

LUMINESCENCE DATING

By Carey Perloff

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Time: The present

Place: The basement of an Archaeology Museum at a notable American university. It is a claustrophobic room with a huge wooden table in the center, a working sink, and rows and rows of shelves behind, filled with artifacts, partially reconstructed pots and boxes of detritus from various excavations. From time to time, the characters give lectures to their classes or talk directly to the audience.

Characters:

Angela Hart: An American archaeologist in her late thirties, specializing in ancient Greek notions of female sexuality. She is fiercely independent, and at a professional crossroads.

Nigel Edwards: A British archaeologist, roughly the same age as Angela or perhaps a bit older. He specializes in military history and is her professional rival. Quick-witted, articulate, secretive and bearded.

Victor Reid: An Africa-American ex-dancer in his late thirties who has come late to Classics and specializes in Queer Theory. He was Nigel's graduate student and now teaches in the same Archaeology/Anthropology Department as Nigel and Angela.

Aphrodite, Goddess of Love: An aging cleaning lady with sore arms and an ancient pedigree. She can only be heard by Angela.

This play is dedicated to my father, Joseph Perloff, with whom I first fell in love with archaeology and who introduced me at age twelve to the mysteries of the Knidian Aphrodite.

This play contains excerpts from Poems by Sappho translated by Suzy Q Groden. (Permission gratefully granted) A note about Sappho: her poetry was not lyrical or gentle, it was a violent, explosive exploration of passion, and should be treated as such.

SCENE 1

ANGELA IS SITTING AT THE TABLE WITH HER HEAD ON HER HANDS, SURROUNDED BY BOOKS, BOXES, ENDLESS COFFEE CUPS, AND CHINESE FOOD. HANGING EVERYWHERE ARE MAPS, PHOTOS, BITS OF POETRY AND A POSTER OF A COPY OF THE PRAXITILES APHRODITE (A FAMOUS CLASSICAL NUDE)—PERHAPS THE ONE IN THE CAPITOLINE MUSEUM IN ROME. SHE SEEMS TO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP. IT IS AFTER MIDNIGHT. WE WATCH HER FOR A MOMENT.

AN OLD CLEANING LADY CLATTERS ACROSS THE ROOM WITH A MOP AND BUCKET. ANGELA IS STARTLED, WAKES UP WITH A JOLT.

ANGELA

Jesus--

APHRODITE

Excuse me...

ANGELA

What time is it? (LOOKING AROUND, PANICKED) Did I fall asleep?

APHRODITE

I thought everyone had gone home...

ANGELA

(CONFUSED) Home?

APHRODITE

Home. Where people go at night.

ANGELA

Not me. (SHE GETS UP AND STARTS PACING THE ROOM, LOOKING AT THE STUFF ON THE WALLS, THE POSTERS OF THE GODDESS ETC.) Come on, *wake up. Think. Why can't I think--*

APHRODITE

(MUTTERING UNDER HER BREATH, PICKING UP A BOOK OFF THE FLOOR. IT IS SAPPHO'S POEMS.) Is this yours?

ANGELA

(TAKING IT) Yes.

APHRODITE

(SURVEYING THE ROOM) What a mess—

ANGELA

(DISTRACTED) I'm sorry—I'm in the *middle*--

APHRODITE

(PEERING AT A POEM TAPED TO THE WALL)

“Love --shakes my heart--

Like a wind-- crashing into mountain oaks”— Huh.

ANGELA

I beg your pardon?

APHRODITE

(LOOKING AROUND) You seen my other mop? I left it somewhere—

ANGELA

(INCREDULOUS) Your *mop*? Have I seen your mop? No, I haven't. Have you seen a seven foot naked female statue that seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth?

APHRODITE

I wish *I* could disappear off the face of the earth... (SHE REACHES FOR THE MAPS HANGING OFF THE FILE CABINETS) And these? Should I clean here?

ANGELA

No! Don't touch the maps!

APHRODITE

They're falling off the —

ANGELA

Leave them alone! (FEVERISHLY) *Tidal patterns*. I've got to figure out the tidal patterns off the coast of Turkey. If she fell into the sea, which way would the tide have pulled her?

APHRODITE

You're not supposed to stick stuff on the *walls*. (PEERING AT THE TABLE. COVERED IN SCRIBBLES) And don't write on the *table*. University property--

ANGELA

Go away! I'm *working*--

APHRODITE

(PEERING AT THE WRITING ON THE TABLE, A SAPPHO POEM)

“Eternal Aphrodite-- rainbow-throned,
you cunning, wily child of Zeus—(SHE SMILES)

Poikilothron athanat'Aphrodita"—

ANGELA

(STARTLED) Are you *Greek*? (PAUSE) That would be just my luck. (PAUSE) Turkish would be even better. (A MAD ATTEMPT) Do you have any idea what the climate is like in Constantinople in the summer? The water density? The chance of fire?

APHRODITE

Fire? (SHE LOOKS AROUND THE ROOM)

ANGELA

Forget it. I never believed the Fire story anyway. I think the key is *water*—if only I could get an underwater team and go down—

APHRODITE

(WRINGING OUT HER MOP LOUDLY) I'm going to miss my bus—

ANGELA

(ANNOYED) Are you finished?

APHRODITE

I'm never finished.

ANGELA

I'm trying to work!

APHRODITE

So am I.

APHRODITE STOPS AND STARES AT THE POSTER OF THE STATUE. ANGELA STARES AT IT TOO.

APHRODITE

Look at her. (READING A POEM TAPED TO THE POSTER)
"And you, blessed lady,
smiling your immortal smile"— (PAUSE. PONDERING IT)
Smiling? She's not smiling.

