

Aphrodite and Phaon

If the cult of Aphrodite encodes ancient conceptions associated with the planet Venus, it must be expected that planetary events will inform and help illuminate specific details in the goddess' mythological biography. In order to investigate this hypothesis we propose to offer a comparative analysis of the poignant tale of Aphrodite's magical transformation of Phaon.

A curious story, popular in Greek comedy and preserved in fragmentary fashion by various ancient writers, relates that Aphrodite once befriended an ugly old ferryman named Phaon after the latter had aided the goddess in crossing the Aegean. In return for his random act of kindness, the goddess rewarded the old man by magically transforming him into a handsome youth.¹

In addition to these basic facts, there are also hints that Aphrodite and Phaon were lovers. Thus, Athenaios reports that the Cytherean goddess was in love with the ferryman, citing Kratinos, Euboulos and Kallimachos as authorities.² Kratinos wrote that Phaon was the most beautiful man on earth and that Aphrodite had hidden him away in order to keep him for herself.³

Although Palaephatos (c. late 4th century BCE) is our earliest source for the story in question, Menander (c. 324 BCE) and other writers also allude to it.⁴ Aphrodite's rendezvous with Phaon is also depicted on several vase paintings.⁵

¹ Sappho fragment 211 LP. G. Nagy, "Phaethon, Sappho's Phaon, and the White Rock of Leukas," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77 (1973), p. 177, writes simply that Aphrodite conferred "youth and beauty on Phaon."

² Athen 2.69d.

³ PCG IV fragment 370; Kallimachos fragment 478. See also L. Köppel, "Phaon," in H. Cancik & H. Schneider eds., *Der Neue Pauly* 9 (Stuttgart, 2000), col. 736.

⁴ Palaephatos 48. The best summary of the extant sources is that of Stein, "Phaon," *RE* 38 (Stuttgart, 1938), col. 1790-1796. See also T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 103-104.

⁵ *LIMC* 7 (Zurich, 1994), pp. 364-367.

Considered in isolation, it is difficult to make much headway in deciphering the original significance of these fragmentary traditions from ancient Greece. Certainly it is far from obvious that planetary goings on hold the key to Aphrodite's amorous encounter with Phaon. For further insight into the probable origins of the Greek legend we turn to consider sacred traditions from aboriginal South America.

Star Woman

A fascinating myth, widespread in South America, is the so-called "Star Woman" cycle (A762.2 in Thompson's Index). The basic plot finds a beautiful star visiting Earth and carrying off a mortal to make her lover or husband. In most versions of the myth, the mortal paramour is distinguished by his old age, ugliness, or wretched status, yet as a result of his union with the Star Woman he is magically transformed into a handsome youth. Occasionally it is reported that the Star Woman and her lover ascend to heaven and live happily ever after. A few examples of this myth will serve to illustrate its relevance for understanding the Greek account of Aphrodite and Phaon.

In the first decade of the 20th century, Alberto Fric became the first white man to record a sampling of Chamacoco lore (the latter Indians hail from the Paraguayan Chaco). Included in his collection is the following narrative telling of the love between a homely mortal and Star Woman:

"Formerly the star Venus was a woman who fell in love with a homely man. Thanks to her magic, he became very handsome. When the band traveled, the young man carried Star-Woman in a gourd carefully sealed with wax. Some girls, curious to know what he kept in his gourd, opened it. The half-burned Star Woman burst out and flew to the sky. Henceforth she has had a red sparkle."⁶

Several different versions of this story were subsequently obtained from other Chamacoco informants. Although most are more elaborate and embellished than Fric's

⁶ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chamacoco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), p. 97.

brief account, the same basic plot is usually recognizable. In their compendium of Chamacoco lore, Wilbert and Simoneau include a version narrated by Bruno Barras, the highlights of which are as follows:

“Once there was a bachelor. Every night when he lay down to sleep he wished he had a beautiful wife, a fair-skinned wife. Lying in bed at night he would see the star called Iozly [Venus]...Then the star came...She said: ‘Don’t be afraid. Because you have been looking at me year after year I have now come to sleep with you. I want to be your wife...’⁷

