

SUBMERGING A FANTASY

J.W. Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs*

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ABSTRACT: Responses to and readings of nude paintings are influenced by contemporary debates on sexual power dynamics. The temporary removal of J.W Waterhouse's 'Hylas and the Nymphs' from display in Manchester Gallery in January 2018 was criticised by commentators and visitors, and framed by the curators of the event as an experiment in re-evaluating the Gallery's collections in light of current discussions on gender and sexual exploitation. This article will examine the significance of selecting 'Hylas and the Nymphs' for removal, providing context of the Greek myth the painting depicts and its reception in Victorian Britain, and review the relevance of water nymph iconography and the themes of submergence in water nymph narratives in regard to curation.

KEYWORDS: Mythology, Victorian Art, Sexuality, Curation, Reception Studies, Britain



Figure 1 – J.W Waterhouse's 'Hylas and the Nymphs' (1896)
(Source: Manchester Art Gallery)

Introduction

Within Manchester Art Gallery there is a gallery room titled 'In Pursuit of Beauty' which contains a collection of paintings of beautiful women from the late 19th Century. On 26th January 2018, the artist Sonia Boyce organised an event of responses to works in this gallery, collaborating with performance art groups and gallery staff on the topic of objectification and representation in art. One of the ideas the group discussed was to temporarily take down a painting from the gallery and leave a blank space on the wall in which visitors could write their thoughts on post-it notes. The painting chosen by Boyce and the other gallery staff was 'Hylas and the Nymphs' (1896), a J.W. Waterhouse painting based on the Greek myth of a youth called Hylas who is seduced, or abducted, by seven water nymphs. The moment just before the nymphs drag him into the water is depicted. The painting follows a theme presented in a lot of Waterhouse's work, the supernatural femme fatale, which he painted in the form of serpent women, 'Lamia' (1905), witches, 'Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses' (1891) and sirens, 'The Siren' (c 1900) (Baker, 2004).

This removal of the painting was filmed and the video documenting it was used in Sonia Boyce's later exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery. In interviews about the event, the gallery's modern art curator, Clare Gannaway, expressed 'a sense of embarrassment' about the 'In Pursuit of Beauty' gallery in which women are portrayed as decorative objects by male painters (Brown, 2018). She also referenced 'MeToo' and 'Time's Up', recent movements and discussions of sexual harassment and the sexualisation of women in the media, to frame motivations for the removal of the painting (ibid). The general reaction to the event in the press was condemnation of what commentators regarded as the censorship of a very popular painting and the demonisation of a depiction of romantic myth. Post-it note responses left by members of the public and recorded by Manchester Gallery included requests to reinstate the painting, "Please put it back! And *analyze* the painting in *context*", and both serious and sarcastic remarks on what this meant for the gallery and the curation of art in general, "Why not remove '*Sirens and Ulysses*' in Gallery 6, based on a similar concept of Femme Fatale? Was it a bit too heavy to carry?" (Brown, 2018). Seven days after the removal, the painting returned to the walls of the gallery.

The controversy concerning removing and returning 'Hylas and the Nymphs' renewed interest in a painting that not been written about widely since its first exhibition. Waterhouse's paintings have achieved popularity in posters and postcards but within art criticism he has not received much serious attention, sometimes being regarded as "an empty imitator of other Victorian painters" (Silver, 2011: 264). The main discussions have focused on nudity, the depiction of women in art, and censorship. However, other motivations for this event have been elided. In an interview Sonia Boyce says that the act of filming taking down a painting is about making processes of curation visible: normally the public are not aware of how curators decide which paintings are on display, which are in storage (Fortin, 2018; Luke, 2018).

In this article, to understand more fully why this painting was chosen to be removed, I will analyse it not as a generic Victorian nude painting but as a depiction specifically of water nymphs in a mythic narrative of abduction. Supernatural or monstrous femme fatales in the visual arts and literature embody anxieties about women's sexuality and how it may be conceptualised as a threat. For the femme fatale casts a literal or figurative spell over men to make them powerless. The watery femme fatale has another level to her power. She lives in an element that she is uniquely connected to: dragging men into the water world is a form of pulling them into an element where they are powerless, an environment that land-

dwelling men do not have control over. Water nymphs, along with similar figures such as mermaids, are important as a category of nude paintings of women as their relation to the water casts them as beings who live both above and under the surface. The painting 'Hylas and the Nymphs' and the event of its removal and return feature variations on the theme of submersion. The painting itself is of the moment before an act of submersion, the nymphs pulling Hylas into the water, and the recent curatorial event has been another submerging act. By pulling the painting off the walls into storage, the curators are dragging it under the surface of the art gallery, completing the nymphs' mission.

