

# Aphrodite's Entry into Epic

by Brian Clark

In Greek myth the face of the feminine becomes more defined; the warrior and strategic sides belong to Athena, the mothering and nurturing side rests with Demeter, while Artemis carries the wild and instinctual sides. While we will look at many stories involving Aphrodite perhaps we should start with her entry into epic to appreciate the difficulty her sexuality and erotic nature may have presented to a rising patriarchal and rationalistic society. In Homeric epic it is evident that Aphrodite's erotic power to seduce the hero away from the battlefield is at great odds with the heroic nature of the warrior. Hence Aphrodite enters epic disempowered. Homer, aligned with the hero, portrays Aphrodite as the goddess who seduces the hero away from his tasks.

Aphrodite's name being linked with *aphros* or the sea-foam is a constant reminder of Hesiod's version of her potent and chaotic birth. Homer, placing her lineage under Zeus, makes an interesting comment on changing social mores, placing Aphrodite's erotic power under the divine order of Zeus. Sexual desire or 'the lust that leads to disaster', as well as the instincts of love and pleasure, are now placed in the dominion of the sky god Zeus. In the Homeric poem the *Iliad* Aphrodite is ridiculed and denigrated and also favours the Trojans, not the Greeks.

Why is Aphrodite a threat to the Homeric poets? Her sphere is the bedroom, not the battlefield and her power seduces the hero. In the *Iliad* she rescues her son, Aeneas, and her protégé, Paris, from the battlefield. Her ability to magnetise the sexual desire of the hero leads him away from the battlefield (today the sports field, the boardroom or the parliament rather than the battlefield). She is the power of the feminine who initiates the masculine into the sphere outside mother. Her passions draw out an irrational side in the hero. Unlike mother, she makes no promises of fidelity. She initiates the hero into his erotic and primal desires. Yet in Homer we glimpse the beginning of her sphere being judged profane, as her sexuality is dangerous to the emerging hero culture.

Her dual birth also represents the schism that occurred throughout the development of Greek society splitting the profane (instinctual, primal) off from the sacred (cultured, restrained). Aphrodite was always a dual goddess; her Eastern traditions sometimes portrayed her as bisexual. In Greece she became *Aphrodite Urania*, the ethereal and sublime one, born of heaven and who represented heavenly

and spiritual love, the sacred. She was also known as *Pandemos*, Aphrodite of the common people, physical and sensual love or the profane. Heavenly and earthy love became split into polar opposites.

In the *Odyssey* Aphrodite plays no role except for a story that is told of her by a minstrel and poet. Here the story of the triangle of Aphrodite, Ares and Hephaestus is told to the guests' great amusement. In the *Odyssey* Aphrodite is married to Hephaestus the handicapped god who ensnares his wife and Ares together in his marital bed. In the *Voyage of the Argo* Aphrodite helps Athena and Hera by having Medea fall in love with Jason. In the *Aeneid*, Venus is the protectress of her son, Aeneas who she helps guide to Latium. Finally in the *Golden Ass* she is the terrible stepmother to her pregnant daughter-in-law, Psyche. She sets four impossible tasks for Psyche hoping she will fail. But her first entry into epic is in the *Iliad*.

The epiphanies depicted throughout the course of the *Iliad* effectively allow Homer to contrast the divine and human sphere. The pantheon of gods interjects morality, conscience and instinct into the epic. Their divine appearances also affirm that destiny is not always directed or controlled by heroic willpower, but is something god-given and greater than any individual. The presence of the gods in the *Iliad*, alongside the human drama of war, is a powerful juxtaposition of the world of the mortal with the world of the divine. And the realm of war is also uncomfortable for the goddess of love.

The focus for much of the *Iliad* is on battle. The gods are clearly divided as to which camp they favour, either the Trojan or the Achaian (Greek) one. Being a battle epic, Homer decides how the gods who are not aligned with war will be portrayed. Aphrodite is a goddess associated with erotic love, not war, and Homer's depiction of her in the *Iliad* highlights the division between the battlefield and the household or the spheres of the masculine and the feminine, and what is heroic and what is not. Aphrodite's treatment by Homer serves as a commentary on both the morality of the poet and his contemporary time as well as influencing the way Aphrodite will be portrayed in subsequent epic and literature.

Homer's geneogram of the Olympian family places Zeus as the eldest sibling, not the youngest, and rearranges the parentage of Aphrodite. In Homer, Aphrodite is now the daughter of Zeus. Her mother is Dione, a daughter of the Titans, Oceanus and Thethys, whose name is 'a feminine form of the name Zeus'.<sup>1</sup> Homer has placed Aphrodite's domain under Zeus, a domain that is ordered and hierarchical.

