

The Many Loves of Aphrodite

“Aphrodite’s origin remains as obscure as her name.”¹

Even today, the name Aphrodite evokes images of alluring beauty and erotic passion. The goddess is best known, perhaps, as a divine matchmaker and agent provocateur of sensual desire and infatuation, whose magical charms were enough to entice even the gods into acts of lust and illicit love. In the *Iliad*, for example, Aphrodite’s *zone (kestos himas)* is said to arouse immediate desire in the eyes of its beholder.² As Walter Burkert points out, verbs formed from the goddess’s name denote the act of love, a tendency found already in Homer.³

In Greek myth Aphrodite is known primarily for her liaisons with various gods and heroes. Her adulterous affair with Ares was the source of much amusement to the gods of Olympus in Homer’s account.⁴ Far from being an isolated or incidental report peculiar to the ocularly-challenged bard, Aphrodite’s union with Ares was celebrated in ancient art and cult as well.⁵ In perfect keeping with this tradition Pindar describes Ares as the “husband of Aphrodite.”⁶

Although modern scholars have seldom asked whether there was a celestial dimension to the love affair between Aphrodite and Ares, it is interesting to note that at least one early chronicler sought to understand their union as a conjunction of planets. Witness the following commentary ascribed to the Greek writer Lucian:

¹ W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 153.

² *Iliad* 14:216.

³ *Odyssey* 22:444.

⁴ *Odyssey* 8:266-369.

⁵ A. Furtwangler, “Ares,” in W. Roscher ed., *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 481. See also S. Budin, *The Origin of Aphrodite* (Bethesda, 2003), p. 24.

⁶ L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States, Vol. II* (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 623.

“All that he [Homer] hath said of Venus and of Mars his passion, is also manifestly composed from no other source than this science [astrology]. Indeed, it is the conjuncture of Venus and Mars that creates the poetry of Homer.”⁷

Although relatively late and influenced by Greek astrological conceptions, Lucian’s deduction gains additional credence in light of the Skidi testimony with regards to the primeval union of Mars and Venus.

An aura of mystery surrounds the origins of the Greek goddess of love. Burkert, upon surveying the evidence, confesses: “Aphrodite’s origin remains as obscure as her name.”⁸ While Aphrodite is securely attested in the earliest epic literature, her name is absent from the Mycenaean religion as known from the Linear B tablets. Thus, it is likely that the cult of the goddess came to Greece in the period between 1200 BCE and 800.⁹

Whence, then, did Aphrodite arrive on Greek shores? For Homer, Hesiod, and other early writers, the goddess was intimately linked to Cyprus. The *Odyssey* lists Paphos as the goddess’s homeland, while the *Iliad* makes *Kypris* her most common epithet.¹⁰ Hesiod calls her both *Kyprogene* and *Kythereia*.

The search for Aphrodite’s origins does not stop in Cyprus, a well-known melting pot of Oriental religious conceptions. Among leading scholars, there is something of a consensus that the cult of Aphrodite originally came to Greece from the ancient Near East: “Behind the figure of Aphrodite there clearly stands the ancient Semitic goddess of love, Ishtar-Astarte, divine consort of the king, queen of heaven, and hetaera in one.”¹¹

This view receives strong support from the Greeks themselves. Pausanias, for example, offered the following opinion: “The Assyrians were the first of the human race to worship

⁷ *Astrology* 22.

⁸ W. Burkert, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁹ C. Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia* (London, 1994), pp. 176ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153. According to C. Penglase, *op. cit.*, p. 176, “The earliest evidence for Aphrodite in the Greek and Mycenaean area is the temple in Paphos.”

¹¹ W. Burkert, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

the heavenly one [Aphrodite *Urania*]; then the people of Paphos in Cyprus, and of Phoenician Askalon in Palestine, and the people of Kythera, who learnt her worship from the Phoenicians.”¹²

That Aphrodite shares numerous characteristics in common with Ishtar is well known. As goddesses of love both are associated with rites of prostitution, for example.¹³ Both are associated with sacred gardens. Aphrodite, like Ishtar, was represented as armed and invoked to guarantee victory. The strange beard accorded Aphrodite in ancient cult finds a precise parallel in the cult of Ishtar.