In the ensuing weeks, Star Woman continued to make nocturnal visits to Earth. The natives eventually grew restless and more than a little jealous at the dramatic transformation in the bachelor’s appearance:

“When she lay down with him there was a light emanating from her, illuminating everything...By now the other people and some girls were very envious of the young man’s family because they looked so fair and beautiful. The man used to be dark and ugly, but when he slept with Iozly every night he grew better and better looking until he was fair and handsome, with smooth, fair hair.”⁸

The Star Woman cycle is widely distributed amongst the various tribes native to the Gran Chaco region, including the Apinaye, Chorote, Makka, Mocoví, and Toba among others. Of the Star Woman myth in general, the anthropologist Alfred Métraux wrote: “This tale is very popular with Chaco Indians, and it is generally the first story they tell when asked about their folklore.”⁹

A Chorote version of the Star Woman myth serves to complement the Chamococo narrative. Here, too, a mortal of grotesque appearance formed the object of Venus’ affections:

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

⁹ A. Métraux, *Myths of the Toba and Pilagá Indians of the Gran Chaco* (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 46.

“There was a man who was so ugly that no woman wanted him. All the women in his village persecuted him, throwing sticks at him. At night he lay down to sleep outside and started to look up at Katés: ‘What a pretty girl! How I should like to marry her!’...The following night Katés descended to the earth and had intercourse with the young man. When dawn was near she said to him: ‘I come from the sky, and at night I shall be your wife. Do not tell anybody that I have come. I do not go about during the daytime, and so that no one will see me I am going to hide inside that gourd.’”¹⁰

Another Chorote informant offered a slightly different version of the Star Woman narrative. It begins as follows:

“In primordial times, a young man was outside every night, looking at beautiful stars, for the stars were women. He especially looked at Katés (Morning Star), thinking: ‘I should like her to be my wife.’”¹¹

The youth had first gained Star Woman’s attention by shooting an arrow at her. As a result of this affront she promises to visit him:

“Exactly at midnight the woman came. Now he had a wife. In the morning everyone looked at the young man whom nobody had wanted previously. No girl from his village liked him.”¹²

In order to keep their affair secret from the other tribesmen, Star Woman asks her mortal lover to find her a gourd so she can enter into it and remain concealed from sight. Eventually, following further adventures—one of which found Star Woman forced to reconstitute her dismembered lover’s body—“she took him with her to the sky where she lives.”¹³

¹⁰ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chorote Indians* (Los Angeles, 1985), pp. 265-266.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 257.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

The Ge of Central Brazil tell a very similar story. As recorded by Wilbert and Simoneau, the narrative begins as follows:

“A boy was lying down in the middle of the plaza, and Katxere was looking down at him. She felt sorry, and said: ‘I am going to marry that boy.’”¹⁴

After sleeping with the boy, Star Woman tells him to hide her in a basket (*kaipo*) or gourd (*combuca*).¹⁵

A Toba narrative preserves the same basic plot but adds a few interesting twists. Explicitly identified with the planet Venus, Star Woman is described as having “long hair.”¹⁶ As in other versions of the tale, the mortal hero “hid her in a large gourd so that no one would see her.”¹⁷ Star Woman’s lover is described as grotesquely ugly, here attributed to his scabrous body:

“A very poor man who was covered with scabs was liked by nobody because of his disease. But the morning star, a woman who lives in the sky and who uses two mortars to pound algarroba, felt sorry for him, descended to the earth, and carried him to the sky.”¹⁸

According to the Toba version of the myth, Star Woman led her scabrous husband to a garden whereupon she transformed him “into a handsome young man.”¹⁹ The magical transformation of the wretched mortal at the hands of Venus offers a striking thematic parallel to Aphrodite’s transformation of Phaon. The fact that the planet Venus, as Star Woman, is credited with beautifying her scabrous paramour constitutes compelling evidence that Aphrodite personifies Venus in her interaction with Phaon.

