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PATRICIA FANCHER

Yearning for Peitho, the Goddess of Consent Culture

Dangling into the warm water of the Aegean Sea, the city of Argos was named after a many-eyed giant who died trying to protect the nymph Io from Zeus' rapacious appetite. Outside of the city wall, the citizens of Argos worshipped a minor goddess of persuasion and seduction, Peitho. She embodied sweet words, both men's debates in the agora and the seductive words dripping from lovers' lips. Peitho could be called upon for aid in politics, family disputes, and unrequited love. Inside the temple's smooth marbled walls, I imagine women gathering, honing their tongues with care and precision. I imagine men on their knees begging for pow-

erful speech. Peitho was depicted carrying a ball of string while doves hover in her shadow. She could string you along with her words, while peace followed at her behest. Peitho's powers of persuasion lingered in my imagination while I earned my PhD in Rhetoric, the study of persuasion.

I spent a summer aspiring to live the life of the mind at a summer graduate school for theory nerds in the rarified air of the Swiss Alps. I was dizzy from the stunning beauty of the place, short supply of oxygen, and intensity of the intellectual dialogue. The other students were well-read, sharp-witted, and wielded theoretical terms with an acumen that I felt I lacked. I sat for hours listening to heady lectures. I grasped for each new theory like silk threads easily pulled again from my hands. I attempted to braid these threads together in hopes of holding them longer. Alongside a glacier-fed azure brook and alpine forest, I hunched over books. Living the life of the mind doesn't leave much time to live a life in a body.

Peitho glimmered in the margins of my studies, a quaint myth of feminine persuasion. Throughout ancient Greece, Peitho was worshipped as a minor deity whose gift was pleasing words, persuasion, and seduction. And I was a young woman studying rhetoric. Peitho was a whisper that I strained to hear. I'd spent years studying Greek philosophers of persuasion: Aristotle's treatises, Plato's dialogues, and the sophists' remaining fragments. It could be Greek or it could be Roman. Either way, the legacy of persuasive arts has been men's for the taking.

After lectures, students and faculty would gather in a basement bar, warming ourselves with cheap whiskey that fueled intellectual posturing through the second or third round. I flirted awkwardly with a Polish political philosopher with perfect blue eyes, our hips unnecessarily close to each other. Our quiet banter was cut short when Žižek arrived to hold court. He's the

rare variety of popular philosopher who achieved last-name-only status while still living, made famous by weaving poop jokes and sexist cliché into Marxist philosophy. When Žižek spoke, everyone listened, even if he was complaining about women he found unattractive. His chosen topic on that night was what was on most our minds in one way or another: sex.¹

Sniffling and sweating, he complained, “Feminists insist you ask with every move.” With exaggerated gestures, he would mock, “May I now touch your breast?” as he grabbed his own drooping chest. “May I next touch your pussy?” as he performed an obsequious bow then grabbed his own crotch and laughter rippled across the bar. He explained that feminists sought to sterilize sex, taking all the fun out of the game. “Will the Politically Correct pressure compel us to accompany all these games with some formal-legal proclamation of consensuality, etc?”¹ he said while whipping his hands on his sweat-stained white t-shirt. Words have no place in intimacy, apparently only “a silent understanding and tact offer the only way to proceed when one wants things done.” Leaning in, he cautioned, “One should also talk about feminine manipulation and emotional brutality.”

I now understand that Žižek’s ardent defense of wordless sex was reflective of rape culture: to even imagine giving and receiving verbal consent poured water on the flame of his entitled passions. At the time, this argument resonated as familiar. My experience of sex was largely wordless, except a few climactic clichés. Had anyone ever asked to kiss me, to move from first to second base, to fuck me? I had assumed that if I didn’t say ‘no,’ then the answer was ‘yes.’ I knew feminist theory, and I wanted to be a feminist in practice. But in the bedroom, I was content to be wanted, whether or not my partner asked what I wanted.

¹ These three quotes are direct from Žižek published in the The Philosophical Salon 2018. I chose to use his exact words (published four years after I met him) to ensure I did not misconstrue his arguments through paraphrase.

Whether or not I asked myself what I wanted. I lacked the language to put my desire into words. I pursued the myth of Peitho. I prayed she could teach a vocabulary for consent culture.

As legend has it, Peitho’s temple was commissioned by Queen Hypermnestra who prayed to Peitho for words that saved her from rape. Hypermnestra was one of 50 beautiful virgin daughters of a king. These 50 princesses were forcibly wed to 50 brutish brothers (who were also the brides’ first cousins). On their collective forced wedding night, 49 of these brides murdered their grooms rather than be raped. Hypermnestra would not be raped, nor did she want to murder. Instead, she called upon Peitho for her blessing. Hypermnestra successfully persuaded her groom not to rape her, to let them live married but unconsummated. A testament to the power of persuasion, Queen Hypermnestra raised a temple on a hill in Peitho’s honor.

