

PERFUME AND PROPHECY

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[The Medusa perfume] offers a hefty dose of pure civet, a sensual animal musk with a savage edge, brings the cursed, monstrous Medusa to life.

House of Puente advertisement for *Medusa* perfume



Introduction

Let's be honest: civet stinks. It smells like poop; it's nauseating, foul, and putrid. But, that's not the end of the story. When civet oil, extracted from the glandular secretions of this wild cat, is diluted for its use in perfumery, it adds "warmth and radiance" and acts as a fixative (The Perfume Society). So, we must assume that when Puente proposes this luxury perfume experience that he is not talking about that hefty stinky dose of pure civet which he purports to be offering. In this way, we must wonder what he is signaling to his customers in his interviews and advertisements about the desirability of his latest perfume that he has named Medusa. This essay attempts to indulge such an inquiry. I consider the historical, social, and psychological significance of the ancient myth of Medusa for its relevance today.

The Psychoanalyzing Medusa

When the great psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud announced that "dreams are the royal road to the unconscious," he was explaining that our dreams can reveal our hidden desires through their language of images, metaphors, and symbols to our conscious awareness. In the early nineteen hundreds when Freud unfolded his theory of the mind, the world was about to change fundamentally. Enter advertising and the world of consumer commodities.

Whereas Freud was referring to the unconscious mind of the individual, advertising extended its power beyond the individual to the culture and society. That is, advertising becomes a means and method to shape and to express the repressed desires of the society as a whole. As Walter Benjamin explained, "the dream consciousness of the collective awakes in advertising" (quoted in Abram, 2017, see also Stammelman, 2006). In this way, we may examine the significance of House of Puente's Medusa perfume to capture contemporary hidden sexual and erotic desires.



What I find disturbing about the Fuente choice of mythological referent is more than its fanciful use of the name of the beautiful maiden, Medusa, who was raped and changed into a hideous serpentwreathed death-dealing monster. Perhaps the perfumer is simply trying to convey the notion of female power in his choice of name? He claims to want to show Medusa's beauty with her ugliness. Advertising, as we know, enables us to explore this choice for its implicit repressed sexuality that the ad uses to promote its appeal. Accordingly, the Fuente Medusa perfume advertisement promotes its main ingredient: authentic civet oil.

This valuable perfume oil is collected from the anal glands and droppings of civet cats who are tightly caged for their lives to produce this excrement. The extreme stress of the confinement is necessary to produce the glandular secretion so highly prized by traditional perfumery. This expensive ingredient has an inexpensive synthetic replacement with minimal olfactory loss. So, why would this perfumer deliberately choose to use a product that involves cruelty for its acquisition when there are alternatives? Why advertise this rare ingredient so prominently? Why even use this ingredient? What might its connection with Medusa be?

If we follow the insights of Freud and Benjamin, the advertising of the civet contents of the Medusa perfume displays a route to understanding our cultural unconscious. For this understanding, we must first trace the ancient Greek myth of Medusa as a cultural and symbolic archetype. It is a story of patriarchal cruelty.



Advertisement concerning tuberculosis

The horrible head of Medusa

The perfumer, Eliam Puente, designer of this scent, describes his product in this way:

We all know about Medusa, a monstrous creature with snakes for hair that could turn a man to stone with a simple gaze. But did you know that Medusa was considered to be very beautiful before she was cursed? After Medusa’s affair with the sea god Poseidon, Athena exudes her wrath upon her by transforming her into a hideous hag, making her hair into writhing snakes and turning her skin a greenish hue. Once beautiful, but now beastly, Medusa spends the rest of her days in a cave before being found and beheaded by Perseus...

*The perfume was inspired by her story. I wanted to showcase the two sides of Medusa’s life, the beauty and the monster. Medusa starts with a grand opening of gorgeous flowers. Smooth Morocco rose, opulent jasmine, and seductive orange blossom represent Medusa’s beauty. At its base, earthy notes of elegant orris root, deep vetiver, and rich oakmoss contrast the floral bouquet. **Final, a hefty dose of pure civet, a sensual animal musk with a savage edge, brings the cursed, monstrous Medusa to life.***

*Medusa is a perfume that balances the contrast between beautiful flowers, earthy notes, and beastly civet. Recommended for those who enjoy musky, floral perfumes and **for those who want to experience the scent and effect of real civet musk at its fullest.** (boldened by author)*

