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Writing Aphrodite: Imagining a Rhetoric of Desire for a Feminist Writing Course

Cover Page Footnote

Hildy Miller is associate professor of English at Portland State University where she directs the writing program and teaches seminars in rhetoric and composition.

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Hildy Miller

For a long time it has seemed to me that much of the academic writing our students do has something missing; at its worst, it can have a sameness, a lack of feeling and aesthetic qualities, a general joylessness in its language, and a repetitiveness in its worn out discourse forms. Many of my students agree: "After you've written for a couple of years, you get the forms—introduction, ideas, and conclusion. That's all you can really do. . . . I always read a page and think, 'God, this is really boring.'" Another one characterized her academic writing as "conveyer-belt" papers. She preferred the first drafts that she habitually concealed from teachers: "I like to save my first drafts because I find them interesting. I don't think teachers would share my appreciation of them!"¹ Certainly, we have a contemporary tradition of varying academic writing, which can potentially enliven it, beginning perhaps in 1980 with the insights of Winston Weathers. Since then, rhetorical scholars have retheorized a place for style in the classroom (Johnson, *Rhetoric*; Johnson and Pace; Williams), proposed alternative discourses (Bishop; Bridwell-Bowles; Starkey), revalorized personal writing (Harris; Holdstein and Bleich; Nash; Spigelman), rethought the role of emotion in writing (Brand; Davis; Jacobs and Micciche; McLeod), and revised historical views of western discourse so that it appears far less logocentric than it once did (Glenn; Jarratt; Poulakos). However, very little of this work has actually transferred to the average college classroom.

What's more, I have also noticed the continuing difficulties that many women students have in doing academic writing and participating in the writing classroom. Cultural feminists such as Cixous and Clement, Irigaray, Lorde, hooks, and Daly once theorized alternative discourses that drew on women's ways of knowing as a means both to enable women to speak and write more fully and to rebalance a discourse gendered male. Of course, feminist theorists (and rhetorical theorists) were not the only ones attempting to describe alternative rhetorics. Diane P. Freedman summarizes a confluence of similar propositions:

[B]lurred or mixed genre texts have been "produced and theorized by feminists, deconstructors, French psychoanalytic critics, reader-response critics, and composition teachers, not to mention past poet-critics from Sir Phillip Sidney and Walt Whitman to W.E.B. Du Bois, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson

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¹Quotations from students come from interviews conducted for "Design for Writing: Image and Metaphor in Cognitive Processes of Writing." They have given me permission to cite their responses anonymously.

along with anthropologists Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, Renato Rosaldo, George Marcus.” (Freedman, *Alchemy* 83 qtd. in Freedman, “Life” 204)

But these cultural feminists were concerned not just with changing discourse forms, but with nothing less than transforming the way we conceive writing, writers, teachers, and writing classrooms. These scholars, each in her own way, called for a feminist rhetoric of desire to transform existing writing practices.

Subsequent scholars, including Susan Kirtley, Kerry Burch, and Jim Garrison, have echoed their call—mythologizing that rhetoric of desire—by identifying Eros as a missing but powerful force in the classroom. Kirtley, drawing on Plato’s *Symposium*, hypothesizes Eros as a daimon who acts as a messenger between gods and people and who facilitates erotic exchange between people; he represents dialogue, movement, and the involvement of the passions (60-61). She says, “I like to think that Diotima had it right all those years ago, and that if we are willing to mindfully embrace eros in our classrooms, it will guide us to traverse boundaries, coming to a place where wisdom leads to desire” (66).