In his comprehensive survey of Aphrodite’s cult, Burkert never once mentions the planet Venus. Here the renowned scholar is presumably just following the prevailing view, which does not recognize an early connection between the goddess and planet (the identification between Aphrodite and Venus is first attested in the *Epinomis*, now generally ascribed to Philip of Opus). Wolfgang Heimpel’s opinion on this issue seems to represent the consensus among classicists:

“Originally, the goddess Aphrodite had nothing to do with the planet. The link was in all probability made as a result of Babylonian influence in the field of astronomy.”¹⁴

Yet inasmuch as the Semitic Ishtar was specifically identified with Venus, it stands to reason that the Greek goddess originally shared this characteristic as well. In fact, it is our opinion that it is impossible to understand Aphrodite’s cult and mythology apart from reference to the planet Venus.¹⁵

In order to determine whether Aphrodite’s identification with Venus is fundamental in nature or relatively late in origin—as per the view of Heimpel and the vast majority of scholars—it is necessary to investigate her cult in some detail. Aphrodite’s epithet

¹² Book I:14:7.

¹³ C. Penglase, *op. cit.*, p. 163, citing Strabo 378 for Corinthian cults of prostitution associated with Aphrodite. Notice also the epithet *Porne*.

¹⁴ W. Heimpel, “A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities,” *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4:3 (1982), p. 11.

¹⁵ E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 91-112.

Urania offers a valuable clue. As Farnell points out,¹⁶ *Urania*—“the celestial one”—was a Greek translation of the Hebrew epithet *malkat ha-šāmayim*, “the queen of the heavens,” long understood as having reference to Venus.¹⁷ Yet almost unbelievably, Farnell questions whether Aphrodite’s epithet betrays an astral component! Such an opinion ignores the plain fact that this epithet finds precise parallels in the cults of other Venus-goddesses throughout the ancient world. Thus, a Sumerian hymn invokes Inanna as follows:

“To the great Queen of Heaven, Inanna, I want to address my greeting. To her who fills the sky with her pure blaze, to the luminous one, to Inanna, as bright as the sun...”¹⁸

The Akkadian Ishtar shares the same epithet. Witness the following hymn:

“Her very first name, her great appellation which her father Anu, whom she adores, named her of old, is Ninanna ‘Queen of Heaven’.”¹⁹

How is it possible to understand these early hymns to Inanna and Ishtar apart from reference to a celestial body?

In complete agreement with the religious literature, Babylonian astronomical tablets include the Sumerian epithet *^dnin.dar.an.na*, “the bright, or vari-coloured, queen of heaven” among the various names for the planet Venus.²⁰

The Queen of Heaven also figures prominently amongst the pagan gods mentioned in the Old Testament, and there was doubtless much truth in Jeremiah’s admission (ca. 600

¹⁶ L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 629.

¹⁷ See L. Bobrova & A. Militarev, “From Mesopotamia to Greece: to the Origin of Semitic and Greek Star Names,” ed. by H. Galter, *Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens* (Graz, 1993), p. 315.

¹⁸ F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 105.

¹⁹ B. Foster, *Before the Muses* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 501.

²⁰ P. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 35. See also L. Bobrova & A. Militarev, “From Mesopotamia to Greece: to the Origin of Semitic and Greek Star Names,” in H. Galter ed., *Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens* (Graz, 1993), p. 315.

BCE) that the Israelites had long burnt incense to the stellar whore.²¹ Although Jeremiah does not name the planetary goddess in question, Astarte seems a likely candidate.²² Astarte's identification with the planet Venus is commonly acknowledged,²³ as is her fundamental affinity with Aphrodite. Indeed, an inscription from the Hellenistic period (ca. 160 BCE) identifies Astarte with Aphrodite *Urania*.²⁴

Given this evidence from comparative religion, there would appear to be little justification for Farnell's view that Aphrodite *Urania* did not have a celestial component.

Aphrodite and Adonis

“Bethlehem which is now ours, the most august place in the universe...was shaded by the sacred wood of Tammuz, that is, Adonis. And in the grotto where the newborn Christ once cried, there were tears for the lover of Venus.”²⁵

The testimony of St. Jerome, taken together with that of numerous other ancient writers, attests to Adonis's former exalted status. What, then, do we know about Aphrodite's celebrated paramour?

According to Panyassis (early 5th century BCE), the newborn Adonis was so beautiful that Aphrodite jealously hid him away in a coffin. After handing him over to Persephone for safekeeping, Aphrodite was subsequently heartbroken upon learning that the goddess of the underworld refused to give him up. Here is the account as preserved by Apollodorus:

“Struck by his beauty, Aphrodite, in secret from the gods, hid him in a chest while he was still a little child, and entrusted him to Persephone. But when Persephone caught sight of him, she refused to give him back. The matter was submitted to the judgment of Zeus;

²¹ *Jeremiah* 44:17-25.

²² W. Heimpel, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²³ J. Henninger, “Zum Problem der Venussterngottheit bei den Semiten,” *Anthropos* 71 (1976), pp. 153ff. See also M. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1967), p. 116.