¹⁴ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Ge Indians* (Los Angeles, 1978), p. 195.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Toba Indians, Vol. 1* (Los Angeles, 1982), p. 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56. See also A. Métraux, *op. cit.*, p. 44 where it is reported: “Upon nearing the garden, she transformed her husband into a handsome young man.”

Sky-Maiden

The Star Woman theme is attested around the globe, although in most instances the myth has been localized and humanized to such an extent that the heroine's link to the planet Venus has been obscured or lost entirely. In the sacred lore of South Africa, Star Woman is represented as the beautiful daughter of a heavenly "chief" who, together with her female friends, was in the habit of journeying to Earth to bathe in a local lake. It was said that the only way to capture Sky Maiden was to steal her plume, a feat that the youths of noble bloodlines had consistently failed to accomplish. As fate would have it, it is a poor boy that eventually succeeds in stealing the plume and thereby secures her hand in marriage:

"There was a chief who lived in heaven. He had a child, a very beautiful girl...Every day the princess and her nurse and the other girls came down from the sky to bathe in a lake... When the sons of royalty and of nobility had failed to take the Sky girls, a youth, the son of a poor man, said he would go and try to take the plume of the Sky girl. Those youths who had failed to take the plume laughed heartily at him; but he persisted...The Sky girls arrived; and, after they had gone into the water, this youth took the plume of the princess...The princess asked the youth (to marry her), saying, 'Wait, you shall marry me.' The youth stopped, and the princess said as follows: 'you shall go with me to my home in the sky.' The Sky person and the young man went to the sky."²⁰

In the New Hebrides (Melanesia), the natives of Leper's Island recount Tagaro's misadventures with a beautiful swan-maiden. The anthropologist Codrington summarized this narrative as follows:

"It was Tagoro...who married the winged woman—a Banewonowono or Vinmara, Web-wing or Dove-skin—from heaven...These women flew down from heaven to bathe, and

²⁰ F. Boas & C. Simango, "Tales and Proverbs of the Vandau of Portuguese South Africa," *Journal of American Folklore* 35 (1922), pp. 200-201.

Tagoro watched them. He saw them take off their wings, stole one pair, and hid them at the foot of the main pillar of his house. He then returned and found all fled but the wingless one, and he took her to his house and presented her to his mother as his wife.”²¹

A version of the Sky Maiden myth collected from the Halmahera (Indonesia) contains several mythemes of interest. Here the mortal hero is described as “very ugly and covered with sores.” As in other versions of the myth from this part of the world, the poor wretch hides in wait and steals the clothes of a beautiful Sky Maiden, thereby preventing her from returning to heaven. The two forthwith become husband and wife and ascend to heaven in a magical flying palace (Indonesian myth is distinguished by its numerous fabulous elements and this tradition is no exception in that regard).²²

Eventually, thanks to an old woman who took pity on him, the forlorn hero was cured of his sores.

The Toradja in Central Celebes (Indonesia) preserved an interesting variant on the Sky Maiden theme. There a hero named Magoenggoelota absconds with the clothes of a heavenly maiden with the predictable result that she is forced to marry him. Upon being deprived of her ability to fly to heaven, the Sky Maiden utters the following words:

“You don’t need to hold me; I will not go away, for I do not know the road. If you are fond of me, put me in your betel-box.”²³

As requested, Magoenggoelota puts the Sky Maiden in his box and takes her home. One is reminded here of the gourd or basket within which Star Woman was concealed and transported in South American lore. The fact that the same general idea can be found in the narratives of the Australian Aborigines—wherein Venus is described as confined within a mesh bag²⁴—raises intriguing questions as to the origin of this widespread mytheme. Are we to imagine a celestial stimulus here as well? Or are we to assume that

²¹ R. Codrington, *The Melanesians* (Oxford, 1969), p. 172.