Painting Nymphs

Nymphs take their place in the collection of romantic, supernatural female figures who feature in the popular painting of the era, which also included Lamia (serpent-like women), mermaids, fairies and sorceresses. Nude nymphs were a popular topic with other 19th Century British painters, e.g. William Etty's 'Sleeping Nymph and Satyrs' (1828), 'Sabrina and Her Nymphs' (1841); William Edward Frost's 'Wood Nymph, The Sea Cave' (c 1851), George Frederic Watts' 'Thetis' (c 1868), Lord Frederic Leighton's 'Actaea, the Nymph of the Shore' (1868); Arthur Hacker's 'Daphne' (c 1890), Syrinx (1892). Sometimes paintings depicted nymphs who were main characters from mythic narratives of love, lust and transformation, sometimes anonymous nymphs, individually or in groups, in generic pastoral settings. 'Hylas and the Nymphs', depicting Hylas, a Greek youth, and seven nude nymphs, draws on a trend for paintings of narratives inspired by literature and mythology. Later in this article, I will expand on why mythological and historical subjects may have been necessary to defend paintings with erotic content from accusations of indecency.

Nymphs were prevalent in ancient Greek and Roman literature and art. Ancient Greek and Roman literature included interactions between mortals and the gods, the crossing of boundaries and entwining of worlds. Nymphs appeared in the genealogies of heroes who had semi-divine ancestry, for example, Thetis the nereid (sea nymph) married Peleus, a mortal, and gave birth to Achilles, central figure of Homer's *Iliad*. A long parade of nymphs features in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, erotically pursuing and being pursued by mortals and gods. However, nymphs were not just poetic creations but rural religious figures who received cult worship across the ancient Greek world (Larson, 2001). Nympholepsy, the abduction of mortals by nymphs, pictured in 'Hylas and the Nymphs', was not confined to literature but also an explanation found on the funerary inscriptions of people who had disappeared mysteriously (Larson, 2001: 192). Waterhouse depicts water nymphs in the painting but nymphs could also be connected to forests or mountains and caves (Larson, 2001: 8). Overall, nymphs were minor goddesses strongly linked to their environment, the topographical features they inhabited or embodied.

It is not clear which source inspired Waterhouse's vision of the Hylas myth; the most well-known versions of the tale are found in Theocritus' 'Idyll 3', a Greek bucolic poem, and Apollonius' *Argonautica*, a Greek epic, both from the 3rd Century BCE. However, he may have not been influenced directly by classical sources but instead by a contemporary retelling such as William Morris' popular poem 'The Life and Death of Jason' (1867). Viewers of the painting may have had a classical knowledge or no previous exposure to the myth. The basic narrative follows Hylas, a young male companion of Heracles who is ready to join Jason and the Argonauts to sail off to heroic adventure, but is seduced or abducted by nymphs who drown him when he goes to fetch water. They pull him into their world where he is trapped. In Apollonius' version he becomes the husband of one of the nymphs, whilst in Theocritus

the erotic element is emphasised less, the group of nymphs console him together as he cries for the mortal world he has left behind (Segal, 1974: 29). The nymphs in the painting are anonymous, although they do have names in Theocritus. The seven nymphs are drawn from two models, making an eerie effect of lookalike nymphs surrounding Hylas, mirroring each other and multiplying before our eyes (Trippi, 2018).

There is room to read different implications in the word “nymph” which had multiple resonances at the time the painting was produced. There are other nymph paintings by Waterhouse using more specific terminology, for example ‘A Hamadryad’ (1895), the term for a tree nymph who lives within the trunk, and ‘A Naiad’ (1893), a term for a fresh water nymph. However, the more generic term “nymph” offers more possibilities for reference and significance. It was used as a generic term for an attractive young woman, unbounded by a specifically classical framework (Goldhill, 2011: 7) and also featured within the sexual slang of the era. “Nymph” formed part of the French term *nymph du pave* (‘nymph of the pavement’), a reference to street-walking sex workers used in erotic literature and in local news-reporting on women accused of prostitution (Lee, 2014). Nymphae, as well as being the technical name for species of water lilies, was also still in use as a euphemism for the labia in British pornographic literary publications such as *The Pearl: A Magazine of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading* (1879-1880) and ‘the term could also evoke Nymphomania, a medical term that replaced the earlier *Furor Uterinus* to denote a woman diagnosed with a dysfunctionally overactive sexuality, a characterisation that was increasingly in use in the 19th Century (Luta, 2017). Therefore, the painting and its title could have evoked more explicitly sexual material in the minds of the viewers.

