CHAPTER 4

Archetypal Patterns in Sex

Myths, Saints, and Celebrities

ON THE SCENT of the soul of sex we have seen that the nymph we are looking for in our sexual curiosity, passion, and longing is felt as a presence in ordinary life. She may be spotted in a person or a painting, smelled in a perfume, touched in a slinky fabric, or perceived by whatever organ it is in the eye that receives color with all its emotion and meaning. She shows herself in the beauty of a face and in the feel, aroma, and toss of hair. She is the mysterious background behind profound feelings and reminiscences rising from the specific organs of sex. She diffuses herself in sex as passing memories, faint longings, and wisps of meaning.

The nymph of sex also appears in the stories and fragments of stories, the images and memories that play a subtle but defining role in sexual experience. Sex is never plain and simple, and like everything else in which human beings are involved, sex is always part of a story. It is likely to be part of the personal tale of our coming of age, our quest for an end

to loneliness, the expression of our love, and, on the shadow side, a means for exerting power or expressing anger. And so our life story may shed light on the role of sex in our lives and in our marriage. When couples tell each other their family stories, their family mythologies come to light. Each person catches a glimpse of the narrative they've unwittingly entered into by loving another.

When I tell stories about my family, not just my immediate family but my more distant relatives as well, I see fragments of my own feelings. I notice the familiar reserve about sexual matters, but I also recognize a lust for life and a deep acceptance of life experiments gone awry. Over the years, I've noticed these same themes and personalities appearing in my dreams, where they sometimes connect directly to my sexuality.

In therapy, I have always been careful to invite as many stories of family as want to appear, but I don't translate these stories into explanations for current problems. I listen to the remembered family stories for signs of the myth, the deep narrative that resonates beneath the teller's life and awareness. If the current concern is sex, I don't expect the relevant stories necessarily to be explicitly sexual. Sex is tightly woven into every aspect of life, and so stories that apparently have no sexual content may shed light on the sexuality of the person telling the story, and stories blatantly and lasciviously sexual may speak to issues that seem far distant from sexuality.

Ancient and enduring mythological motifs appear here and there in our personal and family stories. These are the archetypal patterns that give shape to our own lives. We can glimpse these archetypal figures and motifs in mythology, religion, and even recent history, and in them we might find lessons about the nature of sex and about the erotic conflicts that lie at the very base of existence.

Artemis

The Greek goddess Artemis, in many ways equated with the Roman Diana, is a figure whose aura has immense appeal to many people. Her virginity represents the purity of one who lives far from civilization's corruption, is close to animals, is at home in the woods, likes to run and sport, and favors women and young men. The androgyny in her image makes her a special patroness of those who are gay. She is usually pictured as a tall, graceful figure, quite different from the seductive Aphrodite or the bountiful Hera. Filtered through Artemis, the allure of sex is an attractive blending of purity and integrity.

Artemis is remote, preferring the wilderness of the woods to the niceties of civilization, and she is not usually found in the company of men. Rather, she is often described as surrounded by her female nymphs. Even her male devotees, like the young man Hippolytus, like to remain in the company of their own gender, and in many ways they are aloof and solitary.

Sometimes a spirit will descend upon a man or woman—at any time in life—instilling in them a strong desire for solitude or for the single life. Artemis people may feel a desperate need to be surrounded by members of their own sex or simply by friends and intimates rather than lovers. At least temporarily, their erotic desires may be satisfied by the absence of sexual behavior. In the name of Artemis, life can be celibate, solitary, pure, and self-absorbed, and yet still be free of narcissism. Artemis doesn't represent an anxious avoidance of sex, but rather a chaste way of being sexual.

Although she is the most virginal of the goddesses, Artemis is not asexual. She embodies a special kind of sexuality where the accent is on individuality, integrity, and solitude.

Her spirit can be at the root of masturbation and private erotic fantasy, giving sexuality a solitary mode. At other times we may enter sex with a strong desire to be taken seriously, our independence assured. Homoerotic fantasies, too, may turn in the direction of the whole world of Artemis.

