Sexuality, Power and Roman Venus

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1. Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite (Text and translation by Evelyn-White) 1-7

μούσα μοι ἔννεπε ἔργα πολυχρόσου Ἀφροδίτης,
Κύπριδος, ἦτε θεοίσιν ἐπὶ γλυκῶν ἱμερῶν ὄρσε
καὶ τ’ ἐδαμάσσατο φῦλα καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων
οἰμώνοις τε διπετέας καὶ θηρία πάντα,
ἡμέν ὦσ’ ἱππερός πολλὰ τρέφει ὅδ’ ὁσὰ πόντως:
πᾶσιν δ’ ἔργα μέμηλεν ἐνυστεφάνου Κυθηρείης.
τρισάς δ’ οὐ δύναται πεπιθεῖν φρένας οὐδ’ ἀπατήσαι.

Muse, tell me the deeds of golden Aphrodite the Cyprian, who stirs up sweet passion in the gods and subdues the tribes of mortal men and birds that fly in air and all the many creatures that the dry land rears, and all that the sea: all these love the deeds of rich-crowned Cytherea. Yet there are three hearts that she cannot bend nor yet ensnare.

2. HHA 34-44

τῶν δ’ ἄλλων οὐ πέρ τι πεφυγμένον ἔστ’ Ἀφροδίτην
35οὐτε θεών μακάρων οὒτε θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων.
καὶ τε παρὲκ Ζηνὸς νόον ἤγαγε τερπικεραύνου,
ὅστε μέγιστος τ’ ἐστὶ μεγάλης τ’ ἐμιμορε τιμῆς.
καὶ τε τοῦ, εὐτ’ ἔθελοι, πυκνὰς φρένας ἐξαπατώσα
ῥημίδωσι συνέμειξε καταθνητήσις γυναιξίν,
Ἡρῆς ἐκλελαθοῦσα, καστυγνήτης ἄλοχου τε,
ἡ μέγα εἴδος ἀρίστη ἐν ἄθανάτησι θεήσι.
κυδίστην δ’ ἄρα μιν τέκετο Κρόνος ἀγκυλομήτης
μήτηρ τε Ρείης Ζεὺς δ’ ἀφθιτα μήδεα εἴδος
αιδοίην ἄλοχον ποιήσατο κέδν’ εἰδυῖαν.
But of all others there is nothing [35] among the blessed gods or among mortal men that has escaped Aphrodite. Even the heart of Zeus, who delights in thunder, is led astray by her; though he is greatest of all and has the lot of highest majesty, she beguiles even his wise heart whenever she pleases, and mates him with mortal women, [40] unknown to Hera, his sister and his wife, the grandest far in beauty among the deathless goddesses --most glorious is she whom wily Cronos with her mother Rhea did beget: and Zeus, whose wisdom is everlasting, made her his chaste and careful wife.

3. HHA 45-52

But upon Aphrodite herself Zeus cast sweet desire to be joined in love with a mortal man, to the end that, very soon, not even she should be innocent of a mortal's love; lest laughter-loving Aphrodite should one day softly smile and say mockingly among all the gods [50] that she had joined the gods in love with mortal women who bare sons of death to the deathless gods, and had mated the goddesses with mortal men.

4a. Iliad 14.166-186 (translation Samuel Butler)
ἀμβροσίη μὲν πρῶτον ἀπὸ χροὸς ἰμερόεντος
λύματα πάντα κάθηρεν, ἀλείψατο δὲ λίπ᾽ ἐλαίῳ
ἀμβροσίῳ ἐδανῷ, τὸ ρά οἱ τεθυμένον ἦν·
τοῦ καὶ κινυμένοι Διὸς κατὰ χαλκοβατές δῶ
ἐμπῆς ἐς γαῖαν τε καὶ οὐρανὸν ἱκετ' ἀυτή.
τῷ ρ’ ἦ γε χρόα καλὸν ἀλευσμένη ἰδὲ χαίτας
πεξαμένη χερσὶ πλοκάμους ἐπλεξε φαεινοὺς
καλοὺς ἀμβροσίους ἐκ κράτος ἀθανάτου.
ἀμφὶ δ’ ἄρ’ ἀμβρόσιον ἐανὸν ἐσαθ’, ὃν οἱ Ἀθήνη
ἐξευ’ ἀσκήσασα, τίθει δ’ ἐνὶ δαίδαλα πολλά·
χρυσείης δ’ ἐνετήσι κατὰ στῆθος περονάτο.
ζώσατο δὲ ζωήν ἐκατὸν θυσάνος ἀραυνή.
ἐν δ’ ἄρα ἐρματα ήκεν εὐτρήτουσι λοβοῦσι
τρίγλωνα μορόεντα· χάρις δ’ ἀπελάμπετο πολλῇ.
κρηδείμων δ’ ἐφύπερθε καλύψατο διὰ θεῶν
καλῶ νηγατέω· λευκὸν δ’ ἴν ἥλιος ὦς·
ποσιδ’ δ’ ὑπὸ λιπαροῦσιν ἐδήσατο καλὰ πέδιλα.

