

## BOOK REVIEW

*Nymphs*. By GIORGIO AGAMBEN. London: Seagull Books/University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. vii + 66. Hardcover, \$15.30. ISBN 978-0-8574-2-094-7.

**N**ymphs are a “ubiquitous presence in popular imagination, art, myth, and cult” (Malkin, *OCD*<sup>4</sup> s.v.).<sup>1</sup> They are, however, far more complex and potentially important than the image of charming female cult divinities and would-be-wives-at-home might suggest. Homer, Porphyry and many of the ancients knew this, Sappho knew this well, as did Demetrius, for example, who says (*De Elocut.* 132): “Virtually the whole of Sappho’s poetry deals with nymphs’ gardens, wedding songs, eroticism.”

Among modern scholars of antiquity J. J. Winkler, who cites Demetrius’ words, is one of those who has recognized the far-reaching hermeneutic potential of the idea of nymphs. In the section entitled “Gardens of Nymphs” in one of his most insightful and best known essays (“Double Consciousness in Sappho’s Lyrics,” in *The Constraints of Desire*, 1990, and, of course, earlier in *Foley’s Reflections on Women in Classical Antiquity*, 1981), Winkler notes that the word *Nymphê* “names a young woman at the moment of her transition from maiden (*parthenos*) to wife

<sup>1</sup> See recently, e.g., Lowe, D. 2011. “Scylla, the Diver’s Daughter: Aeschryon, Hedyle, and Ovid.” *Classical Philology* 106 (3): 260-264; Pache, C. O. 2011. *A Moment’s Ornament: The Poetics of Nympholepsy in Ancient Greece*. New York: OUP USA; Romano, A. J. 2010. “The Invention of Marriage: Hermaphroditus and Salmacis at Halicarnassus and in Ovid.” *Classical Quarterly* N. S. 59 (2): 543-561; West, E. B. 2010. “A Quartet of Graeco-Aryan Demi-Goddesses: Leukothea, Eidothea, Ulupi and Varga.” *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 38: 147-171; Cowan, R. W. 2009. “Thrasymennus’ Wanton Wedding: Etymology, Genre, and ‘Virtus’ in Silius Italicus, *Punica*.” *Classical Quarterly* N. S. 59 (1): 226-237; Hyllested, A. 2004. “L’Esprit des eaux: grec νύμφη, sanskrit *Rāmbhā*, lituanien *Laumė* et quelques autres formes semblant apparentées. In *id. et al.* (eds.) *Per Aspera ad asteriscos: studia Indogermanica in honorem Jens Elmegård Rasmussen sexagenarii Idibus Martii anno*, Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachen und Literaturen der Universität, pp. 219-233. Sourvinou-Inwood, C. 2005. *Hylas, the Nymphs, Dionysos and Others. Myth, ritual, ethnicity*. Stockholm: Paul Åströms Förlag; Larson, J. 2001. *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ando, V. 1996. “*Nympe*: La Sposa e le Ninfe.” *Quaderni Urbinati di cultura classica* 52: 47-79; Connor, W. R. 1988. “Seized by the Nymphs: Nympholepsy and Symbolic Expression in Classical Greece.” *Classical Antiquity* 7: 155-89; etc.

(or ‘woman,’ *gynè*); the underlying idea is that just as the house encloses the wife as veil and carriage keep the bride apart from the wedding celebrants, so the woman herself encloses a sexual secret” (181) [my emphasis].

It’s not surprising, then, that the very idea of nymphs has played a critical role in forming Winker’s epoch-making arguments about “double consciousness”. Nymphs occupy the compound centre of a resonant nexus of meanings. For those who are attracted by such critical prospects and are prepared to cast their gaze more widely, Giorgio Agamben’s recent book *Nymphs* may offer some productive reading.

Agamben (b. 1942) is a prolific scholar whose work, sometimes the source of controversy, is widely discussed among students of literature, philosophy, political philosophy, ethics and history, cultural critics, art critics, practitioners of art, and sometimes classical scholars, too (for example, Dean Hammer, David Elmer, reviewed for *CJ* by Hammer, or the present writer). His earlier writing (collected, e.g., in *The End of the Poem*, 1999) deals with philology and poetics, especially in Mediaeval texts and contexts. In later writings, Agamben develops a distinctive, idiosyncratic style and non-dogmatic arguments situated at the interface between political thought (famously exploring the idea of ‘power’, drawing on his readings of Benjamin, Foucault, Schmitt and others), history, aesthetics and ethics (see *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1995; *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, 2013; *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 2003).

