

# The Girl by the Water: Images of Aphrodite as Mediated Desire

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The image of a pretty girl by the edge of a body of water, typically the ocean, reoccurs frequently in mythology, art, and literature. Since what Daniel Boorstin calls “the Graphic Revolution,” pictures of her have been a staple of many kinds of entertainment, journalism, and advertising. The omnipresence of the girl by the water invites attention not just to her beauty and the interests in whose service pictures of her are being offered up. She sells, or attracts, or deflects because the scene in which she is found is a fundamental one. The girl by the water is sexuality at the boundary between water, as the source of generation in nature, and land, the location of human culture. How she is portrayed in art is an index of a culture’s mediations of sexuality. These mediations are visible representations as diverse as travel advertisements and Celtic and Hindu folklore. Hesiod, Homer, and Shakespeare offer images of the girl that contrast in instructive ways with two of her striking modern appearances: in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

## I. The Girl and the Edge of the Water as Images

René Girard’s analysis of mimetic desire presupposes the existence of what he at times calls appetites (e.g. *Origins* 122) and at other times calls animal instinct (e.g. *Satan* 90, 93-94). Appetites are biologically grounded needs, the satisfaction of which is necessary for physical survival. The fact that people occasionally starve in circumstances where the only food available to them is food which violates culturally bound tastes is evidence for Girard’s analysis. By definition, we have no experience of unmediated appetite; we experience our appetites as desires. Desire is “what happens to appetites and needs when they become contaminated with imitation or even entirely displaced by it” (*Origins* 122). Imitation affects everything from what we think is food to what we think is dangerous to why we think we are sad. We experience our appetites as what our culture’s mediations have done to our

appetites.

Girard's account of the ways in which mimetic interaction is intertwined with rivalry and hence with capacities for violence that culture must deflect confirms the importance of literature. Both mythology and later texts offer data about mimetic interactions and their consequences and invite related studies of the passions that move through contemporary culture.

Lust is an appetite that at its root is a biochemical phenomenon. Its centrality to survival is such that it generates activities that are highly pleasurable and highly selective in genetic terms. In social terms, they are highly competitive, potentially violent, and hence intensely mediated. Girard's explication of the incest taboo describes a feature of this mediation that is virtually universal. The varied and extensive taboos and rituals associated with sexual expression are other mediations. A wide range of literary and artistic representations of a girl by the water illustrate the interfaces between sexual appetite and sexual desire.

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The edge of the water is, in a simple way, the edge of the human world. We cannot live in water. Standing in shallow water is standing at the edge of human experience. Water is connected to generation, both because our bodies, all cellular life, require it to function, and because it is the source of our life in evolutionary terms. The sea in which we cannot now live is the source of the life we now have. The edge of the sea is the edge of life and of generation. The body separates its water from the sea. The fluid in the body is chemically related to the fluid in the sea but must maintain its differentiation to be a body. Such water on land differentiated by and within the body is a person. At the edge of the sea, a person is at the edge of the human and at the edge of the power of generation that is the basis of life. With her feet in the water, the girl is in contact with the water of life in its undifferentiated form, but she is human and lives on land. When she leaves the water and walks back up to the land, she returns to community.

In this parsing, the sea is unmediated life, the world of appetite that we can imagine as a possibility but cannot experience. The land, as the location of the human, is the world of culture, of mediated desire. Life on land is dependent on water, but the water is constricted by the body. Appetite is constricted by culture. The sexuality of which the girl is the image is universal, powerful, and important. Undifferentiated, like water in the sea, it would generate so much mimetic conflict that it would threaten culture. Like water on land, sexuality is constrained. The constraints within culture include taboos based on many kinds of kinship relations; rituals, including circumcision and other mutilations; conventions of courtship, which focus on such

matters as decoration and codes of communication; and marriage, whose many versions limit competition and manage matters associated with child-rearing and property. The girl by the water is a culture's image of what is ideal in the female. That unmediated desire would be explosively dangerous for a culture is clear. Hence this ideal of sexuality is standing at the edge of the water, an ideal melding of nature and culture, standing at their intersection. That the ideal is not an actual possibility in human experience is something we all know. The location is a representation of the complex status of our sexual imaginations, which are tied powerfully to biology but also haunted in diffuse ways by images from culture. The edge of the water is the edge of human experience, the location of an ideal that is conceivable—rarely, almost perceptible—but not part of culture's business of limiting violence and getting the children raised.

The many appearances of the girl by the water begin, in western culture, in Hesiod. In the *Theogony*, she is Aphrodite, and she first comes ashore on the island of Cyprus. In Homer, she is Kalypso, the goddess on the island of Ogygia; the Sirens; or Nausikaa, the Phaiakian Princess whom Odysseus finds playing ball on the sand. Nausikaa, is the literary ancestor of the volleyball players of Venice, California. She is Edna Pontilier, the Creole wife of Kate Chopin's novel whose awakening is represented as learning to swim in the ocean and whose escape from the inhibitions of Creole culture is to commit suicide by swimming out to sea. The Samoan girls whom Margaret Mead thought she found on a tropical island are instances of the same representation. In the travel advertisements, there is sun, sand, water, and a pretty girl. Usually, she is walking at the edge of the water with very few clothes on. At this point, we are back to Hesiod and Aphrodite.

