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Article

Aphrodite in Mirrors: Aphrodite's Epithets as Manifestations of Complex Gender Roles

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Abstract

"Aphrodite in Mirrors: Aphrodite's Epithets as Manifestations of Complex Gender Roles" examines the differing portrayals of Aphrodite seen across the Ancient Greek world, highlighting the ways in which they contrast with one another as supposed idealized depictions of femininity and womanhood. Nonetheless, by subsequently charting differing regionalized gender roles and gender politics, this paper demonstrates that these differing iterations of Aphrodite are manifestations of these localized gender roles, highlighting the complexity of womanhood and the female experience in the Ancient Greek world.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Roles, Feminism, Women in Antiquity, Ancient Greek Women, and Aphrodite.

Introduction

Contemporary perspectives of Aphrodite often render her likeness as the radiant and hyperfeminine goddess of love and beauty; however, her representation and materialization in antiquity varied greatly across the Mediterranean basin. While today, many scholars agree that Aphrodite's cults have their origins in the Sumerian Inanna, Akkadian and Babylonian Ishtar, Phoenician Astarte, and Canaanite Asherah, a collection of closely related Near Eastern goddesses (Manning, 2002, p. 7), her worship across the Greek peninsula also varied so

greatly that many different iterations of Aphrodite emerged, each functioning as a separate figure despite their shared origin. The most popular versions of Aphrodite worshipped in antiquity were Aphrodite Pandemos and Aphrodite Ourania, notably seen as contrarian figures representing carnal and spiritual love. In other parts of Greece, Aphrodite was celebrated and revered for her masculine virtues. In Sparta, she was primarily worshipped as Aphrodite Areia, the warlike Aphrodite, while in Cyprus, Aphrodite also took on the form of Aphroditus, a male Aphrodite. Although these differing versions of Aphrodite seem both antithetical and contradictory, they are nonetheless the consequence of varying beliefs and views regarding gender roles and politics seen throughout the ancient world. By understanding the positions regarding gender and womanhood seen across the Ancient Greek world, this paper argues that the various iterations of Aphrodite are the result of the manifestation and materialization of local gender ideals.

Lust and Love: Aphrodite Pandemos and Aphrodite Ourania

Aphrodite Pandemos and Aphrodite Ourania were the most widely celebrated and worshipped versions of Aphrodite seen in antiquity, especially in major centres, such as Athens. Although these goddesses' cults and reverence often emerged within the same geographical locales, they nonetheless functioned entirely differently. Pandemos, whose name literally translates to "belonging to all the people," referring to her dominion over "common, vulgar love" (Rosenzweig, 2007, p. 13), was seen as a goddess who governed the interpersonal relationships of the Greek people. In contrast, Ourania represented a pure and spiritual love (Manning, 2002, p. 5) which was "untinged with wantonness" (Plato, ca. 370 B.C.E./1925,

181c). The two figures were both referred to as Aphrodite; however, their worship, depictions, and mythologies were kept distinct. For example, as recorded by Homer in his *Iliad*, Pandemos was the daughter of Zeus and Dione (Manning, 2002, p. 5), while, as told by Hesiod, Ourania famously rose fully formed from the sea foam (Manning, 2002, p. 3-4). Pausanias further argues this, noting that Ourania is the older of the two Aphrodites, being first worshipped by the Assyrians, and then later the Phoenicians, who introduced her worship to the Greeks at Cythera (Pausanias, ca. 180/1918, 1.14.7). Unlike Pandemos, whose cult was believed to be Hellenistic in origin (Rosenzweig, 2007, p. 13-140), Ancient Greek thinkers often concluded that Ourania was a foreign import, linking her to other Near Eastern goddesses. In his *The Histories*, Herodotus argues that the worship of Ourania was proliferated by Arabs and Assyrians, who called her Alilat and Mylitta, respectively (Herodotus, ca. 415 B.C.E./1920, 1.131).