Under her aegis, a life in sports can lead both men and women to dedicate themselves to the passion of a game. Her brand of sexuality may be attractive because she is so devoted to her own life. In myth many men are drawn by her athleticism and aloofness and, impassioned, chase after her. Apollo, smitten by Daphne and mad with desire, runs after her until she transforms into a tree; and Hippomenes races so he can be with Atalanta, another Artemis nymph. King Minos chases through hills and valleys after Britomartis. In Euripides' tragic play *Hippolytos* the young man who embodies many of Artemis's qualities is the object of his stepmother Phaedra's passion—this Artemis spirit is not exclusive to women.

We may see Artemis in a woman playing tennis, figure skating, running a race, playing basketball, or swimming. We may catch a glimpse of her in young men on a track team, hiking, or playing baseball. In men and women in training for an athletic event we may sense her self-absorption, her purity of life, and her spirituality, which often plays a big role in athletics. Society may be disillusioned to discover that its sports heroes are not as pure as expected, the Artemis myth shattered by the intrusion of her rival Aphrodite. Not all athletes are possessed by the spirit of Artemis, but she definitely has a home on the field and the court, and even in the locker room.

We may all have periods in life or just moments in a day when we need to be alone, disconnected from love and sex,

devoted to an interest of our own, or simply withdrawn and remote. The myth tells us that this preference may not be an antisocial rejection of people but simply a deep, positive, even sexual focusing on oneself and one's world. Naturalists may find this spirit dominant in their lives, or painters and other artists, who become absorbed in the pure seductiveness of their work. George Sand, in many ways a follower of Artemis, dressed in men's clothes and enjoyed living in the countryside, while her lover, Chopin, found it difficult to be far from the more civilized city.

Stories tell of Artemis's aggressive ways of protecting her seclusion. Without hesitating she sprinkled waters of regression onto the head of the boy Acteon, turning him into a deer, and at the slight accidental touch of her shirt, she sent a scorpion to deal with the hunter Orion. We might expect this kind of anger in sexual liaisons with Artemis men and women and not be surprised at the unexpected combination of purity and aggression in their personalities. The Artemis spirit helps us stand up for our needs and wishes and leads us to the solitary place where our values are formed. Sex and aggression come together under many different mythic umbrellas, one of them this Artemis way of protecting individuality and personal integrity.

The stories also tell of contests between the Artemis woman and attentive males, another pattern we might see in our sexual relationships. Atalanta is swifter than Hippomenes, and only the clever intrusion of Aphrodite keeps her from besting this boastful man when he races to gain her hand in marriage. In sexual relationships, one sometimes finds oneself in such a situation, in which one or both of the partners acts in the spirit of contest.

On dates young people will often try to show their abili-

ties at games and sports, not just to show off and win a person's admiration, but sometimes simply in a spirit of contest having more to do with preserving one's individuality in the face of love's urge to join and meld. These small rites of self-preservation may be important for the relationship and especially for sex, because the failure to remain intact in love may well show itself in sexual difficulties. In sex, people may anxiously try to preserve their individuality by holding back or setting limits or not surrendering.

In general, myth teaches us to honor and respect feelings and actions that can easily be criticized from some more socially accepted point of view. Society may appreciate openness and vulnerability and may frown upon any display of self-preservation. Since our psychology is so personalistic, we criticize lovers for engaging in contests, thinking that their behavior is motivated by an anxious ego, when myth teaches that it may be archetypal, a necessary and ultimately fruitful ritual in the course of courtship.

Flight, too, is an Artemis reaction. People often need to pull back, resist surrender, run away, keep the chase in play, and never give up. This is part of sex and not a reaction against it, a necessity and not an aberration. Artemis reactions preserve all aspects of life that are not part of marriage and partnership, such as individual ambition and achievement, personal vision, and a sense of self. In ancient rituals dedicated to Artemis people would dress up as plants and dance her special steps, honoring this goddess of pre-social, pristine naturalness. Our own efforts to remain natural and unspoiled may be seen as a continuation of this dance that celebrates the myth of purity—our own naturalness and pre-social innocence.

In spite of all of these efforts at purity and self-preservation, Artemis and her devotees have special sexual allure, the allure perhaps of a crisply dressed nurse, an awkward woodsman, an athletic young woman, or a gardener. It's not irrelevant that in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* a woman of nobility falls in love with a rough but sensitive gamekeeper. Strong, earthy Mellors the woodsman stands in sharp contrast to Lady Chatterley's husband, a wounded executive. The world of Artemis is virginal, and yet at the same time it can be immensely attractive and sexually intriguing. The love scenes in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* are filled with references to the realm of Artemis—nature, flowers, trees—and, oddly, a book that gave censors chills is rooted in the archetypal realm of emotional virginity.

