

Making Passion Last: The Myth of Psyche and Eros

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How to keep passion alive--that is the question. Not only scholars and relationship gurus, but many people who want to make everyday Valentine's Day have combed the myth of Psyche and Eros (Cupid) looking for answers. According to Google, the myth is mentioned some 600,000 times on the web. Today there are Psyche-and-Eros based relationship quizzes and guided imagery exercises, as well as more serious love guides, e.g., John Bradshaw's *Creating Love*, and Ken Keyes, Jr.'s, *A Conscious Person's Guide to Relationships*. The word psyche stems from the Greek *psihi* or spirit (meaning soul, spirit, courage and/or dearest one).

This tale of Psyche, a beautiful princess who wins the heart of Eros (god of love and son of Aphrodite, goddess of love), has been likened to Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. But, being Greek, Psyche's story is, of course, far more complicated and, of course, concerned with far deeper issues than these other tales. Unlike Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, in order to live happily ever after with her Prince Charming, Psyche has to do more than be gorgeous. She has to earn Eros' love by making the painstaking journey from adolescence to adulthood. Eros has to grow up too.

The myth traces back to the ancient Eleusian mysteries. Yet it persists today, perhaps because it addresses two major sticking points in the fiery negotiations of intimate relationships: (a) the inevitability of confrontation and wounding in any romance hoping to go beyond raw passion and (b) the need for each partner to become their own person by breaking away from domineering family members and rigid sex roles. Retaining sexual bliss requires Eros to develop

forgiveness and other traditionally female virtues; and Psyche, to develop historically male ones, like courage.

The mythological Psyche was so exquisite that people began worshiping her instead of Aphrodite. Enraged, Aphrodite commands Eros to cause Psyche to fall in love with a vile serpent. Instead Eros falls in love with Psyche and hides her in a secret palace where she can have anything she wants.

Every night Eros makes wonderful love to her. Yet he forbids her from seeing his face, leaving the premises, and contacting her family. According to Gisela Labouvie-Vief's *Psyche and Eros: Mind and Gender in the Life Course*, Eros wants Psyche to surrender her individuality and personal freedom. But Psyche's sensual paradise is so fulfilling that, at first, she assents to Eros' restrictions. (Here she's naive, young, and in love with love, not a real man.)

Although raised to be a good Greek girl, eventually Psyche gets bored. So strong is her desire for more than a life of passivity and ignorance, that one night, at the risk of losing Eros, Psyche lights a lamp (symbolizing consciousness) to see him. In her other hand is a knife with which to kill him – in case he proves to be a hideous beast. Instead she beholds the radiant Eros and falls deeper in love. As she bends over Eros to kiss him, she inadvertently burns him with hot oil from the lamp.

Shrieking in pain, Eros flies to his mother's house to nurse his wounds. Meanwhile Psyche roams throughout the world looking for Eros. But nobody helps her, for fear that Eros's mother (i.e., Aphrodite) might curse them with uncontrollable sexual passions that could ruin their lives. In order to be reunited with Eros, Psyche must complete four tasks. Although Aphrodite designed

these tasks to destroy Psyche, they are identical to those psychologists agree are necessary for every girl (and boy) to master in becoming a mature adult.

Aphrodite initiates Psyche into adulthood by beating and ridiculing her, then gives Psyche three hours to sort a huge pile of peas, lentils, barley, and other seeds into separate stacks. But Psyche must learn more than how to organize cupboards or make *fasolatha* (Greek bean soup). In Erich Neumann's *Amour and Psyche*, the seeds represent Psyche's inner potentialities and emotions. Psyche needs to order her potentials (so they can develop) and to sort out her feelings (so they don't overwhelm her). The seeds also symbolize the semen of various men, indicating that Psyche must forgo promiscuity and be monogamous.

Next Psyche must gather strands of wool from certain "shining, golden sheep," symbols of physical, spiritual, and intellectual powers traditionally associated with men. But the sheep, like these powers, have a dark side: when agitated, they become violent. Hence in order to grow into maturity, yet remain a decent person, Psyche needs to incorporate only the positive aspects of these male strengths. If she imitates the sheep's dark side, for example, by yanking at their wool, they'll probably attack and kill her. Even if she survives, she'll be viewed as castrating, making impossible an enduring romance with Eros (or anyone else).

