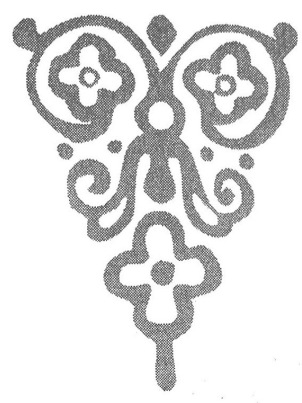


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# CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

SEVENTH EDITION



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love of God that pervades all serious religious devotion. Aristotle too thinks in Platonic terms when he describes his god as the unmoved mover, the final cause in the universe, who moves as a beloved moves the lover.

How far we have come from the traditional depiction of Eros as the handsome young athlete who attends Aphrodite! Even more remote is the image that later evolved of Eros as Cupid, a chubby mischievous little darling with wings and a bow and arrow. He still attends Aphrodite; and although the wounds he inflicts can inspire a passion that is serious and even deadly, too often he becomes little more than the cute and frivolous deus ex machina of romantic love.

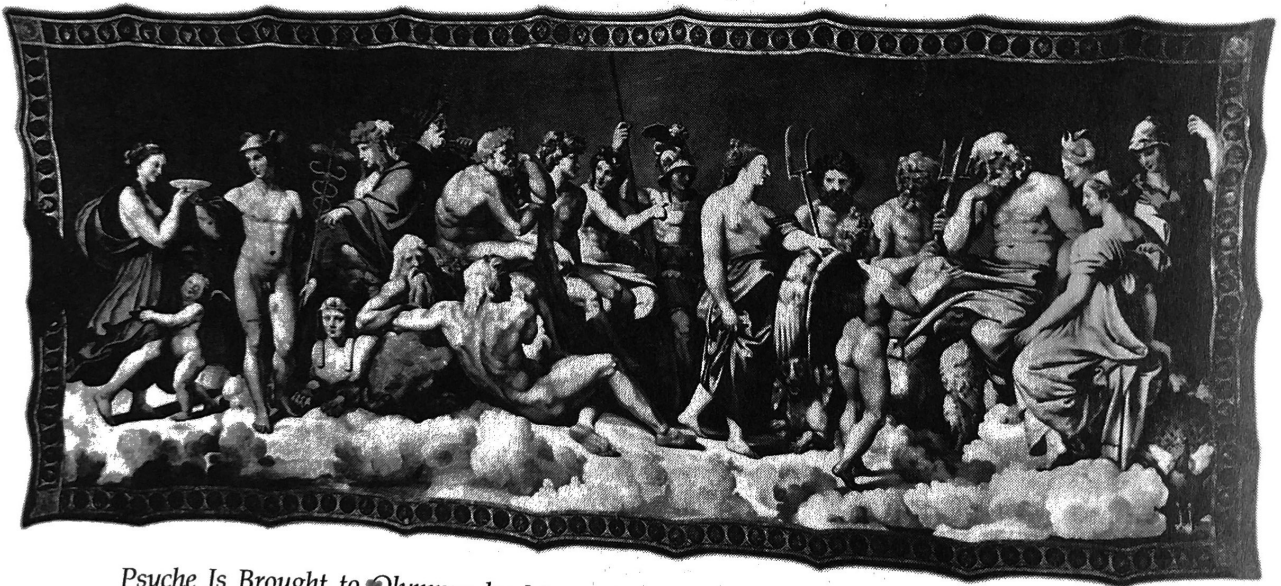
### CUPID AND PSYCHE

Finally, the story of Cupid and Psyche remains to be told. It is given its classic form by Apuleius, a Roman author of the second century A.D., in his novel *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass* (4. 28–6. 24). One's first impressions about a tale uniting Cupid (or Eros) with Psyche ("Soul") should inevitably be Platonic; but whatever philosophical profundities, Platonic or otherwise, have been detected in Apuleius' allegory, popular and universal motifs common to mythology in general and folktale, fairy tale, and romance in particular emerge with striking clarity: for example, the mysterious bridegroom, the taboo of identification, the hostile mother figure, the jealous sisters, the heroine's forgetfulness, the impo-

sition of impossible labors accomplished with divine assistance—among them descent into the very realm of Hades—and the triumph of romantic love. In this tale, which begins “Once upon a time” and ends “happily ever after,” Cupid appears as a handsome young god with wings. Here is a summary of Apuleius’ version.<sup>16</sup>

Once upon a time, a certain king and queen had three daughters, of whom Psyche, the youngest, was by far the most fair. In fact many believed that she was Venus reincarnated and paid her such adulation that the goddess became outraged. And so Venus ordered her son Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with the most base and vile of mankind; instead, Cupid himself fell in love with Psyche. Psyche’s inferior sisters had easily found husbands, but Psyche remained unmarried since she was admired by all with the awe that is inspired by divinity. Her father suspected that a god’s wrath was responsible. He consulted Apollo, who demanded that Psyche be decked out like a corpse and placed on a mountaintop to be wed by a terrifying serpent.