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<sup>1</sup> Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology 5th Edition*, 128.

Hesiod depicts Aphrodite, an older deity born the generation before Zeus, as a much more potent and primal goddess than the one portrayed in the *Iliad*. Did Homer wish to rearrange the myth 'for the down-playing of carnal extremes'<sup>2</sup>? Hesiod allows for Aphrodite's more chaotic, exotic and erotic nature. Homer's Aphrodite and her passionate realm are now under the control of Zeus and order, therefore while she still evokes chaos, she is not outside the realm of Zeus' control. In other myths, Aphrodite is represented as a potent and independent goddess but in Homer she is subjected to ridicule and disrespect. Aphrodite is scolded by Diomedes and Zeus, deceived and ridiculed by Hera, physically wounded by Diomedes, and insulted and assaulted by Athena.

Why Homer chooses to devalue Aphrodite in this way could stem from various reasons. Aphrodite's sexual power and magnetism may have been too threatening to a moral poet in changing times. As a goddess who migrated from the East<sup>3</sup>, introducing her into the western tradition of the time may have meant rearranging her lineage to be subject to a more rational god. Erotic desire, Aphrodite's realm, may be safer if placed in the jurisdiction of the sky god Zeus. Her Eastern heritage may also have included magic and healing, arts, which Homer virtually censors from the *Iliad*. A remnant of these arts is suggested when Aphrodite embalms Hector's corpse with 'rosy immortal oil' and keeps the dogs from ravaging the body. Aphrodite's 'magic' is also referred to in reference to her girdle. The poet also seems to be occupied with a heroic epic of war, and heroes are insular and separate, not caught up in the grips of the love goddess' spell. Aphrodite's more exotic side needs to be quelled.

One of the visible ways that Homer depicts his struggle with Aphrodite is in her relationship to other gods and mortals in the *Iliad*. Aphrodite's character, according to Homer, emerges through her relationships with Paris, Dione, Helen and others.

### ***Aphrodite and Paris***

Aphrodite's 'down playing' is interesting given that the mythic roots of the Trojan conflict reach back to the judgement of Paris, a judgment that Aphrodite won with her charm, beguile and promises. The title 'fairest' was awarded to her rather than Athena or Hera, by the judge Paris. Aphrodite was obliged to fulfil her promise to Paris who was to receive the beautiful Helen as his prize. This reward however was not achieved through heroism or *kleos* (glory), but through the manipulation of the goddess,

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<sup>2</sup> G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary Volume II: books 5-8*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1990), 99.

<sup>3</sup> G. S. Kirk in the introduction to *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume II*, 6 states: "Aphrodite is pure Sumerian/Akkadian in type and origin; she is Innana and Ishtar, Canaanite Anath, the love-goddess, down graded by the Greeks from her aspect of 'queen of heaven'.

Aphrodite. Homeric heroes achieve their recognition through their skill as warriors, not through judging beauty contests. Paris' alignment with the goddess Aphrodite places his world at odds with the heroic world.

It is Aphrodite who manipulates the abduction of Helen from her Spartan home and her husband, Menelaus, and relocates her to Troy with Paris. This powerful saga is the reason why the Greek armies are assembled below the walls of Troy: to rescue Helen from the grip of the Trojans. The story of the judgement of Paris is however only alluded to in a few lines of the epic poem, described as 'the lust that led to disaster'. Aphrodite's 'lust' that compels Paris has no place in heroic epic. Even Hector, Paris' brother and Trojan hero, judges his brother's desire as anti-heroic. For Homer, shame and lust are often synonymous and are both aspects of possession by Aphrodite.<sup>4</sup> Lust is anti-heroic and therefore shameful to heroic men.

Aphrodite also serves the poet by allowing a contrast to exist between his characters Paris and Diomedes. Paris, who is identified with the goddess and her realm, is antithetical to the hero Diomedes, who by wounding Aphrodite shows no reverence for the goddess. Diomedes as a symbol of 'the masculine sphere'<sup>5</sup> confronts Aphrodite on the battlefield. The poet, through both the mortal and divine voices of Diomedes and Zeus, lets the audience know that this is not where the goddess belongs. After he wounds Aphrodite, Diomedes says:

Give way, daughter of Zeus, from the fighting and the terror. Is it  
not then enough that you lead astray women without warcraft?  
Yet, if still you must haunt the fighting, I think that now you  
will shiver even when you hear some other talking of battles.<sup>6</sup>

And Zeus too rebukes her participation in the battle:

No, my child, not for you are the works of warfare. Rather  
concern yourself only with the lovely secrets of marriage,

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<sup>4</sup> Boedeker, Deborah Dickmann, *Aphrodite's Entry Into Greek Epic* (The Netherlands: 1974), 34 states: "...the motif of shame which in epic poetry is frequently attributed to characters under the influence of sexual desire."