However, for women in a feminist writing classroom, it seems to me that the mythical figure of Eros might not be so apt a choice to stand for a rhetoric of desire to balance academic writing, since, in Eros, desire is gendered male. According to Gisela Labouvie-Vief, in her study of the role of mythos in cognitive development, early on, Eros was appropriated by masculinist values. A masculine erotic of “phallic intrusion” supplanted a feminine erotic of desire and connection. She goes on to say: “The fact that historically Eros became associated with desire is interesting in itself, since it indicates that neither the Greeks nor most of subsequent Western intellectual tradition acknowledged female passion and desire as a positive principle” (31). Nor can the writer’s Muse, as she is currently figured, be of much help to women writers. Like Eros, she inspires creativity—beautiful verbal expression, access to feelings, and a physical sense of well-being. But, the Muse, as Toni Wolff characterizes her, is a hetaera or “a sexual and spiritual confidante to a man” (Woolger and Woolger 142). She is illusory and quixotic; at one moment, she may appear as an inspiring projection onto a mundane woman, while, at another, she may refuse to appear at all when most needed. Though at least she is female, whereas Eros is not, the Muse is traditionally defined by her service to men, so it is hard to imagine how women writers could commune with her unless she were radically reinterpreted.

That is why I have long been intrigued with the possibilities of the goddess feminist interpretation of the myth of Aphrodite and wondered if she might not be used to address that missing element in academic writing by personifying a feminist rhetoric of desire. In order to recover this goddess, is it necessary to step back into an older cultural feminist paradigm little used nowadays.

Reclaiming Aphrodite from Past Feminist Theories

From the late 1970s through the early 1990s, cultural feminists in many fields were exploring the ramifications of the then-current concept of gender as a binary construct consisting of “male” and “female” sides. The masculine (or masculinist) was seen as the better known and more valued dominant side of the binary with the feminine (or feminist) side likely to be either denigrated and distorted or unknown and suppressed. Much of the cultural feminist project of

the time elucidated the feminine by identifying and often celebrating its “difference.” It was in that era of feminist thought that “goddess feminists” were particularly prolific; they retold myths—often theorized from a feminist Jungian perspective—of goddesses who embodied energies that redeemed and revalued the feminine side of the binary in some way. Among the many books on goddesses, which were particularly influential when written in the 1980s, and which are still read today, are Sylvia Perrera’s *Descent of the Goddess*, Christine Downing’s *The Goddess*, Marion Woodman’s *The Pregnant Virgin*, Nancy Quallis-Corbett’s *The Sacred Prostitute*, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford’s *The Myth of the Goddess*, and Jean Shinoda Bolen’s *Goddesses in Everywoman*.

This extraordinary flowering of interest in goddesses in that feminist period has been viewed, in retrospect, as resulting from the impact of matriarchal prehistory theories, which were then in circulation. Though the notion of an idyllic matriarchy had appeared over the years from time to time in accounts by such figures as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sir James George Frazer, it was the publication of Merlin Stone’s *When God Was a Woman* and the claims of folklorist and anthropologist Marija Gimbutas during the 1970s that seemed to trigger immense interest in the subject (Eller 32). Cynthia Eller explains the connection between the two: “Goddess worship itself is sometimes taken as a shorthand for matriarchal myth: goddesses are proof of matriarchy, reminders of it, and calls to recreate it” (36). Such ancient Camelot-like matriarchies held enormous appeal, in part, because they contrasted with the bleak political situation of the day. Then, as now, there was an apocalyptic sense that, culturally and politically, we were coming to the end of a cycle. This cycle was viewed as patriarchal and seen as tilted too far to the qualities coded as “male” in the gender binary. Therefore, matriarchy “was a myth that, however recently created, wielded tremendous psychological and spiritual power,” since its values might save western culture at its eleventh hour (5).

