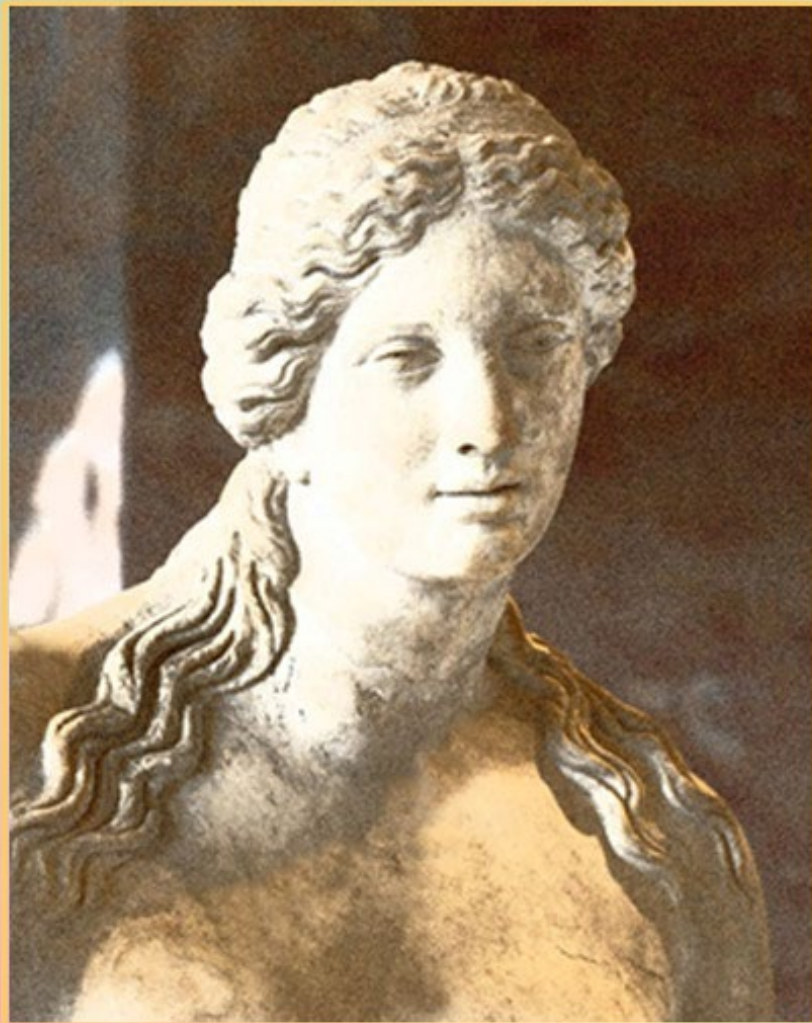


MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY



Aphrodite
Goddess of Love

HELEN MARTINEAU

APHRODITE GODDESS OF LOVE

She must be reckoned with

Love is sweet, love is serious and must be reckoned with. For good and for bad Aphrodite is a great goddess who springs ... from the nature of living things; and essentially from the nature we know best – our own; where she remains.

— Geoffrey Grigson, *The Goddess of Love* (p. 90)

Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty was not originally Greek. In the primal ages she dwelt within the being of the all-encompassing prehistoric Earth Mother, and then as part of the Triple Goddess, until changing and evolving on the way she emerged as a singular goddess with her own characteristics, roles and attributes in the city-states of Mesopotamia. There she retained her power, despite the emergence of male gods.

In Sumer she was Inanna, the powerful goddess of love, fertility and war, queen of heaven and consort of the shepherd god Dumuzi. In Babylonia and Assyria, she was Ishtar who as the evening star welcomed lovers to bed and as the morning star, woke them and sent the men off to war. Her lover was Tammuz. She travelled westwards into Canaan – the Bible calls her Ashtoreth. And the sea-faring Phoenicians, who called her Astarte, brought her to the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. There the Mycenaean Greeks found her and called her Aphrodite, some said because she arrived on the sea foam, the *aphros*.