Puente calls her a “hideous hag” while ancient sources use a similar adjective. In the Latin poet Ovid’s telling of this tale, we notice a curious description of the effect of the hero Perseus seeing Medusa’s face directly. When the various heroes who have invaded her cave to slay her and look directly at her serpententwined and boar-tusked face, they are “horrified” and turn to stone. Perseus must figure out how to confront her without gazing directly at her face, collect her slain carcass, and survive to tell the tale. The ancient mythographer includes this curious detail of horror in this experience of heroism. Why doesn’t the poet just say that the wanna-be heroes turn to stone when looking at her? Why add the element of “horror”? This description clues us in to a deeper meaning of her relevance. Freud explained that feelings of horror were a signal of an eruption of the uncanny; that is, a resurfacing of repressed material that breaks into conscious awareness. Hence, it is the thrill that is felt by horror films today and even in the retelling of the horror-inducing myths of Medusa.

Medusa, with the linguistic root of her name meaning, “she who rules,” derives from a stratum of Greek religion that precedes the arrival of the patriarchal Greeks. She was queen and mother goddess for an

agrarian society that used the metaphors and symbols of the earth for expression and meaning. Hence, her serpentine blood is said to hold a dual capacity to heal or to kill, as we know that botanical medicines turning into poisons are oftentimes a matter of dosage. That she is an elemental generative female—a symbolic womb—is demonstrated by her beheading that was committed with a threshing knife resulting in two children emerging from her severed “head.”

Traditional psychoanalysts claim that this myth is an example of male “castration anxiety.” According to Freud, boys, in their early development, fear that they will lose their penises when they witness female nudity. Feminist psychoanalysts, such as Karen Horney, also have identified the source of this maternal anxiety with a twist on the nature of this early sense of loss and deprivation. They have challenged the Freudian notion of “castration anxiety” which purports that men fear their loss of this appendage. In contrast, post-Freudian feminist psychologists suggest that the very notion of castration anxiety arises out of a deep jealousy of female creative and procreative capacities. Anthropologist Margaret Mead first named this complex “womb envy.” From this perspective, patriarchy originates from this developmental psychological, historical, and societal suppression of the female. We can easily lay this onto contemporary gender power structures that denigrate the female mind, undermine female agency, and legislate against women’s body as an act of gender decapitation symbolized by this myth. Consequently, we might suspect that the civet image, the wild cat that hunts in the lunar light, is featured in the Fuente Medusa ad to tap into this archetypal act of violence against female dominance. We will witness the severing of the female head from its body in this myth holds a different ethnobotanical significance in antiquity.



Beyond the texts: Art and artifacts

The gathering of the sacred botanical sacred source that facilitates communing with the divine(what we call an entheogen today) is a motif that we can trace throughout ancient art work of the Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans. Given the agrarian context of ancient mythology, whose contribution was already indicated by Perseus slaying Medousa with a harvesting tool, we can look to the interplay of

Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art and artifacts for material evidence of how this symbolic complex may have appeared and functioned in everyday life in ancient times. Specifically, Etruscan mirrors display this interaction between the severed head as a harvested plant from the earth and its association with marriage and prophecy. Familiar in the myth of Orpheus, these mirrors present the severed floating head as a source of prophetic vision and oracular communication [de Grummond citation for images]

Notice the floating head of the master satyr, Silenos, crowned with ivy at the top of the upper mirror, and the severed prophetic head emerging from the ground on the lower mirror.

Floating prophetic heads

II.13 Bronze mirror, 325-300 BCE, Berlin, Staatliche Museen. After ES:2.212. Adorning of bride, with prophetic head of Silenos (above).