Moreover, explorations of goddess myths made it possible to hear what cultural feminists would call women’s “different voice.” As Susan Rowland explains, “In goddess feminism, the metaphysical feminine principle is mapped onto pre-Christian-mythologies in order to seek out non-patriarchal narratives and ways of thinking” (61). For post-Jungian goddess feminists, these myths could be used to repolarize the human psyche (Woolger and Woolger 148). As they saw it, if “masculine” and “feminine” stand metaphorically for opposing binary values—passive and active, love and war, light and dark, Eros and Logos, and so on—then, ideally, both must coexist consciously in ever changing dynamic tension. But if one of the polarities is repressed—submerged and trapped in the unconscious—eventually, the imbalance must right itself, perhaps violently, when what is repressed explodes into conscious awareness. Walter A. Shelburne describes the process: “The unconscious supplies contents that compensate the conscious attitude by representing features of the person’s total situation which are overlooked, repressed, or undervalued by the conscious personality” (60). This rebalancing process, then, was thought to apply both to individuals and to entire cultures; contemplating powerful myths and archetypal images and thereby developing “recessive potentials” was key to undertaking any creative effort (Lauter and Rupprecht, “A Proposal” 221). James Hollis describes the imagistic process by which it was said to occur: “Underneath these cultural splits, the archetypal imagination seeks, through affectively charged images, to connect us to the flow

of energy that is the heart and hum of the cosmos" (10). Parting company with Jung, post-Jungian feminists saw goddess myths and figures simply as "recurrent images, symbols, and narrative patterns rather than as transcendent absolutes" (Pratt, "Spinning" 107) or as "categories to contain women" (Lauter and Rupprecht, "Introduction" 7). Goddess myths, in fact, were seen as potentially helpful not only to women but also to men; for everyone, "raising the unconscious" was a major priority (Lauter and Rupprecht, "A Proposal" 231).

Such mythical forays may seem foolishly romantic, idealistic, and theoretically dated today. As Rowland says, "Goddess feminism is not fashionable in today's capitalist, materialist, non-religious culture" (62). A bigger problem for many of today's academic feminists are the tenets of cultural feminism which underwrote it. Many postmodern feminists now find the very notion of gender constructed as a binary of "male" and "female" an essentialist assumption that ignores a wider spectrum of gender possibilities. Further, in the contemporary postmodern view, to explore women's "difference," unwittingly reinforces the binary and, thus, all the attendant oppression associated with "female" qualities. And, finally, much of the purpose for exploring goddesses is rooted in Jungian theory, and, for many postmodern feminists, Jung remains a problematic figure. Rowland sums up the most common objections: "Jung's reductive and misogynistic language, the slippage of gender into biological sex and the equation of women, the feminine, Eros and diffuse consciousness" (67).

I share some of the *theoretical* reservations about the underlying binary of cultural feminism, both in itself and in the way it is used to support post-Jungian feminist interpretations of goddess myths. Certainly, our contemporary constructions of gender as more fluid and less essentialist than was previously thought provide a more complex and nuanced basis for theorizing. And I too sometimes flinch at Jung's more misogynistic and essentialist statements. But I am less inclined than some scholars simply to reject all this material entirely and prefer instead to extract what still might be of use. As I have said, my experiences with my own classes (and in working with faculty with their classes) have convinced me that, *in practice*, much of the academic writing our students do can still aptly be described as lopsidedly "masculinist." And many women students, in particular, continue to struggle with academic writing and the academic classroom as it is currently figured. So it is from this older feminist tradition that I have extracted an interpretation of the function of Aphrodite in order to mythologize a feminist rhetoric of desire.

Aphrodite is, after all, a figure of mythological significance: "Aphrodite is a goddess born of the sea; she is primeval, oceanic in her feminine power" (Johnson, *She* 3). The post-Jungian feminist interpretation of her birth myth goes as follows: For years the sky god Ouranos oppressed his wife, family, and kingdom by brutally suppressing "feminine" energy in many ways. Most notably, he tried thrusting his wife Gaia's children back into her womb in a forceful attempt to deny feminine creation and procreation. Eventually, with the feminine principle so suppressed, the masculine principle increased until it was so out of balance that it turned destructive. Hence, Kronos, the son of Ouranos, whirled on his father in a destructive range and castrated him. Kronos' genitals, flung into the sea, were instantly transformed into the goddess Aphrodite, who then re-introduced to his kingdom the missing feminine qualities of love, desire, laughter, beauty, and human connectedness.