²² R. Dixon, “Oceanic Mythology,” in L. Gray ed., *The Mythology of All Races* (Boston, 1916), p. 208.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁴ J. Isaacs, *Australian Dreaming, 40,000 years of Australian History* (Sydney, 1980), p. 154.

this particular mytheme diffused from the South Pacific to South America (or vice versa)?

In North Celebes a farmer named Walasindouw is annoyed to discover that his yams are being stolen during the night. Laying in wait, the man discovers that the thief is a Sky Maiden who, together with her companions, comes down to Earth to bathe:

“When she was in his power [because he had taken her clothes] she asked forgiveness of him (for the theft), pleading that she was a child of heaven. Walasindouw, being unmarried, immediately made her his wife.”²⁵

In the aforementioned tales collected from Oceanic tribes, there is no explicit identification of the Sky Maiden with the planet Venus. Although rare, such examples can be found. Witness the following Papuan tradition from Dutch New Guinea (Melanesia) wherein the Sky Maiden is represented as a thief, as in the previous tradition from North Celebes:

“The Papuans of Geelvink Bay, on the northern coast of Dutch New Guinea, tell of an old man who used to earn his living by selling the intoxicating juice of the sago-palm. But to his vexation he often found that the vessels, which he had set overnight to catch the dripping juice of the tapped palms, were drained dry in the morning. As the people in his village denied all knowledge of the theft, he resolved to watch, and was lucky enough to catch the thief in the very act, and who should the thief be but the Morning Star? To ransom herself from his clutches she bestowed on him a magical stick or wand, the possession of which ensured to its owner the fulfillment of every wish. In time the old man married a wife, but she was not pleased that her husband was so old and so covered with scabs. So one day he resolved to give her a joyful surprise by renewing his youth with the help of his magic wand. For this purpose he retired into the forest and kindled a great fire of iron-wood. When the flames blazed up he flung himself among the glowing embers, and immediately his shriveled skin peeled off, and all the scabs were turned into

²⁵ S. Hickson, *A Naturalist in North Celebes* (London, 1889), p. 265.

copper trinkets, beautiful corals, and gold and silver bracelets. He himself came forth from the fire a handsome young man.”²⁶

Here, as in the Toba narrative from South America, the scabrous old man is cured of his affliction and transformed into a handsome youth through the magical machinations of a Star Woman. And in New Guinea, as in South America, the Star Woman is explicitly identified with the planet Venus. The indisputable thematic parallels between the two accounts—vastly removed in time and space—confirm that we have to do with a very widespread tradition, however it is to be understood from an astronomical standpoint.

The Morning Star

If the Star Woman is to be identified with the planet Venus, how are we to understand her mortal paramour? And what are we to make of a planet consorting with or “marrying” a mortal?

An important key to answering such questions is provided by the widespread belief that the most prominent stars formerly resided on earth. The following tradition from Aboriginal Australia may be taken as representative in this regard:

“All over Australia, it is believed that the stars and planets were once men, women and animals in Creation times, who flew up to the sky as a result of some mishap on earth and took refuge there in their present form.”²⁷

If the planets were once believed to reside on earth, it stands to reason that the Star Woman’s mortal paramour might well have been a planet prior to the cataclysm that resulted in his “flying” up to the sky and joining his stellar beneficiary. And that, in fact, is exactly what the evidence suggests.

²⁶ J. Frazer, *Apollodorus: The Library, Vol. 2* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 361. See also J. van Hasselt, “Die Noeforezen,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 8 (1876), pp. 176-178.

²⁷ J. Isaacs, *Australian Dreaming, 40,000 years of Australian History* (Sydney, 1980), p. 141.