A couple might like to keep their sex pure in some ways, giving it an Artemis touch that would make it conform more to their feelings and thereby increase the pleasure. Some people like to give up all reserve, expressing their sexuality publicly and enjoying sexual experiments in private. An Artemis couple might be just the opposite, protecting the privacy of their sex life and enjoying a degree of modesty in their love-making. While sex may indeed be hurt by traumas in the past of either partner, sometimes reserve simply reflects the nature of the couple and their deep and genuine appreciation for an Artemis-like reticence.

We need the freedom to be cautious and guarded about sex, to be true to the needs of the soul for privacy. Some people may display an excessive concern about giving themselves in sex because they don't feel free to honor their deep feelings of reserve. It might help many people to allow themselves their sexual shyness, not discounting it as a personal inadequacy but recognizing that indulgence and abandon are not the only kind of sexual liberation.

Jesus

Related to Artemis in spirit and imagery is the figure of Jesus, both the god-man we find in the canonical Gospels and the venerated figure of tradition, art, and legend. Because so many people are deeply influenced by their image of Jesus, he plays a special role in forming attitudes and fantasies about sexuality. It's widely recognized that Christians may have special trouble with sex, often falling into the repression-obsession pattern characterized by moralism and preoccupation. But any religion or philosophy that defines itself against the values of paganism may find sex challenging, and therefore the whole society might find some sexual relief in a reconsideration of the sexuality of Jesus.

History has given us many images of Jesus, but except for historians who try to tell us that he had a normal life, and except for a very few novelists who have portrayed him as a man enjoying an erotic life, the sources unite in presenting an image of Jesus as a typical *puer aeternus,* an eternal youth. As such he could be seen as a follower of Artemis—pure, idealistic, misunderstood, and surrounded for the most part by men.

I have no intention, nor do I have the qualifications, to argue about the sexuality of the historical Jesus, but one doesn't have to be an expert to notice a discrepancy between the Jesus of the Gospels and the Jesus who is the object of belief and worship. The former is unusually kind, open-minded, accepting, and understanding of those who are obviously confused about their sexuality. The Gospel Jesus is also intimate, emotional, physically expressive, and even sensual in many ways. The Jesus of the moralizing preacher, in contrast, is inhumanly pure and uncompassionately asexual.

A hint of Epicureanism in the Gospel Jesus appears when

he assures, through a miracle, that a wedding celebration has enough good wine. On another occasion, he gives people bread and fish, again through a miracle, not feeding starving people in severe need, but simply taking care of an audience who needs lunch. Like Epicurus, he has prostitutes in his company, and he saves from certain death a woman condemned for adultery. His heart aches at the death of his friend Lazarus, and this loving feeling is the motive for the miracle of Lazarus's return from the dead. His touch is healing and his presence full of magic. This is an image of a man who is not afraid of eros, who lives from his heart and from his body.

In the Gospels Jesus is contrasted with the moralists and legalists of his time as a man of infinite compassion. Paradoxically, the churches that profess to carry on his teaching are not known for their compassion as much as for their legalism. The Epicurean Jesus is nowhere to be seen, and eros often appears to be the chief enemy, not the chief characteristic, of his followers. The sexuality of Jesus evaporates in these rigid attitudes, replaced by anxious and obsessive suppression of eros.

The Jesus I see in the canonical Gospels is a sexual celibate or a celibate lover. He would be a scandal in our time, as he was in his own, because he tolerates so much humanity. At first glance it may seem a contradiction to be chaste and morally tolerant, but Jesus' celibacy never seems anxious or repressive. It allows him to love in an embracing way and is so comfortably part of his philosophy and style that he doesn't have to judge others for their sexual ways. Moralistic judgments always betray confusion and struggle in the one making the judgments, but in Jesus there is no sign of this neurosis that sometimes plagues his followers.