²⁴ W. Heimpel, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²⁵ St. Jerome, Letters 58, 3 as translated by R. Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1996), p. 148.

and dividing the year into three parts, he decreed that Adonis should spend a third of the year by himself, a third with Persephone, and the remaining third with Aphrodite... Later, however, while he was hunting, Adonis was wounded by a boar and died.”²⁶

Although there are conflicting reports about the precise manner of the god’s death, it is agreed that he died young and under tragic circumstances.²⁷ According to one version of the myth, Aphrodite is said to have leapt off the Leucadian rock out of grief for the beautiful youth.²⁸

Aphrodite’s passion for Adonis is attested as early as Sappho (ca. 600 BCE). In a fragment attributed to the melancholy poet of Lesbos, one finds an early reference to the ritual lamentations that distinguished the god’s cult:

“He is dying, O Cytherean, the tender Adonis! What shall we do? Beat your breasts, young maidens, and tear your tunics!”²⁹

Bion, writing in the mid-second century BCE, composed a lengthy poem recounting Adonis’s tragic fate. In his account it is the goddess Aphrodite herself who bloodied her breasts while mourning the youth’s death:

“But Aphrodite, having let down her hair, rushes through the woods mourning, unbraided, unsandalled; and the thorns cut her as she goes and pluck sacred blood. Shrilly wailing, through long winding dells she wanders, crying out the Assyrian cry, calling her consort and boy. Around her floated her dark robe at her navel; her chest was made scarlet by her hands; the breasts below, snowy before, grew crimson for Adonis.”³⁰

²⁶ Apollodorus, *The Library* III:14:4 as translated in R. Hand ed., *The Library of Greek Mythology* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 131-132.

²⁷ According to Apollodorus, “Adonis died in a hunt while he was still a young boy, from a wound inflicted by a boar.”

²⁸ See the discussion in L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States, Vol. II* (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 650.

²⁹ Fragment 152 as translated in R. Turcan, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

³⁰ Epitaph on Adonis, lines 19-27 as quoted in J. Reed, *Bion of Smyrna* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 123-125.

The wailing rites alluded to by Sappho and Bion betray the telltale influence of Dumuzi's cult, whose proverbial lamentations are first attested in Mari during the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1800-1600 BCE) but undoubtedly go back much further still, likely to the dawn of civilization itself. Lamentations for the god are most familiar from the testimony of Ezekiel, who wrote as follows of the abominations then current at Jerusalem: "Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz."³¹ Like the god himself, such rites proved very difficult to extinguish and were still being performed by the Sabeen women of Harran as late as the tenth century CE.³²

The Adonis-myth formed the subject of several Greek rituals during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.³³ Women were the primary participants in the rites in question, known as Adonia, which were typically celebrated on rooftops, thereby emulating the Oriental custom. Interestingly, ladders formed a conspicuous element in the god's cult:

"According to textual evidence, Adonis rites were performed on the roofs of houses. The iconography contains some striking scenes in which ladders are outstanding features."³⁴

In Athens, the Adonia featured the parading forth of the god's body and its burial, followed by a period of general licentiousness marked by drinking and dancing.³⁵ Further details, unfortunately, are lacking with regards to the precise order and content of the Attic rites. Walter Burkert emphasized the link with the ancient Near East in his summary of Adonis's cult in ancient Greece:

³¹ *Ezekiel* 8:14.

³² B. Alster, "Tammuz," in K. van der Toorn et al eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, 1995), col. 1569.

³³ S. Ribichini, "Adonis," in K. van der Toorn et al eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, 1995), cols. 12-17.

³⁴ T. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection* (Stockholm, 2001), p. 127. On the iconography of the ladder in the Adonia, see R. Rosenzweig, *Worshipping Aphrodite* (Ann Arbor, 2004), pp. 63-68.

³⁵ F. Graf, "Aphrodite," in K. van der Toorn et al eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, 1995), col. 120.

“There remain enough lacunae and uncertainties in our knowledge. Still we can feel confident as to the general outline: the yearly festival of weeping for Tammuz spread from Mesopotamia to Syria to Palestine, and thence, with the name ‘Adonis,’ to Greece. At Jerusalem, as still in fifth-century Athens, this is not an established state festival, but an unofficial ceremony spontaneously performed by women, and viewed with suspicion by the dominant male.”³⁶

Outside of Greece proper, there are indications that the cult of Adonis was once widely disseminated throughout the Mediterranean region. In Rome, as in Athens, Adonia were celebrated. Numerous Roman murals, according to Robert Turcan, show “Adonis being carried away by Venus.”³⁷ The love of Adonis and Aphrodite was also a familiar subject on Etruscan mirrors from the fourth century BCE.