## II. The Girl in Shakespeare and Homer

When Shakespeare's Ferdinand washes up on the beach of Prospero's magic isle in *The Tempest*, he finds Miranda, one of the compelling versions of the girl. Miranda is a young but not a child. She has not had corrupting experience, but her questioning of Prospero about their history indicates intelligence and competence (1.2. 52-185). She is a beautiful virgin who has never seen an attractive young man before Ferdinand appears, yet she is fully sexual and immediately responsive to him when they meet. She has an ideally mediated sexuality, has no lust when there is no appropriate object of lust and lots of it when such an object appears. Her virginity is emphasized in the play. This might seem quaint. Within the play, it is the product of the same isolation that has produced her innocence. It reflects social a social convention. To the extent that the convention alludes to anything fundamental, it invokes a fact that differentiates the sexuality of women from men. Sexually active women have babies. Hence virginity, as a value restraining sexuality for women outside of the marriage that provides for the children that result, has a

meaning that is important and still not completely anachronistic. Babies still turn up, and even the technologies that have made undesired pregnancy less likely have brought with them a whole new set of problems. The biology which no longer is as likely to bring a baby now brings a disease. If not virginity per se, sexual restraint still matters, and it matters in different ways for women than for men.

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Ferdinand knows he is on to a good thing. But they share a worry which is visible in her first words about him to her father. She asks Prospero, "What is't? A spirit? Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir, it carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit" (1.2.410-2). Ferdinand, who has seen the world, has an identical response to her. He likes her, but he is not sure she is real. He has been following Ariel's music, and when he sees her, his first guess is that she is "the goddess on whom these airs attend." But he asks her, just to make sure. "My prime request, which I do last pronounce, is (O you wonder!)/ If you be maid or no?" (1.2.426-8) Prospero is content. "At the first sight, they have changed eyes"(1.2.442). The boy and girl fall in love, and neither, within the universe of the play, are spirits. Their raising of the question in the first place is a measure of the fragility, the rarity if not the impossibility, of what they have encountered. They are, while experiencing a desire that is close to appetite, fully within the sphere of mediated desire. They are both eligible, are intensely mutually attracted, are-the evidence is the Italian they both speak-of appropriate social station. This is, they are afraid, too good to be true. The encounter happens in a play whose topic is the relation, in Girard's reading a self-mocking of the relation, between reality and the images of reality in art (*Envy* 343-353).

Girard explicates Shakespeare's portrayal, in comedy and tragedy, of characters who do not know what they want, who have troubles of one kind or another because they imitate the desires of others. This is the human situation. In his penultimate play, Shakespeare offers a heroine who is at the far end of a continuum the other end of which would be occupied by characters such as Rosaline, Maria, and Katherine in *Love's Labor's Lost*, who can't accept what they want even when they have learned what they want.

Miranda has not had others around whose desires she could imitate and offers no narcissistic resistance to Ferdinand when they are attracted to each other. But the setting of the play is a desert island where events are controlled by a magician. Prospero is a figure for Shakespeare and the magical setting is his reminder that the ideal of sexuality in Miranda, like the other ideals of the play, is not real. Miranda is in a play. Her encounter with Ferdinand takes place at the edge of the sea. The perfect desire of Miranda is within the range of human imagination, but

Shakespeare's play and setting establish his sense that the imagined ideal will never be realized. Shakespeare understands his own desire, and ours, so well that he can create Miranda. He mocks himself and us when he identifies himself with Prospero and makes the images in his play the stuff of magic. The lovers on Prospero's magic isle are no more real than Aphrodite, the creature of Hesiod's myth.. At the same time, the play points precisely at the problems his earlier characters have with sexual desire and what a better response would look like if they had it.

The imaginings of men about women will in some ways differ from those of women about themselves and each other, but a wide range of females go to considerable trouble to wear bikinis at beaches. That the image of Aphrodite is powerful is a given. How it is mediated, how it drives individuals in healthy or unhealthy directions is the topic of the stories about her. She is sometimes a blessing, sometimes a curse. The desire to attract men may lead women to wear bikinis at the beach as a strategy, irrespective of their own images of themselves. Clearly, some females do imagine themselves as the girl by the water. Clearly, some women are damaged by their efforts to project this image, whether successful or not, and others are damaged by their refusal to accept the sorts of demands entailed in fashionable versions of the image. The image can damage men as well, turning them from real women and situations to the imitations that they imagine. Homer offers a different response to her in *The Odyssey*.