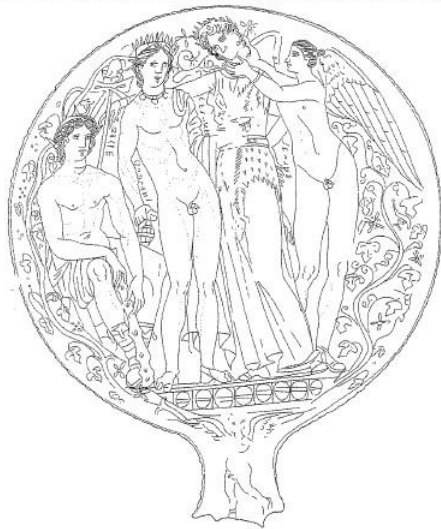
II.10 Bronze mirror from Chiusi, ca. 300 BCE, Siena, Museo Archeologico. After Maggiani 1992, fig. 2. Head of Urphe appears (lower left); at the feet of the soothsayer (Lunaeles, who holds a ribbon attached to a net or bag for the head. Alpanea (right) records the prophecy; couple in between, probably consulting the orade for a marriage prophecy. Reclining couple in the upper exergue; winged female in the lower exergue. Not all the inscriptions on this mirror are clear, and it is not possible to tell which names belong with which figures. The couple in the exergue may be Turan and Atunis.

The harvesting of the botanical entheogen is symbolically related in the origins of Perseus, the ancient hero known as the Gorgon-Medusa slayer. Perseus comes from Mycenae, the so-called Mushroom City. It was named because of the mushrooms picked at this site that led to its founding. Accordingly, Medusa gains lunar boar tusks at her metamorphosis that display her porcine tools of mushroom collection from

the underground that is located by smell. Vase paintings show magical mushrooms growing at the feet of satyrs and centaurs who are known for their prophetic powers. Satyrs with culled prophetic floating heads are repeatedly seen engraved on Etruscan mirrors. Similarly, the inspired bacchant worshippers of Orpheus cull and collect the prophetic head of the good Orpheus as it sings and floats down the river. Prophecy, as we will soon see Plutarch, the ancient priest of the Delphic Oracle, is identical with a bacchic experience. We see the bacchantes, the ecstatic worshippers of Dionysos, in the act of prophecy on the Etruscan mirrors, dancing with satyrs.

Prophecy and bacchantes

VI.1 Bronze mirror from near Viterbo, 470 BCE. *Giuseppe Marletta, Prophecy of Art et d'histoire. After Lambrecht's 1978, p. 129.* A man and a satyr dance merrily; they are labeled as *Mumthul* (darts) who is dressed as a fine lady or goddess and *Chelphun* (grapes), who sports an animal skin cape and has pointed ears, a horse's tail, and a hairy chest—all typical satyr characteristics.



VI.8 Bronze mirror from Castelgongolo, near Orvieto, ca. 325-300 BCE. Baltimore, MD: Walters Art Museum. Drawing by Elizabeth Wylie. Fulm, wearing a crown, holds a patera in his left hand and a pitcher in his right. He assists Venua, in maenad's costume, in reading a prophecy. Svatul (right) turns his head toward the patera. Herakles, seated on the left, is the outcome. Cf. commentary on Fig. VI.9.

Reflected and mirrored images are a feature of oracular divination. Whether on water or polished metal, the reflected image appears identical to its petitioner, but is reversed and inverted from the face that peers within. This is an important representation of the prophetic source and inspiration: the capacity to see beyond the known world into its alter existence and otherworldly realm of the spirits. Bacchantes join satyrs as intermediaries of prophetic inspiration. Accordingly, Medusa appears in their company on the antefixes of Etruscan temples. The Etruscans were early settlers of Pompeii and we can witness their enduring influence in Pompeian art and religion.

The Villa of the Mysteries

Covered with ash at the volcanic explosion of Vesuvius in 79 AD and not begun to be excavated until the early 20th century, this archaeological site has brought about ongoing controversies about its artistic representations and identifications. Specifically, the multi-paneled frieze in the Villa of the Mysteries displays the use of a prophetic mirror in the rendering of its narrative imagery. For us today, this particular segment of the frieze provides a relevant and potent representation of the psychological act and goal of integrating the Other into conscious awareness.



At the Villa of the Mysteries from Pompeii, we witness this exact association of satyrs, masks, mirrors, childbirth, and Bacchic mysteries. Whether one sees these images as independent or as related as a sequence of initiation, the frieze puts them in association with each other in time and space. Specifically, the satyr is highlighted as the source of prophecy and facilitator of initiation represented as a sacred marriage. The association between birth and prophecy is well-known in ancient times, though is oftentimes ignored because of our current ethnocentrism that doesn't hold the same symbolic tapestry. As such, we must consider what we know to guide us into examining what we do not know. A prime example is the frieze paintings of Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii.