Adonis was especially popular at Byblos, a Phoenician stronghold of great antiquity.³⁸ Indeed, there is much reason to believe that Adonis was Astarte’s youthful consort at Byblos. An eyewitness to the rites practiced there—Lucian (2nd Century CE)—reported that the god experienced a resurrection:

“As a memorial of his suffering each year they beat their breasts, mourn and celebrate the rites. Throughout the land they perform solemn lamentations. When they cease their breast-beating and weeping, they first sacrifice to Adonis as if to a dead person, but then, on the next day, they proclaim that he lives and send him into the air.”³⁹

Origen (3rd century CE) likewise attests to Adonis’s resurrection in ancient cult:

“The god whom the Greeks called Adonis is called Tammuz by the Jews and the Syrians, as they say. It seems that certain sacred ceremonies are practiced each year; first, they

³⁶ W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 107.

³⁷ R. Turcan, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

³⁸ Vase fragments from the Fifth Dynasty reign of Unas have been found at Byblos. See W. Stevenson Smith, “The Old Kingdom in Egypt...,” in I. Edwards et al eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History* Vol. 1:2 (Cambridge, 1971), p. 189.

³⁹ *De Dea Syria* 6.

weep for him as if he ceased to live; then they rejoice for him as if he had risen from the dead.”⁴⁰

Jerome, writing slightly later than Origen (ca. 345-419), provides complementary testimony in favor of a rite of resurrection involving Adonis. Thus, in his commentary on Ezekiel, Jerome wrote as follows:

“What we have rendered as Adonis, the Hebrew and Syrian languages denote as Tammuz. According to a pagan tale, Venus’s lover, a very beautiful youth, is killed...After this, he is said to have risen...There is an annual celebration of his feast, in which women bewail him as dead, and then he is praised in song when he returns to life...The same pagans interpret, in a subtle manner, the poets’ narratives of a similar kind, narratives about shameful things: they understand the sequence of wailing and joy as referring to the death and resurrection of Adonis. They take his death to be shown by the seeds that die in the earth, and his resurrection by the crops in which the dead seeds are born.”⁴¹

Cyril of Alexandria, writing in the 5th century of the current era, commented on the Adonis rites then being celebrated in his native city. Cyril’s disdain for the Greek practice is everywhere apparent:

“They pretended to unite in weeping and lamentations with Aphrodite when she was mourning Adonis’s death. Then, when she reappeared from the Netherworld and announced that she had found the one she had been looking for, [they pretended] to unite in rejoicing and jumping [for joy]. And even today this comedy is still being performed in the temples of Alexandria.”⁴²

In addition to the ritual wailings, there is evidence that the Adonia featured a *hieros gamos* between the youthful hero and Aphrodite/Astarte. Such was the case in the rites

⁴⁰ Sel. in Ez. 8:14 as quoted in S. Ribichini, *op. cit.*, col. 16.

⁴¹ *Explanations in Ezekiel* III, 8, 14 as quoted from T. Mettinger, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁴² *Isaiah* 18:1-2 as quoted in T. Mettinger, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

practiced in Ptolemaic Alexandria, according to Theocritus (4th/5th century CE). The Alexandrian rites have been summarized by Sergio Ribichini as follows:

“The first day the participants celebrated the union between the two lovers, represented in the course of a banquet under a kiosk of dill stems and surrounded by fruits, delightful gardens, pots of perfumes and a big variety of cakes. On the second day the epithalamium gave way to a lament as the worshippers gathered for a funeral procession to carry the image of Adonis to the seashore.”⁴³

The sacred marriage between Aphrodite and Adonis can't help but recall the *hieros gamos* associated with the Sumerian Inanna and Dumuzi. Inasmuch as the Sumerian rite had its origin and *raison d'être* in ancient conceptions associated with the planet Venus, one is naturally led to suspect that similar conceptions informed the aboriginal cult of Aphrodite and Adonis.

That there was a celestial dimension to the Adonis myth is also evidenced by the fact that his rites were typically celebrated on rooftops. It was on rooftops, after all, that astronomical observations and offerings were commonly made throughout the ancient Near East.⁴⁴ Jeremiah's testimony is especially instructive in this regard:

“And the house of Jerusalem, and the houses of kings of Judah, shall be defiled as the place of Tophet, because of all the houses upon whose roofs they have burned incense unto all the host of heaven, and have poured out drink offerings unto other gods.”⁴⁵

The Judaic rites are reminiscent of practices described in the sacred marriage hymn of Iddin-Dagan from more than a thousand years earlier. There one reads that incense was offered to the planet Venus on the rooftops:

⁴³ S. Ribichini, *op. cit.*, col. 13.

⁴⁴ M. Weinfeld, “The Worship of Molech and of the Queen of Heaven and its Background,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 4 (1972), pp. 151-154. See also *Zephaniah* 1:5.

