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Nymphs and Nymphomania: Mythological Medicine and Classical Nudity in Nineteenth Century Britain

By Isabella Luta¹

Abstract

The concept of women being overwhelmed by excessive sexual desire had been present in medical discourse for a long time, but the nineteenth century saw a shift from describing this using the term 'Furor Uterinus' to 'Nymphomania'. In this paper I will investigate the significance behind this change and explore how myth influenced medicine to tackle the question of why 'Nymphomania' became the preferred term for excessive female sexuality in the 19th century. I will consider the connections between artistic depictions of nymphs and medical descriptions of nymphomaniacs, whilst exploring the etymology of 'Nymphomania' and ambiguous uses of Latin and Greek in the history of medicine. This essay is in the field of Classical Reception Studies, looking at the uses and abuses of Roman and Ancient Greek cultural material in later historical periods. I will focus on the multiplicity of meanings of the nymph in the Classical world, from the religious to the erotic, and the resonances of her image in 19th century Britain in the form of female nude paintings exhibited within the specific social context of attitudes towards female art models, prostitution and pornography. I will look at nude paintings of Classical nymphs as a way of accessing hidden sexual discourses and examine to what extent paintings of nymphs were also paintings of nymphomaniacs.

Keywords: Medical Humanities, Classical Reception Studies, Sexuality

Introduction

In the history of medicine, the role of Greek and Latin as medical languages has resulted in the presence of Greco-Roman mythical characters in medical terminology. The phenomenon of "mythical medical naming" was particularly prominent in psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century, producing such examples as the *Oedipal Complex* and *Narcissism*. However, "mythical medical naming" is also present in anatomical disorders such as *Priapism*, the term for a persistent erection, after Priapus, the phallic god.² Similarly, the Roman goddess Venus has been invoked as the term for sexually transmitted diseases, "venereal", since the mid-1600s.³

This paper will focus on Nymphomania as an instance of "mythical medical naming": it aims to find the "nymph" in Nymphomania and explain its presence. Investigating the term "Nymphomania" is particularly important because this is a term with a history of changes: "Nymphomania" became preferred over the earlier term *Furor Uterinus* in the nineteenth century and continued its legacy into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The institutionalisation of

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² Priapismus, as a medical term, is found in Caelius, *On Chronic Diseases*. 5.89-90.

³ The earliest instance of 'Venereal disease' in English was in 1658 (*OED*, 2016).

nymphomaniacs in insane asylums such as Eberbach in Germany, highlights the increased perceived threat of Nymphomania in the nineteenth century, before which promiscuous women were mainly treated as delinquents, not medical cases (Goldberg, 1988 p. 35-52). It is the basis of my argument that the displacement of *Furor Uterinus* by Nymphomania is significant, and that the “nymph” in Nymphomania is relevant. Exploring art, especially nude paintings, is a way of accessing sexual discourses which were elided from written discussions, as the classicising tendencies of these paintings allowed sexual representation to be more explicit. Therefore, the classical nymphs of nude paintings provide a way in to making sense of Nymphomania in the nineteenth century.

Nymphomania is usually discussed in terms of its symptoms and treatments, not its etymology. Previous scholars who have discussed links between classical nymphs and Nymphomania are limited. Cora Gilroy-Ware in her *Bodies of Nature* exhibition (2014) has focused on eighteenth century paintings of pastoral nymphs and their relation to contemporary discourses about Nymphomania. Also Simon Goldhill, writing on Victorian reception of the Classics has discussed Waterhouse’s painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) (Goldhill, 2011 p. 52-56). He argues that considering the different linguistic resonances of “nymph” from the period, including Nymphomania, offers a more useful method of viewing classical nymphs portrayed in Victorian paintings. However, whilst Waterhouse’s depiction of the moment before the nymphs’ erotic abduction of a young man fits in with the idea of the sexually aggressive nymphomaniac, the pictorial range of nymphs in nineteenth-century paintings is large and inconsistent, displaying different expressions of sexuality. There are many paintings of nymphs which do not display active desire. This paper aims to cover a range of nineteenth century paintings of classical nymphs in their varied relations to Nymphomania. I will argue that Nymphomania’s staying power as a term is due to the image of the nymph and her mythic ambiguity, as both victim and threat. The contradictions within the image of the nymph are useful and correlative to the inconsistencies of the term Nymphomania. Whilst considering the wider context of European and American medical history, I will investigate paintings exhibited in Britain in particular, so I can situate them within specific discourses on dissident female sexualities endemic to Victorian Britain.

Words and Images in the Construction of Nymphomania

There is evidence for a common cultural consciousness of Nymphomania in Victorian Britain. Most references to Nymphomania in newspapers are in the advertisements section for ordering volumes with coloured plates of an erotic nature.⁴ These references appear from the mid-nineteenth century. We do not have these volumes to know their content but their appearance in the adverts section indicates that their sellers assumed that enough people knew the meaning of “Nymphomania” to understand that this volume would contain titillating material depicting hypersexual women. At the end of the century the term appears, albeit infrequently, in articles and reviews, in the “diagnosis” of fictional characters, but not in reference to Nymphomania in reality. In a theatre review for Henrik Ibsen’s *The Master-BUILDER* (*The Pall Mall Gazette*, 1893), the reviewer gives one interpretation for the character of Hilde Wangel, “perhaps the most detestable character in the drama’s range” as a “victim of Nymphomania”. These references suggest that readers of these periodicals were expected to be familiar with the term.

