

The Temporality of Aphrodite in Early Greek Epic: Sexuality, Maternity, Mourning

In an important paper, Alex Purves (2006) studied scenes of gods “falling into time” in Homeric epic, and concluded there is something special about Ares and Hephaestus, both of whom fall in the *Iliad*, or are said to have fallen at some point in the past—namely, they are characterized by a particular *closeness* to humankind. Indeed, just before Ares is felled by Diomedes’ spear stroke, we hear of the god stained with blood (μυαιφόνος), killing and stripping a human corpse of its armor (*Il.* 5.842-843, 847-848). Likewise, Hephaestus, the god of material craft, is forever marked by his crippled foot, a reminder of his fall to earth (*Il.* 1.590-593; cf. ἀμφιγυήεις: 1.607, 14.239, 18.383, κτλ.; κυλλοποδίων: 18.371, 20.270, 21.331; χώλος: 18.397; χολεύων: 18.417), and the god huffs and puffs and sweats as he moves with difficulty through the world (ποιπνύοντα: 1.600; ιδρώοντα: 18.372). When these gods fall, they become like humans at the moment of death.

I wish to consider another divine figure in Greek epic who participates in human temporality, namely Aphrodite. Aphrodite’s involvement with the human condition—especially in its embodied form—renders her vulnerable to the “disease” of time (cf. Mueller 2016), especially as dis-ease, a violation of what it means to be a god and to enjoy the unlimited resources of divine life (cf. Sissa and Detienne 2000; Vernant 1991). In Greek epic poetry, Aphrodite suffers temporal experiences of physical pain when she is stabbed by Diomedes and struck by Athena (*Il.* 5.334-362, 21.423-426; Purves 2006: 203; Garcia Jr. 2013: 174-187; Allen-Hornblower 2014). But she also suffers emotional pain when she claims she will bear her mortal lover a child to be named Aeneas, because the goddess will suffer terrible grief (αἰνὸν ἄχος) because of them (*h. Aphr.* 196-199, 253-255; Faulkner 2008: 257-258). Aphrodite will suffer ἄχος through shame because she has succumbed to the desire she normally inflicts upon others,

but also, surely, through grief that old age and death will soon enfold Anchises and Aeneas (*h. Aphr.* 241-255).

Additionally, I argue that Aphrodite marks and is marked by time in the experience of sexual intercourse that she both rules over and represents. When Aphrodite “falls” for Anchises or becomes attached to mortals like Paris, she becomes enmeshed in human temporality. When Helen states at *Iliad* 3.406 that Aphrodite should abandon the way of the gods (θεῶν δ’ ἀπόεικε κελεύθουζ) and become Paris’s wife or concubine, we see a mythological possibility, as if the goddess, through her attachment to mortals, could shun the gods altogether and live among humankind as a human being—analogously, perhaps, to Demeter who hides from the gods while mourning Persephone. This possibility reveals something about the sex act itself as defining intimacy: the body’s disclosure in the experience of sexuality grounds the participants in worldly temporality and care (cf. Jacobson 2014).

Both Ares and Hephaestus are closely involved in the human world and hence subject to “falling,” as Purves (2006) notes. So too Aphrodite. She is connected to embodied human existence through the very act of sexual intercourse and its consequences, the human offspring born of an afternoon’s tryst with a herdsman. Aphrodite is a goddess between two worlds; in the mortal realm she helps give rise to the experience of time, whether it be through the quickening of one’s pulse and the catch of one’s breath in the moment of attraction and excitement, or the feelings of shame and regret that haunt her afterward, knowing that she has been tamed by Zeus (Bergren 2008: 161-167, 190-199) and that she will suffer still more, since her lover and son must both die while she lives on.

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