Odysseus's careful approach to Nausikaa, predicated on avoiding any appearance of the threat of rape, acknowledges her situation as a girl on a beach and models a competent response to it (*Odyssey* 8.129 ff.). Odysseus is mature, long finished with the construction of his sexual life; thus, the girl's presence in Homer's poem serves a different purpose than the presence of Miranda in *The Tempest*. Nausikaa is beautiful; but her presence and possibility do not alter the course of the hero. That is why he is the hero. His desires are mediated by the normal duties which his history and circumstance have given him. He has a wife; he is a king; he has a son; he has a home. When offered marriage to the princess, he declines (8.335-40). The Homeric scholarship of the twentieth century has established the way in which Homer is preserving an ethical code for Archaic Greece which is culture bound (Knox). There are a lot of ways to respond to beautiful young girls. Odysseus's response offers a norm which universalizes one ethical response to desire, one mediation of culture and biology. He maintains the *oikos*.

### III. The Girl as Aphrodite

Aphrodite is the central Greek version of the girl by the water, and, because Archaic Greece was a coastal culture, consciousness of the sea accounts for details of Aphrodite's mythic history. But the details of her Greek origin second my parsing of her significance. She is the moist principle as a source of fertility (Rose 7). She is connected to water as the moisture of sexuality. Homer says she is the daughter of Dione, a goddess whose name is the feminine form of Dios, which as "god" becomes a reference to Zeus (*Iliad* 5.312; see Rose 53). This suggests an early history in which she is a consort to Zeus. In Hesiod she has a new parentage (*Theogony* 185ff.). When Kronos castrates his father Ouranos, he throws the severed genitals into the sea "and they drifted a great while on the open sea, and there spread a circle of white foam from the immortal flesh, and in it grew a girl. . . ." She went first to Kythera, then to Cyprus, where she comes ashore. The account in Hesiod is detailed enough to have complex sexual associations. *Aphros* is "foam" and her name means "foam born" in Greek. The Greek root of her name ties her to semen and to the secretions of the vagina. She is sexual moisture, but in the patriarchal version of Archaic Greece, she is connected to masculinity. As the prototype of the girl by the water, she is not an independent sexuality, a matriarchal principle of fertility like Eurynome in the Pelasgian creation story. Neither is she Eros, the primal being in Hesiod who is the principal of generation (*Theogony* 120ff.). She is an image of sexuality arising from the genitals of the male. I find this a precisely accurate representation of the masculine experience of the female: the masculine experience of women is regularly a projection of masculine constructs that have no essential connection to what makes a woman a woman biologically or an independently self-actualized person in ethical terms.

Aphrodite's epithets are Kytheria, of Kythera; Kyprogenia, born of Cyprus; and Philommedea, lover of members, because she appeared from *medea*, members (Hesiod 196ff.). Her name, as the verb *aphrodisiadzo*, means to have sexual intercourse; the active being intercourse by the male, the passive intercourse by the female. The power which she represents is visible in *The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* which describes her seduction of Anchises, the father of Aeneas. This account treats her as having near absolute dominion, even over the other gods. Only Athene, Artemis, and Hestia are immune to her. She has power over Zeus, but he retaliates by causing her to fall in love with the mortal Anchises. In an analogue of the story of Paris, she comes to Anchises while he tends cattle on Mt. Ida. He is not by the water, but he is an isolated male. When "awesome longing seized her heart," she had gone to her temple at Paphos on Cyprus where the three Graces anointed and clothed her. From there she travels to Troy, bewitching lions, wolves, and bears in route. They fawn over her, and she leaves them filled with lust and

copulating. She has the same effect on Anchises. Disguised, she “stood before him, in size and form like an unwed maiden, so that he might not see who she was and be afraid” (81-3). She is so beautiful that Anchises, like Odysseus and Ferdinand, asks whether she is real. The goddess lies, behaves modestly, explains that she is there because she has been carried off by Hermes, and asks to meet Anchises’s family. Anchises’s response is identical to Ferdinand’s. His sexual ideal is in front of him, and he speaks quickly:

“If you are mortal and born of a mortal woman  
and Otreus is your father, famous by name, as you say,  
and if you are here by the will of Hermes,  
the immortal guide, you shall be called my wife forever.  
And so neither god nor mortal will restrain me  
Till I have mingled with you in love  
right now; not even if far-shooting Apollon himself  
should shoot grievous arrows from his silver bow.  
O godlike woman, willingly would I go to the house of Hades  
once I have climbed into your bed” (145-54).