⁴⁵ *Jeremiah*, 19:13.

“Everybody hastens to holy Inana. For my lady in the midst of heaven the best of everything is prepared (?). In the pure places of the plain, at its good places, on the roofs, on the rooftops, the rooftops of dwellings (?), in the sanctuaries (?) of mankind, incense offerings like a forest of aromatic cedars are transmitted to her.”⁴⁶

The Adonis rites are significant not only for the clues they provide with respect to the celestial context of the sacred marriage rite but for the light they shed on dying gods in general and the myth of Dumuzi in particular. How, then, are we to understand the god behind these curious rites? As Ribichini points out with reference to the cult at Byblos, the name Adonis is most likely an epithet of a great god:

“He must indeed have been a god of high rank. It is probable that the cult of Adonis in Byblos continued the worship of a Phoenician ‘Baal’, conceived as a dying and rising god. This god was not merely a spring deity or vegetation spirit, as Frazer believed, but an important city god comparable to Melqart in Tyre and Eshmun in Sidon.”⁴⁷

Melqart, in fact, was addressed as *Adon*, “my lord,” the epithet from which derives the name of Adonis.⁴⁸ At Tyre, Melqart was the beloved consort of Astarte/Venus, thereby occupying a position similar to that of Adonis at Byblos.⁴⁹ Early on identified with Nergal, Melqart is best understood as a personification of the planet Mars (see chapter six),⁵⁰ and therefore it is interesting to find that Tyre was renowned for its worship of the red planet.⁵¹ One Arabic author, writing in the first decades of the 14th century CE, offered direct testimony on the matter: “Among [the temples that were found] in the city of [Tyre], near the waterside, a temple of Mars.”⁵²

⁴⁶ Lines 142ff. in J. Black et al, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

⁴⁷ S. Ribichini, *op. cit.*, col. 14.

⁴⁸ KAI 47.

⁴⁹ T. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection* (Stockholm, 2001), p. 126.

⁵⁰ E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997), pp. 42-48. See also S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1989), p. 164: “The name of Melqart, chief god of Tyre, is a Phoenician translation of the Sumerian name Nergal, and they are thus very closely assimilated.”

⁵¹ H. Seyrig, “Antiquités Syriennes,” *Syria* 64 (1944-45), p. 70, cites Saleh ibn Yahya for the worship of Mars in Tyre.

⁵² Quoted from J. Hjärpe, *Analyse Critique des Traditions Arabes sur les Sabéens Harraniens* (Uppsala, 1972), p. 75. Note: I am indebted to Rens van der Sluijs for this reference and the translation thereof.

The author in question—Al-Dimashqi—goes on to state that Tammuz himself was to be identified with the planet Mars: “The Sabaeans contended that [Jerusalem] had been built before Solomon, peace be on him, and that the city had a temple of Mars where an idol called Tammuz was found.”⁵³ How or from what sources Al-Dimashqi derived this information is not clear. That said, the fact that the Greek astronomer Ptolemy identified Adonis with the red planet offers some support for Al-Dimashqi’s claim. Thus, in a discussion of the inhabitants of Syria in his *Tetrabiblos*, the greatest astronomer of the ancient world wrote as follows:

“Those who live in these countries generally worship Venus as the mother of the gods, calling her by various local names, and Mars as Adonis, to whom again they give other names, and they celebrate in their honour certain mysteries accompanied by lamentations.”⁵⁴

Ptolemy’s primary works stem from the first half of the second century CE. The fact that he wrote from Alexandria, a hotbed of Adonis-worship, suggests that Ptolemy was uniquely qualified to comment on the possible astronomical aspects of the Adonis-myth.

Aphrodite and Phaon

“Children, Kypris is not Kypris alone, but she is called by many names. She is Hades, she is immortal life, she is raving madness, she is unmixed desire, she is lamentation; in her is all activity, all tranquility, all that leads to violence. For she sinks into the vitals of all that have life; who is not greedy for that goddess?”⁵⁵

If the cult of Aphrodite encodes ancient conceptions associated with the planet Venus, it must be expected that astronomical events will inform and help illuminate specific details in the sacred traditions surrounding the goddess. In order to investigate this hypothesis we propose to offer a comparative analysis of Aphrodite’s rendezvous with Phaon.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ II, 3, 68. F. Robbins, translator, *Ptolemy: Tetrabiblos* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 146-149. I am indebted to Rens van der Sluijs for this reference.

⁵⁵ From a fragment attributed to Sophocles, as quoted in Stephanie Budin, *The Origin of Aphrodite* (Bethesda, 2003), p. 18.