While there is no definitive and accepted interpretation of the events depicted in this frieze, there is general agreement on specific aspects of its imagery: it depicts a birth ritual, a scene of oracular prophecy with satyrs, music, and mirrors, and is set in a Bacchic context with the prominence of a seated Dionysos and Ariadne. I focus her on the role of satyrs and mirrors in ancient prophetic traditions and how childbirth serves as a dominant motif that signals this complex.



In a scene at the middle of the frieze, one dominant satyr, wreathed master satyr, Silenos, holds a reflective bowl for the young initiate or student satyrs to view their reflections. Behind them, another young satyr holds high a theatrical mask of a satyr to reflect in the bowl, thereby replacing his personal reflection experientially with this “horrible” mask. The viewer experiences the Other as an immediate and internal perception of Self. An Etruscan mirror explains to us the meaning of Dionysos’ one sandalled-pose as a gesture of prophecy. The central figure demonstrates this “prophecy pose” as he narrates the prophetic message. AsA



Il.15 Bronze mirror cover, 3rd century BCE, Durham, NC, Duke University Art Museum. Photo: Museum. Etruscan version of the reunion of Odysseus and his wife or perhaps his nurse. Oracular head of “Juno Sospita” in the middle of the scene. Odysseus, with left leg raised in the prophecy pose, makes a gesture explaining the message.

As we see in the Villa of the Mysteries frieze, water prophecy takes place at birth scenes. Notice the satyr reading the water bowl in the upper band of the mirror depicting the nursing and adoption of Herakles.

Dionysos and Silenos with water prophecy



Fig. 11. Etruscan bronze mirror, with the adoption of Heracle by Uni, c.325-300 B.C. Florence, Archaeological Museum (after *ES* 5, 60).



Fig. 28. Etruscan red-figure kylix with Fufluns prophesying, c.350-300 B.C. Antikensammlung Berlin, State Museums (Photo: museum).

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So too, in our existential journey to wholeness, we seek to recognize the Other as an aspect of an integrated Self. Also of particular interest, but without an accepted scholarly identification, is the object that hovers near the god Dionysos' face as he reclines in an act of prophecy in the image beside the prophesizing satyrs at the Villa. Archaeologist Elizabeth WolframThill (2018) connects this scene with a similar representation on the Borghese sarcophagus where we witness an identical scene of Dionysos and Ariadne with a profession of satyrs and other mythological figures at a bacchanalia celebration.



Similar to the Villa depiction of Dionysos, as archaeologist Thill points out in the side by side comparison above, Dionysos is presented with some sort of fruit. The Villa object is ambiguous and, unfortunately, parts of the picture are missing. However, archaeological accounts record the addition of various psychoactive and entheogenic ingredients to the wine vessels at Pompeii. These include mind-altering substances such as opium, cannabis, white henbane, and black nightshade and medicinal plants including willow, comfrey, and vervain that were found in the remains of wine vats at the Villas' storehouses (Muraresku, 2020). Might this mysterious object suggest a sacred substance as source of divine inspiration?

Furthermore, Plato uses an analogy of a satyr box, known and traced to this dialogue in later English times as a silenos box that held medicines within an ugly container, as a metaphor for Socrates' ugly physical feature, but beautiful spiritual internal world.

We will soon examine how prophecy for Plutarch was a gift of the otherworldly daimones. Similarly, for Plato, it is the effect of the life force of Eros, also half divine and half mortal. Bringing us back to the power of the maternal that we discussed with the psychology of Medusa, Socrates explains this as a maieutic, or birth, process. Through the voice of the Mantanean prophetess Diotima, Socrates explains the procreative powers of women as the model for enlightenment. Though the highest level of this ladder of development posits the ascension from the physical to the abstract philosophical, it always maintains its prioritization in the value of the informing metaphor of birth and creation.

Plato and Plutarch on Prophecy Enter Plato

In the middle of an all-male drinking party, a symposium, where the guests have decided to offer individual praise songs to the god Eros, Socrates offers an unexpected and unique explanation of this god in Plato's dialogue, *Symposium*. After Agathon, the host of the party, describes Eros as "living among flowers, full of bloom and fragrance, there he settles and stays" (196b), it is Socrates turn to speak. He starts by joking about his faulty prophetic skills (196b) and "worries that he'll face the Gorgon-like head [Medusa] and turn into a speechless stone" unable to enter the debate. He proposes, instead, to "tell

the truth about Love.” Eros is, according to Socrates, “a great spirit...between god and human...mortal and immortal.” That great spirit is called a *daimon*.