In his remarkable book *Christs,* David Miller, a former pro-

fessor of mine, explores imagery of the grapevine, wine, and even drunkenness in several religious traditions, and he makes the case for seeing a Dionysian motif in Jesus.[1] The Greek god Dionysus, identified with the grape and its fermented drink, represents a life not divided between pleasure and principle, joy and emotional impoverishment. It is a profoundly erotic spirit that says yes in the face of vitality and mortality alike, and so can be felt as a kind of drunkenness, a spiritual loss of control, and a mystical intoxication. The Dionysian Jesus is like the inebriated figure in Sufi poetry who has lost his ego in his reach for union with the divine.[2]

In his beautifully complex book *The Axis of Eros,* Walter Spink summarizes this point vividly. He says Christ's message was one

> of life, of eros. . . . His rules for the constitution of perfection and for the imposition of the ideals of Paradise upon the earth were premised upon the principle that man renounce the burdens of possessions, and then "follow me." It insisted that one must "love thy neighbor as thyself," and this was something Western man could neither do nor wished to do; for all these threatening principles involved an implicit renunciation of the ego and a convention-disrupting loosening of the disordering and dionysiac forces in the id.[3]

In these two interpretations of Jesus, Miller's and Spink's, we find a Jesus who is not anti- or asexual, a Jesus whose teaching leads to a drunken state of unreserved devotion to God and to mystical enthusiasm. Referring to Old Testament instances of divine drunkenness, Miller speaks of it as "a drunkenness that made eros possible."[4] Dionysian surrender to life includes an ego-relaxed receptivity to sexuality, a willingness to let life be shaped by desire and by sexual inclination. Yet when this Dionysian spirit is linked to the compassionate eros of Jesus, it takes an unusual form, becoming an emotional oxymoron—carnal chastity, promiscuous compassion, or, in the perfect phrase of Mary Daly, pure lust.

The Dionysian spirit is usually seen as a sexually expansive force, and so it is not obvious in most portraits of Jesus. Yet, as Miller demonstrates with considerable subtlety, the Dionysian affirmation of life is strong in the character of Jesus. The theologian Rosemary Ruether summarizes the Gospel picture of Jesus in imagery like Miller's that closes the gap between Dionysus and our usual idea of Jesus:

> He sits at table with sinners. The sinful woman (presumably a prostitute) is held up to the Pharisee as a model of love and repentance. . . . Jesus lives in towns, in the habitations of friends. He does not fast, but eats and drinks (not grape juice). . . . "The Son of Man comes eating and drinking, and they say, behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."[5]

Ruether concludes that "Jesus appears to be a person unperturbed by sexuality because he relates to both men and women first of all as friends."

All figures of history, but none more so than Jesus, are transformed by the imagination of those who come after them. In spite of themselves they become objects of mythic imagination. There are by now countless images of Jesus, each defended strongly and often anxiously, and among them is the Dionysian Jesus espoused by Ruether, Miller, and Jung. This is the Jesus drunk on life, inebriated by vitality, and able to live with an intensity inaccessible to most. This Jesus knows the secret suggested by Rosemary Ruether that sex

thrives in the air of friendship. Eros and philia, lust and intimacy, can feed each other, resulting in the stimulating and creative paradoxes of erotic chastity that characterize the Jesus of the Gospels. Later, of course, Christianity would lose this creative, humane sexuality and become preoccupied with the suppression of the Dionysian.[6]

In our superego-dominated world, we may wonder where in Dionysian drunkenness we would find necessary limitations on our sexual desires. The image of Jesus suggests a way of placing limits that derives from joy and pleasure rather than fear and anxiety, limits determined by a positive choice in life. Jesus seems to choose joyful celibacy and then to tolerate the struggles of others to establish their ways of being sexual and their ways of finding limits.

Anyone married or living in some other kind of committed relationship can also be positive about the decision to enter deeply into a sexual relationship. They reach far into life and are not neurotically self-protective, and can have compassion and empathy for others as they find their own way toward the same goal of surrender to life and their own forms of nonrepressive limitation on sexual behavior. There is a strong and deep-seated reciprocity between our personal effort to find a satisfying sex life and our judgment and treatment of others.

The sexuality of Jesus consists in his openness to strangers and friends, the physicality of his healing, the sacramentality in his approach to food, the tolerance he displays in the face of sexual transgression, and his espousal of a philosophy based on love. Only a worldview mired in materialism could fail to see the sexuality in this expansive and inclusive erotic philosophy. The sexual teachings of Jesus, told best through his example, present a soul-centered eroticism in which

friendship and a compassionate heart are not only included but placed at the center.