<sup>5</sup> Arthur, M., 'The Divided World of Iliad VI', *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, edited by Helene Foley (New York, 1981), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago (Chicago, 1961), 5.348-351. While there are many translations of the *Iliad* Lattimore's is most frequently cited. In most cases the translation quoted in the text will be this one.

while all this shall be left to Athene and sudden Ares<sup>7</sup>

The lines are drawn. Through both hero and god, the poet has defined Aphrodite's role away from the battlefield, a sphere where Homer says she does not belong. Earlier in the poem, Aphrodite had rescued Paris from being choked and dragged away by Menelaus. She rescues him from the dangers of battle placing him safely in his 'perfumed bedchamber'. Aphrodite also commanded Helen to Paris' bed. Against Helen's own wishes, she recanted. However, Helen still managed to express her disgust to Paris: 'Oh, how I wish you had died there beaten down by the stronger man'. Paris, using the seductive powers of Aphrodite, finally charms Helen into submission.

In this scene, Paris is anti-heroic; passion and desire has led him away from the sphere of battle into Aphrodite's sphere of lovemaking. The poet uses Paris as an example of how the erotic passions of Aphrodite can take the hero away from the task of battle. Homer points to the dangerous side of Aphrodite and Helen, her mortal embodiment. The danger lies in the chaotic realm of lust and desire that lead the warrior away from his heroic labour. Hector, unlike Paris, is a hero who is able to delineate the boundary between the battlefield and the household, not being seduced or enchanted away from battle by Aphrodite. However, Helen enchants Paris and therefore he falls under the spell of Aphrodite.

Subtly, Homer also reminds us of Aphrodite's chaotic side by referring to her in line 5:330 as 'the lady of Kypros'. This reference links her to her Cyprian cult and earlier heritage, which the poet, as suggested previously, has ignored.<sup>8</sup> Diomedes, as the Homeric hero, and Paris, as Aphrodite's protégé, contrast the realms of war and love, the battlefield and the *polis*, as well as the world of the masculine and the world of the feminine. Homer uses Aphrodite as a device to clarify the boundaries between these worlds.

### ***Aphrodite and Dione***

Dione has virtually no role in the *Iliad* except as Aphrodite's mother, yet her presence in one scene gives the poet another chance to trivialise Aphrodite. Dione is a comforting mother 'who gathered her daughter into the arms' fold' after Aphrodite had been wounded. In her mother's presence Aphrodite

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<sup>7</sup> *Iliad*, 5.428-430.

<sup>8</sup> Cyprus was where Aphrodite floated to after her birth from the sea according to Hesiod. Homer also refers to the island in the *Odyssey* as the place Aphrodite takes refuge after being humiliated (*Odyssey*, 8:362-4). For further elaboration on the use of Aphrodite as "Kypros" see discussion on page 94-96 of *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume II*.

regresses to a young and whining girl. The poet uses this opportunity to depict Aphrodite as a child who flees back to Olympus and the protection of her mother when things do not go her way.

Dione questions Aphrodite about which Olympian god has injured her. This question is the identical question Zeus poses to Artemis later in the epic. While Artemis has been assaulted by Hera, Aphrodite had been wounded by a mere mortal. Both Artemis and Ares, who also support the Trojan side, seek refuge with Zeus when wounded, whereas Aphrodite seeks the feminine realm of her mother for comfort. The poet has once again contained the realm of Aphrodite in a sphere away from battle. Dione tries to comfort her daughter by reciting the names of other gods who have been wounded by mortals. Ares, Hera and Hades are on the list; both Ares and Hades have been wounded by the greatest hero, Heracles. The scene ends with Zeus reiterating Aphrodite's sphere to be the 'lovely secrets of marriage', not war. Athena is the image of the feminine that Zeus supports for the 'works of warfare'. Athena's strategy and *metis* is valued throughout the epic by the poet unlike her Homeric half-sister, Aphrodite.

