



Regarding Venus

by Hadley Fitzgerald

a kaleidoscope, an imaginal gypsy and a 16th Century courtesan

When I was five years old, my father gave me a bright green toy kaleidoscope. It made a lovely tinkling sound with each rotation, and I was enchanted to discover the slightest turn of that cylinder gave me a different view of what was sealed inside. I've imagined this was how I began to learn there's always another way to look at something that initially appears quite stationary. The root of "kaleidoscope" draws on the Greek words *kalos* meaning "beautiful, good, notable" and *eidos* meaning "that which is seen; shape, form." It strikes me as a rather Venusian object – and a useful imaginal instrument for our time.

Decades later, when I left the clinic where I'd been working for several years and moved to my own office, one of my first clients looked like the classic, on-the-rise business woman of the '80s: the steel grey power suit tailored to a T; a precise, off-white silk blouse; black designer heels. She sat primly at the edge of the couch with her expensive handbag and beautifully-tooled dark leather briefcase leaning against it. As I gathered information about her background, it became obvious she'd lived a life wherein asking for help was anathema. I could see she was

struggling to contain her anxiety, and I surmised that presenting herself in a therapy office bordered on shameful. That wasn't unusual, and I'd learned I had a knack for helping new clients relax.

About 30 minutes into the standard intake process I was shocked to sense/"see" the archetypal presence of a beautiful six-foot tall gypsy woman over my left shoulder. She was a figure straight out of Bizet's "Carmen." Her peasant blouse was off her shoulders, there was a hand on one hip while the other hand was hiking her full bright red print skirt upward. She had a cascade of long black curly hair dipping slightly over one eye and, of course, there was a red rose in her teeth.

I'd never experienced anything like this and made every attempt to dismiss whatever it was; I focused intensely on the client, and for a moment the image vanished. Then she was back – fiercely stomping a foot. I realized I had to surrender, so I said: "I'm very sorry. I know I've been recommended to you, but you don't know me, and what I'm about to tell you will make me sound crazy. I assure you I'm not. I don't know what to do with this, but, if I don't tell you what's going on, I won't be able to focus on the rest of this session, and I very much want to do that."

I then described exactly what/who was invisibly hanging out over my shoulder and asked if this meant anything to her. The client looked startled, as if shaken from sleep, and burst into tears. "Oh my god! Oh my god! That's *me!* That's who I *really* am! Look at me – look at this suit, these shoes, this 'thing' I've become! I'm so successful, but I'm turning into some kind of female eunuch. I can't stand this anymore – I feel like I'm dying! I *hate* my life – I want a different one." Venus/Aphrodite had entered the room in one of her many guises, we'd broken the ice, and we didn't even have to work our way through the customary thicket of the presenting problems.

In the alarming, near-magical experience with this client whose sensual inner gypsy had been stuffed into the persona of a young Margaret Thatcher type, something turned the kaleidoscope for me. This taught me to trust the images that present themselves in my office and in our lives. It taught me to trust that each relationship with a client will have its own unique energy. It proved the wisdom of the sign Jung had over his door: "Called or not called, the god will be there" despite how consistently we disown vital parts of ourselves. It seeded what has bloomed into a particular perspective on what

Image above: NASA image of the transit of Venus over the Sun in 2012. The black dot is Venus.

we, as astrologers, therapists, and those who attend to the souls of our fellow humans, can offer those who come to us for counsel. It has also become, in my mind, a story for our time, a reminder of the deeper wave beneath all the superficial cultural foam relentlessly washing over us.

You need only be living and breathing in these first two decades of this century to recognize that we are all, to some extent, that woman in my office in her suit with her briefcase – and we have the archetypal equivalent of one or more internal missing persons longing for reconnection and acknowledgement somewhere, somehow. Whatever the presenting issues, each time clients consult us, I believe they're seeking wholeness and thereby seeking someone who can turn the kaleidoscope just enough that it morphs into a mirror to their soul. They're seeking someone who can witness and companion what is constantly pushed aside while the persona dodges the slings and arrows of outrageous distractions zooming through daily life. This involves more than exploring the way Venus is configured in the chart; it means consciously bringing Venusian archetypal energy into the session. Too often I think we astrologers are unwittingly presumptive with these forces because we work with them every day. We get used to thinking we know what they represent, and thus we presume a familiarity that doesn't always call into our own consciousness a sufficient reverence for their depth and power. The goddess herself noted "I bless those that respect my power and disappoint those who are not humble toward me."¹