⁴ Classified adverts for “*Nymphomania* coloured plates, 2s 6d.” are found in *The Northern Star and National Trades’ Journal* (a chartist newspaper with working-class readers) 13 December 1845 – 10 January 1846 and in *The Era*, 7 June 1857.

However, there is not enough written material to investigate why “Nymphomania” became the term which made the most sense to describe pathologised female sexuality during the nineteenth century. This is due to the repressive nature of public sexual discourse of the period in general, and specifically regarding women. For example, Diane Mason notes how “male” masturbation was part of public discourse, so it could be warned against and restricted, but “female” masturbation was talked about much less frequently (2008 p. 27-32). There was a hope that as long as young women never heard about it most of them would not naturally discover masturbation by themselves. Overall, it was more taboo to talk about women and sexuality, so Nymphomania, as both a sexual disorder and a female disorder, was not discussed openly. Therefore, it is hard to find records of its construction through public written discourse.⁵

However, nude paintings are a sphere in which sexual representations of women were more visible than representations of men (Smith, 1996). Therefore, I argue that art and imagery were important for conveying discourses on and attitudes towards female sexuality that were not written about publicly; this is especially true of classicising female nudes of the Victorian period, which were the centre of moral debate, but still had a place in public spaces because of their “high art” status. Greco-Roman images, because of their cultural prestige and their firm place in a long academic and artistic tradition, offered a much greater license to explore sexual themes (Smith, 1996).

Problems in Etymology: the Nymph in Nymphomania

Firstly, in order to investigate the nature of the relationship between nymph and nymphomaniac, I will establish that this relationship exists. In this section, I will explore different possible interpretations for the ambiguous “nymph” in Nymphomania, and then I will argue that the classical nymph has a strong presence in this word in the nineteenth century.

In texts defining and diagnosing Nymphomania in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries the term’s etymology is never explained (de Bienville, 1775; Krafft-Ebing, 1903). Even within modern dictionaries of psychological terms, the etymology is given as “νύμφη” meaning “a bride or nymph”, with the author attempting no further accuracy in definition (for example Colman, 2009).⁶ The eighteenth-century French physician, D.T. de Bienville, who wrote the defining and popularising text on Nymphomania, announces his decision to “confine [himself] to the word ‘Nymphomania’... in all references to the *Furor Uterinus*” with the qualification that “these names [are] arbitrary” (1775 p. 44). He does not explain where this word is from or why he is using it.⁷ This could be de Bienville being obscure, or it could be that the word was so obvious to his readers that he did not need to explain it to them. Gilroy-Ware argues that the nymph is fully and obviously present in Nymphomania for de Bienville since his focus is on the sexually unrestrained woman: “Although de Bienville does not mention the nymph, he does not need to. Her significance is already entrenched in his choice of subject” (2014). However, I think it is more likely that the initially stronger resonance of the “nymph” in Nymphomania was “νύμφη” as a term for the clitoris, following a tradition of Ancient Greek anatomical texts such as Soranus’

⁵Carol Groneman (2001) makes use of medical journals, e.g. *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, but these were only circulated within a small group of professionals.

⁶Colman (2009, p.517) writes “Nymphomania - A psychological condition of women characterized by uncontrollable sexual desire and an inability to have lasting sexual relationships. [From Greek *nymphē* a bride or nymph + *mania* madness]”.

⁷De Bienville was not the first to use Nymphomania, he was preceded by J. Kersey in his *General English Dictionary* (1708) (*OED*).

Gynecology (1.18): the term would literally mean mania of the clitoris. Thus, Nymphomania perhaps originally was a translation and transposition of *Furor Uterinus*, the madness of the uterus, shifting the physiological site of genital madness and translating Latin into Greek.

However, whether the nymph in de Bienville's Nymphomania was originally obscure or obvious, there is evidence that it certainly was ambiguous by the mid-Victorian period, both to the general public and to medical professionals. In some nineteenth-century medical sources, "νύμφη" signifies the clitoris in the context of other words, e.g. "Nymphitis: inflammation of the clitoris" (Dunlison, 1856 p.604). However, "νύμφη" is not a word to be pinned down easily. In the same medical lexicon, the "νύμφη" in Nymphomania is given as the generic translation "bride" instead of the specific meaning clitoris (ibid). There is also confusion and ambiguity between "νύμφη" the clitoris and "νύμφαι" the labia minora in other words such as Nymphotomy, which nineteenth-century physician and medical lexicographer Robley Dunlison defines as "the excision of the nymphae", but he also notes that other people have used it for "the amputation of the clitoris" (ibid). Therefore, possibly the reason "νύμφη" is given as "bride" by Dunlison is due to an unwillingness to attach it to a specific body part and decisively narrow down the definition of this term.

