



Cupid and Psyche
(1817) by Jacques Louis David.

Subjects of the Visual Arts: Psyche

by Kieron Devlin

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Psyche, a late addition to Olympian divinities, was a beautiful young girl whose name in Greek means "Soul." One source claims that she was the daughter of the Sun (divine light) and Endelechia (the ripeness of Time).

The story of her relationship to Cupid (Amor) is frequently read as an allegory of the human confrontation with desire and the divine. Although universal, the story has a particular resonance for gay people, whose identity is tied closely to desire. Moreover, while Psyche is female, she may be read as a symbol of the male soul; hence, images of Psyche often blur gender boundaries.

The various versions of the story of Psyche most frequently emphasize the tribulations caused by jealousy and desire. As a young girl, she gained a reputation for great beauty. When Venus (Aphrodite) learned of her beauty, she was unnerved by the competition and instructed her son Cupid (Amor) to make Psyche fall in love with an ugly monster. Cupid, however, on seeing Psyche, immediately fell in love with her himself.

Cupid could not reveal his divine nature, so he visited Psyche in darkness. The girl's jealous sisters claimed that Cupid was really a terrible creature who would devour her. When Psyche managed to uncover him while he was sleeping, she was transfixed by his beauty. However, she accidentally dropped hot oil on his naked shoulder--one of the incidents in her life most popular with artists.

Angered, Cupid abandoned her to her fate. Psyche was condemned to wander the earth performing onerous tasks assigned by Venus. She attempted suicide and ended up in the underworld. Cupid eventually relented and appealed to Zeus to allow him to marry her and thus make her divine. They had a child called Voluptas.

The primary source for the romance of *Cupid and Psyche* is Lucius Apuleius's riotous novel, *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass* (second century C. E.). Apuleius's Psyche is a searching, inquisitive girl who is basically good but credulous.

She shines a light into the mystery of love too impulsively, only to watch it vanish. The drudgery of her punishment is also her education and eventual liberation into her divine aspect. The allegory fuses Greek myth with the initiation rites of Eleusis and Platonic idealism.

Psyche has inspired operas by Pier Francesco Cavalli and Jean-Baptiste Lully, ballets by Mikhail Fokine and Frederick Ashton, and appears as often in painting and sculpture as in literature. Frequently depicted naked and with wings, Psyche is often linked to Cupid but is also seen solo in a number of artists' works.

The best known depictions of Psyche from the Renaissance are those by Giorgione and Raphael. In the seventeenth century, Caravaggio, Titian, Velázquez, and Poussin all turned to the subject of Psyche.

In the late eighteenth century, Romantics Henry Fuseli and William Blake both did a series of visionary engravings inspired by her.

The painting *Cupid and Psyche* (1817) by Jacques Louis David is especially noteworthy, as it has a cheeky eroticism, and lacks the innocence of other treatments.

Some artists returned to Psyche numerous times, among them Peter Paul Rubens, François Boucher, Auguste Rodin, and Edward Burne-Jones. Burne-Jones's painting *Cupid and Psyche* (1865-1887) and Rodin's marble sculpture *Cupid Embracing Psyche* (1908) are two outstanding examples. Burne-Jones makes Cupid and Psyche practically twins, as does the Rodin statue, where they are almost fused together, thus collapsing the male/female divide.

Literary inspirations also testify to the abiding allure of Psyche's story. Walter Pater made it the centerpiece of his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), feeling that it expressed the ideal of a perfect imaginative love. Eudora Welty in *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) and Thomas Mann in *Doktor Faustus* (1947) used it thematically. Joyce Carol Oates and James Merrill, among many others, refer to Psyche in their poetry.

The term "psyche" now more commonly refers to the mind in its subconscious aspect rather than to the soul. In psychology, some experts regard her story as indicative of female psychic development, whereas others interpret Psyche as representing the *anima* (Latin for soul), a female image of the male soul.

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