Psyche succeeds through patience and strategy: the skills of Athena, goddess of wisdom. In Homer's *Iliad* Athena advises Achilles and Ulysses to not attack forces greater than themselves directly. Instead, Athena instructs, they need to study their enemies and outsmart them.

In keeping with Athena's advice, Psyche spends time observing the sheep. Hence she realizes that the sheep calm down at night. So, she concludes, if she waits until dark to gather the wool, the sheep are less likely to attack. She also observes that when the sheep brush against

bushes, some of their wool clings to the branches. Therefore, instead of angering the sheep by pulling at their wool, Psyche decides to collect tufts caught on nearby bushes.

Psyche's third task looks easy: filling a cup with water from the river of life (which symbolizes taking a portion of life for herself). But the stream of life begins at the top of a high mountain. Climbing it taxes, yet develops, Psyche's physical stamina. Along the path, dragons repeatedly tell Psyche that she's not entitled to part of the life force (because she's a woman perhaps?) and that she will surely fail. Although terrified, Psyche presses on, thereby acquiring emotional muscle too.

Eros' wounds have long-healed, yet he's still at mothers, letting Aphrodite pamper and restrict him, just as he once pampered and restricted Psyche. Having been burned once, he's reluctant to venture forth. (Sound familiar?) He's well-aware of Psyche's ordeals but like a spoiled, egotistical child, he refuses to forgive. Only when Psyche collapses during her fourth task does love overcome his male pride.

Eros revives Psyche, then takes her to Mount Olympus and demands that Zeus marry them and make Psyche immortal. Just as Psyche extricated herself from Eros' control, now Eros has extricated him from his mother's control, as well as from her promiscuous life style. Hence Eros is free for him to embrace Psyche, not as a sex slave, but as an individual with needs of her own and as an equal worthy of his fidelity, not a sex slave.

The myth has been widely applauded for showing (a) that even pure lust can't survive when one person feels imprisoned by the other and (b) that lasting love involves episodes of disruption and repair. Furthermore, while most Olympians ultimately discarded their mortal lovers, Eros marries Psyche, thereby bestowing divine status to human love.

Usually mortals who disobeyed the gods were severely punished. But Eros doesn't punish Psyche for having disregarded his orders by calling her "overly demanding;" and Psyche never calls Eros a "mama's boy." They navigate their first conflict without the "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse four forms of negativity" which John Gottman's *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* insists are "lethal" to emotional intimacy and good sex: character assassination (vs. complaining about specific behaviors), contempt (sarcasm), chronic tuning-out, and attacking without apologizing afterwards.

Did Psyche and Eros avoid the Horsemen during their next disagreement? Nobody knows. But at least they set a precedent by doing so their first time around.

This myth elevates women out of relationships dominated by sex and men. Yet some think it's outmoded because Psyche doesn't develop interests outside of her love relationship. Nevertheless, the myth describes the critical process of moving beyond the self-absorption of youth, where women enjoy the power stemming from their fresh beauty and focus on being adored and loved, rather than on loving and the compromises entailed in committed love. Given today's media messages teaching girls that their value and futures depend primarily on their allure, this ancient myth is quite relevant.

Might there be less domestic and dating violence if girls were encouraged to develop Psyche's hard-earned competencies; and fewer divorces if both sexes did so?

In this myth, Psyche also evolves from childlike dependency into a woman who risks losing her lover and financial security in search of the truth (even though she's pregnant and has no family support, job skills, women's shelter, or welfare program). Today there are still men and women who, like Psyche, feel trapped by their passions (or other forces) in relationships where

they feel restricted or don't really know their partner. But unlike Psyche, they ignore their dissatisfactions or simply find a new partner. Perhaps they fear that confrontation could result in painful emotional distancing or worse, in separation. This would thrust them from the familiarity and relative safety of their current life into unknown territory where, all alone, they, like Psyche, might encounter challenges for which they're ill-prepared.

Perhaps a Psyche: Part 2, where Psyche embarks on a career, is needed. But given the age in which the myth originated, perhaps it's revolutionary enough that Psyche defied her husband, burned him, and plotted his murder, then had the nerve to pursue him and want him back, even though he was a god, and she, a mortal.

Like all myths, this myth has many versions and interpretations. Aside from its Valentine themes, it's also rich with insights into the tensions between sexuality and spirituality, logic and emotion, and other opposites that human beings have yet to reconcile.