The main motivation for reading the mythical nymph as present in Nymphomania, as Gilroy-Ware argues (2014), is that the male analogue of Nymphomania was called Satyriasis. Nymphs and satyrs, often depicted as companions, are the two mythical archetypes of wild, unrestrained sexuality, extracted from the same landscape (Larson, 2001 p.92).⁸ Nymphomania and Satyriasis are described as analogues in Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1903). Although Nymphomania was more frequently diagnosed and discussed by doctors in the nineteenth century than Satyriasis, as a medical term Satyriasis predates Nymphomania considerably: Satyriasis is found in ancient medical texts. It is the name given to a violent desire for sexual intercourse in Roman physician Caelius Aurelianus' Latin translation of Soranus' *On Acute and Chronic Diseases* (1990). Caelius discusses the etymology of Satyriasis, giving two popular explanations, the first explicitly linking the term to mythological satyrs, "*translative a similitudine satyrorum*" (1990 3.175). Sufferers of Satyriasis mimic the rowdy and excessive behaviour of mythical satyrs. Caelius describes it as the term for excessive sexual desire common to both men and women; there is no separate female analogue. However, in the nineteenth century both Satyriasis and Nymphomania exist as terms and the existence of Satyriasis, with its clearer mythical etymology, would have encouraged people to see the mythical nymph in Nymphomania and draw stronger links between myth and medicine.

Gilroy-Ware (2014) asserts that from the beginning the mythical nymph is the main resonance of Nymphomania instead of any body part. However, these different meanings are not necessarily mutually exclusive, for synecdoche was a fitting way of treating women both in antiquity and in the nineteenth century. This blurs the line between a whole female figure, whether the character of nymph or bride, and a specified body part. There is an ancient precedent for shifting in and out of synecdoche when using the word "νύμφη". Soranus claims that the clitoris is called "νύμφη" because it "withdraws like a bride": "νύμφη δὲ εἴρηται διὰ τὸ ταῖς

⁸ Larson (2001) notes how satyrs and nymphs were depicted as natural companions in Archaic Greek representations. They were a common subject in the European artistic tradition for paintings, engravings and sketches. E.g. Agostino Carracci - *Satyr whipping a nymph* (c.1590), Hendrick van Balen - *Diana and Her Nymphs Asleep, Spied upon by Satyrs* (1620) Peter Paul Rubens - *Nymphs and Satyrs* (1635), Claude Lorrain - *Landscape with Dancing Satyrs and Nymphs* (1646), Johann Georg Platzer - *Nymphs and Satyrs Drinking* (c.1740), J.M. W Turner - *Naked Nymphs and Satyrs Engaged in Sexual Activity* (c.1810).

νυμφευομέναις ὁμοίως ὑποστέλλειν τὸ σαρκίον” (1927 1.18). The clitoris is thus named for supposedly mimicking the behaviour of a shy bride; young women and the clitoris overlap. A similar shifting back and forth between the whole and part, the woman and her genitals, is present in Victorian erotica publication *The Pearl*. The use of “nymphae” to refer to the labia minora is limited in the publication. But when it is used in *La Rose D’Amour*, a story about a young aristocratic man’s erotic adventures serialised in *The Pearl*, it is used close to instances of the word “nymph” in a way that evokes classical and pastoral imagery, such as when the narrator and his friends have sex with their lovers on a river bank.⁹ In this particular serialisation, it seems that the word “nymphae” is used, as opposed to other more pornographic terms for genitalia used elsewhere in the publication, to create a specific connection to the image of the naked women as nymphs; their mythological transformation in the narrator’s imagination is linked to his focus on their genitalia.

In summary, there was not an explicit etymological explanation for the “nymph” in Nymphomania available in the nineteenth century. The origins of de Bienville’s “Nymphomania” were obscure. Therefore, I argue that the “nymph” in Nymphomania was up for interpretation, and would have been viewed differently by people with different knowledge. However, I think it is reasonable to read the classical nymph in Nymphomania, as the male analogue for excessive sexuality was Satyriasis and nymphs and satyrs were companions in a long artistic tradition. Furthermore, a larger proportion of the public would have been more aware of classical myth and representations of nymphs than of ancient medical texts. Moreover, the other readings of “νύμφη” referring to the clitoris or the labia do not exclude the presence of the classical nymph, as we have seen in examples of switching synecdoche. Perhaps the “νύμφη” in Nymphomania originally referred to the clitoris, but, if so, Nymphomania, as a word, transcended its original etymology to become ambiguous, complex and mythic.

What is a Nymph?

Having established a link between the mythical nymph and the medical nymphomaniac, I will now attempt to define and understand both as separate categories.

There is no one authoritative and consistent definition of a nymph in antiquity. Nymphs possess a long and complex history, with many different resonances (Larson, 2001). The word “νύμφη” can refer to a mortal or divine woman: in the mortal sense it refers to a young bride or a girl of marriageable age, as opposed to “γυνή”, woman or wife. In this way, “νύμφη” refers to a woman’s age, as opposed to a constant identity throughout her life; it forms part of the terminology of transience. In the divine sense, “νύμφη” refers to minor goddesses closely connected to nature, specifically springs and water sources, mountains and caves.¹⁰ This image of the divine nymph is the one on whose representations I will focus.