We have a strong tendency to think of sex as emanating from the sex organs or from the purely physical body, but Jesus demonstrates a quite different notion—sexuality rooted in compassion and in the capacity for friendship. It is a more broadly defined but no less sensuous sexuality, in which love and pleasure are joined integrally. There is no need to import affection to what is thought to be a plain physical expression or to justify sex with love. In the sexuality of Jesus physical life and compassion are two sides of a coin. In him we find that the heart is an organ of sex, as surely and effectively as any other private part.

Hester Prynne

Another rich mythic figure of sexuality is the woman caught in adultery. We find her in the Gospel, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* and in the daily newspaper. Hester Prynne wears her letter "A" to identify her as someone who has surrendered to desire and who has broken the rules of propriety. In Hawthorne's story she is contrasted with the early American Puritans, who seem inexplicably rigid, showing little compassion or acceptance of human imperfection. We may understand Hester Prynne and her judges not only against the backdrop of the first days of America, but also as archetypal tendencies in us all.

It isn't easy to live up to our own sexual ideals or those of our community, and so we can find this tension between the weak transgressor and the demanding critic in modern social life and in our private lives. It's odd that we know privately how difficult it can be to deal with sexual desire and yet we

make extreme demands on others. There must be profound anxiety behind this judgmentalism, which is perhaps a displacement onto the lives of others of our own wish for control.

We have within us also a tendency toward masochism, a degree of satisfaction in being judged and limited, and so we create institutions that give external form to the pattern. Not only do people enjoy sitting in churches being told what to do and being chastised regularly for living imperfectly, but even our self-help books tell us how to live with perfect emotional and physical health, and they are sometimes filled with veiled authoritarianism that isn't so far from that of our Puritan ancestors. What we consider expertise was once called authority, and where preachers once used the colorful language of hellfire and brimstone, our experts now speak authoritatively of emotional and physical health.

Hawthorne's analysis of sexual desire is appropriately complex. *The Scarlet Letter* begins with Hester Prynne stepping out of prison with the accusatory letter on her chest and refusing to enter too deeply into the role of penitent. She has embroidered the letter so artfully that it stands out for its size and beauty. She lets the world see it, though she doesn't flaunt it. Then she lives a life of service to her community. Her lover, Arthur Dimmesdale, in contrast, hides his sin. He has a habit of placing his hand over his heart, where his scarlet letter might have been pinned, as though he both feels the searing in his heart and covers it over. Unlike Hester Prynne he lives as though nothing had happened. His letter is invisible, interior only, and it eats away at him from within. In the end Hester prospers and Dimmesdale confesses too late to his desire and forfeits the joy he might have had. Hester's wronged husband Roger Chillingworth, bent on revenge, plays the

part of the devil, and yet Hawthorne begs the reader to have compassion even for him.

The beauty of Hester Prynne's story is its portrayal of several ways sex shapes people's lives. We might all have a Hester Prynne, an Arthur Dimmesdale, and a Roger Chillingworth in our erotic makeup—one who has fallen to the charms of sex and embraces the consequences, one who tries to maintain an ordinary surface life while beneath that persona lies a heart profoundly troubled, and one who embodies the role of the wounded and betrayed avenger. Sex has a way of creating a drama of intense emotion around these characters, and most people have a taste of it at some time in their lives.

Hawthorne's tale reminds us that we can benefit from the failure of virtue that sex forces upon us. His words are precise and accurate. Of Hester Prynne he writes: "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers." In this story the heroine is the adulteress, a woman truly shamed by her passions but who found a way through them deep into her community, her motherhood, and a life of educated, complicated virtue. Others around her failed because they refused to come to terms with sex, but she lived her entire life dedicated to her passion.

C. G. Jung says that in our sexual life we have to deal with our particular fate and dharma, the place where universal morality and our individual law come together. Hester Prynne is the great sinner, publicly shamed by her community, but she embraces her fate, acknowledges her passion, and thus finds her life. Healing of the soul begins when men and women live their earthly reality instead of their ideas and ideals.