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Anchises falls in love at first sight and intends marriage. But he too suspects that what he is looking at is too good to be true, not being mortal at this point being the equivalent of not being real. His suspicion that the girl is a goddess is confirmed when Aphrodite unmask herself after their lovemaking. Anchises is terrified. She has power, and he prays that she will not make him impotent. She requires of him only that he not boast of the encounter. His fear and Aphrodite’s reassurance establish the fact that sexuality as appetite is dangerous. It is a biological force that overwhelms individuality in its chemical form. Mediated as a girl who is beautiful but also eligible, one who is concerned about proper families and such, it is the most intense manifestation of individual desire. This is again, in the Archaic text, a confirmation of a point that has a long history. Culture confines the power of sexuality within limits, chastity and marriage being the typical ones.

Aphrodite in *The Homeric Hymn* is a natural force, and something closely connected to but prior to the girl by the water. I would gloss her in the *Hymn* as biology, the real but impersonal force of sexual desire. She is terrifying when not mediated. She must mask herself in order to be attractive to a man. This is a kind of paradigm. When she takes on the guise of the chaste Phrygian maiden, when she is like Miranda or Nausikaa, Aphrodite moves within the sphere of the masculine imagination and becomes attractive, rather than wondrous and threatening. Then she looks like the source of personal fulfillment, and Anchises acts like the man who

sees what he wants.

Aphrodite is, in the *Theogony*, less a force of nature than a behavior. Hesiod says she was given privilege over “the whispering together of girls, the smiles and deceptions, the delight, and the sweetnesses of love, and the flattery” (205ff.). She is the goddess, at this point, of Nausikaa on the beach playing ball with her friends, and worried about what people will think if she rides into town with a strange man in her cart. Looking for the cultural variables in Hesiod’s description of her, I would note a detail of her description. She is a “modest lovely Goddess, and about her bright and slender feet the grass grew” (195-6). I take the emphasis on feet to be a detail of the conventional Archaic concept of beauty, a part of the archetype that is culturally relative, like suntans, pale skin, and degrees of corpulence. Aphrodite in Hesiod is more like Aphrodite in disguise in *The Homeric Hymn*. The girl and the goddess exist in a relation that is changeable and ambiguous and which represents the complex mix of biology and culture that is bound up in all of the images of the girl. Aphrodite in Hesiod lacks the terrible seriousness that she will have for Troy.

In Homer’s only reference to the judgment of Paris, Aphrodite is the source of the delusion which causes Paris to dishonor Athene and Hera when they come to his courtyard and to favor her who supplied “the lust that led to disaster” (24. 28-30). She is here like the *ate* that deludes Agamemnon. She is not a patron of gossiping girls; she is again a force of nature that does things to men. She causes wars and shatters kingdoms.

Homer calls her a goddess. It is another 300 years before Euripides identifies her in precisely the terms we would now use. “Aphrodite is nothing but the human lust, named rightly . . .” (*Trojan Women* lines 989-990). The speaker is Hecuba, and she is denouncing Helen’s claim that Aphrodite made her run off to Troy, in effect, that humans have no individuality in relation to sexual appetite that makes them responsible for what they desire. *The Trojan Women* dates from 415 B.C. Euripides makes the point more explicit when he turns to the *Helen* in 412. He uses a version of her history in which the Helen at Troy is a fake, an image substituted by Hera to punish Paris for slighting her in the beauty contest. Euripides could not be more explicit, in reacting to the mythic canon that he had inherited. The thing that the men pursue, this image of beauty, this face that launches ships, is a figment of someone’s imagination. Aphrodite and Helen and the girl by the water merge; they are explicitly identified as representations of sexual appetite mediated by circumstance.

## IV. Chopin's Use of the Image of Aphrodite

The mediation at issue in Homer and Shakespeare is marriage. Kirke, the Sirens, and Kalypso are dangerous because they threaten to keep Odysseus from his wife. Nausikaa and Miranda are ideals because, for all of their power, they intend to use their sexuality within marriage. That marriage is a threat to desire is another, particularly fashionable, perspective on mediation. Edna Pontilier, the wife and mother of Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, is a prototype of this response.

The novel's publication in 1899 was an avatar of the American feminists who refuse to accept the mediations of marriage. *The Awakening* makes careful use of allusions to Aphrodite as vehicles for a critique of the roles available to women of Chopin's class. Chopin had married a New Orleans businessman and had six children by the time he died when she was 31. She returned to her family home in St. Louis and supported her family with stories about the Creole culture of Louisiana in which she had lived.

Her most important character, Edna Pontilier, is married to a successful, complacent, and utterly conventional businessman. She accepts her life and all that comes with it until, vacationing on a coastal island, she agrees to join her circle in a moonlight swim. Previously, her entrances into the water had brought with them "a certain ungovernable dread" (29), but on this night "a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul" (29). She swims boldly out to sea, relying on the new power she feels, but "the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome" (30). She returns to shore, defies her husband's domination for the first time, and throws an orange (40), a fruit that is one of the traditional emblems of Aphrodite, to Robert Labrun, the young man who has been keeping her company during the summer.