Divine nymphs were rural religious figures who received cult worship. They sometimes featured on Hellenistic and Roman funerary inscriptions when some children who had disappeared mysteriously were represented as having been abducted by nymphs (Larson, 2001). Nymphs were

⁹ The reference to labia minora as “nymphae” in pornographic description, “rubbing the head between the nymphae”, occurs after the reference to sexually available women as nymphs in a pastoral setting: “Raoul and Julien had laid their nymphs down on the edge of the water”. ‘La Rose D’Amour, Or the Adventures of a Gentleman in search of Pleasure’ in *The Pearl*, Vol. 9 (1880).

¹⁰ See Larson (2001 p.8-11) for how nymphs are related to topographical features. See p.226-227 for the cave as a primary place of worship for nymphs: “Cave shrines are unlike most other sanctuaries in that their location is dictated first by nature.” Nymphs are connected to nature in their cult worship.

also significantly linked to sex, both actively and passively.¹¹ Homer references nymphs in the genealogies of heroes in the *Iliad*; they are divine figures with whom mortal men have had sex to produce impressive offspring. There are literary tales of men asking to have sex with a nymph as a reward, which shows nymphs' desirability to men (ibid).¹² Nymphs can also be portrayed as active sexual beings or predators themselves, most notably in the abduction of Hylas.¹³

Nymphs can possess more sexual freedom than young mortal women living in family homes. They are also more sexually accessible than goddesses, as they reside in earth-bound habitats rather than Olympus (ibid). However, another common image of the nymph is the deliberately virginal follower of Artemis. Thus nymphs have both a sexual reputation and a chaste one. Larson (2001) argues that the simile from Book Six of the *Odyssey* comparing Princess Nausicaä and her companions to Artemis and a group of nymphs is responsible for inspiring the image of nymphs as chaste maidens who follow Artemis and only delight in hunting in later literature.¹⁴ In short, in classical antiquity nymphs have varying religious and erotic resonances.

What is a Nymphomaniac?

Similar to the nymph, the nineteenth-century nymphomaniac was a shifting and slippery concept. The figure of the nymphomaniac during the nineteenth century was vague due to the malleability of the definitions and symptoms of Nymphomania. An example of a professional definition of Nymphomania from a medical lexicon of the period is "an irresistible and insatiable desire, in females, for the venereal act" (Dunglison, 1856 p. 604). Whilst that seems to delineate the core concept of Nymphomania, namely excessive female sexuality, the methods for identifying and diagnosing Nymphomania were not clear or consistent. An "insatiable desire" for sex is not something easily quantified so could manifest itself in different ways, ranging from the extreme to the trivial: from delirium and compulsive masturbation to being "overly" flirtatious. For example, the gynaecologist Dr. Horatio Storer published his case notes on a twenty-four year old married woman who has regular sex with her husband, which she enjoys, and erotic dreams about men she's just met (*in Groneman, 1994*). Her dreams and desires for multiple men are considered disturbing enough to make her a pathological subject. Worries about sexual excess were the essence of Nymphomania and excess is a relative concept produced by the designated limits of "normality" in specific cultural and moral contexts. The nymphomaniac was a sexually transgressive figure so her definitions and manifestations shifted in relation to the different moral standards held by different people and institutions.

In addition to the problem of identifying the nymphomaniac, within medical and popular discourses there was also uncertainty over explaining the causes of the nymphomaniac. Was Nymphomania the result of a shock caused by a dramatic event, such as Krafft-Ebing's case of Acute Deadly Nymphomania in which a girl becomes a nymphomaniac after being abandoned by her betrothed (1903)? Was it caused by a self-indulgent and sensual lifestyle: reading too many novels, sleeping on soft pillows?¹⁵ Or was a nymphomaniac a specific type of woman with an

¹¹ See Larson (2001 p. 94) on "overt sexuality" being a characteristic of nymphs depicted with satyrs in sixth century black-figure vase painting.

¹² Rhoikos and Arkas protect a tree and stream respectively then receive a sexual reward from a nymph.

¹³ Theocritus, *Idyll 13*.p.47-50. The nymphs, struck by desire, pull Hylas into the pool.

¹⁴ This image of Artemis and the nymphs "belongs almost exclusively to epic" and is limited outside Homer and Hellenistic and Roman poetry.

¹⁵ Groneman notes a middle class nymphomaniac patient who was "ordered to replace her feather mattress and pillows with ones made of hair to limit the sensual quality of her sleep" (1994, p. 15).

intrinsically dysfunctional personality? The nineteenth century saw shifts from physiological to psychological explanations for Nymphomania: but this was not a simple, uniform movement. Instead differing possible explanations co-existed and contradicted one another, making the definition of a nymphomaniac unstable and elusive.