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.⁵⁶

In addition to these basic facts, there are also hints that Aphrodite and Phaon were lovers. Thus, Athenaios reports that the Cyprian goddess was in love with the ferryman, citing Kratinos, Euboulos and Kallimachos as authorities.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

Although Palaephatos (late 4th century BCE) is our earliest source for the story in question, Menander (ca. 324 BCE) and other writers also allude to it.⁵⁹ Aphrodite's encounter with Phaon is also depicted on several vase paintings.⁶⁰

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 interactions hold the key to Aphrodite's tryst with Phaon. For additional insight into the origins of the Greek legend we turn to consider sacred traditions from aboriginal South America.

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

⁵⁶ 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."

⁵⁷ Athenaios, *Deipnosophistae* 2.69d.

⁵⁸ 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.

⁵⁹ Palaephatos 48. The best summary of the extant sources is that of Stein, "Phaon," *RE* 38 (Stuttgart, 1938), cols. 1790-1796. See also T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 103-104.

⁶⁰ *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Vol. 7 (Zurich, 1994), pp. 364-367.

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 some deformity, 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 tribe hails from the Paraguayan Chaco). Included in his collection is the following narrative telling of a Star Woman's love for a homely mortal:

“Formerly the star Venus was a woman who fell in love with a homely man. Thanks to her magic, he became very handsome.”⁶¹

Several different versions of this story were subsequently obtained from other Chamacoco informants. Although most are more elaborate and embellished than Fric's 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...’⁶²

⁶¹ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chamacoco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), p. 97.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

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.”⁶³

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. 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.”⁶⁴

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

“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.’”⁶⁵

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

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

⁶⁴ A. Métraux, *Myths of the Toba and Pilagá Indians of the Gran Chaco* (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 46.

⁶⁵ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chorote Indians* (Los Angeles, 1985), pp. 265-266.

“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.’”⁶⁶

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.”⁶⁷

In order to keep their affair a secret from the other tribesmen, Star Woman asks her mortal lover to find 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.”⁶⁸

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.’”⁶⁹

After sleeping with the boy, Star Woman tells him to hide her in a basket (*kaipo*) or gourd (*combuca*).⁷⁰

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁶⁹ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Ge Indians* (Los Angeles, 1978), p. 195.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

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.”⁷¹ As in other versions of the tale, the mortal hero “hid her in a large gourd so that no one would see her.”⁷² Once again 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.”⁷³

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.”⁷⁴ The magical transformation of the wretched mortal at the hands of Venus offers a striking thematic parallel to Phaon’s dramatic metamorphosis at the hands of Aphrodite. Indeed, the fact that the planet Venus, as Star Woman, is credited with beautifying her scabrous paramour constitutes compelling circumstantial evidence that Aphrodite personifies Venus in her interactions with Phaon.

Sky-Maiden

Although it is attested around the globe, in most instances the Star Woman myth has been localized and humanized to such an extent that the heroine’s link to the planet Venus has been obscured or even 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 companions, 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

⁷¹ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Toba Indians, Vol. 1* (Los Angeles, 1982), p. 55.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

⁷⁴ *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.”

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.”⁷⁵

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 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.”⁷⁶

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

⁷⁵ F. Boas & C. Simango, “Tales and Proverbs of the Vandau of Portuguese South Africa,” *Journal of American Folklore* 35 (1922), pp. 200-201.

⁷⁶ R. Codrington, *The Melanians* (Oxford, 1969), p. 172.

numerous fabulous elements and this tradition is no exception in that regard).⁷⁷

Eventually, thanks to an old woman who took pity on him, the forlorn hero was cured of his hideous 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, 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.”⁷⁸

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 sacred narratives of the Australian Aborigines—wherein Venus is described as confined within a mesh bag⁷⁹—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 this particular mytheme diffused from the South Pacific to South America (or vice versa)?

In a tale from North Celebes, a farmer named Walasindouw is annoyed to discover that his yams are being stolen during the night. Lying 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.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ R. Dixon, “Oceanic Mythology,” in L. Gray ed., *The Mythology of All Races* (Boston, 1916), p. 208.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁷⁹ J. Isaacs, *Australian Dreaming, 40,000 years of Australian History* (Sydney, 1980), p. 154.

⁸⁰ S. Hickson, *A Naturalist in North Celebes* (London, 1889), p. 265.

In the aforementioned tales collected from Oceanic tribes, there is no explicit identification of the Sky Maiden with the planet Venus. But, 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 [Mangoendi] 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 copper trinkets, beautiful corals, and gold and silver bracelets. He himself came forth from the fire a handsome young man.”⁸¹

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.

⁸¹ J. Frazer, *Apollodorus: The Library, Vol. 2* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 361. See also J.B. van Hasselt, “Die Noeforezen,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 8 (1876), pp. 176-178.