Socrates claims that Eros is not even a god. He tells his version through the voice of a prophetess named Diotima from Mantinea who instructed him on these mysteries and was known for her prophetic proficiency when she saved the Athenians from ten years of plague. For the purposes of this essay, I want to focus on Socrates’ metaphoric use of females giving birth to explain extraordinary prophetic experience.

Socrates, whose mother was a midwife, proposes to speak his praise-song to Eros not in his own voice, but through the teachings given to him by the prophetess Diotima. She, in turn, uses the metaphor of childbirth to explain Eros, the figure of love, as the force of creation, revelation, and prophecy. We will soon see that is the position that Plutarch also professes this daimonic efficacy and will later appear in the writings of the neo-Platonist Plotinus, too.

In Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima explains further: “Eros is a great spirit, Socrates. Everything classed as a spirit falls between god and human.”

“What function do they have?” [Socrates] asked.

“They interpret and carry messages from humans to gods and from gods to humans. They convey prayers and sacrifices from humans, and commands and gifts in return for sacrifices from gods. Being intermediate between the other two, they fill the gap between them, and enable the universe to form an interconnected whole. They serve as the medium for all divination, for priestly expertise in sacrifice, ritual, and spells, and for all prophecy and sorcery... There are many different spirits, of very different types, and one of them is Love.” (203a, translation Gill).

In other words, Eros is the power of prophecy. Etruscan mirrors and the Villa frieze document these associations of birth and prophecy. Diotima goes on to explain that “Love’s function is giving birth in beauty in both body and in mind.” To which Socrates responds: “One would need to be a prophet to interpret what you’re saying...I don’t understand.”

Diotima continues: “Well...I’ll explain it more clearly. All human beings are pregnant in body and in mind, and when we reach a degree of adulthood we naturally desire to give birth... Yes, sexual intercourse between men and women is a kind of birth. There is something divine in this process; this is how mortal creatures achieve immortality, in pregnancy and birth” (206b-c).

Diotima’s speech is extraordinary, especially because the ancient Greek model of conception did not involve a female genetic component or contribution. The male deposited the seed into the fertile womb of the female, without understanding her genetic contribution. So, having this in mind, Diotima is proposing a model of the soul that is female and womb-based, without consideration of the male part in conception. Hereby, this process and experience of birth is the model that Socrates uses. It is essentially and actually a female act of gestation and procreation. She also claims that this understanding moves beyond gender definitions so that both genders, taking on hermaphroditic identities, can experience childbirth through creative activities (209b-c). And Eros is the means of this experience of creation. This is a radical model of extraordinary consciousness, even for today.

Enter Plutarch

Like Socrates' proposal of the intermediary function of Eros, Plutarch, a priest of the oracle at Delphi, identifies this force as a demigod, a *daimon*. Explaining the power of the oracular, Plutarch explains that prophecy is not the communication of the gods.

"It is not the gods...who are in charge of oracles, since the gods ought properly to be free of earthly concerns but that is the demigods, minister of the gods, who have them in in charge" (418)

Instead, prophecy is made possible through the communication of *daimones*, half divine/half mortal spirits that are brought into awareness through an experience that he likens to the bacchic ecstasy of the worship of the god Dionysos.

Plutarch goes on to ask "[How do] demigods possess the natural faculty of knowing and revealing future events before they happen? (431E). He answers his own question: "the faculty which is the complement to prophecy is memory...[that] oftentimes discloses its flower and radiance of dreams, and some in the hour of death...attains...a temperament through which the reasoning and thinking faculty of the souls is relaxed and released from their present state as they range amid the irrational and imaginative realms of the future..." (432).

Incredibly, Plutarch here appears to anticipate Freud's royal road to the unconscious through dreams. It is a state of consciousness that he connects with Dionysus by quoting Euripides, *Bacchae* (line 298): "For Bacchic rout and frenzied mind contain much prophecy."