### ***Aphrodite and Thetis***

Aphrodite and Thetis have much in common yet are depicted by Homer very differently. Each is a persuasive goddess and a mother of heroes in the war. Thetis is mother to the Achaian hero, Achilles, while Aphrodite is mother to the Trojan hero, Aeneas. Both the fathers of these heroes are mortal and inferior to the goddesses. While they are referred to in the *Iliad*, the fathers play no part in the epic.

Both goddesses have significantly influenced the course of events that shape the *Iliad*. Aphrodite's role in Helen's abduction, the core event that precipitates the war, is not part of the epic. The power Aphrodite has to influence the course of events is not acknowledged. Thetis, on the other hand, plays a visible role in the epic's plot. She secures a promise from Zeus that places the Greeks under Agamemnon, at risk. Without Achilles, Thetis' son, the Greek army is to suffer. Her power is acknowledged. Thetis protects her son and intervenes on his behalf, yet never intercedes while he is on the battlefield. Aphrodite, however, rescues both Paris and Aeneas from danger and even transports Paris back to his own bedroom. Unlike Thetis, Aphrodite crosses the boundary between the battlefield (the sphere of the hero) and the bedroom (the sphere of sexual desire). In saving her son and her protégé from death, Aphrodite also robs them of their heroism. Whether consciously intended or not, Aphrodite's role on the battlefield in contrast to Thetis portrays the realm of Aphrodite as oppositional to the realm of the hero.

Even though Thetis is the ‘lesser goddess’<sup>9</sup>, she is more nobly treated than Aphrodite. Both these goddesses have an element of power over Zeus. Thetis had previously rescued Zeus aligning her with Zeus and the preservation of his ordered world. She now uses this leverage to obtain a promise from Zeus to fulfil her son’s wishes. Aphrodite’s power ‘with which you overwhelm mortal men, and all the immortals’<sup>10</sup> is her love charms personified as a girdle, a magical zone. This does not belong in the ordered realm of Zeus. Unlike Thetis, Aphrodite does not use her power to get what she wants, but gives the magic away to Hera. Hera supports the Greeks, and therefore is a rival in the war. Aphrodite is duped into unwittingly aiding Hera in her schemes against the Trojans. Aphrodite, who supports the Trojans, is depicted as naive and subordinate to Hera, who champions the Greeks.

### ***Aphrodite and Ares***

More fun is had at Aphrodite’s expense in her relationship with Ares. While Homer in the *Iliad* does not define their relationship, he certainly does in the *Odyssey*. In the *Odyssey* Aphrodite is married to Hephaestus<sup>11</sup>, an unusual partner for the love goddess and certainly no physical match for her lover, Ares. Homer introduces the extra marital affair of Ares and Aphrodite having the bard Demodokos singing the comic tale to Odysseus. The tale is a humorous interlude but when judged moralistically it is ‘a song that so scandalised ancient commentators that, along with some of their modern counterparts, they wanted to athetise it from the text’.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps part of the scandal is that epic is dealing with sex, not war.

In the tale, Hephaestus conspires to trap Aphrodite and Ares in his own bed with a webbed net constructed to bind the lovers so ‘neither of them could stir a limb or get up’.<sup>13</sup> The woven web that ensnares the lovers is a clever image employed by Homer. While weaving is the domain of Athena, threads that bind are a reminder of the three Fates, the Moirae. The audience may be subtly reminded that cunning Athena, goddess of weaving, would not allow herself to be trapped in such a way. The poet suggests that lust, belonging to Aphrodite, is no match for Athena’s wisdom. Or if the web refers to the Fates, then is it destined that this type of lust be exposed? The scene is amusing not only to the audience listening to the poet, but also to other male gods who are summoned to the bed side to view the entrapped pair. In an interesting twist Homer depicts Poseidon as the only god not amused by the

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<sup>9</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 20.106. Apollo is enthusing Aeneas into battle against Achilles, stating his birth is from the Olympian daughter of Zeus, Aphrodite, but Achilles is born from “a lesser goddess”.

<sup>10</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 14.199. Hera lies to Aphrodite about her purpose in obtaining the magic girdle.

<sup>11</sup> In the *Iliad* Hephaestus is married to Charis, one of the Graces. *Iliad* 18.382-3.

<sup>12</sup> Zeitlin, Froma, “Figuring Fidelity in Homer’s *Odyssey*”, from *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer’s Odyssey* (Oxford, 1995), 128.