Aphrodite dressed as imaginal gypsy blessed my client and myself because we could respect her power. But years later in another part of the country the goddess provided proof of how severely she could "disappoint" when she's forced to live in psychic exile. In this

instance, my client was 45 years old and, along with being extremely intelligent, she was utterly Venusian – charming, convivial, and stunningly beautiful by every Western standard. She also had a history of well-disguised eating disorders, and was in an abusive relationship. We'd been tracing the labyrinthine origins of her self-worth issues when her psyche brought forth an incident from age 13 just prior to graduation from eighth grade. Straight "A" students at her Catholic school were eligible to run for valedictorian, and the class would then vote for their favorite candidate. My client had worked hard, had a perfect academic record, was well-liked, and was thrilled to be elected by a large majority. A day later, two nuns took her aside to tell her she wouldn't be allowed to be valedictorian, so they were giving the honor to the runner-up. Why? Because there would be many men - fathers, brothers, and relatives of other students - at the graduation, and my client's beauty would be "an occasion of sin" for them. In other words, where godly (i.e., good) people were assembled, Aphrodite was to be rejected; and my client was traumatically mandated to reject the Aphrodite part of herself, just as she was of age to start exploring what that might involve. Over the next thirty-two years the goddess remained present, albeit her fierce side most in evidence by wreaking havoc on my client's body, mind, and spirit. In this case the road to self-love, self-respect, and wholeness was lengthy and complex.

As my practice grew in that particular part of the US, I realized many therapy and astrological clients had Irish Catholic backgrounds like mine, so this client's experience drew me into reflecting more deeply on that particular upbringing and on how a facsimile of the Venus archetype was introduced to our lives and psyches. We were raised in a religion where one not-quite-goddess Mary was the anomalous



"virgin mother," the other Mary was a recovering prostitute, and the Son of God's closest companions were twelve men. In the 20th century millions of Catholics were schooled by intelligent, dedicated women whose entire bodies, except for their faces, were covered in yards of dark clothing. We could see them move with a kind of feminine grace, and we could hear their feminine voices, but we saw nary a hair escape from their wimples and veils; and rumor had it that their heads were shaved. The Church taught that this extensive camouflage rendered them closer to God - or as close as mere women could get. We couldn't have imagined the profound effect this intense suppression of the goddess

could have on us - or on the nuns. In our brief excursions into "art education" the sole permissible image was of the Venus de Milo in an encyclopedia, mostly naked but with her arms visibly and metaphorically amputated by history. She was powerless to touch us, let alone imaginably embrace us, and thus remained a remote vulnerable object, lifeless, literally out-of-reach. Unless you were an archaeologist, art historian, or Grecophile back then, images such as the sensual Aphrodite of Rhodes weren't easily accessible.

When I moved back to California, these contemplations about Venus stayed with me over the years, not least because the sexual abuse scandal in the Church began to get significant public attention in the media. Both my astrological and therapy sessions were filled with women who felt a new permission - perhaps a mandate - to release the burden of their imposed shame at long last. Venus was in the room in myriad guises, in agony and triumph, alternately weeping and railing, vengeful and rejoicing, speaking and listening, seeking a witness and validating the testimony.

Then in February 1998 a beautiful film appeared out of nowhere. There was no advance p.r., no big ad campaign when it was released into local theatres. Nonetheless, it stayed



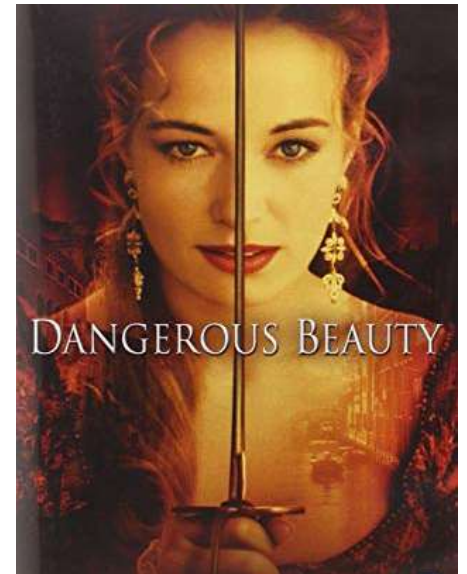
Veronica Franco,
portrait by Tintoretto, c. 1575

around for nearly four months, and as I was standing in line to see it again (and again), I found myself in line with many other women who were doing the same thing. This film, "Dangerous Beauty," was originally entitled "Courtesan." I learned that, when the producers were getting ready to release it, they did a market survey and discovered that 95% of the American public had no idea what a courtesan was. So, with the asteroids Eros and Psyche conjunct in Scorpio and transiting Venus square Saturn on the release date, they picked an odd, strangely telling name in its stead. We could have a long discussion regarding what the title "Dangerous Beauty" still tells us about our collective relationship to Venus.²