Woolger and Woolger remark, that, inevitably, this myth “also means that the patriarchy cannot hope to control the essentially expansive nature of feminine energy. Suppress the fecundity of the earth (Gaia), and it will spring up again in time (Kronos) as joyful erotic energy (Aphrodite)” (148). It is these qualities, as they appear in Aphrodite, rather than in Eros or the Muse, which post-Jungian feminists might say could transform “phallogocentric” writing, figured as the severed genitals of Kronos, into something more balanced and whole.

Certainly, Aphrodite has accrued much power over the years, if, as Jung believed, some archetypal images become more energized from widespread use (Myss 8). Even so, at first glance, she is an unusual female image to associate with writing. The more likely feminine image might be Minerva, the scholarly woman who speaks and writes in measured tones. Or patient Griselda, the good girl who plods along trying to please her readers, might be a less attractive but more common image (Bolker). Perera concurs: “In the West, women have too often been defined only in relation to the masculine as the good, nurturant mother and wife, the sweet, docile, agreeable daughter, the gently supportive or bright, achieving partner” (“Inanna” 141). Aphrodite, however, is not known for her goodness, her diligence, or her scholarly interests. On the contrary, she stands for the most audacious creativity and can therefore serve as an image for a feminist rhetoric of desire.

How Aphrodite Presided Over My Feminist Writing Class

It was with Aphrodite’s myth in mind that I developed a feminist writing class in which fifteen students, all women from a variety of majors, read feminist theories of writing and wrote several papers. In cultural feminist fashion, we were trying to balance out learned approaches to writing with new ones. For us, Aphrodite became a kind of presiding mythical figure, giving us a shared sense of understanding or purpose. We were a group that truly “constellated on an archetypal image”; that is, everything we did referred back to her in some way, in order to do our exploratory work with writing (Gray 203). The sections that follow highlight the qualities that made Aphrodite such a powerful image for what we were trying to do by using examples of student writing from the course.²

Beauty and Style in Writing

Aphrodite is, most of all, the goddess of beauty. The pleasure she takes in finery and ornamentation is well known. She wears precious jewelry and the most sensual of clothes—all of which enhance her natural beauty. As a result, she is much admired by everyone who sees her. Such an emphasis on the creation and appreciation of beauty suggests attention to style in writing. Throughout much of the rhetorical mainstream in the twentieth century, what was once considered style became mostly a matter of adhering to set discourse forms and following grammatical and stylistic conventions. Even the once-revolutionary process movement did little to change this perception when it conflated style with “surface correctness” and “mechanics,” thereby replicating an earlier rhetorical attitude of abhorring ornamentation in language. Nor has most of the contempo-

²Examples of texts come from papers submitted by students in a course on feminist writing. They have given me permission to quote their work anonymously.

rary social epistemic movement reconciled it with the rest of writing and rhetoric in any meaningful way. Though scholars have rethought both the role of style and the shape of traditional discourse, my students tell me they have seldom experienced these theoretical innovations in their assigned writing. Candace Spigelman agrees: “[T]his ‘blended genre’ is starting to appear in our professional literature, although it has not made its way into many college classrooms” (2-3). Instead, many seem to be left feeling as one student did who explained forlornly to me how she truncated any stylistic inclinations in order to meet the demands of the academy: “And then I cut out all those wonderful words that I love so much.”

In the feminist writing class, we explored different possibilities for exercising stylistic options. For example, one student writing an essay about the pressures of college chose to organize her paper by returning cyclically to the word “college,” placed in bold print before each section detailing the stresses:

College. A time of stress, a sense of recklessness as I work to make ends meet, struggle to keep up with assignments, papers, due dates, due dates, due dates. Always changing, always lagging over your head, keeping your mind in a constant frenzy, rarely able to relax. So many aspects of your life pulling you in every direction, everyone, everything demanding your undivided attention.