This signifies a change in her response to him, from casual attention to sexual attraction and a desire for a life with him. But he is bound by a code of gentlemanly restraint, escapes to Mexico to avoid temptation, and while he is absent, Edna accepts the seduction of Arobin, a local rake. When he kissed her, "it was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (90). She does not regret husband or children or social status. She regrets that "it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her. . ." (90).

Chopin uses Edna's relation to water in explicit allusion to the lore of Aphrodite. Nothing on the shore makes her aware of her own sexuality, not the company of a handsome young man or the bearing of children by an orthodox husband. The sea from which Hesiod's Aphrodite was born is the source of her awakening, and the

things on shore are a barrier to her appetite once she is conscious of it. Appetite, with which she is comfortable, leads her to move out of her home, offer herself to Robert Labrun, and to accept the sex available to her in Arobin. When she does this, she accepts a scoundrel whose promiscuity is an emblem of appetite. Edna's copulation with him satisfies an appetite that is at root an impersonal biological force that any male could satisfy. But she wants not just appetite but "the kiss of love." She is willing to abandon conventional marriage to have it. Labrun is not. She enters her small house expecting to see Labrun waiting for her, imagining "no greater bliss on earth" than possession of her loved one. But he has left again. His note reads, " 'I love you. Good-by—because I love you' " (121). Labrun is unable to cross the barrier to his appetite created by Edna's marital status. A servant named Mariequita, hearing Edna's behavior at a party described, imagines that "Venus rising from the foam could have presented no more entrancing a spectacle than Mrs. Pontilier . . . (121). This imagining is presented as Edna is walking by Mariequita on the way to the beach where she will commit suicide. She strips off her clothes, enters the water, and swims out to sea to her death. With no fulfilling mediation available to her in Louisiana, Aphrodite returns to nature.

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The presence in the masculine genetic inheritance of the sexuality from which Aphrodite arises means that beauty contests do not go away, that Ursula Andress's presence on the shore of Dr. No's island will be followed by TV's *Baywatch* and that pictures of beautiful women will sell things. The images of Aphrodite still work to their various consequences, sophisticated or otherwise, and in mixtures that are sometimes startling. That Kate Chopin's girl by the water commits suicide adds a new element to her history. Edna finds her sexual appetite at the beach, and she has impersonal sex available through a conventional means, adultery. What she still does not have is what Ferdinand and Miranda have, a fully individualized and desirous monogamous love. The things behind her, her existing marriage and children, are the barriers that cut her off from the particular use to which she wishes to put her appetite. The girl by the water in *The Awakening* is not a mythic projection. She is the vehicle carrying an early version of the feminist critique of the lack of flexibility of the institutions which house desire in western culture.

## **V. Aphrodite Comes of Age in Samoa**

Chopin's novel is a careful use of fiction for anthropological analysis. It is very interesting when the girl by the water shows up at the core of modern cultural anthropology, presented not as myth or a literary device but masked as scientific fact, as in the work of Margaret Mead. In discussing her re-creation of the girl by the water, I will be using the work of Derek Freeman, who has done a careful analysis of

Mead's mistaken claims and who also does a careful history of the intellectual climate which produced those errors.

Freeman starts with Levi-Strauss's argument (*Heretic* 30n.3) that Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* founds modern anthropology by raising the "question of the relationship between nature and culture" (30-33). Social Darwinism was one answer offered in the nineteenth century. The claim that personality is plastic material shaped by culture was the claim of the cultural determinism offered by Franz Boas and others in response to the eugenicists of the turn of the century who sought to account for cultural difference in racial, that is, in genetic terms. This intense debate, to which we owe both Stalin's promotion of Lamarck's genetic theories and the American civil rights movement, was the background for Margaret Mead's work under Boas. Margaret Sanger had begun writing a newspaper column in 1910. Mead is part of the same historical impulse. Sex could be handled better, could be a source of more happiness than typical American mores generated. Mead had an audience waiting for her among those taught they were unhappy because they had been pulled away from happiness by the forces of urban industrial life and especially among those who maintained as a political theory the belief that biology uncorrupted by culture fulfills desire. There then would be, somewhere in nature, a place where scarcity either does not exist or is, at least, equalized, where property does not exist, and where sexual appetite is not mediated by culture, a place where Prospero's island is real.

The south seas were one available location for this hope. They attracted a series of explorers, observers, missionaries, and artists (Freeman *Heretic* 327 n.5). Many of these were matter of fact and competent in their reporting on life in Samoa, both before and after the wholesale conversion of the islanders to Christianity in the 1840's. Margaret Mead was not matter of fact in her perception and understanding of the Samoans, and her mistakes illustrate how hard it is to be clear-sighted about Aphrodite.

