

There is a way to recast sexual relations – and it starts with Venus Bettany Hughes

The goddess's long life story tracks centuries of men's fear and prejudice, with women the victims

The Guardian Domestic edition · 15 Nov 2017 · Bettany Hughes is a broadcaster, author and professor of ancient history Bettany Hughes's Venus Uncovered is on BBC Four tonight at 9pm

Venus, ancient goddess of love and beauty, is an apparently irrelevant, invented deity of the long dead. But Venus merits scrutiny. Chart her life story across 5,000 years and you chart the evolution of our conflicted relationship with sex and with the female body. Now the Weinstein floodgates are open, root and branch reform is, rightly, demanded. But to address a problem, you have to understand its size, its shape and its provenance.

Journal



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Over the last decade I've been investigating Venus – the influential incarnation of human desire and beauty across millennia – to help explain the state we're in: why we deal with lust, love, sexuality, sexual transgression and the female form the way we do. It's about finding the roots of our prejudice, because once you understand the depth of a problem, you can better deal with it. With a track record spanning 50 centuries, Venus is a barometer of sexual mores and sexual prejudice. Her narrative also, arguably, offers a solution to their misuse.

Say Venus's name today, and what springs to mind? Botticelli's wafy nude emerging from the sea on a giant shell? Classical statues – naked or with diaphanous drapes (just) covering their marble-modesty? Pink, "female-friendly" Venus razor blades? Not a bearded, full-breasted gender-bending figurine? Or a Cypriot statuette with a penis for a head and prominent vulva? Or a sinister, black, cultic stone? Odd. Because the ancients would be hard pushed to recognise the fluffier images as their primal, feisty divinity, the mighty Aphrodite.

Venus-Aphrodite was never just a goddess of romantic love – for millennia she represented something much stronger and darker. The stories that the ancients told about her were appropriately shocking. Aphrodite, they declared, had a gruesome birth. Gaia, Mother Earth, was sick of the god of the sky, Uranus, eternally copulating with her. So Gaia persuaded her son Cronus to slice off his father’s penis and testicles with a serrated scythe. The amputated genitals were flung into the sea with a roaring splash, and out of the gory foam emerged an “awful and lovely maiden” – the goddess Aphrodite.

The early Aphrodite and her acolytes commanded respect, but a key issue arose come the iron age – when sex, rather than being simply a charged gift of the goddess, became a woman’s fault. In the canonical epic poems that form the basis of western civilisation, sex increasingly becomes a distraction from the manly businesses of fighting and empire-building – a deceptive, “limb-loosening” trick brought into play by the playthings of Aphrodite.

Think of mythical women such as Helen of Troy, whose beauty sparked a war of worlds – “a herorace of godlike men were destroyed for rich-tressed Helen’s sake”; clever Princess Medea (her story the basis for the BBC TV hit *Doctor Foster*), so tortured by her unrequited love for Jason she poisons his new bride and kills her own children. All those poor Greek heroes, helpless in the presence of charismatic women; the consensus emerging that the only choice they had was to rape or control or betray. The fallout that followed a troubled sexual liaison was memorialised as the fault of the female of the species. Women – real and mythical – who engaged in sex (“ta aphrodisia”: the things of Aphrodite), were *casus belli*.

At a time when the rules of civilisation were being set down, men could be both beautiful and good (the Greeks had a phrase for these male paragons, *kalo’k’agathia* – noble in mind and appearance), but the first created woman was described as *kalon kakon* – the beautiful-evil thing. And whereas real Greek women were encouraged to dress modestly, sometimes even to veil themselves, Aphrodite, originally clothed, regularly starts to shed her kit.

The famous Knidian Aphrodite sculpture, now lost but copied again and again down the centuries and across the known world, shows a gorgeous, tantalisingly nude Aphrodite, her fluttering hands ostensibly moving to cover her nakedness but in fact drawing attention to her breasts and pudenda. Men were surrounded by omnipresent images of the naked female form, frequently representing the goddess – but also raised on morality myths that told them a woman’s body was something to be distrusted and/or conquered.

It wasn’t all bad news. Aphrodite could be benign as well as malign. When the Greeks named Aphrodite they also gave her qualities such as kindness and compassion. When she stepped out of that spumy sea Aphrodite was said to have brought fertility, flowers, life, light to a barren world. For centuries women and men went to her sanctuaries to seek her pity and protection. Her domain was originally not just lust, but lust for life. A sixth-century BC figurine from Amathus on Cyprus incarnates a bearded Aphrodite – suggesting she also represented the power of sexuality in diverse forms. She was primarily, for the ancients, the goddess of mix is, of mixing things up. A deity who helped humans negotiate the complex, beautiful, bewildering business of living together.

But the goddess of love never shook off that early association with violence and sex. When the Romans adopted Aphrodite they officially combined her with their ancient fertility goddess Venus to become a martial creature. Caesar wore a ring emblazoned with the goddess and Roman generals would make sacrifices to Venus before battle. Increasingly, Venus-Aphrodite was portrayed armed. So, while painters from the Renaissance onwards used her as an excuse to put temptingly available female flesh on show (think of Botticelli’s gorgeous *The Birth of Venus* – an intellectual allegory on the nature of

neo-platonic love delivered via the image of a nude woman), the spiky charge to the words she has bequeathed us – venereal disease, aphrodisiacs, the poisoned arrows of her son Eros-Cupid, cupidity – remind us of the trouble that desire was perceived to bring.

Flintily fitting, then, that in 1914 the suffragette Mary Richardson walked into the National Gallery in London, a meat cleaver hidden in her sleeve, and slashed at the supine back of Velázquez's Rokeby Venus because she "couldn't stand the way men gaped at it all day". Aphrodite-Venus had become not a subject of adoration, but an agent of exploitation. From the moment Christian society perceived sex not as a gift of the goddess but a crime against God himself, women were believed to be the vessels of love's malign power.

Venus's life story across 5,000 years reminds us not to trivialise the power of desire: the ancients were right to never underestimate its influence. Mighty Aphrodite was often blamed in Greek myth for inspiring men to do dark deeds in the name of desire – rape, incest and adultery. Yet the ancients never discovered a remedy to treat desire's symptoms. But Venus's journey through time tracks centuries' worth of sexual anxiety and sexual prejudice – with women both victims and fall-guys. It's time to overturn a canon of art and ideas that encouraged the world to *cherchez la femme*, and which legitimised sex as an expression of power. Time to reclaim Venus's role as a catalyst of cherishing, compassionate, consensual love.