One can easily be tempted to disown what passion has wrought in life, or to try hard to screen passion out, but these

are tragic choices. I've worked with men and women who, like Roger Chillingworth, have indeed been chilled by adultery and betrayal on the part of their spouse and have responded by withdrawing from life and community. I've worked with men and women who have succumbed to adulterous passion and have disowned it without struggle by means of manipulative, simplistic, or false repentance. The betrayer says: "I'm sorry. It was a mistake. It doesn't mean anything." But the betrayed feels as though the whole of life has been torn apart, and the betrayal, whatever the conditions, means everything.

I've often felt that the betrayed party has the most obvious opportunity to go deeper into life, even though the suffering may be intense. The betrayer may be too defended against the loss of control, the influence of passion, and the shadow feeling of having done something wrong to allow deep reflection and genuine remorse. Hester Prynne is exceptional. She betrays her husband and then goes on to find her place in community and in love through the emblem of her passion and her imperfection, her colorful scarlet letter.

Hester Prynne finds her freedom after seven years of suffering, a number we might take as symbolic of whatever substantial period of time it may require for a person to find new life. She remains complex, first moving to the Old World with her daughter and then returning to Salem to live out her destined life. Earlier on, she impetuously removes her scarlet letter and senses an almost forgotten freedom, but then she puts the letter on again because she knows it is her destiny.

As part of our quest for a blemish-free emotional life, we may look for a complete absolution after having betrayed sexually, but Hawthorne preserves life's complexity by suggesting that there is no way ultimately to remove the scarlet

letter, which is a sign not only of literal adultery but also of the eternally soul-shaping soiling of sexuality. Once we have fallen to passion, we have to live our lives keeping that failure in sight. Not just a mental awareness, but a full-hearted owning of the failure ushers us into our humanity. This is a kind of submission to the authority of passion that takes us deep into life, where we can engage, as Hester Prynne did, in humane community service and achieve a moral position that enhances rather than restricts life.

The illusion of moralistic perfection can be purchased at a cheap price, but deep morality lies well within the realm of passion and can be gained only after one has been baptized in the often turbulent emotions of sexuality. There, morality and vitality come together, one supporting and nurturing the other. Paradoxically, Hawthorne's novel resolves the problem of virtue and passion by bringing the two together in the life and consciousness of a woman weak enough to succumb to passionate life and yet strong enough to live her passion openly and virtuously.

The widespread hypocrisy of society today in the face of sexual passion hints that we have not learned the lesson of this remarkable story from our American literary tradition. Maybe we have only appreciated the story for its technical brilliance and not for its existential teaching. Maybe we have not realized in our intellectual defensiveness that Hester Prynne is a figure of the soul, an attitude and achievement of character to which we might aspire.

Sexual transgression is all around us, but the big-hearted conscience of Hester Prynne is difficult to find. If we merely neglect the purity, reserve, conscience, and limitations that were exaggerated in the Puritans of her day, we are not free to combine passion and virtue as she did. We can find relief

in avoidance of the struggle altogether, but we won't necessarily discover the freedom and vitality that Hester Prynne won through her courage, honesty, and loyalty.

Virtue born of eros is not an achievement of intellect and will, nor does it derive from the repression of passion. It arises from an affirmation of life, a limiting of sexual behavior that is rooted in passion, not turned against it. Hester embroiders her scarlet letter the way she cultivates the implications of her surrender to passion and love. She doesn't disown what it represents, and indeed her daughter fails to recognize her when the letter has momentarily been removed. Hawthorne recognized that we become persons through our transgressions, by bringing them close to home, allowing them to etch the outlines of our character in gradual, painful realizations.

Therapy for the betraying lover does not lie in the removal of guilt and pangs of conscience, but in the deepening of remorse. No one wants to betray or be betrayed, yet betrayal is part of life and has gifts to offer, provided it is neither indulged nor denied. It may help to remember, in painful moments of betrayal, that sex has led us deep into one of its terrifying and sullying myths. Sexual betrayal is not just a personal fault, it is an archetypal narrative that from a deep, dank place shapes the underside of the soul. It, too, is an opportunity to find our humanity, to become a feeling member of the community, and to live a creative life—the kind of life modeled by Hester Prynne, the sinner.

Marilyn Monroe

In recent times another woman has appeared on the stage of American history and art bearing a scarlet monogram—MM

for Marilyn Monroe. There is much difference of opinion about her motives, talents, and even her beauty, but I'm persuaded that Marilyn Monroe was the genuine article, a true avatar of Aphrodite for modern culture.