Mead went to Samoa at 23, immediately after finishing her doctoral work at Columbia under Boas. When Mead encountered Boas at Barnard as an undergraduate, she found her life's work. She enrolled in his doctoral program at Columbia and did a dissertation on aspects of Polynesian culture using the literature and collections available to her in New York. Boas and his teaching assistant Ruth Benedict were struck by the brilliance and energy of their graduate student. She was also under their spell, and Boas had a plan for her. He wanted to challenge the hereditarian approach to behavior by "a study of adolescence in a culture markedly different from those of Western Europe and the United States" (*Heretic* 59-60). If the study demonstrated that the turmoil associated with adolescence in the West was not universal, Boas would have evidence that behavior was culturally

determined. He wanted Mead to work with an American Indian tribe. Mead, set on Polynesia, resisted, agreeing only to focus her work on adolescent girls and settling on Samoa because liners stopped at Pago Pago on the island of Tutuila every three weeks. Boas helped her secure a fellowship from the National Research Council, and she left for American Samoa in August 1925.

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Once in Samoa, Mead spent six weeks in Pago Pago studying the language, then began looking for a place to do her research. She settled on the island of Tau, one of the three islands of Manua, where she lived from November 1925 until April 1926 with the family of the American who ran the local medical dispensary (*Heretic* 69ff.).

She studied the Tau phenomenon of adolescent sexuality with the aim of determining “the relative strength of biological puberty and cultural patterns” in the *Sturm und Drang* associated with adolescence in the industrialized west (*Heretic* 60). Her work was based on interviews with a cohort of approximately twenty-five girls, ranging in age from fourteen to twenty. A typhoon which hit the islands on January 1, 1926, did so much damage that her informants were unavailable for weeks. In February 1926, she joined an expedition from the Bishop Museum to another village on Tau and to two other islands in Manua. This travel, along with the delays caused by the typhoon, meant that her research on the sexuality of Samoan girls involved only about five weeks of work. In her conversations, she spoke to adolescents in the back room of an American household on Tau in a language that she hardly knew. She had virtually no experience of Samoan political and religious life and had discussed techniques of field work with Boas for half an hour before she left the United States (*Heretic* 284). She returned to the United States and published *Coming of Age in Samoa* in 1928.

Mead went to Samoa to locate the “negative instance” that would confirm Boas’s view that adolescent sexual stress was not universal. She thought she found it. She reported that the girls on this tropical island enjoyed sexuality in a manner free from the conflicts of American culture. “Familiarity with sex, and the recognition of a need of a technique to deal with sex as an art, have produced a scheme of personal relations in which there are no neurotic pictures, no frigidity, no impotence, except as the temporary result of severe illness, and the capacity for intercourse only once in a night is counted as senility” (Mead 151). The system of relations which produce this spectacular society is the topic of Mead’s eight chapters. Her account describes extended families and social relations which free children from conflict by freeing them from intense bonds with their parents and competitive relations with other young people. Sexual initiation was early, and promiscuity was the norm so that “romantic love as it occurs in our civilization,

inextricably bound up with ideas of monogamy, exclusiveness, and jealousy, and undeviating fidelity does not occur in Samoa" (105). Mead's claim was that she had found a society free of rivalrous mimesis, especially the sorts generated within families and by the primacy of competition.

What Mead found when she went to Samoa was essentially her own culture's projection of the Greek Aphrodite, but she presents Hesiod's archetype as ethnography. The first paragraph of her first substantive chapter describes the morning of "A Day in Samoa." "As the dawn begins to fall among the soft brown roofs and the slender palm trees stand out against a colorless, gleaming sea, lovers slip home from trysts beneath the palm trees or in the shadow of beached canoes, that the light may find each sleeper in his appointed place" (Mead 14). Young girls who have been at the water's edge for the night treat copulation as a natural phenomenon, a part of nature which needs no mediation. "The Samoan girl who shrugs her shoulder over the excellent technique of some Lothario is nearer to the recognition of sex as an impersonal force with no intrinsic validity, than is the sheltered American girl who falls in love with the first man who kisses her" (222). This would, of course, be true if it were true.

A Samoan girl who believed that sex had no connection to her identity as a human being or to her relations to other human beings would indeed be closer to believing that it had no "intrinsic validity" than would be an American girl who had read *The Tempest* and thought it did. Mead's tautology is a window into her thought processes. Validity is meaning conferred by culture on the forces of nature. Aphrodite in *Coming of Age in Samoa* walks back and forth between the beach and household without taking on the cultural freight that Mead finds problematic. Part of this freight is the differentiated sexual focus that is behind western romantic love and all of its images. To the extent that any Samoan girls did have sexual encounters that involved only an impersonal force, they would be incarnations of Hesiod's myth.