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 clue 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.”⁸²

The very same idea is attested amongst the Skidi Pawnee of North America. Thus, Von Del Chamberlain reports that: “The Skidi believed that the stars were either gods or people who had once lived on earth and had been changed into stars at death.”⁸³

If the planets were once thought to reside on earth, it stands to reason that 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 benefactress. And that, in fact, is exactly what the evidence suggests.

One of the most instructive myths in this regard comes from the Sikuani Indians of the Orinoco region 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. In fact, it is only in the last fifty years that anthropologists have succeeded in recording the tribe’s oral traditions, a number of which

⁸² J. Isaacs, *Australian Dreaming, 40,000 years of Australian History* (Sydney, 1980), p. 141.

⁸³ V. Del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (College Park, 1982), p. 48.

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.”⁸⁴

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 over⁸⁵—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’s 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 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 South American lore. 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.”⁸⁶

In order to make sense of the mythological traditions surrounding the respective planets it is essential to recognize that the mythical “Morning Star” and Venus are two entirely different planetary bodies. Hitherto scholars have assumed that by “Morning Star” the planet Venus was inevitably denoted. Given the present order of the solar system, wherein Venus forms the most prominent star in the morning skies, this hypothesis is perfectly sensible as a starting point. Yet a comparative analysis of ancient myth will show that the mythical Morning Star is always to be identified with the planet Mars. The

⁸⁴ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Sikuani Indians* (Los Angeles, 1992), p. 26.

⁸⁵ 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.”

⁸⁶ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Mataco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1982), p. 49.

planet Venus, in turn, is to be identified with the Mother Goddess, the consort or love interest of the mythical Morning Star.

To return to the Sikuani narrative involving the Morning Star: It is reported that he showed great prowess as a warrior while still a child:

“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 *mêlée* winning his fights like a king...”⁸⁷

Morning Star’s extraordinary success as a fighter is credited to an unusual ability to “grow larger” in size. The 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 “Morning Star” to a “king,” in turn, is also noteworthy inasmuch as it forms an interesting parallel to Dumuzi’s enthroning in the wake of his battle with the rebel powers. Thus, in BM 96739 it is stated that Inanna established Dumuzi as king: “You then seated king Amašumgalanna on your sacred dais.”⁸⁸ Dumuzi’s enthronement likely commemorates the fact that the warrior-star was installed as “king” by virtue of his defeat of the powers of chaos or—in a variant interpretation of the same extraordinary events—as soon as he “married” the Venus-goddess, the latter of whom embodied sovereignty and was responsible for investing the king with his regal powers (see chapter ten).⁸⁹

Most important, perhaps, is the report that the hideous looking Morning Star 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

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ The classic example in this regard is the Sumerian warrior-hero Ninurta. See the discussion in A. Annus, *The God Ninurta* (Helsinki, 2002), p. 5. On the goddess as embodying sovereignty, see H. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton, 1946), p. 177.

spent the day traveling. The next morning he bathed and turned into the handsomest man in the world.”⁹⁰

The transformation of the sore-laden “Morning Star” into a handsome youth recalls the beautification of Star Woman’s scabrous paramour in Toba myth. Indeed, in our view the two narratives represent structural analogues.

That said, in the Sikuani narrative 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.”⁹¹ 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.⁹² The fact that Jarrawato is described as shining in the morning sky suggests that he is to be identified with the mythical “Morning Star.”⁹³

A Sherente narrative recorded by the anthropologist Curt 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 in eastern Brazil, 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 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

⁹⁰ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Sikuani Indians* (Los Angeles, 1992), pp. 25-28.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 111.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

he called for araca' leaves, grated them up in water, and again washed him. Thus the visitor recovered."⁹⁴

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."⁹⁵

In addition to presenting an obvious parallel to the Sikuani "Morning Star," the ulcerous Starman recalls the scab-laden mortal transformed into a beautiful youth by the Star Woman in Toba myth. Such facts, 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 mythical "Morning Star" and not with Venus (as per Nimuendajú).

⁹⁴ C. Nimuendajú, "The Šerenté," *Publication of the Frederick Webb Hodge Anniversary Publication Fund* (Los Angeles, 1942), pp. 91-92.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[*For a vestige of Venus as Star Woman in the Sherente narrative we would look towards the virgin daughter of Waikaura', raped by the ulcerous visitor.⁹⁶ It was on the virgin's "lap" that the Sherente Starman was cured of his ulcerous sores, much as the union with Star Woman cured the ugly mortal 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, an act that typically leads to one disaster or another.⁹⁷]

From the standpoint of comparative mythology, the Star Woman cycle of myths provides compelling circumstantial evidence that the Greek traditions surrounding Aphrodite and Phaon have reference to the interplanetary affairs of the planet Venus. This in itself is an important finding, one with profound and far-reaching implications for the history of religion.