From the sea foam

For the story of that arrival we can turn to Hesiod, an early Greek poet (c. 700 BCE) who wrote his version of cosmology and a genealogy of the gods in *Theogony*. In the following summary I have left out most of their countless offspring.

From the empty space of Chaos primordial beings emerged, more metaphysical entities than gods - Gaia, the deep breasted earth, Tartaros, the depths below, Eros, the fructifying attraction that brings beings together, Darkness, Night and their children Light and Day.

Gaia gave birth to Pontos, the deep sea and Ouranos, the starry heavens. She united with both and with Ouranos she bore the first race, the Titans, six males and six females, and other offspring most of whom were monstrous to look at.

In horror Ouranos locked those hideous offspring in the depths of the earth. Gaia mourned her lost children but soon became angry. She enlisted one of her Titan sons, Kronos, to castrate sleeping Ouranos. Kronos cast the severed genitals into the sea; the semen foamed up. And from the white foam emerged Aphrodite, fully formed as a beautiful woman.

For many centuries this image of her remained popular and would frequently be represented in art. A repertoire of classical Greek sculptures and statuettes have been discovered, often as Roman copies.

Some are intact like this marble statuette dating from 150-100 BCE. Aphrodite *Anadyomene* – Aphrodite ‘Rising from the Sea’ – was found at Benghazi, Libya. It was probably made to sit in a pool and is now in the University Museum of Pennsylvania.



Here's a question. How could such a goddess be born from a vicious attack? Well, we are looking at myth and myths are pictorial, imaginative

representations of spiritual reality interpreted through human consciousness, which does tend to see things via conflict and trouble. Yet when the Greek poets told this story they were still attuned to the spiritual and connected to mystery knowledge.

The sensual goddess

The blood and semen, the fertilizing power of the sky god Ouranos was offered to humankind as consciousness of beauty via the senses. This is what fell into the sea. And so Aphrodite rose up, a goddess of unparalleled beauty, the goddess born from the ever-flowing mother sea and fathered by divinely given sense experience. She is sensual and sexual and guides us towards knowing beauty through our physical senses and our fluidic emotional responses.

In the *Theogony* creation continued with more conflicts and couplings. With his Titan sister Rhea, Kronos fathered the Olympians – Hera, Hestia, Demeter, Poseidon, Hades and Zeus. But Kronos swallowed his children as soon as they were born until grief-stricken Rhea managed to hide the infant Zeus and replace him with a stone wrapped in swaddling cloth. Zeus grew up in secret and eventually had his revenge. He caused Kronos to disgorge his offspring (alive) and then exiled him to the far reaches of the universe.

The Olympians set up a new ruling dynasty with Zeus at their head. The remaining Titans and then the Giants waged war against the upstarts, but the Olympians emerged victorious from both battles.

With different goddesses Zeus fathered Athena, Artemis, Ares, Apollo, Hermes, Kore, Dionysus, the Graces and the Muses. He also seduced nymphs and mortal women producing a retinue to surround the gods in their home among the clouds on Mount Olympus.