Both Aphrodites were further differentiated in their iconography. Pandemos was often depicted riding a goat, while Ourania was depicted with a swan as her mount (Rosenzweig, 2007, p. 71). The she-goat came to be seen as sacred to Pandemos, who was often referred to as Aphrodite Epitragia, meaning "Aphrodite upon a Goat," as it was believed that the hero Theseus had offered a she-goat to Aphrodite as a sacrifice (Elderkin, 1941, p. 382). In Ancient Greece, the goat had been understood as a symbol of carnal desires and untamed natures, attributed to figures such as Pan, Dionysus, Artemis, and, thus, Aphrodite, in her role as Pandemos (Franklin, 1921, p. 49-51). The swan, on the other hand, was seen as the sacred mount of Ourania due to its symbolic representation of "good health, music, divination, and grace" (Terracotta Disk with Aphrodite Riding on a Swan, "Terracotta Disk," n.d).

The antithetical nature of the two Aphrodites often led them to be seen as a nocturnal and diurnal counterparts, with Pandemos being a nighttime goddess, owing to her role in carnality and shameful acts, while Ourania was seen as a goddess in Apollo's realm, who was also associated with the swan (Harrison, 1984, p. 383). Their worship also varied greatly, with Pandemos' blessings being seen by some Greeks, especially men, as something to fear and avoid. In his *Symposium*, for example, Plato warns that Pandemos bestowed the type of love seen in "the meaner sort of men;" the type of men who focused more on beauty than morality when choosing their partner (Plato, ca. 370 B.C.E./1925, 181b).

While philosophers warned men against Pandemos' gifts, Xenophon, in his *Symposium*, shared that Ourania was a goddess of chastity and noble conduct, that is, wedlock (Xenophon, ca. 360 B.C.E./1979, 8.9-8.11). This is why married women primarily worshipped her (Rosenzweig, 2007, p. 78). This is unlike Aphrodite Pandemos, who was largely seen as a goddess "excelling in looseness" (Xenophon, ca. 360 B.C.E./1979, 8.9), and, among women, was worshipped by courtesans and prostitutes. According to Athenaeus, many of Pandemos' temples were populated by temple prostitutes (Manning, 2002, p. 5), and, elsewhere, Solon is cited as erecting the first sanctuary dedicated to Aphrodite Pandemos with the use of brothel funds (Pala, 2010, p. 197). As such, although Pandemos and Ourania were often worshipped within the same vicinity, in both form and function, they were seen as separate entities governing separate dominions.

As described above, Pandemos and Ourania were understood to be extremely antithetical figures despite being iterations of the same goddess. Pandemos, especially, was

seen as a fickle and haphazard figure that one should be wary of. Despite their differences, their existence coincided across the Ancient Greek world. For example, Pausanias describes the existence of statues dedicated to both Ourania and Pandemos at Thebes (Pausanias, ca. 180/1918, 9.16.3). Plato, much like Pausanias, also refers to Ourania as the elder of the two Aphrodites, with Pandemos being the younger (Plato, ca. 370 B.C.E./1925, 181c). Xenophon remarks that, although Pandemos and Ourania could be two names for the same figure, it is more likely and rational that they were two separate goddesses (Xenophon, ca. 360 B.C.E./1979, 8.10). The existence of both goddesses was not marked as contradictory or irrational. Rather, these two differing versions of Aphrodite concur within the context of the varied and complex views regarding gender and love within Greece, especially in places such as Athens. Greek attitudes towards Pandemos, especially regarding avoiding her more volatile gifts of love, are in line with mainstream Greek views of women.

As Hesiod recounts in his *Theogony*, women were a "beautiful evil," inclined to bring suffering to men (Hesiod, ca. 700 B.C.E/1914, 585). Similarly, Aristotle taught that women were akin to a plague, as they ultimately "caused more confusion than the enemy" (Aristotle, ca. 335 B.C.E./1944, 1269b). Ultimately, these negative views of women in places such as Athens permeated throughout both Greek law and religion, leading to increased anxiety that materialized in laws and social norms which segregated and isolated women from the male-dominated society (O'Pry, 2012, p. 9). Furthermore, the idea that women were a source of hardship and difficulty for men directly correlates with the hesitance Pandemos was reputed with, especially regarding her role as a force which brought men and women together (Plato, ca. 370 B.C.E./1925, 181b). Despite this, Pandemos was often seen as a patron of civic

unity, especially in Athens (Scholtz, 2002, p. 232), where she was prayed to for political unity (Rosenzweig, 2007, p. 13).