That said, there is every reason to believe that the Star Woman myth has much more to tell us. A number of parallels can be drawn between this myth and the Sumerian traditions describing the marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi. For example, a prominent component of the sacred marriage rite finds the mortal king achieving divinity—"stardom" in a quite literal sense—upon marrying the planet Venus. This is evidenced by the fact that early kings who performed the rite had the mark of divinity appended to their names and received divine honors after their death.⁹⁸ The "deification" of the king, in our view, has its mythological prototype in Dumuzi's catasterization or apotheosis upon marrying Venus. Thus, in "The Ascension of Dumuzi to Heaven" the mortal hero is installed as a star alongside Inanna/Venus.⁹⁹ The same idea is implicit in BM 96739, as we have documented.

⁹⁶ C. Lévi-Strauss offers a similar opinion in *The Raw and the Cooked* (Chicago, 1969), p. 251.

⁹⁷ See the various myths discussed in *Ibid.*, pp. 165-169.

⁹⁸ E. van Buren, "The Sacred Marriage in Early Times in Mesopotamia, Part II," *op. cit.*, p. 52. See also the discussion in H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 296-297.

⁹⁹ Pirjo Lapinkivi, *op. cit.*, p. 27 writes: "The ascension of Dumuzi to heaven and his being stationed there as a star can also be understood as a consequence of the union." See also W. von Soden, *The Ancient Orient* (Grand Rapids, 1994), p. 68.

A catasterization of the mortal hero is also attested in several versions of the Star Woman myth. Thus it is that the mortal paramour is suddenly taken up to heaven to live alongside Venus, one narrative remarking of the (im)mortal hero that “now he is a star beside her in the heavens.”¹⁰⁰

A pivotal event in the sacred marriage rite saw the king being imbued with the luminous splendor or “glory” of the planet-goddess. This idea is evident in the following passage from the Old Babylonian hymn BM 96739, cited earlier:

“Oh Inanna, a husband worthy of your splendor has been granted to you... You, oh mistress, you have handed over to him your power as is due to a king, and Ama-ušumgal-anna causes a radiant brilliance to burst out for you.”¹⁰¹

Françoise Bruschweiler, in her masterful analysis of the symbolism associated with Inanna/Venus, offered the following commentary on this particular hymn:

“This passage is interesting due to the way in which, in the context of a sacred marriage, the luminous essence of the goddess is passed over to King Ama-ušum-gal-anna, who is identified for the occasion with Dumuzi.”¹⁰²

It is our opinion that the mysterious event interpreted as Inanna/Venus conferring glory on Dumuzi—however it is to be understood from an astronomical standpoint—provides the historical prototype and logical rationale for understanding the archetypal myth of Star Woman. As Inanna/Venus was believed to confer power or “glory” on Dumuzi so, too, does Star Woman/Venus confer youth and beauty on her wretched paramour. In each case a sexual union with a Star Woman has a dramatically transforming effect, and in each case it is the Star’s luminous efflux that transfigures the mortal hero. Thus, Dumuzi is empowered and shines brilliantly as a result of his marriage with

¹⁰⁰ C. Nimuendajú, “Šerente Tales,” *Journal of American Folklore* 57 (1944), p. 184.

¹⁰¹ Quoted from F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 110. For a slightly different translation, see J. Black et al., “A tigi to Inana (Inana E),” *ETCSL*, lines 21-24.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Inanna/Venus. In the Star Woman myth, similarly, the previously ugly mortal is transformed into a beautiful youth and “shines” with luminous splendor as a result of sexual union with Venus. A narrative from South America, cited earlier, captures the essence of this extraordinary effusion of luminous splendor characterizing “union” with Star Woman:

“When she lay down with him there was a light emanating from her, illuminating everything...The light, or maybe her beauty, was transmitted to her parents-in-law and to the other people who were there every night ...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.”¹⁰³

It is as if Star Woman and Inanna enveloped their respective paramours with a splendor akin to St. Elmo’s fire, thereby endowing them with extraordinary beauty and superhuman power.

But what does it mean that the planet Venus confers her “power” or luminous “splendor” on Dumuzi, the latter supposedly a mortal king? The key to the puzzling imagery, in our view, is to understand Dumuzi in his original context—as a planetary body set alongside Venus. Inanna’s empowerment of Dumuzi/Mars is best understood as having reference to a spectacular conjunction between two planets, one in which Inanna/Venus was seen to crown Dumuzi/Mars with her luminous splendor (we will return to this theme in chapter eleven).

¹⁰³ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chamacoco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 85-86.