It's the true story of a famous 16th century Venetian courtesan and poet named Veronica Franco. After learning she'll never have sufficient dowry to marry the man she loves, we follow her decision to be schooled as a courtesan by her courtesan mother. She's an excellent student and becomes known for her wit and intellectual eloquence as well as her social and political skills and sexual artistry. Well into her professional life, she was not only a favorite of nobles and clerics, she was also lauded for persuading the French king to support Venice in its war with the Ottoman Empire.

But when the plague sweeps through Venice, 16th century fundamentalists preach that this is God's punishment for Venetian licentiousness; courtesans are reviled or killed, and Veronica is imprisoned after being accused of witchcraft by an envious aristocrat. When she's brought before a Church court and ordered to confess, the scriptwriters have her deliver an unrepentant confession of her wholeness, of who she is and how she's chosen to live - concluding with:

"...I confess I find more ecstasy in passion than in prayer. Such passion is prayer.... To know that always, this



is mine. If this had not been mine - if I had lived any other way - a child to her husband's will, my soul hardened from lack of touch and lack of love... I confess such endless days and nights would be a punishment far greater than you could ever mete out. You, all of you, you who hunger so for what I give, yet cannot bear to see that kind of power in a woman, you call God's greatest gift - ourselves, our yearning, our need to love - you call it filth and sin and heresy... I repent there was no other way open to me. I do not repent my life."

Women in the audience at every showing burst into applause after that soliloquy. The story is glamorized by Hollywood, of course, and the film omits significant details of Veronica's life and of the severe conditions that ended it. But I don't think I've ever seen a more vivid representation of the Venus/Aphrodite/hetaera archetype - nor one whose imagery more beautifully evidenced the connection with both Taurus and Libra.

And that turned my inner kaleidoscope yet again....

Among the many things over which she presides, Venus can speak to the courtesan in all of us. She is the companion, not the wife or mother. Over the centuries in sundry censorious cultures, humans have substantially exiled

this manifestation of Venusian energy to the shadowy domain of the prostitute where we can judge, punish, and control her. When I searched the internet for images of the courtesan, everything I saw was sexualized, and much of it was degrading; a search under “hetaera” fared no better. Perhaps our cultures are so sexually obsessed because they’re so hetaera-ically repressed?

Even our own astrological shorthand can confine Venus to designations like “relationships,” “money,” “beauty,” “pleasure,” etc. – important categories all, yet categories nonetheless, and subject to platitudes. After seeing “Dangerous Beauty” and all its rich, archetypal imagery, I began to imagine how we astrologers could see ourselves as, in essence, courtesans to the soul. In deepening our personal relationship to Venus-as-hetaera we would also expand our capacity to bring her influence into a world which sorely needs artful compassion, experience with longing and desire, and a grounded blend of vulnerability, soulful companionability, and clear boundaries.³

The sacred preserves itself in various guises. As we evolve, the archetypes evolve. Some of them are more primary than others. I’m not alone in believing they also present themselves to us at various times in history because either they need us to integrate their energy more into our lives or because we’ve been egregiously neglecting them, though basically those are one and the same. The art of astrology now has a presence in the 21st century in a way that few of us could have imagined as we labored in the shadows to bring this work into the respectable light of day. Using a small device in the palm of your hand, it’s become possible to get a quick “reading” for the day as well as a synopsis of the potential for a life match with that person whose appearance caused you to swipe right on the other app.

You can be stuffed with information and still be left starving for wisdom. The beautifully designed “smart phone” is seductive, intimates companionship and can provide seemingly limitless entertainment; but it will take your money and your data, and the relationship is purely transactional. Whether or not we’re particularly interested in social media, it’s woven into our daily lives via these devices; yet alarming numbers of people report being anxious, depressed, and lonely. There are supposedly limitless opportunities for “connection,” yet a connection to meaning is elusive, and archetypal engagement is more and more difficult to come by. We’re in a soul diaspora.