Viewing Victorian Art Today

In reports of the 2018 removal of the painting, different possibilities for the main reason behind this action were invoked. In some, it is nudity which is the offensive material, the central word is “topless” or “nude”. In others, it is slightly more specific: *The Mancunian* describes the “topless — yet adolescent — beauty” of the nymphs as causing controversy (Badley, 2018). Here, it is not only the nudity of the nymphs but this combined with their young age that Boyce and the curators are removing and rejecting. Some articles focused more on the ideas within the painting being the source of concern and motivation for action. Curator Clare Gannaway foregrounded the idea that the nymphs, and other nude women in the gallery, are decorative femme fatales (Brown, 2018). It is the function or role of the nude women in the painting that needs to be removed and then ‘recontextualised’ as opposed to the nudity itself. The Manchester Art Gallery website described the event as ‘challenging a Victorian fantasy’ (Manchester Art Gallery, 2018). On an aesthetic level, the ‘Victorian fantasy’ manifests itself as women who are young, pale, thin, have long hair and red lips, and are naked and nameless. Boyce, reflecting on her discussions with staff who included curators, gallery assistants and cleaners, spoke about ‘a sense of the idealised female form’ and ‘the female figure as the embodiment of death or something deathly, which is a very old trope’ (Luke, 2018).

Art critic Jonathan Jones described the removal of the nude painting, which he did not link to the artist Sonia Boyce but only to the curators of the gallery, as a regressive move undoing the sexual liberation of the 1960s (Jones, 2018). The curators who organised the removal were labelled “new puritans” by both Jones (ibid) and Christopher Hooton (Hooton, 2018). Hooton described the attitude of Clare Gannaway as “bizarrely and ironically Victorian in its moral probity” (ibid: online). By invoking the word ‘Victorian’ as a label of repression and

prudishness, what is at stake is not just the present but also our conception of the past and our relation to it. Jones and others are not only worried that this removal is restrictive and repressive in the present but also worried that we are becoming more censorious than curators of the Victorian period, which we generally view ourselves as having “progressed” from. I will now provide context for viewing ‘Hylas and the Nymphs’ in a Victorian frame, focusing on the rise of pornography and related concerns about the impact of erotic material on society and the importance of classical and mythological subject matter in elevating female nudes and distancing them from disreputability.

In 19th Century Britain the invention of photography and increase in affordable printing widened access to erotica. As a result, there were rising worries about the effects of pornography on public morality. There was an increase in morality campaign groups, for example the National Vigilance Association, founded in 1885, who campaigned against the production of sexually explicit material. There were also new laws concerning obscenity, such as the Obscene Publications Act 1857, which regulated both sexual and non-sexual offences (Stoops, 2015: 137). This law extended penalties for the publishing and dispensing of pornography, increasing the power for forces to seize offensive material. Other laws, the Post Office Protection Act 1884 and Indecent Advertisements Act 1889, furthered the campaign against the sale and distribution of erotica as they targeted the mail order services which dominated the industry (Stoops, 2015: 143).

The seriousness with which people considered the effects of erotic imagery on the minds of the public provided the background in which large-scale nude paintings of women were exhibited in galleries, potentially threatening their position as works of art if they were seen as comparable to pornography. However, nude paintings of women had a collection of set pretexts to excuse their explicit content, appealing to historical events and mythic narratives. Whilst a painting of a woman in a contemporary setting might have seemed more like directly viewing a real woman, with mundane details appearing biographical, almost photographic, a Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Medieval or otherwise remote setting made a nude painting a distant fantasy, ‘an entry into a cultural dreamland that was sexual yet respectable’ (Webb, 1975: 168). There was a revival of nudes in the late 1860s after Lord Frederic Leighton’s ‘Venus Disrobing for the Bath’ (1867) exhibited at the Royal Academy; nudity was elevated by the respectability of the classical ideal of beauty (Smith, 1996: 101). A number of later paintings also feature bathing, whether in man-made baths or natural sources of water, pre-emptively defending the paintings from accusations of moral corruption by making them images of literal purification. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema produced many paintings with ancient Greek and Roman characters and settings, including Roman bathing. The titles of ‘A Favourite Custom’ (1909) and ‘In the Tepidarium’ (1881) suggest that the focus of the painting should be on the setting and deployment of historical detail, the accurate portrayal of bathing customs not the naked attractive young women whose bodies are on display. Lord Frederic Leighton painted ‘The Bath of Psyche’ (1890) even though there is no crucial scene featuring nude bathing in the mythic narrative of Cupid and Psyche. Water offered a natural explanation and excuse for why the featured women were nude.

Overall, classical and mythological pretexts were important in the justification of nudes and the protection of their respectability because the historical distance attempted to separate the depiction of nude bodies from contemporary concerns around sexuality and pornography. In the Victorian period, the classical pretext distanced the body of the nymph or goddess from the real body of the typically working-class artists’ model, who within the discussions of middle-class moral campaign groups and purity societies was often depicted as a symbol of vice or possible exploitation (Smith, 1996: 26). Nudity was an important aspect

of Greek and Roman sculpture: the nude Venus before bathing, the nude male athlete throwing a discus, these were respected works of art with a lauded place in the canon. Ancient nymphs inhabited pastoral settings and this classical paganism represented freedom and a connection with nature. The nudity of river nymphs, therefore, belonging to another time and another world, was not expected to be judged by contemporary values.

