

QUEERING MUSEUM. Part 1: *The Sarcophagus*

by Denis Maksimov

Performed by the mediators and educators for the public at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek Museum in Copenhagen on August 15, 2019

This object represents the life path of Dionysus, the son of Zeus and mortal woman Semele. Dionysus is referred in ancient literature as 'thrice-born': as he, beyond his birth, was resurrected according to some sources two times from the dead. The image of Dionysus in mythology and especially in following it appropriations in monotheistic religions such as Christianity is a question of the hot debate. Look at the face and appearance of the Dionysus - does he remind you someone? Some hints: Dionysus was described as well-built, but effeminate in appearance young man, tender and beautiful, with long curly hair and sometimes accurate beard and moustache. In fact, the resemblance of physical appearance of Dionysus and Jesus is striking - especially if you compare the imagery produced in the early ages of Christianity. There is a strong evidence to claim that Jesus' character is based on Dionysus: the similarities in rebirth, sacrifice and all-loving nature of the god are omnipresent. But a lot of taken away: Dionysus multidimensional character is reduced to a simplistic dogma. Dionysus referred to as a child-god, *eriphos*, with his mortal mother being raised to the status of divine (as was Christian Mary). *Dionysus* is 'the son of god'.

The sarcophagus can be read as a book with different scenes being the chapters in it. It tells the queer story of difference of Dionysus from all the other gods and about him being representation of the multiplicity of life in all possible forms - as well as resistance of life to attempts of its destruction by 'the normality'. The latter is signified in the figure of Hera, the consort and primary wife of Zeus, whose jealousy of Semele and hatred of Dionysus as being the offspring of Zeus from mortal woman brought upon Dionysus death and oblivion.

He (or rather they?) is unusual, our we could say 'queer' god for the Olympus for many reasons. He isn't a purely immortal as his mother is mortal. He is distinctively polysexual and pansexual, gender-fluid, cross-dressing, connected closely to transgender transitions. It is strongly illustrated in Euripides tragedy "Bacchae", where effeminate appearance of the god is the centre of the plot - the repulsion of king Pentheus, who doesn't believe that a male god can be feminine, leads him to the ultimate and tragic end. The depictions of Dionysus as androgynous beauty are omnipresent in the archeological finds which are now part of the collections of National Archeological Museum in Athens and Metropolitan Museum in New York, among others.

He is a god that embraces the change over any established status quo, as opposed to the idea of everlasting stability represented in the figure of Zeus. He represents the 'life'-side of dichotomy between 'existence' and 'living' - with the first one being the continuous production of sameness and pre-established normative structures, such as a family and a state. Dionysus shared a special relationship with Athena: both are *parthenogenic* (born of the one parent's body) after Zeus' 'conquest' of their mothers. Panathenaea and Dionysia, celebrated in Athens and other poleis, were among the most important festivals of the year.

The theatre of Dionysus played the political function: being 'a moral parliament' where the challenging normality concepts could have been addressed. 'Creative madness' that had been assigned to the followers of Dionysus: such as driving women 'mad' in the sense of inspiring them to challenge the patriarchal rule of men, the maenads living in separate communes and bringing up children on their own - in fact can be seen as his gestures towards their liberation. One of the epithets of Dionysus is "the Waker of Women". In comparison to Apollo he is the democratic and pluralistic god: accessible in prayer to all, seeing beauty in all the forms of life. The coming of Dionysus and his returns symbolised

the return and possibility of restitution for the repressed, hope for the oppressed and future for the doomed.

QUEERING MUSEUM. Part 2: *Two Women*

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Several sculptures in this room depict Athena. she is the symbol and protectress of asexuality: the goddess never had official spouse or children apart of adopted by her Erechtheus (sprang from the earth after the semen of Hephaestus was shovelled by the goddess from her thigh), the mythical king of Athens. Alongside with bisexuality, asexuality is one of the most ostracised subgroups of the queer sexual identity - being attacked and prosecuted by both strict homosexual (such as gay and lesbian) and heterosexual communities as “the ones who refuse to choose” or “traitors”. It is a fluidity that is constantly being looked at with suspicion as it defies the identitarian character of the sexuality’s politicisation. The extreme ‘otherness’ of Athena and her omnipresence in the cultural and political landscape as an archetype of wisdom, knowledge, defence and protection are the vivid example of superposition of impossible: the illustration of rationality juxtaposed and coexistent with irrationality, a human with the algorithmic.

Athena sports many traditionally ‘male’ attributes of power: spear, physical strength unrivalled by male gods - Ares, Hephaestus and her uncle Poseidon are among men who tried to battle Athena unsuccessfully.

The archetype of Athena transcends the rigid borders of identifying allegiance, identity and gender.