In these sections, I have explored the difficulties of defining both the nymph and the nymphomaniac. Thanks to lexical ambiguity, the divine nymph is connected to and entangled with the figure of the mortal bride as both are “νόμοφαι” and can share features that make them resemble each other, such as youth and beauty. Aside from ambiguities arising from overlaps between the nymph and the other “νόμοφη”, divine nymphs are inconsistent and fluid due to their many different appearances in religion, art and literature. They appear variously as objects of desire, aggressive subjects, consenting companions and chaste victims. This results in the nymph possessing a large amount of sexual ambiguity. The nymphomaniac is also an incredibly unclear figure. She is vague in her definition and identification, as her core feature of “excessive” female sexuality is a relative and unstable concept. Her sexuality is also shifting and ambiguous in what it signifies for men, in the responses it provokes. Nymphomaniacs could be represented as attractive and seductive, “by exposing their feminine charms, even by exhibition, they lure men”, and figures of pity and disgust, “these unfortunate women disseminate the spirit of lewdness”, within the same text (Krafft-Ebing, 1903 p. 324-325).

Victorian Visions: Why was Nudity Classical?

Before I compare representations of nymphs and nymphomaniacs, I will first provide the context for looking at paintings of nude nymphs, focusing on moral debates concerning female nudity in art exhibited in Britain during the nineteenth century. In this section I will explore why classical pretexts were important for nude paintings and representations of sexuality.

Paintings of nude figures had been prominent in the European art tradition, but there was a greater necessity for the justification of female nude paintings in Victorian Britain. Erotic paintings became more of a source of danger and concern in the Victorian period, as the invention of photography saw a rise in access to pornography and therefore an exponentially growing concern about the effect of erotic media on its audiences (Stoops, 2015). Imagination was vulnerable and images had the power to corrupt communal sexual morality. This concern about the sexualisation of culture is present in Emile de Lavelaye’s speech to Josephine Butler and other moral campaigners, in which he fears “a contagion of satyriasis...which infects alike our books, our journals, engravings, photographs” (in Bristow, 1977 p. 200). He imagines a metaphorical Satyriasis infecting contemporary culture, threatening the whole of society. In his view, books and images are methods of transmission for sexual disease and excess. In order to defend the general morality and health of the public from disease and vice, the media must be clean and protected. His speech demonstrates how the issue of sexual content in the media had the potential to be a profound source of anxiety.

There was an increase in morality campaigners in Victorian Britain and new laws on “obscenity”, which included non-sexual offences such as blasphemy, exemplified by texts like *The Obscene Publications Act of 1857*. This law increased penalties for the publishing and dispensing of pornography. Female nudity in art was a greater source of concern since men’s bodies were justified in being studied and shown for anatomical purposes (Smith, 2001). Classical pretexts were necessary to attempt to protect the respectability of a nude female painting up until the arrival of the “boudoir nude” at the end of the century, when painters would start representing naked

women in modern domestic settings. Before this move to wider acceptance, classical pretexts were important in the justification of nudes because the nude bodies of Greek and Roman sculpture had the status of “high art”, the highest art in tradition.

Furthermore, appreciation of art was a way of separating people based on class and education, distinguishing those who could be corrupted by nude images, seeing them only for debased uses, and those who could appreciate the aesthetic qualities of a nude without being tainted or tainting the image itself with their vision (Smith, 1996). The classical pretext emphasises this, as Classics was the basis of an elite education. Thus classical subjects reinforced the idea that elites would be better equipped to understand and appreciate these nude paintings. The classical pretext of a painting worked on two levels of elevation: elevating the viewer, by selecting a privileged audience to view the art in an “educated” way, and by distancing the body of the nymph or other classical figure from the body of the typically working-class model who was, as I will explore later, a symbol of vice and exploitation.¹⁶

Overall, representing the naked bodies of women was already a source of concern, but within the context of increasing worries about the effects of pornography and erotic material on public morality and worries about prostitution and the sexual exploitation of working class women, these images became more dangerous in the eyes of middle class viewers during the nineteenth century. Using classical pretexts for sexually charged images was a way of reinforcing their status as art, so that they were representations of beauty rather than obscenity.¹⁷

Victim and Threat: Nymph/Nymphomaniac Ambiguity

In this section, I will argue that the nymph’s complicated status as both potential victim and potential threat is a central feature of her artistic depiction and that this contradiction corresponds to medical descriptions of the nymphomaniac. The complex and ambiguous nature of the nymph comes to light by comparing and contrasting representations of nymphs with their male counterparts, satyrs. The different tropes employed for portraying the excessive sexuality of nymphs and satyrs demonstrate the different limits and standards put in place for men and women.

One of the most significant markers of difference in representations of nymphs and satyrs and Nymphomania and Satyriasis is the amount of violence and active aggression displayed or implied. Satyrs are uniformly represented as more violent and threatening than nymphs. Whilst there were pre-nineteenth century paintings of nymphs and satyrs as a collective group engaging in consensual activities, even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was common for paintings to depict satyrs uncovering the naked bodies of nymphs as they slept.¹⁸ Satyrs, with their horns and hairy, hooved legs, are bestial manifestations of male aggression, sometimes jovial, sometimes explicitly threatening. Whilst nymphs are often the victims of satyrs’ unrestrained desires, satyrs are rarely nymphs’ victims.¹⁹ When nymphs are depicted as sexual aggressors, the

¹⁶ See Smith (1996) on middle class views towards sexuality of working class women.