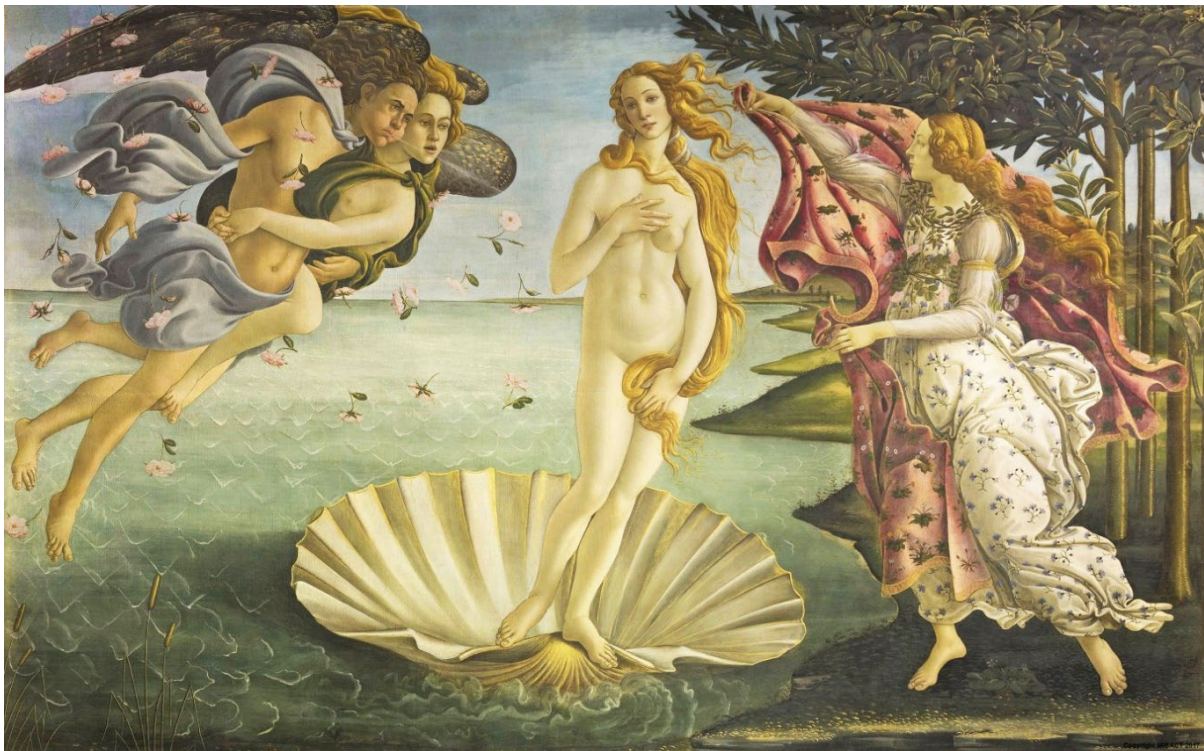
The patriarchal family structure Hesiod portrayed diminished some of his goddesses, but he did not place limits on Aphrodite. That was left to others. Although she was more venerable and higher than the gods of Olympus, in *The Iliad* the poet Homer made her a daughter of Zeus and adopted her into the Olympian family through marriage to the smith god Hephaestus, son of Hera. It was a good choice. Although he was ugly and lame, his superb art works remind us that beauty is an inner quality. Hephaestus created the *kestos* for his wife, a glittering necklace that encircled her neck and coiled between her breasts and, according to the stories, made her irresistible.

Homer also had Aphrodite cavorting with the war god Ares, only for them to be found out and ridiculed by the other gods. That was not so well done. The two would become Venus and Mars for the Romans and they remain

today as symbolic opposites, ever desiring each other because we humans do not know who she really is.

Who was she really?

We are fortunate that the goddess Aphrodite has her own legends not connected with the gods' human-like family quarrels. Carried on the breath of Zephyrus the west wind and guided by dolphins (the shell was a later addition) she floated first to Kythera and then to Cyprus. There she stepped naked onto the Cyprian shore and flowers grew in her footprints. The Graces and the goddesses of the seasons, the Horai welcomed her and clothed her in garments perfumed with larkspur, crocus, violets, narcissi, lilies and the fragrance of roses, all the lovely spring flowers of Cyprus.



Sandro Botticelli 'The Birth of Venus', 1485-6, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Like the old goddesses of Mesopotamia, Aphrodite was the morning and evening star and was found in the glories of sunset and sunrise. But she was no longer a goddess of both love and war like her antecedents Inanna, Ishtar and Astarte. She was all love. Casting aside her warlike ancestresses, she moved close to the wisdom and magic of Egyptian Isis. She remained feisty, however and could not be contained. She lay with gods and men as she wished.

But she has long been framed by human thinking, the mindset that desires to take what one wants. Aphrodite is not like that. Her love is free giving. She makes love from her very being, the core of her being. She is both in herself and in the other. She comes in light and brings joy.

She is so many things. She is Aphrodite *Antheia*, Aphrodite 'of the Flowers'; she is Aphrodite *Thalamon* 'of the Bedrooms'; she is Aphrodite *Harma*, the one 'Who Joins' enlisting her associate, the goddess Harmonia, to bring heavenly music to lovemaking.