Analogous beliefs are attested amongst various aboriginal cultures in South America. One of the most instructive myths in this regard comes from the Sikuani Indians of the Orinoco plains of Colombia and Venezuela. Virtually unknown prior to the 20th century, the Sikuani long resisted the best efforts of clerics and researchers to infiltrate their culture and observe their sacred practices. Indeed, it is only in the last fifty years that anthropologists have succeeded in recording the tribe's oral traditions, a number of which preserve what appear to be extremely archaic mythological motifs. The Creation myth of the Sikuani begins as follows:

“In those days the sun and the moon and everyone were human beings and lived on this earth. Sun had a son who had sores all over his body; he was the morning star.”²⁸

The Sikuani belief that “Morning Star” was covered with sores is paralleled elsewhere—in Mesoamerica, for example, the Morning Star is described as pimpled all over²⁹—and naturally recalls the aforementioned Toba narrative in which Star Woman's lover is described as “covered with scabs.” Indeed, as we intend to document, a wealth of evidence suggests that Venus' mortal paramour is to be identified with the mythical “Morning Star,” understood here as the planet Mars.

That the masculine “Morning Star” is to be distinguished from the Star Woman—and thus from the planet Venus—is patently obvious in Skidi lore, as noted in chapter one. The same distinction is also evident in the South American traditions. Witness the following Mataco tradition:

“The morning star is an old man who has a big fire. His fire is cold. The star-woman was the daughter of the morning star.”³⁰

²⁸ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Sikuani Indians* (Los Angeles, 1992), p. 26.

²⁹ See W. Lehmann, “Ergebnisse einer mit Unterstützung der Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft in den Jahren 1925/1926 ausgeführten Forschungsreise nach Mexiko und Guatemala,” *Anthropos* 23 (1928), pp. 749-791. Of the Morning Star Viejito, it is said that he “has pimples all over.”

³⁰ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Mataco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1982), p. 49.

A prerequisite for making sense of the mythological traditions surrounding the respective planets is the recognition that the mythical “Morning Star” and Venus are two entirely different planetary bodies. Hitherto scholars have usually assumed that by “Morning Star” the planet Venus was inevitably signified (Alternatively, it has been proposed that the ancients personified the morning star phase of Venus as male and the evening star aspect as female³¹). Given the present order of the solar system, wherein Venus forms the most prominent star in the morning skies, such hypotheses are perfectly sensible as a starting point. Yet a critical analysis of ancient myth will show that the mythical Morning Star is always to be identified with the planet Mars. The planet Venus, in turn, is to be identified with the great mother goddess, the consort or female counterpart of the mythical Morning Star.

To return to the Sikuani narrative involving the Morning Star: It is reported that he is a great warrior.

“Morning Star, growing larger than his father and brothers, won all the fights. He won over his father and over his brothers; he came out of the melee winning his fights like a king...”³²

Morning Star’s success as a fighter is credited to his ability to “grow larger” in size. The strange and sudden increase in size associated with the warring Morning Star can’t help but remind us of Dumuzi’s “swelling” to enormous proportions while fighting the powers of chaos. The comparison of the “Morning Star” to a “king” meanwhile, likely alludes to the fact that with the defeat of the powers of chaos the warrior-hero was installed as king or—in what amounts to the same thing—“married” the Venus-goddess, the latter of whom personified sovereignty and invested the king with his regal powers (see Chapter X).³³

³¹ This is the opinion of Dahood, for example. See M. Dahood, “Ancient Semitic Deities in Syria and Palestine,” in *Le antiche divinità semitiche* (Rome, 1958), pp. 85-90.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³³ H. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton, 1946), p. 177.

Most important, perhaps, is the report that the hideous looking Star-Man was subsequently transformed into a handsome youth:

“The girl who had been given to Morning Star by his uncle did not want him because he was very ugly. When Morning Star realized that the girl did not want him, he left and spent the day traveling. The next morning he bathed and turned into the handsomest man in the world.”³⁴

The transformation of the sore-laden “Morning Star” into a handsome youth recalls the beautification of Star Woman’s scabrous paramour in Toba myth. That said, in the Sikuani narrative about Morning Star there is no explicit mention of the Star Woman. Yet the Sikuani preserved another sacred narrative involving a hero who is likewise described as having “sores all over his body.”³⁵ The hero in question—Jarrawato—was cured of his affliction by a star woman whereupon he assumed a beautiful form and ascended to the sky as a star.³⁶ The fact that Jarrawato is described as shining in the morning sky suggests that he is to be identified with the mythical “Morning Star.”³⁷