Her duality, as both a goddess of feminine disorder and maintainer of political stability is highlighted by her dominion over prostitution, as prostitutes were one of the only classes of women in Ancient Greece who had "freedom of movement in the male society" (O'Pry, 2012, p. 9), being both educated and allowed to participate in politics (O'Pry, 2012, p. 9). In comparison, Ourania was seen as a goddess embodying attitudes towards idealized and spiritual love, including the importance of seclusion and chastity, while Pandemos was seen as a goddess encompassing the reality of Greek women, being viewed negatively by men, although still vital to the maintenance and upholding of civilization.

Although Pandemos' characterization as a perilous force was pursuant to popular Greek views of women, Ourania was also celebrated as an important patron of Athens, alongside Athena Polias and Zeus Polieus (Rosenzweig, 2007, p. 105). Thus, although the Greeks' disparaging view of women impacted their view of Pandemos, they nonetheless seemed inclined to celebrate Ourania with great reverence. For Athenians especially, Ourania held the same position as her Near Eastern predecessors as "Queen of Heaven" (Manning, 2002, p. 7). As such, despite whatever ill contempt Greek society held towards women, these views and beliefs did not besmirch their understanding of Ourania in the same fashion they did for Pandemos. Ourania governed over a higher and more spiritual form of love, which was seen as purer and more moral than Pandemos' carnality (Rosenzweig, 2007, p. 6); her honour

and distinction amongst the Greeks can be understood as an outcome of her role in same-sex relationships.

The Pride of Athens: The Aphrodites and Homosexuality

Pandemos was frequently seen as a goddess invoked by men who sought carnal, indiscriminate love, whereas Ourania was aligned with those who practiced a more noble and virtuous love. Plato notes this systemic difference, chastising Pandemos as a goddess sought out by meaner men who "love women as well as boys," while celebrating Ourania as a goddess who "partakes not of the female but only of the male" (Plato, ca. 370 B.C.E./1925, 181b-181c), a relationship seen as more honourable in antiquity. Ourania and Pandemos' roles in homosexual and heterosexual relationships were emphasized by their creation myths. Because Pandemos was born from the union of a male and a female, her love was rationalized as being related to heterosexuality, whereas Ourania, born from the sea after Uranus' testicles were thrown into it, was linked to homosexual love (Casey & Narula, 2021, p. 2). While girls were married off at a young age to men in cities such as Athens (Dover, 1984, p. 145), extramarital sexual and romantic relationships between young men and adolescent boys were seen as preferable, owing in part to the disparaging views of women. For example, because women were seen as intellectually deficient and incapable of passing judgment (O'Pry, 2012, p. 8), true satisfaction could only be achieved through sexual and romantic stimulation with a partner considered as one's equal (Dover, 1984, p. 150; Plato, ca. 370 B.C.E./1925, 181b-181d).

Just as the derogatory views of women manifested in the volatile nature of Pandemos, so did the positive views of men manifest in the celebrated characteristics of Ourania. As Xenophon notes in his *Symposium*, the heavenly love bestowed upon by Ourania was "based more upon friendship than bodily love" (Casey & Narula, 2021, p. 2), thus making it impossible to obtain between men and women. Ultimately, although Pandemos and Ourania both were understood to govern some sort of dominion relating to love and sex, the negative portrayal of women in Greek society impacted Pandemos, leaving her to be seen as a goddess to be wary of. Contrarily, due to Ourania's connection with same-sex relationships, Ourania was seen as a revered and important goddess, owing in part to the favourable views of homosexuality in Greek society, especially in contrast to heterosexual relationships with women.

Warmongering Aphrodite: Aphrodite Outside of Attica

Although Ourania and Pandemos were the two iterations of Aphrodite most popularly worshipped in most Greek city-states (Scholtz, 2002, p. 234), they were not the only ones. As previously noted, scholars recognize several Near Eastern goddesses as precursors for Aphrodite's cults across Greece, notably the Sumerian Ishtar and Babylonian Inanna. Although much like Aphrodite, these goddesses were seen as patrons of beauty, love, and sexuality in their respective cultic centres, they were also worshipped and celebrated for their association with and dominion over war and battle (Stewart, 2002, p. 337). Although these characteristics do not seem to have permeated into the cults of Pandemos and Ourania, they are celebrated elsewhere across the Ancient Greek world.