¹⁷ See Nead (1992, pp. 25-28) for discussion of the balance between the sublime and the obscene in painting the female nude.

¹⁸ This continues into the nineteenth century with William Etty’s *Sleeping Nymph and Satyrs* (1828).

¹⁹ A notable exception is Bouguereau’s *Nymphs and Satyr* (1873), in which a lone satyr is being pushed into the water by a group of nymphs. I have limited this paper to paintings exhibited in Britain so I will not analyse this painting, which moved straight from Paris to New York. But for a useful indication of the difference between the portrayal of satyrs and nymphs acting as sexual aggressors towards each other in European painting: compare Bouguereau to Cabanel’s *Nymph and Satyr* (1860), which depicts a threatening satyr grasping onto a distressed nymph.

object of their assault is Hylas; they attack a single human man as a group. Their functioning as a group is particularly noticeable in Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) [Fig. 1], in which the seven nymphs were drawn from two models (Goldhill 2011). The nymphs are beautiful and unnervingly similar as they gaze at Hylas with desire. They provide the sexual threat of an amorphous mass of women, whose bodies and faces blur into one another, as if they are multiplying before the viewer's eyes.



Figure 1. *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896)
John William Waterhouse
Manchester Art Gallery
BY-NC-ND

The excessive sexuality of satyrs is displayed through rapaciousness and violence. As for nymphs, apart from depictions of the Hylas abduction myth, their over-abundance of sexuality is generally passive and located within viewers' responses to their naked bodies. A nymph's sexuality is constructed through attracting and luring the viewer, through being viewed. This has an interesting analogue with the representation of Nymphomania in medical literature, such as Krafft-Ebing's text on sexual perversion, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1903). It was originally intended for lawyers as a forensic psychology aid, but was read much more widely than this (Oosterhuis, 2000).

In Krafft-Ebing's collection of nymphomaniacs, nudity and self-exposure are important signifiers for recognising the victims of the sexual disorder. In one example, the victim's progression into Nymphomania is signified by the central actions of "refusing to put on her garments" and "furiously [demanding] coitus" (1903 p. 322). Another woman, when left alone with any man, would "immediately remove her clothes and urgently request that he satisfy her desire" (1903 p. 323). Nudity and self-exposure are seen as expressions of sexual agitation and insatiability. Whilst some active sexual assault attempts perpetrated by nymphomaniacs are recorded, in a larger number of cases nymphomaniacs express their symptoms by taking off their clothes and demanding sex.

This method of encoding sexuality within total exposure of the body is seen in Arthur Hacker's paintings: *Syrinx* (1892) [Fig. 2] and the compositionally similar *Daphne* (c. 1890), nymphs from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Hacker shows Syrinx in her human form, just before her transformation into reeds in order to escape the sexual attention of the god Pan. Her face is concealed in shadow, buried into her arm, her torso revealed in light, her left breast protruding. This directs the viewer into an objectifying gaze: shadows obscure the emotions present in the nymph's face, thereby preventing the possibility of an emotional engagement. Syrinx and Daphne are portrayed as passive victims of their own beauty and allure. Their sexuality is in the display and consequent observation of their bodies by their rapists and by viewers of the paintings.

Although this scene is extracted from a chase narrative, Syrinx is standing feet firmly together not running. The delicate, shallow ripples on the water at her feet emphasise her stillness; she is standing, illuminated body on display, to be viewed. Instead of contradicting the nymphomaniac, these nymphs are important in constructing a paradigm in which passivity and powerlessness can be part of a woman's "excessive" sexuality.



Figure 2. *Syrinx* (1892)
Arthur Hacker
Manchester Art Gallery
BY – NC - ND

In contrast, satyrs are often threats to nymphs, but are not presented as being their own victims. According to Krafft-Ebing the “individual afflicted with satyriasis is forever exposed to the peril of committing rape, thus becoming a common danger to all persons of the opposite sex” (1903 p. 325). Nymphomaniacs are frequently described as their own victims, “forced to sacrifice feminine honour and dignity” (1903 p. 323). There is more of a concern with the moral and aesthetic roles women play, and how an excessive sexuality threatens their ability to continue performing them.

In paintings, satyrs embody male sexual aggression; their animalistic desire and lack of restraint are manifested in their beastly appearance. Nymphs, however, are not half-animal hybrids but are represented with the appearance of beautiful human women. This corresponds to de Bienville’s notion that Nymphomania “lurks, almost without exception, under the imposing outside of an apparent calm” (1775 p. 28). Satyrs may be more violent than nymphs, but the extent of their violent nature is manifested in their appearance, so they are easier to identify. Nymphomaniacs, like nymphs, appear as normal women, worryingly making all women potentially pathological.