Submergence

The key themes of Waterhouse's painting and the Manchester Art Gallery event surrounding it are display and disappearance. Within discourse concerning the event, what is at stake is whether the painting should be displayed or not, specifically whether the nude femme fatale nymphs should be on display. In the painting itself disappearance and submersion play an important role for both Hylas and the seven nymphs. Within the mythological narrative Hylas is on the point of being pulled into the water, he is moments away from disappearing. His narrative importance and his subsequent lasting fame, being made immortal by the nymphs or at least memorialised as a lost potential hero, derive from his submersion; he will shortly leave "an interpretive blank spot" in the mortal world (Lovatt, 2018). 'Hylas and the Nymphs' represents a moment when Hylas is on the land, but the viewer of the painting, with or without previous knowledge of the myth, is aware that this state is about to change.

The nymphs, the agents of submersion, are semi-submerged themselves. Their bodies are half on display, half hidden underneath the water, a contrast of glowing white skin and a murky aquatic underworld. The three nymphs in the centre of the painting have a larger area of their torsos exposed in comparison to the marginal nymphs in the corners of the painting who are more obscured by plants. This semi-submersion emphasises the nymphs' ambiguity. Nymphs have the bodies of young human women but with the submersion of the bottom halves of their bodies these nymphs can evoke more of a mermaid mystery. Even though these nymphs do not have mermaid fish-tails and scales — as Waterhouse depicted in some of his other paintings such as 'A Mermaid' (1900) and 'The Siren' (c. 1900) — but full human bodies, their semi-submersion leaves this as a potential: we either cannot see them underneath the surface or can only see warped shapes rippling through the water.

The nymphs exist between land and water and they have the ability to take Hylas across this boundary. In Waterhouse's depiction of this interaction, worlds and bodies are beginning to overlap. Hylas' right hand is submerged in the water or the plants, and his wrist is cut off by the grip of the nymph he is locking eyes with. Hylas' imminent submersion is a threat but also something desirable; seduction and submersion are combined. Submersion is an act which removes Hylas from the land-dwelling world of mortals, leaves an absence, but submersion also offers him the chance to explore another world under the surface. In a way, the nymphs represent death: this is the scene of a fast-approaching drowning. However, in Theocritus' *Idylls* Hylas lives on underwater, he is removed from one world but can live with the nymphs as their captive. Overall, submersion is a central theme of the painting and the implication of movement between the surface and what is underneath provides uncertainty which help set an ambiguous tone, allowing the painting to contain eroticism and melancholy, desire and dread.

Conclusions on Curation

Whilst some reports on the event cite the nude bodies of the nymphs as the primary or, in fact, only reason for the removal of the painting, the artist Sonia Boyce, speaking with *The New York Times* and *The Art Newspaper*, expressed that she wanted to perform an event to explicitly reveal and centre the processes of curation and the private power of curators (Fortin, 2018; Luke, 2018). Boyce talked about the “very quiet but authoritative position” museums hold in deciding what is displayed to the public. When curators make decisions about the visibility of art works they are generally far from the public eye (Fortin, 2018). By arranging an event to take down a popular painting and filming it, the privacy in which curators’ decisions are usually made is interrupted. Boyce views curators as people who have the power to make judgements which influence which art is available; she wanted to pose the question of “who’s given legitimacy or takes up legitimacy to have an opinion?” (Luke, 2018).

However, responses in the press expressing outrage show a public conception of curators as guardians and protectors of art, not as people who make decisions that shape what art is available to the public. The curator should be someone who guards paintings so that they remain displayed continually, not interrupted by the installations of contemporary artists. A painting should remain in place so that it is always available for the visitor to see. In the realities of curation, paintings often have periods of time when they are off the walls, either in storage or in transport; this is reflected on the Manchester Art Gallery website which describes galleries as “dynamic changing spaces with works occasionally moved for loans or conservation or to refresh displays” (Manchester Art Gallery). In fact, from 1934 to the 1960s ‘Hylas and the Nymphs’ was not on display but held in Manchester Art Gallery’s Queens Park storage site. The painting therefore has not been in continual display since its first showing in 1896 (Trippi, 2018). Thus, paintings can move between the surface of the gallery world, on display facing the public, and the depths underneath, stored in the larger collections below and, in this analogy, curators are the nymphs on the boundary with the power to submerge the paintings of their choice. In this way, although responses from the press and the public suggest that the action did not succeed in meeting the aims of its organisers, the imagery of submersion and the narrative of ‘Hylas and the Nymphs’ were thematically well-suited to an event concerning display, disappearance and curation.

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