CHAPTER SIXTEEN

APHRODITE AND THE SPECTACLE OF THE AMPHITHEATRE IN ROMAN AFRICA

Margherita Carucci

Introduction

Super has introcessit alia . . . designans Venerem, qualis fuit Venus, cum fuit virgo, nudo et intecto corpore perfectam formonstitatem professa, nisi quod tenui pallio bombycino inumbrabat spectabilem pubem.

After these another girl made her entrance . . . representing Venus as Venus looked when she was a virgin. She displayed a perfect figure, her body naked and uncovered except for a piece of sheer silk with which she veiled her comely charms. (Apuleius, Metamorphoses 10.31)¹

The image of Aphrodite / Venus has enjoyed great popularity in Western art since ancient times. Thousands of paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings depict this goddess whose image is still present in contemporary iconography, in both art and popular culture.² Despite her varied representation, in a range of replicas and derivations, Venus is mostly represented naked or half-draped, which emphasizes her role as goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and sexuality. This nude Venus is a symbol of ideal feminine beauty, but its association with activities apparently unrelated to the sphere of love and sexuality, such as its occurrence on a third-century AD floor mosaic in Thuburbo Maius, Roman Africa, can cause some uncertainty (figure 16.1).³ The panel of this mosaic, from an

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unidentified building, depicts a field of laurel-framed medallions including wild beasts and male figures, musicians, a gladiator, a *venator* (a hunter who fights with wild beasts in the arena), and an athlete; in a central panel, amid these motifs related to the realm of the amphitheatre, is a naked Venus. The association of this goddess with such spectacles is not attested in other visual forms from Imperial times, although she is not unknown from other mosaics in this region, and the absence of any image may be due to the poor chance of survival. Nevertheless, this representation raises interesting questions about the meaning and perception of Venus in Roman Africa. How can an image of a naked goddess evoking beauty and pleasure be associated with the violent spectacles of the amphitheatre? How might the ancient viewer perceive this mosaic and make sense of Venus’ inclusion? The representation of a naked female body among clothed male figures from the amphitheatre seems to suggest that the content of the African mosaic is connected with the concepts of gender, sexuality, and power in Roman society. How is sexual difference communicated in art? How does the iconography of this mosaic construct and maintain gender identities and relation-