The Greeks adored her body and her nakedness and placed her statues in temples all over the Greek world. There she was served by young women, and possibly young men, who offered sex to visitors who brought offerings to her altars. Did making love in her sacred precincts alert the goddess to pilgrims' heartfelt entreaties? Perhaps so. It was said too that youths and maidens came to the wooded gardens surrounding her temples for their first erotic encounters.

The goddess of love represented the utter need of all life to reproduce – and more. She was the light that inspires lovers and she ignored the limits of social status or gender. Impoverished prostitutes in the brothels of Corinth earnestly begged her favours; aristocratic virgins came to her temple on Cyprus to pray for charms akin to hers. Sappho, the female poet of Lesbos entreated the bright goddess to win her the girl she loved, and Athenian philosophers, while dismissing her impetuous passions, saw aesthetic echoes of her perfection in adolescent boys they admired and desired.

As Aphrodite *Epistrophia*, the one who 'Turns our Hearts' she enlisted Eros as her helper. Poor Eros; this ancient and awesome power of attraction would become the mischievous boy-god with bow and arrows to shoot into the hearts of the unwary, and eventually the cheeky baby Cupid.

The arrows of Eros are disruptive, biting via the senses, opening a space for newness to come in. They can fire up a relationship that has become habitual and stale or fly in as the first potent love-wound. The poet Sappho knew this well. We don't have many of her poems although the few we have speak of the Eros disruption we still experience. Here she is writing about 600 BCE.

Eros, limb-loosener, sweet-bitter,
impossible to fight off, stealing up,
again whirls me off

Yes, our legs do 'go to water' when we first feel that super-strong sexual attraction. And we follow through, even when we know love is inevitably

bitter-sweet. That's because Aphrodite comes in after Eros and exerts her wondrous power. She makes all equal under her sway. When men leave the towers of patriarchal order and enter the feminine realm they open and soften. It's an illusion based on ego and physical effort alone that they are in control. Women, on the other hand experience their real power when in orgasm their bodies become incredibly strong.

Is it by chance that cultures wanting to control women developed the unwritten law that women (or at least good women) do not enjoy sex and don't orgasm? Aphrodite is therefore denied.

Perfection of Form

Perfect form; that was Aphrodite. Her earliest representations as a polished conical stone dared not even try to capture her. Even when artists discovered and applied laws of harmonic relationship, their painted and sculpted Aphrodites mostly remained embedded in the material world with its always changing tastes. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* painted many centuries later in the Renaissance came near to capturing Aphrodite's elusive mystery. But when you look closely, her form has been subtly and cleverly altered to create the illusion of an ideal.

There's a secret here. Even the most inspired attempts to depict Aphrodite cannot reach her because her perfection reveals that she is a Spirit of Form, an *exousiai* or *elohim*, a Sun Being. Her beauty came into existence through heavenly love in the light-filled realm of formative forces that follow divine mathematical and geometrical laws, laws we can only approximate in the physical world.

In her heavenly form Aphrodite holds the archetype of humanity, the blueprint we fail to manifest here on earth because throughout the ages we have been governed by our astral nature, our desire and fear that restrict love. It is a sad mistake that sexual desire has been raised as the paramount temptation and blamed for so much that is wrong with us. All facets of our human lives are invariably coloured by the desires of the ego caught in the physical.

Aphrodite is a sensual goddess. Yet she does not limit us to the desires of the senses. How could she when divine love and wisdom fill her. Buddhists speak of the need to eliminate desire, but really desire is raised to heartfelt motivation when it is creatively expressed.

Lame Hephaestus crafting his beautiful works is the right husband for Aphrodite, because he reminds us that we should not get caught up in outer appearances. Beauty lives in the enactment of love through creativity, empathy and compassion, by expressing goodness in the world

in countless human activities, including lovemaking. The goddess is working in us then.

How we disappoint her

The essence of Aphrodite as a spiritual quality entered human consciousness at a crucial time in evolution marked by a transition from the Sentient to the Intellectual Soul. Greek philosophy emerged from that transition, and this was necessary to avoid a real danger. For it is a weakness in human nature that allows an impulse for good to fall into decadence, excess and imbalance. That is what would take place among the worshippers of Aphrodite.

