

## The Judgment of Paris and *Please Share, Aphrodite!*

My conference paper on post-patriarchal Pandoras ([pegasus-reception.com/paper10](http://pegasus-reception.com/paper10)) included a consideration of *Be Patient, Pandora!*, a boardbook in the Mini Myths series written by Joan Holub and illustrated by Leslie Patricelli. In my paper I suggested that *Be Patient, Pandora!* significantly adapts the myth of Pandora by situating it outside a punishing patriarchal context. As I wrote the paper, I became curious about the way the other books in the Mini Myths series might present or transform patriarchy, so I read *Please Share, Aphrodite!*, which uses the Judgment of Paris as its mythological touchstone.

The 16th and 17th letters of Ovid's *Heroides* provide details about the contest over which the Trojan prince Paris presides. The goddesses Juno (Greek Hera), Minerva (Greek Athena), and Venus (Greek Aphrodite) are competing for a golden apple to be granted to the most beautiful. Mercury (Greek Hermes) relays the command of Jupiter (Greek Zeus) that Paris adjudicate the dispute. Each goddess entices Paris with a bribe: Juno/Hera will give him ruling power; Minerva/Athena offers valor; and Venus/Aphrodite promises Paris the beautiful human woman Helen. Paris chooses Venus/Aphrodite and Helen, and because Helen is already married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta, war between Greece and Troy ensues when Paris claims her.

The Judgment of Paris seems to me to highlight some aspects of patriarchy—and by “patriarchy” I mean a social system which supports and perpetuates male power, privileges, and perspectives. Three females compete for a male's assessment of their relative beauty. The fact that the females are divine while the male is human underscores that the gendered perspective of a male—even one ontologically lower than the females themselves—is prioritized. While the goddesses' bribes, as well as Paris' openness to them, may raise ethical questions, I am more

interested in the bribes for other reasons. The goddesses' willingness to offer inducements emphasizes their goal to win Paris' approbation, whether or not his judgment corresponds to any "objective" reality. The male's verdict is more valued than its veracity. And the proffered enticements themselves cater to the concerns of socialized masculinity in political and personal spheres. The bribe that wins the day reinforces male identity through the possession of a female and highlights a human woman's status as object: she is a thing to be traded. Venus/Aphrodite realizes that she can purchase male regard with feminine currency. Chaos results, however, from the divine female's entry as seller into the marketplace of women. Helen already belongs to Agamemnon, and when she is redirected to Paris, the male-brokered marriage economy is disrupted. War—violent conflict between men—follows. In the Judgment of Paris we can see crucial aspects of patriarchy crystallized: the privileging of a male perspective and masculine desires, the competition among females which that privileging causes, the view and use of females as objects, and the potential for disorder posed by a female's exercise of agency within such a male-driven system.

*Please Share, Aphrodite!* is situated in the present day and shows readers four children. The boy (unnamed) has a caramel apple for which he is willing to trade. Aphrodite wants it, but so do two other girls. One of them offers the boy a jewelled crown; the other, a puzzle. Although these girls are unnamed, their offers connect them to their mythological counterparts, the queen of the gods, Juno/Hera, and goddess of wisdom, Minerva/Athena. (The latter girl also has Minerva/Athena's emblematic owl on her pullover.) Aphrodite says that she'll trade her toy horse—which serves as a wink to the Trojan Horse and to her divine counterpart, since it bears a heart decoration, as do Aphrodite's shirt, headband, and shoes. The boy chooses Aphrodite's proposed trade and promptly exits page right. The other two girls are initially saddened at the

outcome, but while Aphrodite exalts, “I won! I won! I won!” (14) and “The apple is mine!” (15), the other girls go off together, sharing the crown and the puzzle. Aphrodite, alone in her victory, asks the girls if they would like to share the apple, and the girls ask her if she wants to play with them. The story ends with the three of them enjoying one another’s company, eating apple slices and working at the puzzle, with the Hera/Juno girl wearing Aphrodite’s heart headband and Aphrodite sporting the crown. Above this picture is the satisfied declaration “Yum!” (21).