Agamben is an ambitious and eclectic philosopher, not a classicist or a historian as such. But he is classically and philologically trained, and often a close reader of historical and classical sources. His book *State of Exception* (2003) contains extended arguments about the *Res Gestae* and some comments, for example, on Mommsen’s readings of its text, on *auctoritas*, *dignitas* and *potestas*. Such discussions are not anecdotal, nor have they been developed as a comment on antiquity *per se*. They form an integral element in Agamben’s influential general views about the essence of political authority and “the force of law” (a term with a long history in modern critique), and they do establish a strong link between antiquity and the present without any hint of apology or forced pleading.

The present book, although in truth an extended essay (originally in Italian, 2007), puts forward, in the form of theme-based argument about ‘nymphs’, the kernel of an ambitious theory of image, female representation and time.<sup>2</sup> Agamben’s core argument is concise, although his discussion ranges far and wide over

<sup>2</sup> See also, more recently, *The Unspeakable Girl: The Myth and Mystery of Kore*, 2014)

authors and disciplines, from a discussion of a work by the video artist Bill Viola to comments on an essay on the poetics of dance by Domenico da Piacenza (mid 15<sup>th</sup> century) and discussions of Aby Warburg and his seminal notion of *Pathosformel*; from discussions of a vast, “bizarre” unpublished manuscript by an otherwise unknown Chicago recluse, via comments on Walter Benjamin (of whom Agamben is an important interpreter) and his notion of *dialectic at a standstill*, to discussions of Theodore Adorno, Giovanni Boccaccio (who says: “It is quite true that they [nymphs] are all female, but they don’t piss”), Giordano Bruno and more. Agamben’s scope will make your head spin.

But what is Agamben’s argument, and how can coherence be woven through such diverse short discussions? The nymph, he notes, has received much scholarly attention as a “pagan goddess” (Malkin, *OCD* 2012: 1027 says, “a vivid illustration of ancient pantheism”). But, Agamben suggests, we should, instead, pay closer attention to her essence as an “elemental spirit,” a figure on the boundary of the human and non-human. This inbetween-ness (Malkin’s concluding comments offer a hint: “Folk tales, similar to those about fairies and mermaids, are told about nymphs”), which Winkler understood, had earlier attracted the attention of several important modern thinkers, including Aby Warburg (1866–1929), one of the founding fathers of contemporary art history and visual thinking, and his friend, art historian and linguist André Jolles (1874–1946; the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa will hold a large conference on Jolles in 2015).

‘The nymph’ defined one of Warburg’s key terms for perception and for the image itself, what he famously called *Pathosformel*. And what is the Warburgian *Pathosformel*? Turning to classical scholarship, Agamben suggests that the best way to understand this idea is by comparing it to Milman Parry’s (contemporaneous) arguments about orality and the formulae as essential elements of composition in performance. He adds (2013: 12-13):

Albert Lord and Gregory Nagy have shown that formulaic composition entails the impossibility of distinguishing between creation and performance, between original and repetition. This means that formulae, exactly like Warburg’s *Pathosformeln*, are hybrids of matter and form, of creation and performance.”

This nymph, like the formula, is “an indiscernible blend of originality and repetition” (15). She is, as Agamben states (2013: 57): “the image of the image, the cipher of the *Pathosformeln* which is passed down from generation to generation and to which generations entrust the possibility of finding or losing themselves, of thinking or of not thinking.”

Explaining all of this in full requires more space than a review of this compact yet far-ranging book will allow. But if “nymphs are an image of the image” or the image as *Pathosformel* in Warburg’s terms, then formulaic epic text like Homer’s is in essence, at least according to this re-definition by Agamben, nothing *but* an image in text, an image of the nymph. Willing classical scholars may find here opportunities for dialogue.

The nymph, as Agamben himself says in the blurb, is an element of “female representation.” Yet very little proper attention is given to gender in this book. This is not surprising (an esteemed colleague recently described Agamben as part of the “canon of white, male theory”), but is a pity nonetheless. Combining some of Agamben’s ideas with attention to gender (nymphs may not “piss”, as Boccaccio says, but they are *nymphs*...), is something someone like John Winkler, had he been alive, might have productively explored.

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