9

But none of them did. Mead's Samoan girls are not Miranda, but they are equally unreal. Mead's account is incorrect on virtually all of the issues about which she makes claims. Mead described only four girls who were in some way deviant and attributed this to their degree of contact with Christian missionaries (Mead 15). She simply ignored the pervasive role of Christianity in the culture she was observing. Information from previous studies which Mead could have consulted, information which she herself collected, and subsequent studies by Freeman and others demonstrate that Samoan culture has the same sorts of competition, despair, violence, and hierarchy that others do. It also has complex mediations of sexual

behavior. Chastity was highly valued among women, and the bonds within families were, in fact, close and intense. Freeman eventually located one of the women who had been an informant for Mead. This woman, Faapuaa Faamu, filed an affidavit in which she says that she and other girls lied to Mead, teasing her with wild stories made up to deflect Mead's probing questions (Mead *Hoaxing* 7-15). The unenvying girl by the water of Tau was another dream of appetite melded to desire, presented this time not as heroine in play or painting or goddess but as scientific discovery.

Mead was young and not well trained for the work she was trying to do. She would have needed much more time, better language skills, and residence among several Samoan villages in order to produce accurate information. When she says in her introduction that "a trained student can master the fundamental structure of a primitive society in a few months" (8), she suggests that she is anticipating these limitations and trying to rebut them. Her mistake also reflects her desire to please her mentor Boas and her friend Benedict. She wanted to illustrate the tremendous role played in an individual's life by the social environment in which each is born and reared (4).

Freeman closes his study of Mead by citing Daniel Koshland's view that the debate over nature and nurture is virtually concluded. "It is *never* nature or nurture but always nature and nurture" (Qtd. in *Hoaxing* 217 [italics his]). This is a judgment from a writer in *Science* that supports the data that Girard accumulates from literature and my assumption that the omnipresence of images of girls by the edge between water and land stems from the impossibility of separating appetite and desire.

Rather than freeing the West from a bias, Mead took a particularly pressing set of biases with her to Samoa. I assume that, at some level, her own sexuality was an issue behind her misunderstanding of Samoa, as was professional ambition, anthropology's efforts to escape from social Darwinism, and the anti-Western program of some intellectuals inheriting the tone of Marx or Rousseau. When she got to Tau, Mead did not see what was there. Bright, literate, adventurous scholar that she was, she had traveled to "a region that since the days of Bougainville has figured in the fantasies of Europeans and Americans as a place of preternatural contentment and sensual delight" (*Heretic* 283). Her desire to side with culture in the nature/nurture debate trips her.

To show that one middle class American behavioral code is a cultural construct, she goes to a culture without that construct, but she does not argue that Samoa is another set of arrangements for mediating the power of sexuality to generate violence. She argues that in Samoa there is no mediation. The significance of her error is magnified by the enormous influence that Mead's claims have had in the

twentieth century. It is paradoxical that her Aphrodite is offered to science as evidence that the different visions of her are connected to culture, when what is portrayed is a dream of sexuality stripped of culture. A putative scientist has inverted her vision and, while believing that she is looking at the world, is looking at the inside of her own brain. Euripides, Shakespeare, and Chopin are better scientists.

10

## VI. The Beach Is an Important Place

The versions of the girl by the water in ancient myth, folklore from non-literate cultures, and the highly conscious fictions of sophisticated moderns are in one way less problematic than Mead's error. We understand in looking at Hesiod that the facticity in his narrative is not in its literal truth but in the dynamic it represents. It is still possible not to take him seriously, a massive error, but we are not likely to miss the fact that his evidence is garbed in myth. Coming to terms with Mead poses a different issue. She marches behind the banner of science, and anthropology's effort to offer factually accurate data about reality. To take her claim at face value is a different sort of error than ignoring Hesiod's evidence. He is supposed to be doing mythic projection. Mead is not. It is very important, as an exercise in intellectual defense of self and culture, to understand why such a psychological projection should have the status of fact to some educated opinion in the west for half of the twentieth century.

Eric Gans provides an explanation of Mead that supports my own analysis. Responding to Freeman's work, he remarks, "What has made *Coming of Age in Samoa* the most widely-read ethnographic study ever written is that Mead offers the lay reader the guarantee of academic science that there exists a land where adolescent sexuality, more specifically adolescent female sexuality, is without conflict" (2). Every culture depends on this population of young women because they are the locus of its reproductive capacity and hence of its survival. They are "privileged objects of desire, defended as such against unauthorized males by both external and internal restraints." The restraints are the controls, taboos, and inhibitions which complicate sexuality once Aphrodite has come ashore. They are universal: they are the mediations of desire. They are universal because they limit violence, provide for children, and stabilize the use of resources. Samoa had many of them:

Mead's extraordinary success reflects the fact that she makes Samoa the objective correlative of an erotic dream: young female sexuality endlessly offering itself to male desire without ever becoming caught up in the infernal

dialect of desire, not even to speak of the dangers of conception. This is the “innocence” that four generations of readers have found in Mead’s account of Samoan adolescence (2).

That the girl by the water takes the shape of a scientific fact, which has authority in modern culture, rather than is the person of a goddess, whom we no longer believe in, is testimony of the strength of the appetites which lie behind our desires and of the power of the media that shape those desires.

