

Pride vs. Shame in Regards to the Female Nude

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In a comparison between mythological female nudes against religious female nudes of Eve, it is found that there is a distinct difference in emotional representation. Through the artistic works done by Michelangelo, Raphael, and Botticelli we can gain an understanding of these similarities and differences between depictions of female nudes. The Raphael and Botticelli depictions of nude mythological characters show wonderfully proud and heuristic facial expressions while Michelangelo's depiction shows shame and distress through the tales of their different narratives.

A specific and popular character of female nudity is that of Venus, who shows her pride and confidence through the way she is depicted. The Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, is tempera on canvas from 1482 (fig. 1). In this work, the central figure is a nude woman standing on a sea shell, her long



Figure 1: Birth of Venus by Botticelli 1482

golden hair is flowing down with the wind to cover her pubic area like a cloth. She is gazing out at the viewer with a dreamy, mystical stare which also makes up the focal point of this piece and entices the viewer into the painting.¹ Her form shows *contrapposto* with her abdominal muscles flexed or defined as well as the left leg that she is putting all of her weight on. This work is not a naturalistic painting in regards to science, however the depiction is very idealistic. Her sea shell

¹ Paul Barolsky, *Looking at Venus: A Brief History of Erotic Art*, 1999: 94.

boat is on the water just about to reach the shore. This water stretches vastly within the painting, one must assume that this is an ocean. This painting the catching a moment right before this woman reaches the shore where she will be clothed by another woman and wrapped in a pink and gold flowery cloak. To the left there is a winged male covered by a blue cloth flying beside her, his cheeks are puffed up, blowing her to the shore; this figure is the god of wind.² The viewer can see naturalistic wind marks coming from his mouth, creating an angle of her hair blowing in the wind. Another female figure is clutching onto this winged figure is looking to the fully nude female figure in the center with an expression of wonder and amazement, as if she is seeing something she has never seen before. The female figure about to cloth this nude figure is wearing modern Renaissance dress which is billowing in the wind causing large clumps of the white flowery fabric in natural areas on her body. She has vines wrapped around her waist and scooping neckline, connecting her with a mythological figure, because she is the only figure normally dressed in contemporary dress. This figure is conscious of modesty.³ The water has very unrealistic, upside down white triangular lines that represent waves. Flowers are floating in the air surrounding these figures highlighting the windiness and the mystics of the moment. In this scene the viewer is seeing is the moment after Venus was born, right before she arrives on shore. The ways in which the painting was depicted plays a key role in the character of Venus and her confidently sexual nature.

Aphrodite, or Venus, is the goddess of love, fertility, sexuality, and desire; which is the most important part of her description in regards to the female nude. She was born from the moment of the titan (the sky) Uranus' "severed genitals" were thrown into the sea.⁴ She is able to

² Barolsky, 1999: 94

³ Barolsky, 1999: 94

⁴ Michael Gagarain and Andrew Faulkner, *Aphrodite*, 2010: 2

manipulate and deceive all gods and humans with their desires, even Zeus. Since she was born outside of the Greek divine family of god and goddess, she was not able to be controlled by Zeus, but he did force her to marry the cyclops who made their weapons because the gods were fighting over who got to be her husband. She is thought to be the most beautiful and perfect goddess because of her winning of the Golden Apple, which leads to the fall of Troy. Therefore the depictions of Venus are supposed to be perfectly idealistic nude or partial nude form. Venus or Aphrodite has been depicted many times over the course of history, however the first female nude depiction was of Aphrodite by Praxitiles from Ancient Greece, who was said to have fallen in love with the statue because of its perfect beauty.⁵ When Aphrodite or Venus is depicted, she is put with identifying symbolism to make her even more iconic. These symbols are shells, swans or doves, dolphins, and references to bathing because of her connections to the sea and the sky.⁶ Sometimes these symbols are used to depict other female nudes that are not Aphrodite, like for example Raphael's *Triumph of Galatea*.