College. A campus full of nameless faces, racing in every direction, lines of worry sketched upon foreheads as thoughts of grades, classes, money and lack of it, schedules, GPAs, tuition, flash through them mirroring my own thoughts. As I cut across campus, on my way to yet another class full of due dates and a teacher who seems to be under the impression that this is the only class I am taking this semester, an acute sense of stress finds [its] way along my spine until it creeps into my head, splitting it apart with a pulsing ache.

College. Full of time consuming projects that seem to continue, to pile up, in a snowball effect, one after the other. Two tests tomorrow, one on Wednesday, another on Friday.

The stylistic choices this student made—using one descriptive clause after another to suggest the pressures literally multiplying and piling up, before she returns again to the concept of “college” and relentlessly repeating the word to suggest a mind returning to an obsessive thought—are stylistic options usually found in creative or nonfiction writing. Here, they function effectively not simply as stylistic ornaments, but as ways of substantively shaping the meaning of her essay.

Writing as Pleasure

Aphrodite, as the goddess of pleasure, enjoys life and is always ready to laugh. One of Homer’s epithets for her is, in fact, “laughter-lover” (Friedrich 60). Her many romantic entanglements with Ares, Adonis, Hephaistos, and others and the many tricks she engineers, such as influencing Helen of Troy to seduce Paris, are for her a source of amusement. Rhetorical scholar D. Diane Davis theorizes a joyful and uninhibited rhetoric in which laughter is key to resisting patriarchal discourse. However, in the academic work our students do,

writing is too often a solemn endeavor instead. Peter Elbow illustrates the way many instructors regard student attempts at wit:

In a workshop with teachers not long ago I was struck with how angry many teachers got at a piece of student writing. It was not particularly good (it was about falling asleep while writing an assigned essay and waking up on a Greek island with ‘topless maidens’), but what infuriated these teachers was not really the mediocre quality but that the writer said in a piece of process writing that most people in his group liked it. I sensed resentment against the most basic impulses that are involved in being a writer: to have fun telling a story and to give pleasure to others. (“Reflections” 136)

In my writing class, students experimented with integrating humor of all sorts into serious pieces. One student, for example, wrote an essay on why she disliked poetry, ironically fashioning her opening “thesis” into the shape of a poem:

*Supposedly Poetry is a luxury for those
who read it.
My opinion of poetry is that it is hard
to need it.
Such metaphors and similes are only best
For avoiding reality and leaving out
the rest.
Poetry is only inspiring to [those] who
wrote it.
And for those that read it and do not
understand
It is hard to interpret just what the
author has planned.
I am confused and curious at the idea of
a poem.
Maybe they are too deep for me or not
deep enough.
But using a few words for a complex thought
is tough.
That was my attempt to explain why I do not like poetry, which
was written in poetic form. It is ironic and nonsensical, just
like poetry in general, right?*

Her essay went on to point out the problems she saw in poetry and to raise serious objections to it, yet throughout she retained an irreverent tone. In fact, it was a daring paper for her to write for an English professor, given its stance. Laughter—and humor, in general—is typically reserved for people who are socially powerful, and not encouraged in others, such as women or students, for instance, who are likely less powerful. Yet laughter is associated not only with power but with creativity, for humor loosens up the mind to become its most inventive; so the women in my class often laced their essays with humorous insights or commentary.

Writing from Bodily Experience

Aphrodite symbolizes the feminine erotic experience—both in the sense of “procreation and verbal creation” (Bolen 233). One of her many magical acts was to bring to life an ivory statue of the perfect woman sculpted by Pygmalion (236). What was for Pygmalion an abstract lifeless ideal, became, under Aphrodite’s influence, the real flesh-and-blood woman, Galatea. Aphrodite is the principle of transformation with the power to make the inanimate animate by the force of her creative energy. Indeed, much of the feminist enterprise during the cultural feminist era was to humanize what had been made mechanical (Goldenberg). “Writing the body” and writing from personal experience, both grounded experientially in the senses, are still concepts at odds with much contemporary academic writing in practice. Though the bodily nature of writing has been explored (Brand; Ochsner; Perl) and personal writing has been theorized into academic writing (e.g. Harris; Holdstein and Bleich; Nash; Spiegelman), my students tell me that they have rarely encountered either concept in their courses. In our class, they often chose to render bodily experience into words. For example, one student told a story about intervening in a cat fight only to be attacked herself by the animal:

His beautiful blue eyes bulged with rage. He stared right through me. I had become prey. . . . His invincible jaws clamped down on my right hand, embedding his fangs in my tender flesh. Every muscle in my legs forced my body upward in [an] attempt to flee from the pain. However, upon standing, I discovered that the source of this agony remained attached to me, suspended from my hand. What had previously been my poor helpless kitty was transformed into a demon. . . .

My left hand kept a steady grip over the wound. A surge of nauseousness arose in my stomach. The pain began to creep down into my fingertips and up into my shoulders. I decided that I had better go inside.

The entire paper, in fact, described the physical effects of the attack and its aftermath. Not just a personal experience, her paper was insistent in its focus on actual physicality. Like this student, many women in the course wrote about their bodies, including experiences of physical abuse, menstrual problems, and rape. The bodily experiences they rendered so visibly were not always positive, but, more often, physical violations that they had survived. Their bodies were shown not as ideal objects to be acted upon, but as flesh-and-blood, both vulnerable and strong.

Writing from a Stance of Love and Connection

Aphrodite is the goddess of love, and, as such, values the human relationships she so magnetically attracts. Many of her connections are sexual liaisons, but these by no means represent her entire scope. It has been said of her: “Above all, Aphrodite wants relationships to be loving, whether they be amicable, social, physical, or spiritual. Relationships where there is *heart*” (Woolger and Woolger 136). She reaches out to others by listening empathically—recognizing conflicts but sidestepping them with her tolerance, understanding, and appreciation of human differences. This temperate stance suggests the sort of rhetor-audience relationship that some cultural feminists once advocated as an

alternative to the traditional model of forceful persuasion (Gearhart; Meisenhelder). Here, too, rhetoric scholars have proposed other forms of argument—Rogerian argument, for example. However, again, students tell me they have not experienced these alternatives. Under Aphrodite’s influence, rather than developing stratagems for disproving an opponent’s position, a writer might flow empathically in and out of different views, though still retaining her own. Within Aphrodite’s fluid model of connection, a writer can be simultaneously solitary and still united with others.

Two students in the class explored differences in their views of how to reconcile their religious background with their emerging feminist political awareness. One wrote:

For Angela, it is OK to disagree with the Church on such issues and still maintain your faith. She likens it to voting for a politician. Even though you might not agree with him or her on all issues, you can still think they are the best person for the job. She thinks of these as mere side issues, not something to abandon your faith in the Church as a whole over. For some reason she has been [able] to maintain peace with her own ideas, and still be a part of the Church. Maybe it’s because while she agrees with me that there are many conflicts in the Church that need changing, she feels this change should come from the inside. She is willing to be patient as the change comes “a little at a time.” An admirable quality, indeed, as long as the change is taking place. But in the two decades we’ve been caught in this cycle, I have not seen that change, and I’ve lost my patience.

The two writers disagreed, but demonstrated that they understood and respected one another’s point of view.