<sup>13</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, Harper Collins (New York, NY: 1967), 8.298.

shenanigans. Homer is not clear on why, except that in some references Poseidon's name has been suggested as meaning 'husband of the goddess Da'.<sup>14</sup> Clearly in this scene he respects the sanctity of marriage and is not engrossed by the goddess of love.

The relationship of Ares and Aphrodite is not explicit in the *Iliad*; at one point Aphrodite refers to him as 'beloved brother'. They however are companions and aids to each other. When Aphrodite is wounded by Diomedes, Ares lends her his 'gold-bridled horses' to take her to Olympus and her mother. Ares himself is later wounded. When Ares is flattened by Athena, Aphrodite appears and drags him away from the skirmish. Hera in noticing this insults Aphrodite by referring to her as a 'dogfly' and encourages Athena to block their escape. Athena punches Aphrodite in the breasts causing both Ares and Aphrodite to fall, lying 'sprawled on the generous Earth'. No other gods are subject to such humiliation in the epic.

Ares and Aphrodite serve as an interesting polarity in that the god of war is companion to the goddess of love. Ares is referred to throughout the *Iliad* as violent, man slaughtering, bloodstained, and huge and bellowing. But perhaps the best indication of the Homeric view of Ares comes from Zeus. Ares has come to Zeus to complain of Athena's aiding Diomedes to wound him. Zeus responds by naming him the 'most hateful of all gods'.<sup>15</sup>

The war god Ares is not well represented in this epic. Athena as more logical and rational is favoured as a patroness of war. She exclaims to Ares, 'you did not think even this time how much stronger I can claim I am than you'. Athena triumphs over both Ares and Aphrodite, a reminder that *metis* is superior to lust and that rationalism and strategy triumph over chaos. Ares is portrayed as irrational with a lust for battle and therefore is a good mate in Homeric epic for Aphrodite who is also chaotic and lustful.

### ***Helen, Briseis & Cassandra***

Helen is the mortal embodiment of Aphrodite and the goddess is her patroness. Two other women are likened to Aphrodite in the *Iliad*: Briseis and Cassandra. Each of these women is linked through their similar roles as captives. While Helen is protected by the Trojans she is still a captive. Briseis is captive throughout the epic and Cassandra, as the audience will know, will be taken as a captive of Agamemnon after the sack of Troy.<sup>16</sup> Homer, through these three women who are all compared to

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<sup>14</sup> C. Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks*, Thames and Hudson (London: 1951), 181.

<sup>15</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 5.889-891.

<sup>16</sup> The shade of Agamemnon tells Odysseus of Cassandra's murder in *Odyssey* 11:419-23.

Aphrodite, may be suggesting that the realm of Aphrodite is the spoil of the hero. All three women are captives of heroes, which places them, and perhaps Aphrodite, under the jurisdiction of the hero. Perhaps unconsciously the poet is suggesting this would be best.

Captives are also foreigners. In likening Aphrodite to these women, Homer may be reminding us that she is foreign and therefore dangerous. Aphrodite was a foreign goddess and to the heroic psyche, an enchanting yet dangerous force. Captives do not partake in the war and the audience is reminded that Aphrodite's realm, once again, is excluded from the battlefield.

### ***Aphrodite, Homer and Sappho***

Aphrodite's entry into epic epitomises the beginning of her devaluation that reaches its height throughout the Christian era. The relationship between the poet and Aphrodite is uneasy:

the epic tradition progressively removed the most carnal aspects of the Olympian gods and goddesses- leaving certain physical activities, sex in particular, conveniently vague in accord with evidently long standing public taste<sup>17</sup>

Sexual desire, lust, and passions that inevitably lead to chaos are dangerous to Homer who is a voice of the shifting times. Rationalism and order are prized over instinct and disorder, the heroic over the householder. Aphrodite represents these denigrated instinctual feelings that lead the hero away from his labours. As regent of this domain, then, she is also denigrated. She is ridiculed, devalued and marginalised. The poet has clearly stated that her feminine sphere must be separate from the heroic sphere and that her influence must be placed under the ordered world of Zeus.

Aphrodite crosses the boundaries between the battlefield and the bedroom and needs to be controlled. Like her Hellenic son, Eros, she gradually loses her power through epic. Homer begins the tradition of trivialising her, as has been shown, in the *Iliad* and continues this in the *Odyssey*. But Homer's influence continues into later epic and literature. Apollonius of Rhodes in *The Voyage of the Argo* and even Apuleius in *The Golden Ass* continue to caricature Aphrodite.

