

## Receiving Aphrodite

At first glance Aphrodite seems to be a strange paradox. She is laughter-loving Aphrodite, always keen to promote fun and romantic intrigue, the owner of a special belt full of desire and distractions (*Il.* 14.215-7) And yet she, often working with her son Eros, is a powerful goddess, the life force essential for the generation of all beings, and also single-mindedly destructive when her will is thwarted, maddening (*S. Ant.* 790) and terrible (*E. Hipp.* 563). Sophocles sums her mixture of playful and powerful effectively: Aphrodite is an “irresistible” goddess who “plays games” (*S. Ant.* 800).

Of course, the paradox is not so strange. Love can indeed be a joyous or agonizing human experience, while anyone who knows the gods of Greek literature, especially of Homer, is aware that they can behave like human beings at their worst while simultaneously wielding an extreme and violent power, especially in what they can do to any mortal who challenges their supremacy. The gods are both supremely powerful over humans yet also vulnerable to any perceived human disrespect and need us almost as much as we need them.

Aphrodite’s love of intrigue in human lives and insistence on her own supremacy even at some cost to the humans in whose lives she must intervene shape her portrayal in three contemporary novels in which she (and her son as assistant) is a character: sometimes her darker side is emphasized and sometimes she is more of a “laughter-lover”. The best known of these is Phillips (2007), but equally interesting are the Aphrodites of Cobbold (2009) and of Weiss (1999).

In *Gods Behaving Badly*, the Olympians inhabit a decaying house in London whose decrepitude represents their waning powers. Because mortals no longer believe in them, their strength is gradually diminishing and they jealously hoard their divine power because it is no

longer infinite or eternal. Zeus has dementia and is kept prisoner by Hera in a filthy room at the top of the house, while on the lower floors, his diminished Olympian children adopt mortal pursuits aligned with their traditional powers: Artemis is a dog-walker, while Aphrodite is a phone sex-worker and enthusiastic participant in sex with all the males in the household, especially the glamorous Apollo. Critics of the *Iliad* often contrast the serious and morally significant lives of Homer's mortals with those of the gods, for whom everything is "easy", so that their lives become trivial, even dull, and they must rely on mortals for entertainment. This element is strong in Phillips' novel. Aphrodite's exotic sex life with Apollo is, after so many centuries, boring, and when he refuses to use his precious power on heating up her bathwater, Aphrodite avenges his disrespect by having her son Eros (a surprising convert to Christianity) shoot him so that he falls in love with Alice, a thoroughly ordinary mortal. Aphrodite's machinations cause Alice's death so that her boyfriend Neil must act as Orpheus to descend to the underworld (via the London underground) to retrieve her, and also Apollo's temporary death which causes the sun to fail, and a new ice age to descend on London. Artemis heroically saves the humans, while Alice and Neil save the gods by persuading humanity to believe in them again.

Fear for her power also motivates Marika Cobbold's Aphrodite. When a famous romantic novelist renounces romance after a disastrous relationship, Aphrodite's status on Olympus is threatened. Here Aphrodite's intervention in mortal lives is harnessed to mostly beneficial ends, as she incarnates as Angie Bliss, a highly unconventional psychotherapist with mesmerizing eyes and breasts (cf. *Il.* 3.397-8). Even here, there are tiny hints at something darker: the incompetence of mother and son hinders, rather than helps the relationship between the romantic novelist and the tightly-wound divorce lawyer with the look of Adonis for whom they have

destined her, and at one moment, Aphrodite decides to keep the lawyer for herself, with potentially dire consequences.

Though his novel is a comedy, Daniel Weiss' goddess is the most terrifying of the three. Eros longs for his mother's love, perhaps even her carnal love, and to prove his worth, he descends to earth on a mission to reconcile two lovers, choosing a New Yorker called Stanley whom he must bring safely back to his wife in an Odyssey through the perils of New York, such as the subway, drug-dealers and even Stanley's own ambivalence about his return. But at the end of the book, Aphrodite will appear in all her terrifying majesty and rage at perceived disrespect from her son.

#### Bibliography

Cobbold, Marika (2009) *Aphrodite's Workshop for Reluctant Lovers* (Bloomsbury, London)

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Weiss, Daniel (1999) *Honk If You Love Aphrodite* (Serpent's Tail, London.)