So she went her way to her chamber, that her dear son Hephaestus
had fashioned for her, and had fitted strong doors to the door-posts
with a secret bolt, that no other god might open. Therein she
entered, and closed the bright doors. [170] With ambrosia first did
she cleanse from her lovely body every stain, and anointed her
richly with oil, ambrosial, soft, and of rich fragrance; were this but
shaken in the palace of Zeus with threshold of bronze, even so
would the savour thereof reach unto earth and heaven.
[175] Therewith she anointed her lovely body, and she combed
her hair, and with her hands plaited the bright tresses, fair and
ambrosial, that streamed from her immortal head. Then she clothed
her about in a robe ambrosial, which Athene had wrought for her
with cunning skill, and had set thereon broideries full many;
[180] and she pinned it upon her breast with brooches of gold, and
she girt about her a girdle set with an hundred tassels, and in her
pierced ears she put ear-rings with three clustering drops; and
abundant grace shone therefrom. And with a veil over all did the
bright goddess [185] veil herself, a fair veil, all glistening, and white was it as the sun; and beneath her shining feet she bound her fair sandals.

4b  HHA 60-67

There she went in and put to the glittering doors, and there the Graces bathed her with heavenly oil such as blooms upon the bodies of the eternal gods --oil divinely sweet, which she had by her, filled with fragrance. And laughter-loving Aphrodite put on all her rich clothes, and when she had decked herself with gold, she left sweet-smelling Cyprus and went in haste towards Troy, swiftly travelling high up among the clouds.

4c.  HHA 162-7

First Anchises took off her bright jewelry of pins and twisted brooches and earrings and necklaces, and loosed her girdle and stripped off her bright garments [165] and laid them down upon a silver-studded seat. Then by the will of the gods and destiny he lay
with her, a mortal man with an immortal goddess, not clearly knowing what he did.

5a. Iliad 3.330-3

κυνηγείς μὲν πρῶτα περὶ κυνήγησιν ἔθηκε καλάς, ἀργυρέουσιν ἐπισφυρίως ἀραμύας· δεύτερον αὖ θάρση καταπίεσεν ἐδυνεν ὁ ἀκαθανήτῳ Λυκάονος· ἕρμοσε δ' αὐτῷ.

The greaves first he set about his legs; beautiful they were, and fitted with silver ankle-pieces; next he did on about his chest the corselet of his brother Lycaon, and fitted it to himself.

5b. Iliad 7.206-10

ὁς ἄρ' ἔθαν, Αἰας δὲ κορώσσετο νάρπας χαλκῷ. αὐτὰρ ἔπει δὴ πάντα περὶ χραῖ ἐσσάτο τεύχεα, σεύσατ' ἔπειθ' οἷς τε πελάργος ἔρχεται Ἄρης, ὃς τ' ἐκιήν πόλεμον δὲ μετ' ἀνέρας οὕς τε Κρονίων θυμοβόρου ἔριδος μένεῖ ξυνήθεικε μάχεσθαι

So they spake, and Aias arrayed him in gleaming bronze. But when he had clothed about his flesh all his armour, then sped he in such wise as huge Ares goeth forth when he enters into battle amid warriors whom the son of Cronos [210] hath brought together to contend in the fury of soul-devouring strife.

6a. HHA 198-9

τῷ δὲ καὶ Αἰνείας ὄνομ' ἔσσεται, οὖνεκα μ' αἰνόν ἔσσειν ἄχος, ἐνεκα βροτοῦ ἀνέρος ἐμπέσον εὐνή.