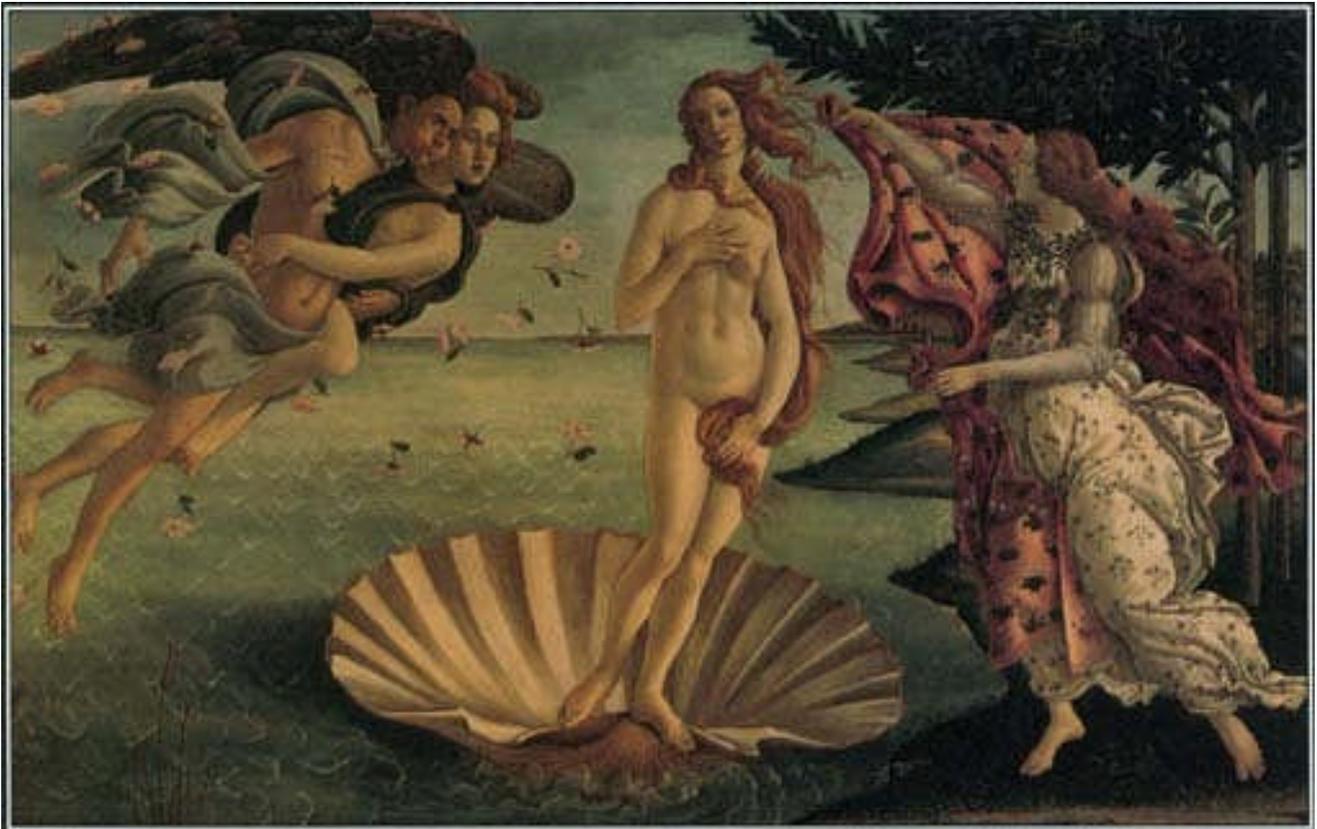
Homer's depiction of Aphrodite in the *Iliad* helps illuminate the potential attitudes of the ancient Greeks towards her domain of love, lust and sexuality. Through Homer, Aphrodite's sphere becomes

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<sup>17</sup> G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, Penguin Books (London: 1990), 13.

placed under the ordered worldview of the supreme sky god, Zeus. However not all poets and mythmakers followed Homer's lead. Many praised the transcendent sphere of Aphrodite. Perhaps an archaic voice who best portrayed the sublime influence of the goddess was Sappho in her *Hymn to Aphrodite*. Sappho became a muse for generations of erotic poets who followed her lead

*On your throne, a marvel of art, immortal  
Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, amused to  
lead us on through folly and pain*



Botticelli's famous *Birth of Venus*;  
her sublime rising out of the Aegean disguised her difficult entry into the Western mindset