and men belong to separate groups and resent desertion of their members for an emotional alliance with an individual from the opposite side, other than for sexual engagement, as practiced by the Amazons. The motif is ritualized in the bachelor and hen parties as practiced today as sexual parody in preparation for the marriage of one of their members. Psyche has divested herself of membership in the sorority of her sisters.

Now that she is a single agent, Psyche attempts to find the particular male who is her sole lover. She seeks the aid of Aphrodite, who is enraged, beats and reviles her for her pregnancy, and then sets three impossible tasks for her to perform. Each Psyche accomplishes successfully by enlisting the aid of natural forces. This is significant in identifying the soul's intuitive female affinity with the physical world. Finally, Aphrodite demands that Psyche fetch a casket of infernal cosmetics from Persephone in the netherworld containing a dosage of beauty to replenish what has been diminished by competition with Psyche as the new Aphrodite and by her tending the ailment of her love-struck



son Eros.

After the danger-fraught journey to the queen of the underworld, Persephone grants Psyche the casket, but upon her return to the upper world, she opens the box from curiosity, finding it filled only with eternal slumber, and she faints away. Eros, escaping from his mother, finds her and awakes her with a kiss.

He takes his bride to Olympus, where she is given a drink of ambrosia to make her immortal like her husband, and then bears their child, a daughter who is named 'Pleasure' (*Voluptas* in Latin, or *Hedoné* in Greek). Psyche was depicted in ancient art with the wings of a fairy-like creature, the diaphanous wings of a butterfly. Psyche as 'breath of soul' is also the word for 'butterfly.'

The butterfly is emblematic of spiritual transcendence. It was noted in antiquity that the butterfly has no mouth and cannot eat or contaminate its spiritual essence with material sustenance. Its only function is procreation. In this act, it is monogamous since the inseminating male inserts a vaginal plug and secretes a pheromone that makes its mate unattractive to further suitors. The beautiful flying creatures, moreover, develop from the larva or worm, whose only purpose is to eat. Then it encloses itself as a little creature, a 'doll' or pupa within the golden chrysalis secreted like an enclosing cave in which it undergoes transmutation to emerge as the beautiful adult butterfly.

The myth encodes the enjoyment of love beyond sexuality, the mystery of the spirit enamored reciprocally with physicality, the ultimate mating of opposites and the equality of the sexes. The beauty of the new Aphrodite surpassed that of the old goddess since it incorporated the human condition of mortality. Death is an

aspect of beauty reserved for humans and something that rewarded Psyche with eternal existence among the deities. Aphrodite joined Persephone in certain rites that celebrated the marital union as the source of love and fecundity. In its context within the novel of Apuleius, the tale marks the pathway for the hero Lucius' restoration from the ass in the cave to a man in a mystery rite in which he sees the Egyptian goddess Isis. Isis' lover Osiris was murdered by his brother Seth and dismembered and buried throughout the land. Isis sought the pieces and reassembled her lover, except for his phallus. This she fashioned for herself and with it begot their son Horus. It is he who inherits dominion of the world.

A votive plaque from the sanctuary that Aphrodite shared with Persephone as patrons of marital love depicts Eros with the flask of the cosmetic unguent of mortality pulling the wedding cart with Psyche, who hold a cock, a bird with the same obscene connotations as today. His mother rides in the cart, inviting the phallic deity Hermes aboard. Their sexual union will produce a son named in both matrilineal and patrilineal fashion after both of them. This is Hermaphroditos, who bears both parents' name. He would become the quasi deified hermaphrodite, with the visible organs of both the sexes.

References:

- Gollnick, J., *Love and the soul: psychological interpretations of the Eros and Psyche myth*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992.
- Lewis, C.S., *Till we have faces: a myth retold*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1956.
- Merkelbach, R. *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike*. Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962.
- Neumann, E. *Amor and Psyche: the psychic development of the feminine: a commentary on the tale of Apuleius* Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1956.
- Ruck, C.A.P., and Hoffman, M.A., *Entheogens*,



myth, and human consciousness. Berkeley;
Ronin Publishing, pp. 136-153. 2013

Carl A.P. Ruck is Professor of Classics at Boston University, an authority on the ecstatic rituals of the god Dionysus. With the ethno-mycologist R. Gordon Wasson and Albert Hofmann, he identified the secret psychoactive ingredient in the visionary potion that was drunk by the initiates at the Eleusinian Mystery. In *Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion*, he proclaimed the centrality of psychoactive sacraments at the very beginnings of religion, employing the neologism "entheogen" to free the topic from the pejorative connotations for words like drug or hallucinogen. His publications include: *The World of Classical Myth: Gods and Goddesses: Heroines and Heroes*; *The Apples of Apollo: Pagan and Christian Mysteries of the Eucharist*; *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*; *Sacred Mushrooms of the Goddess: Secrets of Eleusis*; *The Hidden World: Survival of Pagan Shamanic Themes in European Fairytales*; *Mushrooms, Myth, and Mithras: The Drug Cult that Civilized Europe*; *The Effluents of Deity: Alchemy and Psychoactive Sacraments in Medieval and Renaissance Art*; *Entheogens, Myth and Human Consciousness*; *Intensive Latin: First Year and Review*; *Ancient Greek: Intensive Review and Reference*; *IG II² 2323 The List of Victors in Comedy at the Dionysia*; *Pindar: Selected Odes: Dionysus in Thrace: Ancient Entheogenic Themes in the Mythology and Archaeology of Northern Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey*; *The Ison Conceived in Drunkenness: Magical Plants in the World of the Greek Hero*; *The Great Gods of Samothrace and the Cult of the Little People*.

Carl Ruck, Professor

Department of Classical Studies, School of Theology, 754 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02215, USA

Contact: 1-617-353-4435 (office), 1-781-925-0182 (home) Fax: 617-353-1611

E-mail:

bacchus@bu.edu blaise131@verizon.net