ANGELA

Of course not! Unrequited love does not induce *smiles!*
"You asked me what ailed me now
And what my mad heart most craved"—

APHRODITE

9/7/2018

(SITTING) Coffee. I could use some coffee right about now. My back is breaking...

ANGELA

(SITTING, SHE LOOKS AT APHRODITE. OPENS SAPPHO AGAIN AND READS, AS IF REALLY FINISHING THE PRAYER.)

“Do not break me, Lady,
With the pains and raging ills of love—
But do for my heart what it desires—
And be yourself
My help, and my ally!”

APHRODITE

I'm sorry. I can't help you--

ANGELA

What?

APHRODITE

My arms are shot--

ANGELA

So is my *mind* --

APHRODITE

I've been cleaning this mess for a thousand years. It's enough!

ANGELA

(SHE DRINKS A SIP OF COFFEE. IT IS COLD. SHE GRIMACES.)

I have *got* to get out of this basement.

BLACKOUT.

Scene 2**VICTOR REID IS ADDRESSING HIS CLASS.**

VICTOR

First, a destination check. This is “Eros or Error: Homotextuality in Ancient Greek Poetry.” If that is not your chosen destination, get off the bus now.

Second, this is not a class about dating. (PAUSE) Well, not that kind of dating. Queer Theory shines the light through what we think we know—to see what’s hiding on the other side. History is a story. A pattern. It can be read in a hundred different ways, depending upon the questions being asked. Sometimes the most amazing parts of it lie silent and hidden. If you want to find them, you have to decide to change the lens and look again.

A little back story. I was one of seven children. Vondie, Valerie, Varnel, Vinny, Versa, Virginia, and me, Victor. It was “one monogram fits all” at my house. The only way for me to escape the mayhem was to join the ballet. My version of the heroic quest for the self. And let me tell you, the trials of Hercules are nothing compared to standing on bleeding toes seven nights a week lifting terrified white girls over your head to the sounds of Tchaikovsky. But one night the epiphany came. As I was hauling girl number five over my head in the second row of the corps, I realized that the only thing I really wanted was to murder Sleeping Beauty and kiss the prince myself. And that’s when I turned to ancient history.

I’m telling you this not because I expect you to care about my personal life but because you should know that *everything*, in my opinion, is subjective. Objectivity is a *mirage*. We are all sifting through the rubble to find a little piece of ourselves. Fragments that have been lost suddenly re-emerge, burnished by time. (PAUSE) Homotextuality. A man sees a face in the mirror. Is it his own face, or that of his beloved? The fact that men loved each other was more than a lifestyle choice to the Greeks. It was a metaphor, a feedback loop, a journey into the self. The free flow of knowledge between like minds—for the Greeks, that was the ultimate method of making love. Discover the metaphor, and the truth cracks open. Like the kiss of Sleeping Beauty, the right touch of the lips brings the princess back to life. And that’s when history gets exciting.

BLACKOUT.

Scene 3

CROSSFADE TO VICTOR REID AND ANGELA HART AT THE LARGE TABLE.

VICTOR

Maybe it's time to let it go--

ANGELA

I can't—

VICTOR

It's been fifteen years, cherie—even a coy goddess gets found before that—

ANGELA

Not this one—she's been eluding me since graduate school—

VICTOR

Then take a break.

ANGELA

No! My leave is finished and I'm nowhere! If I don't find her soon, it's over.

VICTOR

Why? You've found everything *else*—her temple—all those offerings—a thousand coins—

ANGELA

So what? Without the *statue*, the rest is useless. Just because I didn't find her this summer doesn't mean she's not going to be found--

VICTOR

True—

ANGELA

Speaking of which, I heard you found a heavenly specimen lying on the beach--

VICTOR

I hear you haven't left this basement in weeks

ANGELA

Tell me!

VICTOR

You tell me.

ANGELA

Come on, Victor—I'm having an autumn of desiccation and despair—give me a vicarious thrill--

VICTOR

His name was Dimitri --

ANGELA

And he had magical powers! (SMILING) How did you manage that?

VICTOR

I'm a classicist. Aphrodite is my next of kin.

ANGELA

Come on, then—Eye color, nationality, profession—

VICTOR

They say you've never made love 'til you've held a Cypriot in your arms. The rest—is silence—

ANGELA

Did he speak English?

VICTOR

Not a word.

ANGELA

As usual—

VICTOR

(SHARPLY) Alex spoke English. Perfectly.

ANGELA

Sorry. (PAUSE) Will you see him again?

VICTOR

Who?

ANGELA

Dimitri—

VICTOR

I leave it to the gods. (PAUSE. CHANGING THE SUBJECT) Shall I tell you whom I discovered, deep in a trench, on my way home?

ANGELA
No.

VICTOR
The man himself.

ANGELA
I thought he was dead--

VICTOR
Not dead, just underground. That old dig of his is right next to the sweetest beach in Cyprus--

ANGELA
I thought Nigel had finished with Cyprus. He told me the site had run dry--

VICTOR
Military fortifications *never* run dry. (PAUSE) He asked about you. In fact he blushed to the roots of his pale British scalp when I mentioned your name. (PAUSE. HE EYES HER CURIOUSLY) I shudder to think—was there more going on with you two during your Turkish excavation this summer than mere—dirt removal?

ANGELA
I was in a *cast*, in case you've forgotten--someone had to carry me into the pit—

VICTOR
Nigel?!

ANGELA
No one else spoke English—he volunteered to help--

VICTOR
How generous of him... (HE LOOKS APPALLED) You and -- ? (PAUSE) Was it—nice?

ANGELA
Until he disappeared--

VICTOR
He always disappears. The guy can't even teach in one place--he had to get tenure on two continents—

ANGELA
Because (IMITATING NIGEL) “British students know how to think and American students know how to dig.”