To summarise, depictions of nymphs range from passive victims to sexual predators. Whilst at first paintings of nymphs as victims may seem not to be conducive to the construction of the nymphomaniac, the nymph as victim does have a role to play. These paintings allow for excessive female sexuality to be passive and located in self-exposure. Thus, combined with paintings of nymphs as sexual aggressors, the nymph has a fluid status as both victim and threat in artistic representation, which helps the construction of the ambiguous nymphomaniac.

Wild Nature and Urbanised Sexuality: Paradoxes on the Painted Body

The second main characteristic of paintings of nymphs is their strong connection to nature and this resonance with a wild sexuality. Among classicising nudes, nymphs are singular in being closely connected to features of the natural landscape (Larson, 2001). Their nudity, as well as conveying sexuality, also conveys freedom from the artificiality of human civilisation.

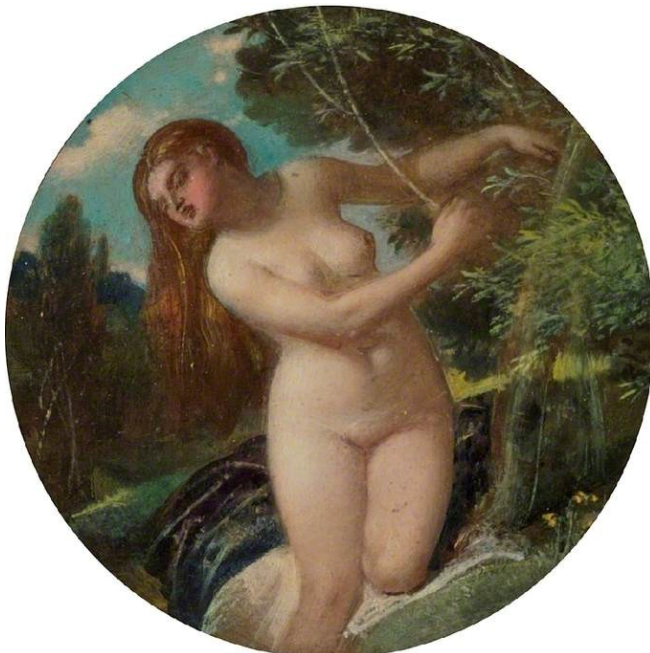


Figure 3. *Wood Nymph* (c.1850)
William Edward Frost
Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum
BY – NC – ND

In the 1850s, after the death of William Etty, pioneer of the British female nude, there was a scarcity of female nude paintings.²⁰ Etty's successor William Frost produced cabinet-size paintings of generic, anonymous nymphs with languid bodies and free-flowing hair. The paintings were titled *Wood Nymph* (c. 1850) [Fig. 3], and *The Sea Cave* (c. 1851) [Fig. 4], expressing the nymph's identity purely through her relation to her home environment; she is part of the landscape. In Frost's *The Sea Cave*, the unnamed sea nymph lounges on the sand inside a cave. Her back and arms are bent and arched, repeating the curves of the cave's opening. Her body is a reinterpretation of her home environment. The position of lounging or reclining on the ground, whether on the shore or on the forest bed, is a typical nymph pose and creates an image in which the nymph's naked body makes a parallel line to the ground, as if she is another layer in the backdrop, conveying her deep connection to the natural world.



Figure 4. 'The Sea Cave' (c.1851)
William Edward Frost
Russell-Cotes Art Gallery &
Museum
BY – NC - ND

This is a special resonance for nymph paintings. Most other nudes were not connected to nature. From the 1870s, when the genre of female nudes had made a return to popularity, one of the most prevalent classicising pretexts for female nudes was bathing. Sometimes named mythological characters were the subjects, such as Frederic Leighton's *The Bath of Psyche* (1890); sometimes anonymous women, such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *In the Tepidarium* (1881) and Edward John Poynter's *Diadumene* (c. 1883). These paintings justify nudity and sexuality with the depicted practice of cleanliness. These bathing scenes take place in human buildings, a sign of civilisation and custom, so that nudity is not related to the wilderness or nature, as the nymph paintings clearly are.

This special emphasis on nature in images of nymphs encourages the viewer to contemplate a paradox about excessive sexuality, as viewed in Victorian culture. From one perspective, excessive sexuality is seen as the manifestation of a wild, animalistic lust: women, overwhelmed by irrationality, disregarding the morals and manners of society to be sexually aggressive.

²⁰ For a detailed history of the Victorian female nude see Smith (1996).

However, on the other hand, sexuality in excess was regarded not as primal and regressive but as a symptom of modernity, of urbanization and technological advances. Within middle-class moral discourse, a possible cause of Nymphomania was thought to be exposure to explicit material. Concerns about the rise of pornographic material in society were linked to concerns about technological advances in photography. For working class women, a supposed possible cause of Nymphomania was living in overcrowded housing, the conditions of poverty and urbanisation, which, in Victorian moral discourse, encouraged sexual immorality and a lack of modesty. Thus the nymphomaniac is wild, but also a product of modernity and over-stimulation.