In ancient times people talked about apotheosis, the transformation of a human being into a god, a hero, or a celestial constellation. Today ordinary mortals, through some twist of fate, sometimes become stars. We still use celestial imagery to describe this transformation, and we still mean apotheosis. A person can become a myth, a great figure of the community's imagination made up of some factual biography and a great deal of fantasy. The political arena and the movie or television screen offer sufficient translation into fiction that a person can be a star and a myth even as they live and breathe and have an ordinary life off-screen.

It might be argued that no one in recent times has gone through an apotheosis of such grand proportions as Marilyn Monroe. The day she sat drawing double Ms to practice writing her new name, Norma Jean Baker began the process of becoming not only a star but a myth out of control, a goddess of sexuality. There have been other paragons of sex, but Norma Jean Baker became a figure of imagination so powerful, so contradictory, so enduring that she offers an image of sexuality that has many of the characteristics of ancient myth and ritual.

As in the case of any genuine myth, Marilyn's life story consists of extraordinary fragments, images that have found their way deep into the collective psyche: her nude calendar, tame by today's standards; her breathy song at John F. Kennedy's birthday party; her mysterious and shocking death.

She was extraordinarily aware of her calling to be a central figure in the world's sexual mythology and demonstrated a

rare sophistication as she played out her role. Fortunately, we have many of her own words describing the tensions and pleasures of her place in society. Collected into a pagan gospel unfamiliar to a Judeo-Christian culture, her reflections make a kind of sacred text in the religion of Aphrodite, so close was she to the spirit that inspired her. I assume that her power came from her vulnerability, not only to the world around her but especially to the inspiration she felt within her.

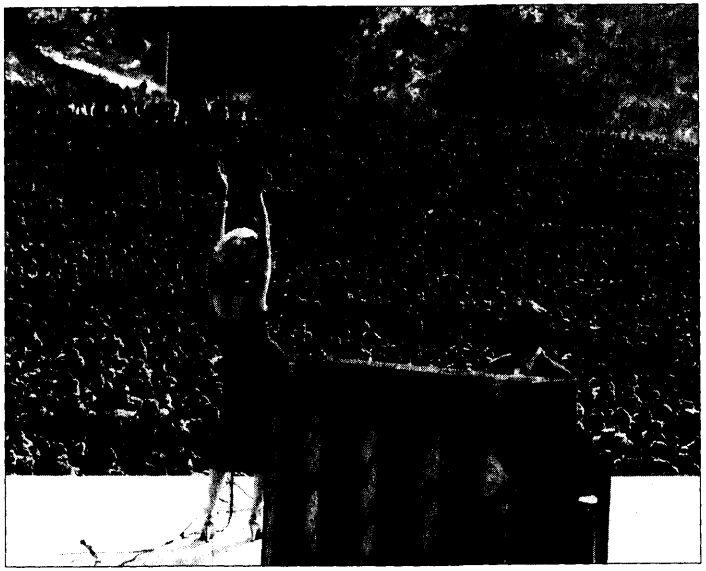
The world always has its collection of sex stars, and in our time their sexuality is usually much more graphic and stark than it was in the days of Marilyn Monroe. Yet, even in her own time, though surrounded by women of renowned beauty and sexuality, she became the goddess, the myth. In fiction, investigative reporting, and biography, writers never stop trying to understand her mystery. I suspect it has to do with her loyalty to the spirit that early in her life she found dwelling within her.

She said she remembered as a young woman daydreaming about her future: "I dreamed of myself walking proudly in beautiful clothes and being admired by everyone and overhearing words of praise." Many young people might say something similar, yet in context with other reflections on her life, these words show the intensity of her devotion to the things of Aphrodite—beauty, clothes, and admiration. Vividly she hears words of praise from the future, and concretely she sees herself fulfilled in being admired for her cultivated beauty.

Later, after she had become a star, she said, "I knew I belonged to the public and to the world, not because I was talented or even beautiful, but because I had never belonged to anything or anyone else." The ancient theme of the abandoned child comes through in these words of a girl raised in an orphanage, almost a prerequisite for a person about to become a myth. It isn't sufficient to hear them as a literal description of her circumstances. If Marilyn has indeed become a myth, we can expect to see ancient patterns of mythic reality in her life and words.