The *Triumph of Galatea* by Raphael is a fresco painting commissioned for someone's house in an interior space (fig. 2). This painting has multiple mythological figure in what appears to be a battle in the water between half male half sea creatures and females with their cupids. This is a dramatic depiction of movement in the way the human body can be show two-dimensionally. To begin discussion this piece the central figure is partially nude. She is wrapped in brilliant red and blue clothe, that is billowing in the



Figure 2: *Triumph of Galatea* by Raphael 1513

⁵ Barolsky, 1999: 93

⁶ Gagarain, 2010: 5

wind along with her long golden hair. Her body is twisting giving her body dramatic movement, her legs face the viewer.⁷ One of her legs is bent upward as if the foot is in the air. The red cloth wraps around her hip showing the flexing of her oblique muscles as her abdomen twists. The bright red cloth leads the viewer's eye around her stomach past her belly button and up to her arm. Her arms are out stretched to the thin ropes that hold onto the dolphins that pull her sea shell boat through the water. This female figure is looking over her shoulder and upward at the sky as if she is escaping something out there. The dolphins that are leading her as she escapes is also killing a small octopus in its mouth.⁸ This symbolism is significant in understanding the moral of the story. Each of the figures in this piece have stoic calm faces, which gives the viewer the idea that it was idealized by the artist. This painting does not really give an illusion of space within this piece, all one can see is a mess of figures, water, and sky. In the sky above everyone on the water is four cupids with bows and arrows about to fire on those below. These arrows are aimed at the center figure, which draws more attention to her.⁹ Raphael frames Galatea on all sides by these figures and the movement between the forms, by making her the center of the composition she is seen by the viewer to be the main point of the narrative of this event.

This mythological character that Raphael depicts is Galatea, a sea nymph. This giant named Polyphemus fell in love with her and he "wooed her," however Galatea did not feel the same way. She loved this young man named Acis. One day the two of them were eavesdropping on Polyphemus singing a love song, Polyphemus saw them and crushed Acis with a rock. Galatea turned Acis into a river, which is still the name of the river in Sicily today. Eventually in

⁷ Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, *Raphael, Galatea C. 1513 Fresco, Villa Farnesina 9'8" x 7'5"*, Film

⁸ Duncan T. Kinkead, *Iconographic Note on Raphael's Galatea*, 1970: 313

⁹ Harris and Zucker, Film

the tale Galatea accepts the attentions of Polyphemus and they have a child.¹⁰ Raphael created this painting for a villa in Italy called the Villa Farnesina, which had a large room of frescos commissioned by Agostino Chigi.¹¹ Next to Raphael's fresco is a painting of the giant Polyphemus, this room appears more like a modern day panorama (fig. 3). However Raphael only painted the one of the Triumph of Galatea. One interesting



Figure 3: room of frescos detail, Villa Farnesina, Italy

symbolistic element that either Raphael or Chigi insisted on was the dolphin killing the octopus. Dolphins are considered the “lords of the sea,” the creatures of divine character while octopus are considered to be unlawful, murderous creatures.¹² Therefore Raphael including this in the painting is a way of saying that good conquers evil or love conquers lust in the story of Galatea.¹³ Raphael was not the only artist to have painted within a large room of continuous narration depicting female nudes.

In comparison against these other two mythological beings is the religious symbol of Eve who is depicted in a drastically different way. Within the Sistine Chapel, one of the many fresco panels is the painting of the *Fall of Man* (fig. 5). The *Fall of Man* is located on the ceiling next to the *Creation of Eve*. The composition in this piece is split down the middle in order to tell the full narrative of the story. The narrative read from left to right like a book. The



Figure 4: *Fall of Man* by Michelangelo 1508-1512

¹⁰ Herbert Jennings Rose, *Galatea*, 2005: 2

¹¹ Harris and Zucker, Film

¹² Kinkead, Duncan T. 1970, 314

¹³ Kinkead, Duncan T. 1970, 315

figures seem too large for the space they are in, the male nude figure is crouching his legs down and reaching to the tree with ease to grab an apple. His body is extremely muscular and stout. This is because these painting were meant to be viewed from many feet below so they would not be visible if the scene was to scale.¹⁴ The nude female is sitting on the rocks beside and underneath the male figure. She is sitting on her hip with her legs together and bent into the back of her thighs. Her torso twists to the left as she reached up to grab an apple from another figure. This figure is half female half serpent, wrapped around the tree, and reaching forward to give the female an apple. The viewer can tell this serpent is female because of the long golden hair and the left breast that is barely visible. This composition is symmetrically balanced because the flying female figure with a sword is mirrored by the angles of the serpent figure. This Angel figure is pointing the sword at the same nude male and female forms as they walk away into a barren space, looking distressed and ashamed. These figures are Adam, Eve, the Angel, and the serpent figure, and the story in the Christian Bible where humans have the potential for sin and thus getting them kicked out of the Garden of Eden.