Therefore, Psyche, amid the rites of a funeral for a living bride, was left on a mountaintop to meet a fate that she finally accepted with resignation. Psyche fell into a deep sleep, and the gentle breezes of Zephyrus wafted her down to a beautiful valley. When she awoke, she entered a magnificent palace, where her every wish was taken care of. And when Psyche went to bed, an anonymous



*Psyche Is Brought to Olympus by Mercury*, by Raphael (1483–1520) and assistants. Fresco, 1518. This is the eastern half of the fresco painted on the vault of the loggia of the Villa Farnesina, which is sixty feet long. The other half shows the wedding banquet. Both scenes closely follow the narrative of Apuleius. Here Mercury introduces Psyche on the left, while the assembled gods attend as Jupiter, on the right, judges Cupid, to whose left stands Venus. Around Jupiter are (from the right) Minerva, Juno, Diana, and Neptune. The fresco was designed to give the illusion of a tapestry. (Palazzo della Farnesina, Rome. Courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource, New York.)

bridegroom visited her, only to depart quickly before sunrise. Thus Psyche spent her days—and her nights—in the palace.

Meanwhile, her sisters set out in search of her; but her mysterious husband continually warned her not to respond to them when they approached. Alone in her prison all day, Psyche besought her husband each night to allow her to see her sisters and give them gold and jewels. He finally consented on the condition that she must not, despite her sisters' urgings, try to learn his identity. When the sisters arrived and interrogated her, Psyche kept her secret—although she did say that her husband was a very handsome young man.

The sisters returned home with the riches that Psyche had given them, but in their hearts they nursed an all-consuming jealousy. The mysterious bridegroom warned Psyche of her sisters' treachery: their purpose was to persuade her to look upon his face; if she did so, she would never see him again. He also told her that she was pregnant, and if she kept their secret, their child would be divine; if she did not, it would be mortal. Nevertheless, he granted Psyche's appeal to see her sisters once again. In answer to their questions, Psyche revealed that she was pregnant. The sisters once again returned home laden with gifts, but more jealous than ever; they now suspected that Psyche's lover must be a god and her expected child divine.

The evil sisters visited Psyche a third time; this time they told her that her husband really was the monstrous serpent of the oracle and that she would be devoured when the time of her pregnancy was completed. Psyche was horrified and, believing that she was sleeping with the monster, forgot the warnings of her husband and took her sisters' advice. She was to hide a sharp knife and a burning lamp; when the monster was asleep, she was to slash it in the neck.

In anguish, Psyche made her preparations; in the night her husband made love to her and then fell asleep. As she raised the lamp, knife in hand, she saw the sweet, gentle, and beautiful Cupid. Overcome by the sight, her first impulse was to take her own life, but this she was unable to do. Spellbound by Cupid's beauty, she gazed at his lovely wings and fondled the bow and quiver that lay at the foot of their bed; she pricked her thumb on one of the arrows and drew blood. Overcome by desire, she kissed her husband passionately. Alas, the lamp dropped oil on the god's right shoulder. Cupid leaped out of bed and attempted to fly away at once; Psyche caught hold of his right leg and soared aloft with him, but her strength gave way and she fell to earth. Before flying away, Cupid admonished her from a nearby cypress: he had ignored Venus' command, he said, and had taken her as his love; he had warned her; his flight was penalty enough; and her sisters would pay for what they had done.

Psyche attempted to commit suicide by throwing herself in a nearby river; but the gentle stream brought her safely to its bank. She was advised by Pan to forget her grief and win back Cupid's love. In her wanderings, she came to the very city where one of her sisters lived. Psyche told her sister what had happened, but added that Cupid would marry the sister if she hastened to his side.

The sister called on Zephyrus to carry her from a mountaintop to Cupid's palace, but as she leaped into the air she fell and perished on the rocks below. Psyche then found her way to her other sister, who died in the same manner.