This paradox is present in the gap between the painting's emphasis on the natural world, which is linked to the nymph's sexuality, and the context the painting was produced in: the gap between the nymph and the real model behind the canvas. This intrusion of the model into the viewer's vision of the painting is described by art critics who deride artists for painting too much of the model. For example, an art critic noted disparagingly of Frost's *Sabrina and the Nymphs*, "We have not nymphs, but certain young ladies – English young ladies; denuded, but not ignorant of stays, for their shoulders are not the loose shoulders of people accustomed to be free" (*The Spectator*, 1850). There is a sharp distinction made between the nudity of mythical nymphs and of contemporary English young women who are used to being held in by corsets. If the model's experience of nudity is too present in the painting, this signifies a failure of the artist who should ensure a safe distance between the nymph and the model. The painting should be firmly located in the mythic and the historical, and not a potentially dangerous reminder of real, present-day, professionally naked women.²¹

However, in critical discourse which expresses a desire for her removal, the model is in fact placed at the centre and becomes even more visible. Moreover, it is not just art critics who would have been sensitive to seeing the model behind the nymph but also viewers aware of purity campaigns, for the role of nude female models in art schools was a contentious moral debate during the nineteenth century (Smith, 2001).²² In moral campaigns against the use of nude models, she is stereotyped as a desperate woman in poverty. There was little difference seen between models for pornographic photography and nude models for art (Stoops, 2015). Whilst classical nymphs may have been free to enjoy nudity without shame, naked women of the nineteenth century were subject to harsher standards, creating a large gap between real and fictive bodies in classicising paintings.

Furthermore, nymphs and nymphomaniacs are both linked to prostitutes, who are connected to the urban environment; prostitution was closely linked to the idea of street-walking (Lee, 2013). Krafft-Ebing names prostitution as the inevitable last resort of poor women who are nymphomaniacs: they "eventually" become prostitutes in order to "find satisfaction and relief with one man after another" (1903 p. 322). Interestingly, a Victorian euphemism for a prostitute was "nymph du pave" or "nymph of the pave".²³ This configures the prostitute as an urban nymph figure, and like a nymph, she is connected to her landscape. The prostitute was the central figure in Victorian sociological investigations into the 'depravity' of the city, especially London.²⁴ Thus

²¹ Smith (1996 p.93) argues that "with working women stereotyped as robust and morally unhealthy, it was essential that the artist omit any sign of class when painting from a naked model".

²² Smith explains that purity movements made efforts "to ban the [nude] subjects from exhibitions on the premise that they threatened the morals both of models and uneducated sections of the viewing public"(2001 p.122).

²³ Lee (2013 pp.70-71) gives examples of "nymph du pave" being used as a term for a prostitute in Kentish newspaper local court reports. "Nymph" on its own is used as slang for a prostitute in erotica publication *The Pearl*: 'The wandering nymph your purse desires' in comic poem *The Wise Lover* (Vol. 2, 1879).

²⁴ For example, J. Ewing Ritchie (1858) *The Night Side of London*.

the classical, pastoral nymph in a painting, through her name, is implicated in discourses on dissident female sexualities connected to urbanisation and modernity.

In short, this intersection of real and painted bodies, mythical women with urban reality underneath, manifests conflicting anxieties about excessive female sexuality which is both the antithesis of society, a return to nature, and the result of the dangerous inventions of a society gone too far.

Conclusion

Nymphs themselves had a diverse range of depictions in the ancient world, especially with regards to sexuality. Some of these aspects were observed and repeated in nineteenth-century reception, such as images of nymphs as icons of a pastoral sexuality, but others were ignored or elided, such as their religious role. Therefore, the figure of the nymph became more indeterminate through the nineteenth century interpretation and configuring of a fragmented past.

In this paper, I have looked at nude images of nymphs because nude paintings were not just indistinguishable depictions of naked women but in fact central to exploring cultural constructions of female sexuality. Although there were relatively few nudes compared to other types of painting – even at their most popular – they were written about disproportionately (Smith, 1996). Female nudes captured the most attention, and made a large impact on the art world. By looking at paintings of nymphs alongside descriptions of nymphomaniacs in the medical literature, I have outlined parallels of ambiguity and contradiction between the myth and the medicine.

Nymphs and nymphomaniacs are both victims and threats in their sexuality. The inconsistency of the nymph—sometimes a sexual abductor of young men, sometimes a virgin fleeing from rape—translates into the ambiguity of the nymphomaniac who endangers public morality but is also her own victim. In addition, she is connected to both pastoral and urban contexts in her painted depictions, for the classical nymph and her sexuality were deeply, intrinsically connected to the natural world, but the model providing her body was linked to narratives which held that modernity and urbanisation produced psychosexual disorder. The “nymph” in Nymphomania succinctly contains this paradox on the causes of excessive sexuality. Hypersexuality is linked to escaping the restraints of society in order to return to an animalistic sexuality but also linked to modern society’s vices and pressures, and nymph-like natural imagery stands out against the cultural context of technological innovation. In conclusion, it is the inconsistencies of the figure of the nymph which make the term “Nymphomania” mythically and medically powerful.

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