In myth Venus mandates that Psyche go through a series of challenges in order to be whole, in order to be reunited with her beloved Eros. We know Psyche’s experience is ours, too, and mythologies remind us that no one gets out of the underworld without help. We can be grateful that getting help in various forms is now more culturally permissible and available, yet it can also come in a guise that’s increasingly abstracted

and reduced to marketable rather than soulful relatedness. Our families, cultures, and many of our religions have entrained us to “soldier on,” to suppress what deeply troubles us and yearns for attention and inclusion in our consciousness. And I wonder if the Mercurial quickness and accessibility of what appear to be innumerable forms of help are further exacerbating our fragmentation. Psyche doesn’t get to skip any of her assigned tasks.

I’m offering here the *image* of the astrologer as a unique articulation of the courtesan archetype—one who can help draw each client into a deeper connection with the many dimensions of the self. Astrological consultations understandably have inherent Mercurial, Lunar, Jupiterian, Saturnian energies, such that the Venusian connectedness can inadvertently be pushed to the side. The hetaera has a role different from the informative, nurturing, teaching, parenting parts of us. The courtesan can listen, soothe, stimulate, inspire, wait for something to unfold; can invite and engage rather than categorize and assume; can value and honor the inner, soul-full life



Eros and Psyche, Giuseppe Cammarano, 1821

that the rest of the world may never see in this person because this person may never show it to the world.

Astronomically and astrologically, Venus orbits between the Sun and the earth and is therefore situated somewhere between the life force and the ego, between our cosmic Light/Life center and our humanity and mortality. Our planetary ecological crisis is shifting this symbolic trinity into an epochally precarious relationship on many levels. Where do we humans fit on the earth now? How do we understand ourselves in terms of our evolutionary challenges now? We see a plethora of symptoms to be treated, but being stripped of soul and meaning is seldom listed among them. Astrology is by no means the answer to all that ails us, but we know it can be a way to help our fellow earthlings come into a deeper, non-digitized, Venusian relationship to the story that makes sense of their lives. We can look at what's happening in the world from a deeper archetypal perspective and help contextualize their lives, help them explore the archetypes that are presenting themselves for integration.

We astrologers are used to being and seeing ourselves as Uranian/Aquarian outliers; but with Uranus residing in Taurus for the next several years, might it now be time for us to think of ourselves as more related to the world inside Saturn's orbit – to claim more of a place as courtesans to the soul of the world? And to see how the events of our lives are connected, to see how our lives then connect with other lives, and to assist others in making deeper connections with all the parts of themselves in their own lives? After all, when we're edged out of the collective consensus reality, as Uranian types are, it gives us a chance to ask ourselves what our real values are. Last time I looked, Uranus and Aquarius have

something to do with revolutions.

Like Veronica Franco, I, too, have a confession: the hetaera archetype is woven into my ancestry. My two grandmothers never met, and I knew only one of them; but each paid an indelible price for embodying the energies over which Venus prevails. After crossing the Atlantic alone in steerage at age 18, one of them worked her way from Ellis Island to the west coast as a "lady of the night" in the early 20th century and ended up sentenced to a marriage that would make her untimely pregnancy less disgraceful. The other was secretly institutionalized for nearly 60 years as the consequence of an extramarital affair that her family deemed unforgivably shameful. Though the stories of these two women were kept from me until I was in my late twenties, I know this has set me on a near-lifelong quest to understand what is so terrifying about allowing the Venus/Aphrodite/hetaera archetype more fully into consciousness – especially in this world that has seemed drunk on Mars anger for millennia.

In the 5th century BCE Euripides said:

In strange ways hard to know, gods come to men.

Many a thing past hope they have fulfilled.

And what was looked for went another way.

A path we never thought to tread was found for us.

So has this come to pass.⁴

So it has come to pass that I wasn't destined to follow in either grandmother's personal or professional footsteps. A path I never thought to tread was found, and the gods have indeed come to me in ways I couldn't have imagined: I fell passionately in love with astrology, it embraced me with both arms, and it has companioned me for all of my adult life.

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¹ Euripides, *Hippolytus*, from *Ten Plays by Euripides*, translated by Moses Hadas and John McLean, Bantam Classics, New York, NY: 1960, p. 75.

² "Dangerous Beauty" was released in the US on 20 February 1998. Its title in the UK was "The Honest Courtesan" which is the title of the book on which it was adapted. Asteroid Eros was 22 Scorpio; Psyche, 23 Scorpio and Chiron was at 18 Scorpio.

³ I'm speaking of the hetaera here metaphorically, not necessarily as Toni Wolff described her in Jungian terms.

⁴ When I was first traveling in Greece decades ago, I came upon these words and their truth is etched in my heart. I did not record the translator but they echo the last lines of Euripides' *Bacchae*.



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