His name shall be Aeneas, because I felt awful grief in that I laid me in the bed of a mortal man.
6b. HHA 247-55

And now because of you I shall have great shame among the deathless gods henceforth, continually. For until now they feared my jibes and the wiles by which, or soon or late, [250] I mated all the immortals with mortal women, making them all subject to my will. But now my mouth shall no more have this power among the gods; for very great has been my madness, my miserable and dreadful madness, and I went astray out of my mind [255] who have gotten a child beneath my girdle, mating with a mortal man.

7a. Aeneid 1.325-337 (text Greenough, translation Dryden)

325Sic Venus; et Veneris contra sic filius orsus:
326 Nulla tuarum audit a mihi neque visa sororum
327O quam te memorem, virgo? Namque haud tibi voltus
328mortalis, nec vox hominem sonat: O, dea certe
329an Phoebi soror? an nympharum sanguinis una?
330sis felix, nostrumque leves, quae cumque, laborem,
331et, quo sub caelo tandem, quibus orbis in oris
332iactemur, doceas. Ignari hominumque locorumque
333erramus, vento huc vastis et fluctibus acti:
334multa tibi ante aras nostra cadet hostia dextra.
335Tum Venus: Haud equidem tali me dignor honore;
Thus Venus: thus her son replied again:
"None of your sisters have we heard or seen,
O virgin! or what other name you bear
Above that style--O more than mortal fair!
Your voice and mien celestial birth betray!
If, as you seem, the sister of the day,
Or one at least of chaste Diana's train,
Let not an humble suppliant sue in vain;
But tell a stranger, long in tempests toss'd,
What earth we tread, and who commands the coast?
Then on your name shall wretched mortals call,
And offer'd victims at your altars fall."
"I dare not," she replied, "assume the name
Of goddess, or celestial honors claim:
For Tyrian virgins bows and quivers bear,
And purple buskins o'er their ankles wear.

7b. ΗΗΑ 92-102

χαίρε, Ἀκασία, ἡ τις μακάρων τάδε δώμαθ' ἵκανεις,
Αἵρετης ἡ Ατηθῷ ἢ' χρυσῆ' Αφροδίτη
ἡ Θέμις ὣγενης ἢ' γλαυκώπις' Ἀθήνη,
95ἡ ποὺ τις Χαρίτων δεύρ' ἱλύθες, αὕτε θεοίησι
πᾶσιν ἐταιρίζουσι καὶ αἵθανατοι καλέονται,
ἡ τις Νυμφάων, αὕτη ἄλσεα καλὰ νέμονται
ἡ Νυμφών, αὕτη καλὸν ὦρος τοῦ δε ναιτάουσι
καὶ πηγᾶς ποταμῶν, καὶ πίσεα ποιήνεντα.
100σοι δ' ἐγὼ ἐν σκοπή, περὶφανομένω ἐνὶ χώρῳ,
βωμὸν ποιήσω, ῥέξω δέ τοι ἱερὰ καλὰ
ὁρθὴν πάσησι. σοῦ δ' εὐφρονα θυμὸν ἔχουσα
And Anchises was seized with love, and said to her: "Hail, lady, whoever of the blessed ones you are that are come to this house, whether Artemis, or Leto, or golden Aphrodite, or high-born Themis, or bright-eyed Athena. Or, maybe, you are one of the Graces come hither, who bear the gods company and are called immortal, or else one of the Nymphs who haunt the pleasant woods, or of those who inhabit this lovely mountain and the springs of rivers and grassy meads. I will make you an altar upon a high peak in a far seen place, and will sacrifice rich offerings to you at all seasons.

8. Aeneid 8.370-86

370At Venus haud animo nequiquam exterrita mater
371Laurentumque minis et duro mota tumultu
372Volcanum adloquitur thalamoque haec coniugis aureo
373incipit et dictis divinum adspirat amorem:
374Dum bello Argolici vastabant Pergama reges
375debita casurasque inimicis ignibus arces,
376non ullum auxilium miseris, non arma rogavi
377artis opisque tuae nec te, carissime coniunx,
378incassumve tuos volui exercere labores,
379quamvis et Priami deberem plurima natis
380et durum Aeneae flevissem saepi laborem.
381Nunc Iovis imperiis Rutulorum constitit oris:
382ergo eadem supplex venio et sanctum mihi numen
383arma rogo genetrix nato. Te filia Nerei,
384te potuit lacrimis Tithonia flectere coniunx.
385Aspice qui coeant populi, quae moenia clausis
386ferrum acuat portis in me excidiumque meorum.