Leonidas of Tarentrum, in the *Greek Anthology*, refers to Aphrodite as taking up Ares' arms, noting that statues of the armed Aphrodite can be seen in Sparta, a fact corroborated by Pausanias (Flemberg, 1995, p. 109). The notion and reverence of a warlike Aphrodite, although often linked with Sparta, was not a unique occurrence. Dedications to an armour-clad Aphrodite were also noted in Corinth and Laconia (Flemberg, 1995, p. 110). In Cyprus, Aphrodite was similarly worshipped under the related epithet Aphrodite Encheios, that is, Aphrodite with a Spear, suggesting that the earliest Aphrodite cults in Greece strongly retained the warlike aspects of her Near Eastern counterpart, introducing them directly to Sparta (Breitenberger, 2007). As such, Aphrodite Areia, the Warlike Aphrodite, was the most worshipped and revered form of Aphrodite seen in Sparta (Flemberg, 1995, p. 110).

Peloponnesian Women: The Spartan Aphrodite

Although the notion of Areia appears to directly contradict depictions of Pandemos and Ourania, references to Aphrodite being involved in war and arm-bearing can be seen in Greek literary and artistic culture dating as far back as the Archaic period (Flemberg, 1995, p. 112; Rosenzweig, 2007, p. 9). Thus, the idea of a warmongering Aphrodite seems in line with the original cult brought over to Greece by Phoenicians and other Near Eastern traders. Across the Greek world, but especially in Sparta, Aphrodite was often linked romantically with Ares, the god of war. While elsewhere across Greece, the connection between Aphrodite and Ares was rationalized as upholding traditional gender roles by linking feminine beauty with masculine strength (Flemberg, 1995, p. 112), in Sparta, both gods were worshipped for their wartime capabilities, with sanctuaries dedicated to Aphrodite in Sparta almost exclusively depicting her armed (Richer, 2007, p. 245). The worship of Aphrodite Areia and Ares was so prevalent in

Sparta, with Aphrodite being depicted in such a ruthless and bloodthirsty manner, that scholars like Pausanias hypothesized that Areia was simply a female form of Ares (Widdowson, 2014, p. 148).

Aphrodite's original Near Eastern military characteristics were celebrated and nurtured in Sparta due to their unique gender roles, which valued women's health and education as precursors for military might and success. Although the absence of Areia's cults in places such as Athens can be understood as a consequence of local gender roles, which only valued women for their ability to reproduce (O'Pry, 2012, p. 9), her longstanding tradition in Sparta can be seen as a legacy of their unique perspective on gender and womanhood.

Unlike other regions of Greece, Sparta was infamous for its unique views regarding gender roles. Although much of what was recorded regarding Spartan culture originates from Athenian writers, they nonetheless were shocked by the "forward behaviour of Spartan women" (O'Pry, 2012, p. 10). Unlike in Athens and elsewhere, in which women were expected to be isolated from the community and received very little education (O'Pry, 2012, p. 8-9), Spartan society valued both physical and intellectual education for both its boys and girls (Barrack, 2022, p. 5). As war was considered a constant activity in Sparta, the physical education of women was not only encouraged but mandated by public authority. Young girls were expected to participate in foot races, wrestling, and throwing discs and javelins, with some archaeological evidence suggesting they exercised nude, much like their male counterparts (Barrack, 2022, p. 5).

Nevertheless, although women in Sparta were trained similarly to men, Spartan gender roles still valued women's role in reproduction. Women did not go abroad on military campaigns like Spartan men, yet their fitness was seen as both a reflection of their capability to raise strong future soldiers as well as their ability to defend their homeland while Spartan men were deployed elsewhere (Barrack, 2022, p. 5-6). While Sparta's emphasis on women's military prowess and physical capabilities explains why Aphrodite's ancient warlike characteristics were maintained and celebrated in the city-state, they still valued both the goddess' and women's ability to reproduce. Areia's role as a war-mother in Sparta was clearly demonstrated by her iconography, which often featured Phobos and Deimos, her sons by Ares, in her retinue (Greenberg, 2020). As the mother of Phobos and Deimos, the personifications of fear and dread, Areia was seen as vital to the upkeeping of warfare, mirroring Spartan views of women, who were valued for their ability to birth and raise future generations of soldiers.