Psyche wandered in search of Cupid. He lay in his mother's bedroom, moaning because of his burn; Venus, learning of what had happened, rushed to her son's side, berated him for his behavior, and vowed revenge. In a rage, Venus left to pursue Psyche, but eventually abandoned her search. She approached Jupiter, who agreed to send Mercury to make a public proclamation for the capture of Psyche. When she was brought before Venus, the goddess denounced and abused her. In addition Venus imposed upon the poor girl a series of impossible tasks.

First, Psyche was ordered to sort out before nightfall a vast heap of mixed grains (wheat, barley, and the like). In this endeavor, an ant came to her rescue and summoned his army to isolate each different grain.

The next day Venus ordered Psyche to go to a riverbank where dangerous sheep with thick golden fleeces grazed and to bring back some of their wool. This time, a reed murmured instructions. She was to wait until the sheep had stopped their frenzied wandering under the blazing sun; and when they had lain down to rest, she was to shake from the trees under which they passed the woolly gold clinging richly to the branches. And so she accomplished the task. Still not satisfied, Venus ordered Psyche to go to the top of a high mountain, from which dark water flowed—water that ultimately fed the Underworld stream of Cocytus. Psyche was to bring back a jar filled with this chill water; among the terrors to be faced was a dragon. The eagle of Jupiter swooped down and filled the jar for Psyche.

Angrier now than ever, Venus imposed the ultimate task—descent into the realm of Hades. Psyche was ordered to take a box to Persephone and ask her to send back in it a fragment of her own beauty. In despair, Psyche decided to throw herself off a high tower. But the tower spoke to her and gave her specific directions to the Underworld and instructions about what she was and was not to do. Among the stipulations was that she provide herself with sops to mollify Cerberus and money to pay the ferryman Charon. Most important, the tower warned Psyche not to look into the box. Psyche did everything that she had been told, but she could not resist looking into the box. Inside the box was not beauty but the sleep of the dark night of the Underworld; by this deathlike sleep Psyche was enveloped.

By now cured of his burn, Cupid flew to Psyche's rescue. He put sleep back into the box and reminded Psyche that her curiosity once again had gotten the better of her. She was to go and complete her task. Cupid then appealed to Jupiter, who agreed to ratify his marriage with Psyche; since Psyche was made one of the immortals, Venus was appeased. Here is how Apuleius describes the glorious wedding feast on Olympus that marked the happy ending of the story of Cupid and Psyche (*Metamorphoses* 6. 23–24):

Immediately a wedding feast appeared. The bridegroom took the highest place, embracing Psyche. So Jupiter with his own Juno took his place and then, in order, the other gods. Then Jupiter's cupbearer, the shepherd boy Ganymede, brought him a cup of nectar, the wine of the gods, and Bacchus gave nectar to the others. Vulcan cooked the feast; the Hours decorated everything with roses and other flowers. The Graces sprinkled the scent of balsam, and the Muses played and sang. Apollo sang to the cithara and Venus danced in all her beauty to the music; the tableau was so fitting for her that the Muses accompanied her with choral odes or played upon the tibia; a satyr and Pan played the pipes.

So, with all due ceremony, Psyche was married to Cupid and, in due time, a daughter was born to them, whom we call Pleasure (*Voluptas*).

### SAPPHO'S APHRODITE

It is impossible to survey the mythological concepts of love without including the poetic vision of Sappho, the lyric poetess of love from the island of Lesbos. Only a little of her work has survived, but the critical acclaim for her artistry glows undiminished. We know practically nothing with certainty about her life and career. She was devoted to Aphrodite and to the young women with whom she was associated. But we cannot even confidently speak about a cult of the goddess, and her relations with her loved ones can legitimately be imagined only from the meager remains of her poetry. Her circle has been interpreted as everything from a finishing school for girls in the Victorian manner to a hotbed of sensuality. From Sappho comes the term *lesbian* and the association of Aphrodite with lesbian love.

In a fervent and moving poem she calls on Aphrodite for help to win back the love of a young woman with whom she has been involved. Sappho's invocation to Aphrodite has real meaning for us in this context because it illustrates beautifully the passionate intensity that infuses so much of Greek art within the disciplined control of artistic form. It reminds us too of the sincerity of the conception of the goddess that was possible in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Too often our sensibilities are numbed by the later artificial and conventional stereotypes to which the gods are reduced, once all genuine belief is gone. There can be no question about the intense reality of Aphrodite in the following lines.

Exquisitely enthroned, immortal Aphrodite,  
 weaver of charms, child of Zeus,  
 I beg you, reverend lady,  
 do not crush my heart  
 with sickness and distress.  
 But come to me here,  
 if ever once before you heard  
 my cry from afar and listened  
 and, leaving your father's house,  
 yoked your chariot of gold.