A Sherente narrative recorded by the anthropologist Nimuendajú provides additional support for the view that Star Woman’s mortal paramour is to be identified with the mythical Morning Star. A Central Ge tribe residing along the Rio Tocantins, the Sherente remember “Morning Star” as a human being:

“Venus [our Morning Star] was living in human shape among men. His body was covered with malodorous ulcers, and behind him was buzzing a swarm of blowflies. All the people turned up their noses when he passed and refused him when asked permission to rest in their houses. At the end of the village he got to Waikaura’s house, who invited Venus in, did not permit him to sit on the bare ground, but ordered the children to bring a new mat. He asked his guest whence he came and whither he was bound, and the visitor

³⁴ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Sikuani Indians* (Los Angeles, 1992), pp. 25-28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 111.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

replied he had lost his way. Waikaura' had water heated for washing the ulcers. Venus wanted to do this outdoors, but his host insisted on having it done within. He also called his virgin daughter, bade Venus sit on her thighs, and washed him in this position. Then he called for araca' leaves, grated them up in water, and again washed him. Thus the visitor recovered."³⁸

In return for this act of kindness, Morning Star warns Waikaura' of an impending flood. At the same time, he admits to having violated the old man's daughter:

“He ordered Waikaura' to kill a juruty dove (*Leptoptila rufaxilla*), and his host went away, leaving the daughter, on whose thighs the guest had sat, to entertain him. When Waikaura' had returned with the dove, Venus immediately told him that he had deflowered his daughter and asked what indemnity he was to pay. But Waikaura', despite his visitor's urging, refused any form of compensation. Venus had the dove split open and spread apart by means of little sticks. He tied it to a cord a fathom in length, and Waikaura' had to suspend it from a tree by the spring. Before daybreak he ordered him to go down and see what had become of the dove. To Waikaura's amazement it had turned into a big boat. In the morning Waikaura' packed his belongings into the boat, while Venus took leave and departed. Hardly had he gone fifty paces when a whirlwind lifted him up to the sky, where he vanished. At nightfall Waikaura' put himself and his family on board. Then the flood came and carried them all away...Only Waikaura' and his family escaped.”³⁹

In addition to presenting an obvious parallel to the Sikuani “Morning Star,” the ulcerous Sherente Starman recalls the scab-laden mortal transformed into a beautiful youth by the Star Woman in Toba myth. This fact, considered in conjunction with the clear distinction between the sore-laden hero and the planet Venus (as Star Woman) in the Toba and Papuan traditions, supports the conclusion that the Sherente hero is to be identified with the masculine “Morning Star” and not with Venus (as per Nimuendajú).

³⁸ C. Nimuendajú, “The Serente,” *Publication of the Frederick Webb Hodge Anniversary Publication Fund* (Los Angeles, 1942), pp. 91-92.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

For a possible vestige of Venus as Star Woman in the Sherente narrative we would look towards the virgin daughter of Waikaura', raped by the ulcerous visitor.⁴⁰ It was on the lap of the virgin daughter that the Sherente Star Man is cured of his ulcerous sores, much as the ugly mortal is cured by Star Woman in other examples of this myth in South America. That the virgin daughter corresponds to Star Woman is further supported by the fact that the latter is often represented in South American myth as having been raped by mortals, an act that typically leads to one disaster or another.⁴¹

If nothing else, the Star Woman cycle of myths provides compelling evidence that the Greek tradition surrounding Aphrodite and Phaon has reference to the planet Venus. This in itself is an important finding, one with profound and wideranging ramifications for the study of ancient myth and the history of religion.

⁴⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss offers a similar opinion in *The Raw and the Cooked* (Chicago, 1969), p. 251.

⁴¹ See the various myths discussed in *Ibid.*, pp. 165-169.