Homebound Aphrodite: Aphrodit(us) in Cyprus

While Areia may seem aberrant in contrast to Pandemos and Ourania, there is one even more enigmatic iteration of Aphrodite. Venerated almost exclusively on the island of Cyprus (Fulinska, 2012, p. 146), Aphroditus was worshipped as a masculine version of the goddess. Portrayed as a feminine figure with a beard, a characteristic also seen in eastern depictions of Astarte (Manning, 2002, p. 8), Aphroditus was most often depicted lifting their dress to reveal a phallus (Bullough & Bullough, 1993, p. 29). Furthermore, Aphroditus was understood by some Greek thinkers to be the precursor of the later deity Hermaphroditus (Braund, 2005, p. 78), further emphasizing the deity's androgynous nature. Worship and cultic practices surrounding Aphroditus emphasized the fluidity of gender, as annual ceremonies dedicated to

the deity included the display of young boys feigning parturition, while sacrifices held in their honour would commence with male and female devotees swapping attire (Bullough & Bullough, 1993, p. 29). As noted by Macrobius in his *Saturnalia*, men would don women's clothing and women would don men's clothing when sacrificing to Aphroditus, because "she is held to be both male and female" (Macrobius, ca. 431/2011, 3.8.2).

Although this celebration and worship of gender fluidity seems in direct contrast to the strict gender roles seen elsewhere in the Greek world, including Sparta, the reverence of androgyny and blurring of gender roles in Cyprus dates as far back as the Cypriot Iron Age, in which male figurines bearing both weapons and breasts were produced (Zeman-Wisniewska, 2012, p. 156-157). These depictions, which blend the male sphere and female sphere, are consistent with Cypriot gender roles. For example, it is also likely, based on archaeological evidence, that both ancient Cypriot men and women "worked together to hunt and process animal remains, gather marine resources, and manufacture and utilize chipped stone tools" (Bolger, 2003, p. 57), with gendered labour divisions also lacking following the introduction of agriculture and farming (Bolger, 2003, p. 60). Thus, labour divisions in Cyprus, unlike other parts of the Greek world, were impacted very little by gender segregation, with, for example, both men and women working alongside one another as weavers, a job seen as traditionally feminine elsewhere (Bolger, 2003, p. 75).

The lack of gender segregation and fluidity of gender roles, in which both men and women often worked beside one another in the same fields, likely explains the reverence of Aphroditus and other androgynous figures on the island. Unlike elsewhere in the Greek world,

where Aphrodite was celebrated and revered as the manifestation of the ideal woman, in her mythemic homeland of Cyprus, Aphrodite was also revered as Aphroditus, a figure which expressed the fluidity of the island's gender roles and binaries.

Aphrodite, Lady Seashell Bikini: The Modern Aphrodite and Final Thoughts

In places, such as Athens, which viewed women negatively, Aphrodite was worshipped as Aphrodite Pandemos, a volatile goddess who could torment men into falling in love with women. Yet, where same-sex relationships were celebrated, Aphrodite was also revered as Aphrodite Ourania, the heavenly Aphrodite who brought men together, maintaining social convention. Uniquely, in city-states like Sparta, which granted women unrivalled freedoms, Aphrodite was most celebrated as Aphrodite Areia, the warlike Aphrodite, emphasizing the importance of women in the militaristic region. However, across the Aegean, on the island of Cyprus, Aphrodite was worshipped as an androgynous figure known as Aphroditus, owing to the island's long prevailing history of blurring the gender roles between men and women. Modern representations of Aphrodite have often stagnated her characterization, superimposing modern standards of femininity and beauty onto her. Most often appearing in contemporary media as the manifestation of male desire rather than a fully-fledged character, modern comprehensions of antiquity often rely on replicating and superimposing current socio-political values. Thus, ancient goddesses of love, such as Aphrodite in all her forms, are often reduced to stock characters, hypersexualized and underdeveloped. Nevertheless, the ancient perspective of Aphrodite varied greatly throughout time and place, with emphasis placed on her role as a political, war, and even masculine figure. While these iterations of Aphrodite may seem in direct conflict with one another, they

are the manifestation of complex and regionalized gender roles seen throughout the Ancient Greek world that have been overlooked in modern adaptations and depictions.

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