

4 Morals

The Judgment of Paris is not a fable or parable. But nor is it a straightforward story. It does, in fact, have a moral - or several morals, depending on how we interpret the motives and actions of the characters.

Why did Paris make the decision for Aphrodite? There are at least three possible answers. First, he chose Aphrodite because her bribe was more attractive than the bribes of the others. Second, he chose her because the consequence of slighting Aphrodite was worse than the consequence of slighting the other two. Third, he chose her because she was most beautiful.

According to Homer, Ovid, Lucian and other literary versions of the story, the correct answer is the first. Paris was bribed. When we look to see how the story links in to other Greek mythology, this answer becomes even clearer - Aphrodite's bribe explains the Trojan war. Although Paris' selection as judge was ostensibly on the basis of his own good looks, Zeus never said why this should qualify him to appreciate the beauty of others. Ancient writers explain that Zeus's professed reason was a feint: his real purpose was to incite mortals into the Trojan war¹. Zeus had decided to cause the war even before Eris threw down the golden apple at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. He seized the opportunity of the goddesses' dispute over who should have the apple to provoke the conflict. He foresaw Aphrodite's conniving and Paris' weakness. So he sent the goddesses to be judged, Aphrodite worked her spell, Paris fell in love with the unknown Helen, together they contrived Helen's seduction and abduction from Menelaus, and the Greek assault of Troy to recover Helen was the inevitable response. Zeus' purposes were fulfilled in mysterious ways.

This interpretation of the story emphasizes Paris' weakness. It is not that Zeus programmed him to succumb to Aphrodite's temptation, simply that Paris was predictable enough to be used for Zeus's ends. Here, if we are looking for one, we can find a moral. It is not simply "Don't take a bribe" or "Don't commit adultery". Rather the story shows that our partialities make us exploitable. To retain our autonomy, we should judge disinterestedly. There is an interesting link with Kant here. If Paris' decision had been a moral one, then, according to Kant, he should act rationally. If Paris did act rationally, he would act predictably, so he would still be open to exploitation, though not to bribery, and therefore not to guilt for the consequences. However, because Paris' decision concerns beauty, he does not have to act rationally. According to Kant, if this decision were aesthetic, it would still be predictable because other people would form the same judgment. But it could simply be a decision about what is most agreeable to Paris. In this case, Paris' decision is not predictable. In exercising free choice according to preference, he could undermine any attempts to second-guess his autonomy. In the same way, susceptibility to our appetites takes away our autonomy, but expression of our tastes enhances autonomy.

Arguably, though, Paris' decision could have been made on a rational basis. This is the second possibility: that he chose Aphrodite because the consequence of slighting her was worse

¹ See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Penguin, 1955, p 631, and p 637 where this tradition is traced to the lost *Cypria*, quoted by Proclus in *Chrestomthy*,

than the consequence of slighting the other two. Even if Paris had known that the consequence of taking Aphrodite's bribe was the Trojan War, in which many would be killed, injured and dispossessed, he could still have rational reasons for preferring this outcome to the alternatives. If we assume that Paris was a pure egoist, the cost of accepting Aphrodite's bribe would be deprivation, suffering and eventual death because of his love for Helen. This could be predicted in general terms as a loss of any sovereignty he already had (through rejection of Hera) and military ineffectuality (through rejection of Athena). But to reject Aphrodite would not only mean missing out on Helen, but could also mean the loss of all love. Faced with this possibility, many of us would consider that Paris did choose the least worst case. This does not mean that, having chosen Aphrodite, he necessarily had to accept the bribe. Again there is a moral: a rational decision may be accidentally correlated with an impulsive one, but we should not therefore think that all the implications are the same.

The third possibility is that Paris chose Aphrodite because she was the most beautiful. As the goddess of love it seems likely, as Ovid claimed, that Aphrodite would be more beautiful than her rivals. Indeed, even if we assume bribery, the fact that Aphrodite was successful in her bribe suggests she had more than just gifts of persuasion. The love that she offered to Paris was defined by her character. Had Hera or Athena offered Helen to Paris, it is unlikely that he would have accepted. Helen was a worthwhile prize *according to* Aphrodite, and the desire that was stirred in Paris was a testament to his faith in Aphrodite's judgment. Thus, even if the contest was decided by bribery, Aphrodite was only able to succeed because her desirability gave credence to her recommendations. There is an echo here of the idea that one who is beautiful will be a good judge of beauty, with the implication that Aphrodite was, indeed, the most beautiful of the three goddesses.

By this argument, if Paris had made a disinterested decision, he would still have chosen Aphrodite. In theory such a decision could be purely aesthetic or based on sexual attractiveness. Even in the second case the decision could be disinterested, with no anticipation of sexual contact on Paris' part (though even mythological figures presumably could have fantasies). So we may ask, when disinterested judgments of human beauty are made, what role has sexuality?

Kant had an answer to this question. In section 48 of *The Critique of Judgment*, he explicitly states that "...when we judge certain objects of nature, above all animate ones, we do commonly also take into account their objective purposiveness in order to judge their beauty. But then, by the same token, the judgment is no longer purely aesthetic, no longer a mere judgment of taste.... Thus if we say, e.g., That is a beautiful woman, we do in fact think nothing other than that nature offers us in the woman's figure a beautiful presentation of the purposes inherent in the female build."² Damisch comments on this passage that "The position could hardly be stated more clearly."³ I cannot agree. To me, Kant is ambiguous. On the one hand he suggests that aesthetic judgment about human beauty is possible but qualified, because humans are objects with purposes in which other humans have interests.

² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, pp 179-180.

³ Damish, op cit, p 57.

He uses people and horses as parallel examples to argue that the beauty of a particular human and the beauty of a particular horse both rely on a teleological judgment about what humans and horses are *for*. So far, the argument has no reliance on sexual attractiveness. Yet "the purposes inherent in the female build" obviously include sexuality (especially as contrasted with the purposes inherent in the male build), and it is not at all clear whether Kant thinks *these* purposes change our judgment of beauty in any special way. Damisch clearly believe he does, leading from this discussion quickly through Freud to Nietzsche's "*cherchez la femme* ... there's a woman behind it somehow."⁴

In the following sections I concentrate on the question of beauty. Issues of bribery and coercion are left behind, but the interplay of beauty and sexuality remains.

⁴ *ibid*