I imagine Peitho as a guide out of a culture in which ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are irrelevant in the face of men’s desire. She carries pleasure in both tongue and touch. Can such a goddess help us cultivate desire that is spoken, affirmed, as well as felt? I yearn for Peitho to become our goddess of consent culture, to whom we can all submit with delight.

As I left the bar after Žižek’s diatribe, another student cautioned me to wait: Famous Philosopher Of Science just left the bar. It wasn’t safe to be a woman on the streets alone while Famous Philosopher Of Science was out. I wasn’t surprised. This is a school in which the director was known to compare the female student’s bodies, commenting on us within earshot. Even the prominent female professor had been accused of sexual harassment.

My imagination needed Peitho. As white marble statues, Peitho and Aphrodite lounged in the Parthenon. The cold stone sculpted into fleshy warmth. Peitho cupped Aphrodite

tightly with her hips while Aphrodite's petite frame reclined on Peitho's chest. Both goddesses are known for love and desire, but Aphrodite was reckless, driving passion without accounting for consequences. Peitho protected women from rape and was known to flee from scenes of rape when she was unable to intervene. Peitho's gift was pleasure for words and bodies. Consent was her craft. She could teach us that language and desire are not so far apart. I understood this in theory, but the practice was still a foreign tongue.

The summer after my tarriance in Switzerland, I returned to write my dissertation in a southern college town. The scent of clay and decay crawled along. As evening cooled, the jasmine flirted by, touched just briefly enough to make me desperate to hold my body within that perfume.

Most folks escape that humid college town after classes end and stay gone until football season begins. Mike and I were often the only people writing in the lone coffee shop that remained open in June. Later we shared small talk over fried food at the dive bar and left late into the humid air. We were friendly, but he wasn't my type. Too short, and silly. Not dark and moody enough for me. My attraction started in earnest when Mike was 3,000 miles away visiting family. He texted questions: "Does your skin taste as good as you smell?" "Where are you ticklish?" Then built to declare his own desires, "I can see your thighs every time I close my eyes." "I dreamt of your lips." He invited me in with his dirty talk, and I was a fast study. My writing on the dissertation crawled and my texting quickened. I described what I imagined, "with your mouth on the outside at first, yes, then your fingers inside. Forward. Slow. Please stay slow." We shot back every sweet thing we wanted with each other's bodies.

While some places cool off when the sun goes down, South Carolina's heat just changes her voice. The shrill heat of the after-

noon softens at night. Mike returned to this stillness and our bodies picked up where our texts left off. Words continued to drive us even when our fingers pursued each soft inch. Words tumbled out—dirty, sweet, affirmations, exclamations, sighs. Our dirty talk was clichéd and redundant. We were charmingly shameless. The sound of my voice filled the room with what I wanted.

I was learning Peitho's craft. Her mistress Aphrodite, goddess of love, placed her in charge of nursing and caring for Eros, the young, irascible god of passion. Eros drives that craving to eat our lovers up bit by bit, destroying self and other along the way. Peitho tempered Eros' more extreme forces and soothed him with her words. On intricately painted vases, Peitho appeared radiant in bronze relief, the softness of her clavicle sinking into a deep well beneath round shoulders. Her delicate smile appeared to me as if she's just winked. Copious robes wrapped her round body, yet a single enviably perky breast peaks out, adorned with gold chains. Eros appeared calm as a babe in her shadow.

Dropping me off in the morning, Mike described what he was looking forward to the next time. His sentences unfurled like Peitho's string, tying me into the seat of the car. My hand gripped at the nape of his neck. Where the humid air pressed in and our bodies' moisture pressed out, fat drops of water dripped down necks, backs, knees.

Sure as the sun, we cooled off as summer faded. I occasionally reread our texts when I wanted to feel sexy and seen. Mike and I weren't in love. I was besotted with the power of choosing what I wanted, intoxicated with our words that made desire potent, enlivened by language and confirmed with consent.

Words do not enter our minds alone, but settle into our body, awakening with the right phrase. There is power in language, both for the speaker and the receiver. Peitho is a symbol of that power. She reminds us that words move bodies. By

speaking our desires, we offer more than consent. Our words for pleasure can help us discover our desires. Lovers' affirmations can be succor for nascent pleasures. The sound of our words is fleeting, but those sounds resound in our minds and refuse to be cloaked in shame. Peitho reminds us that words and bodies belong together. She could teach us to be proficient at speaking our desire. Yes, consent is ethically mandated and legally as well. But can we hope for more? Can we hope for pleasure? Let's imagine our sexual lives as not just affirmative, ethical and enthusiastic, but also as pleasurable in word and deed. Words drip into our ears, seep into our minds, and sweep our bodies along with the flow.