I think that Holub and Patricelli’s narrative works to undo much of the patriarchal encapsulation accomplished by the Judgment of Paris. In the mythological story Paris is enlisted by Zeus/Jupiter to settle the dispute among the goddess. In the boardbook the boy initiates the trade. He remains a “judge” in that he will decide which offer to accept, but he’s not wearing the mantle of decisive, patriarchal authority which the king of the gods passes to Paris in the myth, and his perspective, desires, and choice aren’t tied to a gender hierarchy. Although the three girls compete in the sense that they each offer the boy something in trade for the apple, the interaction is framed primarily as a trade rather than a contest. This lowers the stakes and to some extent evens the field: the girls themselves are not being judged and they are equally able to participate in an open marketplace. And in this marketplace a female isn’t presented as a potential object of trade! While it’s arguable that Aphrodite’s winning offer of a horse plays into gender stereotypes—the horse may be viewed by some as a more “masculine” item than the jewelled crown or puzzle—it doesn’t bolster male identity through the subordination and objectification of a female. *Please Share, Aphrodite!* doesn’t fundamentally pit females against one another nor present them as means to an end. In her vaunting, the girl Aphrodite initially treats her success as if it were a victory over her peers, but it becomes clear that they, though disappointed, haven’t been vanquished and are not operating within a competitive or conflict-

defined context. They exercise their agency to create a mutually beneficial situation, and Aphrodite realizes that she can exercise her own to join in. Instead of the competition among females and the ensuing conflict between males found in the Judgment of Paris and its Trojan War aftermath, *Please Share, Aphrodite!* closes with the comforts of a female community.

The ancient myth privileges the male perspective. Although the goddesses take some initiative with their bribes, they move within a limited, male-catering field and are subject to masculine judgment. Holub and Patricelli shift the weight of the story to a female perspective in a number of ways: Aphrodite is the only named character; her desire for the apple is the first “fact” or event of the story; her emotions are tracked throughout; the one male character exits the story half-way through; and the second half of the book concentrates on the girls’ feelings and relationships. Holub and Patricelli’s adaptation of the Judgment of Paris refocalizes it, and in doing so moves beyond the ancient story’s patriarchal message. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum discuss the need for refocalization (among other narrative strategies) if new versions of culturally inherited tales are to do something other than reinforce traditional, constricting “metanarratives” (22). Although Stephens and McCallum are concerned with “retellings” more than “adaptations” like Holub and Patricelli’s, I think that *Please Share, Aphrodite!* bears out their general point.

The last page of the boardbook provides a selective summary of the mythological Judgment of Paris. While Holub’s abridgement retains the goddesses’ contest for the title of the most beautiful and the golden apple, it somewhat downplays the patriarchal dynamics at work. In particular, the goddesses’ bribes are presented more in the spirit of a trade, and Paris’ choice of Aphrodite and Helen is depicted as a tidy, win/win outcome: with Aphrodite’s “help” Paris finds “his true love” (22)—there is no mention of the Trojan War—and Aphrodite gets the apple

she wants. I see Holub's summary as a kind of compromise approach to patriarchy. Through the careful inclusion and exclusion of particular details it tries to reframe the Judgment of Paris as something more balanced, mutually beneficial, and not destructive. But the boardbook's main narrative goes farther than the summary. The summary stops with the goddess Aphrodite's solitary attainment of the coveted prize; the boardbook's story, however, makes the girl Aphrodite's lonely "victory" a step toward a more satisfying conclusion in a community that recognizes and addresses the desires of all the girls. I don't consider *Please Share, Aphrodite!* "post-patriarchal" the way that *Be Patient, Pandora!* is. Rather, I think of its narrative as illustrating and enacting a turn away from patriarchy. The last two-page spread of the book juxtaposes two options: the left page offers the final image of the girls in shared delight; the right page provides the summary and its compromise with patriarchy. I imagine that I'm not the only reader who feels the pull of the girls' joyful gathering and wants to turn to it, preferring its pleasures.

Rebecca Resinski

pegasus-reception.com

posted 2021

### Bibliography

Holub, Joan and Leslie Patricelli. *Be Patient, Pandora!* Abrams, 2014.

----- *Please Share, Aphrodite!* Abrams, 2015.

Ovid. *Heroides*. Trans. A. S. Kline. poetryintranslation.com

Stephens, John and Robyn McCallum. *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*. Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998.