Myth, fantasy, and dirty books or movies we know about. Gans observes that Mead’s girls are popular for the same reason pornography is: both offer a world of “conflict free desire” (2). Girard’s work has demonstrated that there is no such thing, and efforts to ground pacifism in his revelation of the mechanism of the scapegoat falsify his demonstration that violence does not go away. It changes its masks. The same is true for the conflicts associated with culture’s efforts to inhibit the destructive possibilities of sexual expression. They do not go away, and efforts to treat sexuality as appetite apart from the needs of persons and societies quickly encounter everything from AIDS to loneliness.

Aphrodite is ashore. The images in the masculine brain of which she is a personification are not objective realities, but the values which are embedded in the various versions of the girl are real ideas, and any specific ideas a community tries to live by have objective consequences. Both Chopin and Mead are examples of typical problems. Edna Pontilier was married to a man she did not love and who did not love her. Her problem is a common source of misery in human history. Ann Landers for decades served our society well by offering competent and notably unideological advice to unhappy people about the problems in their marriages. She was a mediator who never thought that happy marriage was impossible but who recognized the myriad of complications generated within the institution. She often recommended divorce, more often recommended other changes, and, in my judgment, did much for human happiness and liberal human relations. Chopin’s analysis of marriage is acute and is the ancestor of contemporaries who have turned away from marriage, some from heterosexual intercourse, on the grounds that the masculine imagination, because it is masculine, cannot satisfy their desire. Abstention from relations with men because they are mediated by masculine concepts of desire is not suicide by drowning but is moving in that direction. In biological terms, it is the end of the species.

11

Mead does not propose suicide as a response to the fact that we live with desire rather than appetite, but I find her error equally destructive. Her claim that normal

sexuality in western culture was an aberration, given the prominence that she achieved, was taken seriously, is still taken seriously, by many people. At best the error creates crises of expectations of the sort which Ann Landers was so skilled at discussing. At worst, it produces sixteen-year-old girls being raped by strangers on the beaches of Cancun during parentally financed spring breaks from the protective mediations of middle class American culture.

Their images of Aphrodite are indices to the health of cultures and individuals. Huge enterprises invite us to imitate their uses of her. MTV broadcasts from South Padre Island did not invent desire and did not invent the image of Aphrodite, but they mediate desire just as surely as does Archaic Greek myth. Aphrodite in that myth is a force of nature that enters human experience as a girl emerging from the sea. Her power is the source of the persuasion (*peitho*) which allows women and men to bond, and which will later be presented by Aeschylus in *The Eumenides* as the source of cooperation in Athenian democracy. She also is the cause of the wars between men. There is a caution in these images that serves the human community well. Some travel advertisements show a man and woman walking in the water at the edge of the sea with children. To suggest that encounters with Aphrodite may also be the location of family life strike me as salutary. Both males and females, in personal and public ways, need to resist the physical, ethical, and political errors, the emotional travesties, that seek to power themselves with the energy of our responses to Aphrodite. We, as well, need to locate, describe, and defend those models of her and responses to her that further human happiness, whether these models are new or old.

Kenneth Burke, speaking of the drama, says that form "is an arousing and fulfillment of desires" (124). He is speaking of the same feature that Aristotle has in mind when he refers to magnitude (*Poetics* 1450b). An effectively formal plot has sufficient length to create expectations in its early parts and then fulfill them in the later parts. It follows from this that longer works of literature, because they have more time to develop expectations, to delay and intensify satisfaction, can produce far more powerful experiences than the shorter genre. *War and Peace* is not wiser than *Gimpel the Fool*, but it is more powerful. This formal principle generalizes.

Life is satisfying when we have appropriate desires and they are met in appropriate ways. The more intensely a sequence of events can generate expectations, the more possibility there is in conclusion for intense fulfillment. This becomes a formal argument that chastity, by which I mean all of the competent inhibitions of sexuality, by delaying sexual experience and intensifying desire, intensifies the pleasures of fulfillment. Margaret Mead's imagined teenagers, for whom intercourse has about the status as eating a good meal, do not have the possibility of such intensity in their universe. Miranda's universe, where desire has been ripening

without fulfillment but produces an uninhibited capacity for love, offers at least a possibility for the world where Shakespeare and we actually live. Courtship is worth some time and effort. It produces all sorts of things, from knowledge to intimacy to sexual energy, which intensify the satisfactions available to people. The sorts of restraint involved in longer courtships have a serious role in furthering human happiness. This ancient truism does not have to become an immediate argument for a stupid rigidity in conduct. Burke's point touches on a way in which literature offers important models of how to actually be happy. Ferdinand's encounter with Miranda is not real but it offers a direction to desire that is more useful than anything that either Kate Chopin or Margaret Mead have imagined.

12

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