When love's fair goddess, anxious for her son,
(New tumults rising, and new wars begun,)
Couch'd with her husband in his golden bed,
With these alluring words invokes his aid;
And, that her pleasing speech his mind may move,
Inspires each accent with the charms of love:
"While cruel fate conspir'd with Grecian pow'rs,
To level with the ground the Trojan tow'rs,
I ask'd not aid th' unhappy to restore,
Nor did the succor of thy skill implore;
Nor urg'd the labors of my lord in vain,
A sinking empire longer to sustain,
Tho'much I ow'd to Priam's house, and more
The dangers of Aeneas did deplore.
But now, by Jove's command, and fate's decree,
His race is doom'd to reign in Italy:
With humble suit I beg thy needful art,
O still propitious pow'r, that rules my heart!
A mother kneels a suppliant for her son.
By Thetis and Aurora thou wert won
To forge impenetrable shields, and grace
With fated arms a less illustrious race.
Behold, what haughty nations are combin'd
Against the relics of the Phrygian kind,
With fire and sword my people to destroy,
And conquer Venus twice, in conqu'ring Troy."


Dixerat et niveis hinc atque hinc diva lacertis
388cunctantem amplexu molli fovet. Ille repente
389accept solitam flammam, notusque medullas
390intravit calor et labefacta per ossa cucurrit:
391non secus atque olim tonitru cum rupta corusco
392ignea rima micans percurrit lumine nimbos.
393Sensit laeta dolis et formae conscia coniunx.
394Tum pater aeterno fatur devinctus amore:

She said; and straight her arms, of snowy hue,
About her unresolving husband threw.  
Her soft embraces soon infuse desire;  
His bones and marrow sudden warmth inspire;  
And all the godhead feels the wonted fire.  
Not half so swift the rattling thunder flies,  
Or forky lightnings flash along the skies.  
The goddess, proud of her successful wiles,  
And conscious of her form, in secret smiles.

Then thus the pow'r, obnoxious to her charms,  
Panting, and half dissolving in her arms [pater left out of translation]:

10a. Aeneid 8.395-406

Quid causas petis ex alto? Fiducia cessit  
396quo tibi, diva, mei? Similis si cura fuisset,  
397tum quoque fas nobis Teucros armare fuisset:  
398nec pater omnipotens Troiam nec fata vetabant  
399stare decemque alios Priamum superesse per annos.  
400Et nunc, si bellare paras atque haec tibi mens est,  
401quidquid in arte mea possum promittere curae,  
402quod fieri ferro liquido potest electro,  
403quantum ignes animaeque valent, absiste precando  
404viribus indubitare tuis. Ea verba locutus  
405optatos dedit amplexus placidumque petivit  
406coniugis infusus gremio per membra soporem.

"Why seek you reasons for a cause so just,  
Or your own beauties or my love distrust?  
Long since, had you requir'd my helpful hand,  
Th' artificer and art you might command,  
To labor arms for Troy: nor Jove, nor fate,  
Confin'd their empire to so short a date.  
And, if you now desire new wars to wage,  
My skill I promise, and my pains engage."
Whatever melting metals can conspire,
Or breathing bellows, or the forming fire,
Is freely yours: your anxious fears remove,
And think no task is difficult to love."
Trembling he spoke; and, eager of her charms,
He snatch'd the willing goddess to his arms;
Till in her lap infus'd, he lay possess'd
Of full desire, and sunk to pleasing rest.

10b. HHA 145-54

"If you are a mortal and a woman was the mother who bare you,
and Otreus of famous name is your father as you say, and if you
are come here by the will of Hermes the immortal Guide, and are
to be called my wife always, then neither god nor mortal man shall
here restrain me till I have lain with you in love right now; no, not
even if far-shooting Apollo himself should launch grievous shafts
from his silver bow. Willingly would I go down into the house of
Hades, O lady, beautiful as the goddesses, once I had gone up to
your bed."