Of course, I'm nostalgic for a time that never existed. The Ancient Greeks and Romans worshipped Peitho, perhaps, and also raped for political purposes or just because they could.

Rome was founded on a rape, and the empire expanded on rape. No other model of empire exists, in times ancient or modern. The story of Queen Hypermnestra offers hope: Peitho gave her the gift of persuasion and she saved herself from rape. But that isn't the end of the story. Hypermnestra's sisters, those 49 virgin brides who saved themselves from rape by killing their husbands, they were punished for self-defense. These women were sentenced to carrying water in buckets filled with holes for all eternity. Women's futile labors are unceasing. Amid this legacy, women have always needed imagination. Feminism is a great work of imagination; we must imagine that things could be otherwise. With only broken threads, we string together dreams capacious enough for women with abundant desire. The goddesses we recover protect those dreams. Peitho equips us with the words to speak fantasy into reality.

After completing my PhD, I moved to California to join the faculty of a large seaside university. Settled in between the hills

and the shore, I realized that I don't have to work so hard all the time. Less than a mile from the beach, there's a door with no sign in the back of an abandoned strip mall that opens into a cool, dark cocktail bar. I entered looking for lovers who might be susceptible to Peitho's charms. "Your fantasies need to be spoken," Josh said. Josh is always quick with a platitude. He's so handsome that everyone smiled and nodded to affirm the profundity of his claim. Sierra chimed in for the first time in the evening, "Do I have to wear clothes?"

"Darling, I would never stop you from undressing," I said with a wink. I'd met Sierra a dozen or so times and heard her speak no more than a few sentences. Exhibitionists can often be quiet.

This local sex-positive meet-up attracts an eclectic community of all ages and walks of life. Gender benders, kinksters, swingers, sex educators, and polycules mingle to swap recipes, recommend where to find 10-inch Pleasers in men's shoe sizes, and safety protocols for hanging humans from meat hooks. Rope bunnies share photos of their bodies bound into intricate patterns, rope pressing into delicate flesh. I learned something new each time I attended.

After a few months of learning, I knew I had something I could teach as well. I proposed an erotic book club. I could share the sweet words that I'd inherited from Peitho. Together, we could practice weaving these words as we explored our own desires. In a way, Josh was right, we need to be able to put what we want into words. Affirmative consent includes verbal affirmation. A simple yes will suffice, but what happens after yes? We have so little practice, so little training.

We have learned the general words to speak our pleasure:

"That feels nice"

"Yes, more."

"It's a little further down."

“Slower.”

“Yes, there.”

“More.”

“Please.”

Can we string together words at such length as to wrap up the abundance of our bodies’ pleasures? How can we conjure in words the bodily experiences we desire? More words are needed. I need enough words to fill a dictionary to give voice to my copious desire. Each desire first spoken and then affirmed coats us with pleasure’s possibility like caramel dripping down sweet fruit. I proposed the book club so that we could practice wrapping our mouths around words before anything else. Josh asked if he could read a technical manual explaining the g-spot, c-spot, u-spot, a-spot. This game-boy approach to female sexuality left me uninspired, but he’s cute when he’s mansplaining. Nicole asked about tentacle fanfiction with a shy smile. Melissa recited Anaïs Nin, “We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection.” I responded with Mary Oliver, “How shall I touch you unless it is everywhere?”

We’ll each take turns reading aloud, feel the phrases on our tongues, watch the words form shapes on each other’s mouths and build heat in our ears. As we perform the pacing, cadence, arch, and resolution, the words will catch in our minds and our bodies will be strung along in the flow. Each phrase becomes an incantation to the goddess of dirty talk. We’ll make Peitho proud.

NATALIE STAPLES

A Single Question Interview with Dilruba Ahmed

Upon reading *Bring Now the Angels*, I was first struck by Dilruba Ahmed’s lyric prowess, in other words, her ability to capture a fleeting moment or sensation in verse. In the second poem of the collection, “Feast,” the speaker describes a family picnic before her father’s death— opening with the striking image of him rolling and cutting a watermelon and building to the line, “our lives,/ for a moment, are an untouched/meal.” The oscillation between concrete detail and the larger, more slippery subject of mortality is remarkable. Ahmed’s lyric flexibility allows the collection to occupy several seemingly distinct modes at once from elegy to the intersection between the personal and the political, to the world of folktales and myth. When I was young, my mother read *D’Aulaire’s Book of Greek Myths* to me several times and I fell in love with those