The main focus taken from this fresco is the woman/serpent figure and Eve because of the relationship between these female figures. First one must understand the story from the Bible is that Eve and Adam were both told by the angels not to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.¹⁵ This serpent slithers out from the tree branches and hisses to Eve telling her to take an apple, giving into these desire Eve takes a bite out of the apple; then Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden, naked and ashamed. The depiction of Eve is almost always with an ashamed demeanor about her.

¹⁴ Avraham Ronen, *An Antique Prototype for Michelangelo's Fall of Man*. 1974: 356

¹⁵ Ronen, 1974: 357

The relationship between Eve and the female serpent is the lust for sin that is brought to Earth through a temptress and someone so easily suggestible. Through depicting both serpent as well as Eve being females, Michelangelo is further exaggerating the notion that women brought the fall of mankind where the first sins of humans are committed. The serpent with a human head began in about the thirteenth century for drama (of the theater or dramatic paintings) and iconography.¹⁶ The technique of personifying the serpent makes it easier to show the viewer the conversation between the serpent and Eve. This event that has been shown throughout history of the fall of man is said to be a “complete mirror,” into the relationship between people and the divine. This imagery is used to help teach and innovate the ideas of “knowledge and belief.” This female serpent is depicted as a temptress with the face of a woman to better ensnare Eve into giving into her desire and lust. Once Adam and Eve are being banished from the Garden of Eden, she is covering herself up entirely while still being completely nude. She hunches over in her fear and shame of committing this sin and is hiding herself from the viewer. In another however very similar depiction, Masaccio illustrates Eve’s hands and arms to cover her breasts and pubic area, while she looks upward with extreme agony and raw emotion (fig. 5). These hand positions are very similar to depictions of nude mythological beings, however utilized in a very different manner.



Figure 5: *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* by Masaccio 1424-1427

Almost all of the paintings or sculptures of Aphrodite or Venus are the illustration of sexuality and seduction, either in fully nude, partially nude, or tightly fitted dresses that show all her curves. Even if she is shown with clothes on like the painting *Venus and Mars* by Botticelli, she is wearing modern Renaissance dress that is clinging to her every curve and shape (fig 6).

¹⁶ John K. Bonnell, *The Serpent with the Human Head in Art and in Mystery Play*, 1917: 256

When comparing this painting to paintings of female portraiture, it is starkly different. The women's faces are in profile and clothed in large dresses.¹⁷ Also this particular painting a representation of the extramarital affair



Figure 6: *Venus and Mars* by Botticelli 1485

between the gods Venus and Mars. Venus is lounging looking out to the side of the painting with a dreamy confident look on her face. The *Birth of Venus* is a major contributor to this discussion of confident representations of Venus, her hands and arms gesture and point out her nudity. These paintings compared to the depictions of Eve are the expressions of confidence or pride instead of shame.

When comparing Eve and Venus against each other the posing is rather similar, Eve is more hunched over and actually making an effort to conceal herself. Venus, Galatea, and Eve all commit actions of lust and desire, however Eve is depicted differently because of her different story. Maybe this difference is morality. These differences come from the differences between mythology and the Christian religion as well as the time periods in which they originated. The book edited by Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott *Manifestations of Venus: Art and Sexuality*, addresses the differences between Venus and Eve,

“In Christian morality a familiar presentation of physical beauty is of the beautiful exterior that hides corrupt and hideous interior, the moral shell and the sinful nature. The introduction of Venus offers a different way of approaching physical beauty...Famous for her arbitrary, her cruel tricks and wiles, she

¹⁷ Patricia Simons, *Women in Frames*, 2006, 40

is also a figure of substantive deception. The deception does not undo the beauty... [celebrating] the erotic (potentially escaping the censorship of religious authorities).”

For Galatea, she is being depicted as a heroine as she flees Polyphemus, where Eve is cowering as she walks out the frame of the painting.¹⁸ In a comparison against Aphrodite and the woman serpent, these two figures hold a very interesting similarity. Aphrodite is known to be a seductress or a temptress, who can seduce anyone into giving into their desires.¹⁹ This serpent has the same role as the temptress in the story of Adam and Eve.²⁰ The serpent’s seduction used to bring the fall of mankind and Aphrodite’s seduction and manipulation brought down the fall of Troy.

As we look at the female nude there are only so many variations, but when we compare them against each other it results in interesting similarities in both background information as well as specific posing. These female nudes all show different emotional responses to their actions with lust and desire, which comes down to confidence and shame.

¹⁸ Harris and Zucker, Film

¹⁹ Gagarain, 2010: 5

²⁰ Bonnell, 1917: 256

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