Writing Classroom as a Salon

Aphrodite charms and captivates and reflects positive images of everyone she encounters. Those who fall under her spell find themselves magically able to accomplish far more than they had imagined. Cultural feminists once posited a feminist pedagogy in which an instructor is figured as a mother, a nurturer of students. In contrast, Aphrodite offers a different kind of encouragement to others (Wehr 32). As Johnson characterizes this capacity: “Aphrodite is the principle of mirroring every experience back into our consciousness. As man is occupied with expansion and exploration and finding that which is new, Aphrodite is reflecting and mirroring and assimilating” (*She* 4). Whereas mothering contains an inherent imbalance of power between teacher and student, Aphrodite runs her classroom and responds to writing from a position of a knowledgeable and empathetic equal. Peer writing groups, too, can model after Aphrodite. In the ancient world, a woman might be a “femme inspiratrice” to men (Woolger and Woolger 142). In the writing groups in our course, students transformed this one-way inspiration into mutual encouragement for one another’s writing. Of course, Elbow has theorized a similar form of response through “the believing game,” in which readers are totally receptive rather than critical (*Writing* 270-72). But my students tell me that they have not experienced this kind of receptivity in most of their writing classes. Our feminist writing class

wound up becoming a kind of salon in which we celebrated the beauty of one another's writing efforts.

Conclusions: Aphrodite and a Feminist Rhetoric of Desire

Goddess feminists tried to reclaim Aphrodite by reinterpreting the sacred significance of her erotic qualities. In the tradition they were resisting, Aphrodite was denigrated, seen as a debased woman, whore, or harlot. She fell into this state, Pratt claims, because "[a]n integrated feminine self, particularly when it includes full-fledged Eros, is frightening to society" ("Spinning" 103). Yet, it is particularly those female images reinforcing negative cultural stereotypes that should be transformed (Lauter and Rupprecht, "Introduction" 14). And, for Pratt, this particular goddess is an especially important one to reclaim. She says, "Aphrodite's interbraiding of immanence, spirituality, and sensual and political powers in a holistic paradigm of feminine possibility endows her archetype with an integrative feminist empowerment" (Pratt, *Dancing* 119). In connection with writing, goddess feminist interpretations of Aphrodite's birth myth suggest that invoking her can heal dismembered masculinist discourse. The objective of such a change would not be "Logos-bashing" (Labouvie-Vief 269), but rather a rebalancing of Logos and Eros and a reintegration of masculinist and feminist discourses.

For my students, the course Aphrodite inspired helped them to break out of previous constraints, to experiment with new discourse forms, and to try out new voices in a new pedagogical space. For me, she provided an alternative image to the cultural feminist "teacher-as-mother" and a different stance toward students and their writing. Aphrodite enabled more of the sort of "erotic exchange" that Kirtley identified with Eros: "There is an intimate, alluring element in the composing process—isn't writing an attempt to seduce readers, to entice them to see and feel the world as you wish them to?" (65). So, as I have asserted, I think today's women students may still benefit from a feminist writing class grounded in the cultural feminist conception of discourse as a binary gendered male and female, in which qualities associated with the feminine side are foregrounded.

Why step back into this previous feminist approach? I think that if we could track how feminist awareness happens in our women students today, we would discover that it is a developmental process. Women may pass through stages of awareness, though in no particular order, very like those that feminism collectively has passed through in recent decades. At various times students may construct feminism through a media stereotype such as bra-burning; as a matter of fundamental equality; as an experience of sisterly solidarity perhaps through consciousness-raising; as a suppressed social and cognitive alternative to a patriarchy out of balance; as valorizing "difference"; as foregrounding the identity marker "woman" out of other markers such as race, class, or sexuality; as a matter of performing one's gender; as a matter of constructing gender as a spectrum of possibilities rather than as a binary; as "power feminism" rather than "victim feminism"; and on and on. Any one of these constructions can serve what bell hooks calls "an important stage in the liberation process" (qtd. in Lloyd 63). For that reason, it seems important not to narrowly reject the insights of feminisms past, to make "straw feminist[s]" out of them (Rhodes 10). Rather, for pedagogical purposes, we can continue selectively to make use of them all. In that spirit, reaching back to goddess feminism, with its "opportunities for feminine fictions

of empowerment and agency” (Rowland 68)—and particularly calling up the figure of Aphrodite—can still provide an antidote to academic discourse as it appears in practice and an evocative image for an alternative rhetoric of desire in a contemporary feminist writing classroom. ☞

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