Long ago we lost our understanding of Aphrodite, which led us to react against her. In the second century the Christian father Clement of Alexandria derided her birth from the 'lecherous members' of Ouranos. He asked, how could a good Christian value a goddess who loved these disgusting things?

Yet she is Aphrodite *Philommeides*, 'Lover of Laughter', the fulsome uninhibited delight that releases us from difficulty and pain. The open-minded classical Greeks would have enjoyed the closeness of her 'love of laughter', her *philommeides*, to male genitalia – Aphrodite *Philommedes*, 'Lover of Genitals' was indeed another one of her many titles.

We enjoy sex too and it is often accompanied by joyful laughter. But in our world, there's a conflicted and distorted relationship with the body, connected too often with shame or a desire to own another person, while sex is blatantly on show without love, or it lurks as terror in dark corners.

Remember that our era mirrors the Egypto-Mesopotamian, and our task is to build on and transform what once existed. But so far, our consciousness rests back with the fierce Mesopotamian love goddesses who also dealt in war – although we lack the spiritually potent religious forms the old goddesses inspired. Love for us regularly becomes a battlefield of rivalries, jealousies, possessiveness and insecurity until our hearts are hardened.

The disappointed goddess Aphrodite will command Eros to let fly more arrows. But it is always humans who let her down.



The famous Eros, high above Piccadilly Circus, London, by Alfred Gilbert 1893

Adonis, the beautiful mortal, was the lover Aphrodite truly grieved for when he was gored to death by a wild boar. In his memory she caused the red anemone to bloom. He is her Dumuzi-Tammuz. His legend tells us that earthly love, however gratifying is not ready for the mighty Goddess of Love, not yet.

A goddess for all time



Aphrodite in our age? Pablo Picasso, line drawing 'Woman and Dove'; recalling Aphrodite traditionally surrounded by doves, her favoured bird

Doves are Aphrodite's companion birds. The gentle dove – messenger of the gods, sign of the spirit descending from heaven, always a symbol of peace and harmony – doves remind us of the serious goddess we must reckon with.

Aphrodite's love embraced the mother of Jesus who like the goddess is sometimes known as *Stella Maris*, Star of the Sea, although the church couldn't come at the erotic implications. Mary Magdalene became the scapegoat. Yet she was especially beloved of the goddess.

The Magdalene opened her heart to Aphrodite, the *elohim* of love and perfect beauty. Her love may have begun with the senses in their needy state, yet she recognized that in Jesus there was more than the ordinary senses could know. In overcoming ego and in the transformation of her senses, the love essence of the goddess filled her.

When Mary experienced the reality of the incarnated Christ, with Aphrodite alive in her being, she truly did enter the bridal chamber to undergo the *hieros gamos*, union on a profound spiritual level with the Christ. Her soul was wed to the Christ, to the eternal 'I'. This is the important marriage for the continuing story of Mary Magdalene who became the first Grail bearer.

She was and is a very high initiate and she became a forerunner of what was to come. Through Mary Magdalene as she went forth in the world, the radiant being of the goddess lived on. It was a beautiful gift for some, a challenge to others.

The beingness of the goddess is not of the mind and intellect, the era of the Intellectual Soul. She waited. Aphrodite waited until our age, that of the Consciousness Soul when the task for all of us is to inwardly unite with Christ, the eternal 'I', and to express this fully through the spiritual will in creative deeds in the world.

This begins by looking clearly at self and facing what in sense experience limits and separates us, knowing that our selfishness can be transformed into beauty through love.

Mary Magdalene can still be a light for us. When we attune to her soul, the love goddess who knows her well is present too, she who has been waiting to reveal the higher senses through which we can know the truth of beauty, love and goodness. How we enact that knowing is up to us, but it is always wonderfully creative. Meanwhile beautiful Aphrodite is in our souls, every soul, as a potential. She is alive now and into the future, the unbounded goddess of love.