Another woman in the hall is Aphrodite. Her mythology has to be a contested field. The more ancient version, such as Hesiod’s Theogony, present her as an aunt of Zeus instead of later versions ascribing her to be Zeus’ daughter from Dione. The queer aspect of the ancient myth presents her a child of two male beings, the first gods on the verge of cosmos and chaos: Oceanus and Ouranos. She is born out of the foam which arose after the Ouranos was castrated by his son, Zeus’ father, Kronos – in what had become the first generational change in the divine of the Ancient Greek mythology. Ouranos fallen phallus fertilised the ‘body’ of Oceanus – conceiving Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love. And she is a child of unwanted intercourse between two male deities.

Aphrodite is associated with a rich variety of the types and forms of love and has a male associated deity - Aphroditus - who shares the look of hers and has men’s genitalia. The rites of Aphroditus were celebrated by with a festival of transvestite communities of the ancient world, of which we know very little to the date. It is believed that Aphroditus arrived to Athens from Cyprus - several depictions of them came down to us in form of archeological finds, one of which is preserved in Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and in the works of writers and historians such as Pausanias, Philostratus and Alicphron. The archetype of Aphrodite in all her layers of multiplicity and complexity represents the infinite richness of the concept of love.

QUEERING MUSEUM. Part 3: *Medusa*

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There are different ways to interpret Medusa in the written sources of mythology - and one of them (apart of the version where she was a born Gorgon-monster) tells her story as a beautiful priestess of Athena, sometimes as the head priestess of the goddess. Turning her into a monster in the consequence

of an affair or a rape by Poseidon in the temple of Athena (is an ideologically charged contested field in interpretation). In both cases it takes two to dance, however the one Poseidon is seldom blamed in the interpretations of the classicists. In the aftermath of the event, Athena is told to “curse” Medusa with the power of stoning anyone she glances into the eye. However can it be looked at as the ultimate power to protect oneself from attempts of violation, like in the case with Poseidon? Gorgoneion, the protective pendant worn later by Athena, can demonstrate the level of respect to Medusa’s stature – and therefore represent awe and respect instead of current fear and disgust.

Perseus, who performs the act of beheading Medusa for the sake of acquisition of her powers of stoning is appropriating her powers while forsaking the context in which they were acquired. The misogynistic nature of the story therefore emphasised on multiple levels.

What other arguments can we draw in defence of Medusa?

Etymologically, name Medusa - Ancient Greek Μέδουσα (Médousa), from μέδω (médō, “rule over”) means “sovereign female wisdom,” “guardian / protectress,” “the one who knows’ or ‘the one who rules”. It derives from the same Indo-European root as the Sanskrit Medha and the Greek Metis (the mother of Athena, Titaness of cunning smartness), meaning ‘wisdom’ and ‘intelligence.’

The normalised Greek myth of Medusa offers plenty to be angry about. The monstrous being with snakes instead of the hair starts out as a human woman, who Poseidon rapes in Athena’s temple. The goddess then punishes Medusa by turning her into a Gorgon ‘monster’ and exiling her. Athena here is depicted as an enemy of women, a traitor to her gender, an impression strengthened by the oft-quoted words put into her mouth by the classical playwright Aeschylus: ‘I am exceedingly of the father...’ – and later being picked up by feminist theorist Judith Butler in her critique of Athena’s archetype and character in relation to the cause of women’s rights.

Earlier Medusa myths, ascribed to Homer, Hesiod and Pindar, make no mention of enmity from Athena; nor do authors contemporary with Ovid, including Strabo.

Ovid and Aeschylus (whose prime is a contemporary to Athenian Empire ‘Victorian decadence’ period of stagnation and decline) exemplify classic patriarchal strategies that blame the victim, set women against one another, and reframe ancient myths to the detriment of powerful females. Athena, Medusa, and Metis have all been diminished in this way, as has Athena’s mother Metis, who has been removed from the scene of Athena’s birth. In “Theogony” of Hesiod, which is seen as a Bible-like source of the genealogy of gods in Ancient Greek mythology, the moment of Metis destruction is vividly violent: “But Zeus... deceiving Metis although she was full wise... he seized her with his hands and put her in his belly, for fear she might bring forth something stronger than his thunderbolt... but she straightaway conceived Pallas Athene... and she [Metis] remained hidden beneath the inward parts of Zeus...”.

As we can look at Medusa from the perspective of her being empowering character – queenly and wise – radically opposing the normalised narrative of the monster doomed to be killed by another masculinity-propelling hero, we are ought to open the critical portals for the re-interpretation of the archetypal characters in Ancient Greek mythology that lay the foundation of the European political imaginary.