An extraordinary photograph shows her from the back standing on a stage in Korea, her hands raised upward toward the sky, an ocean of soldiers spread out before her, and a white cross, ethereal in the background, just above her hands.[7] This is a person open to the public, a priestess of Venus. She played a role in the world that was a challenge to the one represented by the cross, but this photograph suggests that the two were like stars in conjunction, two worlds that are more intimately connected than the followers of either would care to admit.

Another time, she described the sensitivity she had for her



Marilyn Monroe in Korea

public role as a daughter of Venus: "The only people I care about are the people in Times Square, across the street from the theater, who can't get close as I come in. If I had light make-up on, they'd never see me. This make-up is for them, so that when I wave to them it will soften out in the distance across the square." What a remarkable way of thinking, so fully within the scope of Aphrodite. She was clearly a person with a genius for sex, just as some have a genius for mathematics, and she used her special form of intelligence to evoke the myth perfectly.

Truman Capote captured her role precisely: "I don't think she was an actress at all, not in any traditional sense. What she was . . . this presence, this luminosity, this flickering intelligence . . . could never surface on stage. It was so fragile and subtle, it could only be caught by the camera."[8] Laurence Olivier said that "she was happy as a child when being photographed." She lived for the image she embodied, for the ghost perhaps that could only be seen by the camera lens. It might be expected that she would have trouble with actual life and never find a man who could be a fully satisfying or satisfied mate.

One of the most enduring images of Marilyn Monroe is the classic one in which she is captured on the New York City grate, her skirt puffed up around her legs in the ancient pose of anasyrma. The fact that it is a typical image of Aphrodite intensifies the connection between goddess and movie star, and the fact that this photograph, this ancient gesture we see today in museums in the form of tiny amulets, has become so identified with her and has been reproduced countless times—all of this classic, mythic material demonstrates that Norma Jean was a woman possessed, a woman who responded to an unusual call to serve the deep imagination of the world.

Many writers have tried to solve the puzzle of Marilyn Monroe without considering her genuine mythic presence in a society that needed her. Our rejection of the pagan sensibility leads us to place sex in a category far removed from genuine piety and seriousness. In this hollowed-out world, Marilyn Monroe continues to be a reminder of the vitality and allure of the repressed myth. She is not just a sexual person, as many of our contemporary sex stars are. Through her genius for remaining true to her inspirations, we can find in her the sensuality and creative illusion that we crave but at the same time reject.

We could learn many lessons in the arts of sex from her, lessons that in most cases would probably contradict the avowed values of the society. Marilyn, for example, has been accused, even by her most sophisticated biographers, of being narcissistic, and yet her words suggest something different. Her concern for her image is part of her myth. It may have taken more courage from her to remain focused on her self and her image than it takes to complain about her narcis-

Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*

sism. I believe that narcissism is due, anyway, to neglect of our persons, and so in reaction we insist on ourselves or display ourselves ineffectively. Biographers seem puzzled by Marilyn's comfort with her body and with nudity, but her sexual ease simply demonstrates the depth of her identity with this myth that still challenges us.

We might learn from Marilyn to find and honor that spirit in us that is fundamentally sexual. The dancer Margot Fonteyn said of Marilyn that her body movements produced "a delicately undulating effect like the movement of an almost calm sea. It seemed clear to me that it was something of which she was not conscious; it was as natural as breathing, and in no way an affected 'wriggle,' as some writers have suggested."[9] I don't know if Margot Fonteyn was aware when she wrote this that in ancient times Aphrodite was identified with the sea, but I do know that many people dedicated to the Aphroditic spirit often embody it unselfconsciously.

For most of us, Aphrodite is one sanctuary of meaning and vitality among others, but we can learn from Marilyn how to bring that spirit forward in our lives and in that unexpected way find soul. She is a mythic figure who entices us even now to read her words, watch her movies, enjoy her impersonators, and glimpse her spirit in our daily lives. She beckons us into a realm that she perfected and we neglect. Like Marilyn we could become intelligent about sex, not from outside the sexual realm but from within it. We could realize that there are ways to be sexually brilliant, sexually talented, and sexually soulful. We can be educated in sex, not just in its physiology and psychology, but in its own special ethos.