

Image of Venus in Medieval Contexts

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It seems that despite the common view that pagan antiquity had been overthrown at the beginning of the Christian era and that it did not revive until during the fifteenth century in Italy, classical conceptions survived the Middle Ages and were especially strong after the time of Charlemagne. Of course, the classical conceptions which prevailed during the Middle Ages were utterly different from the present ideas of antiquity to the point of being almost unrecognizable. During this time, in Western European countries, it was inconceivable that a classical mythological subject should be represented within the limits of the classical style. So classical conceptions were intrinsically interwoven with the philosophical, literary and artistic culture of the time. Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl note that the Medieval mind was unable to see antique culture as a cultural cosmos historically so far removed from them that they could only think of it as an integral unity. They may have assimilated the ideas of Aristotle, and melted them into their scholastic systems, and medieval poets may have abundantly used the classical authors and the artists may have assimilated their figures to Roman statues, but they could not fully apprehend the meaning of what we call classical philology or classical archaeology. They were incapable of realizing the unity of classical subject matter and classical form because the combination would have been meaningless both to the average artist and the average beholder (1932, 279).

Being familiar, for example, with the game of chess as a characteristic feature of courtly life, Panofsky continues, they saw no incongruity in a picture of Medea playing chess although they would not have understood her had she been represented as the heroine of the drama of Euripides. The depiction of the classical prototypes deprived of their

original meaning and invested with another was attributed to the fact that the medieval artists had no direct correlative with the inherited tradition. Classical mythology reached them after a long period during which it had been repeatedly assimilated and melted down by different cultures, reduced by the hostility of the early Christian priests and scholars, and manipulated by previous scholars and artists to serve the purposes and stances of their own tradition and evolution.¹ Consequently, classical mythological subjects during the Middle Ages in the West are not retained in their classical prototype, but undergoing a destruction of their original form or their original meaning, they are then reintegrated on a new basis from a new point of view, thus producing a "revival" in the true sense of the word. This "revival" in the case of the ancient gods is restricted in the form of intelligences or of astral bodies or personification of human characteristics and behavior.

The euhemeristic tradition, which had developed as early as the third century B.C., remains a living influence throughout the Middle Ages but it undergoes a total change of character.² The ancient gods in the Middle Ages

¹ In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer writes that in the fourteenth century, Boccaccio is in a position to enumerate five different "Venuses." Venus, originally the ancient Hellenic goddess Aphrodite, was the more beautiful goddess of the Hellenic pantheon, born by the offspring of Saturnus in Paphos, Cyprus. Later, she was identified with the Phoenician goddess Baalath, or Astarte, the Great Assyrian goddess of motherhood and fertility and in the Roman period she was re-identified with the latin goddess Venus, goddess of vegetation. Venus or Aphrodite, towards the end of the Roman era and in connection with her lamentation over the dismembered body of Adonis, was also identified with the Egyptian goddess Isis (1958, 456, 488).

² Euhemerus' philosophical speculation explains only the origin of the gods. According to it, mortal men and women became falsely worshiped by their descendants. John Daniel Cook notes that these mortal men were able to continue to be thus worshiped because either mankind had been deceived by poets and mythmakers who had fabricated the stories of their deification and potency or because the so-called gods had come to possess or exert actual power which derived either through the invention of demons and satanic influence or through the identity or alignment of the pagan gods with the planets of the same name which, at least in the later Middle Ages, were thought to possess actual power. The

are still deprived of any kind of worship but they gain new prestige with their foothold in history which emphasizes the righteousness of their mortal life rather than the deity of their nature. And as such they become objects of research. By attempting to apply historical reality to the gods the medieval mind offers them a place in the annals of humanity. Thus the ethnological fables are created. Moreover, the recognition of their virtues which had endowed them with a place in heaven makes them equal to similar figures in biblical history who have been endowed with scriptural reference. So gods develop a history, which moves parallel to the story of the Scriptures and, which is neither influenced nor overshadowed by it. Thus parallels between pagan wisdom and biblical wisdom are created.

speculation about the gods being righteous human beings who were nevertheless recruited from the ranks of mortals became a favorite weapon of the Christian polemics against the pagan antiquities, as well as a source of rejection and contempt (1927, 396-400).