Thereby, Plutarch associates prophecy with a condition of bacchant consciousness. We have already seen these associations on Etruscan mirrors that bring together bacchant revelry, satyrs, mirrors, and prophecy. Plutarch implicitly discusses the effects of psychoactive plants added to the wine through which "impressions of the future are transmitted and also words stored away and unperceived" whereby the worshipper "throws aside the caution that human intelligence lays upon it, and thus often diverts and extinguishes the inspiration" (432F). In this way, Plutarch anticipates Freud's model of psychological id energy and creativity. Again, Plutarch demonstrates a working knowledge of what Freud will later label the unconscious: "when the spirit...throws aside that human intelligence lays upon it, and thus often divert and extinguishes the inspiration (432E).

Plutarch continues to discuss the "spirit of inspiration" as a plectrum, thereby providing us with an explanation of why we see the prophetic satyrs playing stringed instruments at the Villa: "We assign the spirit of inspiration and the exhalation as an instrument or plectrum for playing on it... as if it were a kind of harmony, slackening here and tightening there on occasion...we shall not appear to be doing anything irrational or impossible (437A)."

Let's remember that the master satyr Silenos was the tutor of Dionysos. The ancient saying goes that one must capture a satyr first to capture its prophetic secrets.

Conclusion

Perseus slays this unconscious threat by redirecting his direct gaze from her powerful face. He uses the mirrored reflection on his shield to aim and slay this monster. Medusa, the maiden, hereby, is turned

into Medousa the mother by giving birth to the hero Bellerophon and the winged horse Pegasos that becomes Perseus' steed.

This analysis offers us a historico-socio-psychoanalytical framework for understanding ancient myth: the patriarchal misogyny in the historical subjugation of the agrarian mother goddess is replicated in societal institutions that implant this consciousness in the individual. The head of Medousa is its symbol. Thus, we can understand Puente's need to kill the beast through using authentic civet oil in his perfume. He calls his potion Medusa. How could synthetics ever carry this same horrible emotional and symbolic power?

This commercial perfume with its mythological framework also opens doors for us to examine the impoverishment of consumer capitalism to offer significant meaning for our lives today, especially because it is based on unfulfilled needs, such as love, that cannot be fulfilled with material substitutions for emotional satisfaction. But, in antiquity, we see a deeper possibility for this image of the meaning of Medusa's horrible head.

What a long way we've come from fear of the mother and castration anxiety to the mother as model for psychological integration! Perhaps we should consider the actual effects of Puente's perfume Medusa on a reviewer. Let's remember that she is smelling a significantly diluted potion from its original civet substance, not "the scent and effect of real civet musk at its fullest" as the perfumer claims. A perfume critic describes this encounter with the olfactory Medusa as an experience of ecstasy.

The civet utilized in Medusa is a tincture, and it occupies a full 30% of the formula (per the perfumer): civet maintains its animalic nature while melding into an extravagant bouquet where only the rose bears no fangs or sequestered claws.

*Medusa, in toto – achieves the sensation of being held in the clasp of a masterly ballroom dancing partner who waltzes you across the room so swiftly and suavely that **you feel faint, dizzy with pleasure. You can hear your pulse resound in your ears; feel the heat rising from the hand around your waist; your feet barely touch the floor. It brings back memories of my first waltz at fifteen with a shockingly handsome older Slavic gentleman: I never wished the music to stop. I was breathless and befuddled and ecstatic all at once.*** (bolds added by author)

What better description of the bacchic experience? In this perfume, rather than the full effect of undiluted civet oil, the fowl is diluted and added to enhance the experience of the fragrant. This integration creates the ecstasy of the participant. Antitheses united. The doctor who also attended Plato's *Symposium* quoted the even more ancient philosopher Herakleitos to demonstrate that love, Eros, is the integration of opposites.

In music there is the same reconciliation of opposites; and I suppose that this must have been the meaning, of Heracleitus...like the harmony-of bow and the lyre...music implants, making love and unison to grow up among them; and thus music, too, is concerned with the principles of love in their application to harmony and rhythm. Again, in the essential nature of harmony and rhythm there is no difficulty in discerning love which has...whence I infer that in music, in medicine, in all other things human as which as divine, both loves ought to be noted as far as may be, for they are both present.

Modern perfumes and ancient prophecy offer us a great insight into the necessity of recognizing this surprising necessity of integrating opposites.

Let's breathe deeply and listen to the tunes of the ancient prophetic lyre.

