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# Nymphomania on display



Tate Britain's new show is dedicated to nymphs. The wispy women reveal a lot about European attitudes to sex, says Zoe Pilger

**ZOE PILGER** | Wednesday 30 April 2014

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Nymphomania refers to excessive sexual appetite. The Danish director Lars von Trier recently caused outrage with his epic film *Nymphomaniac* in which the nymph-like Charlotte Gainsbourg plays a lifelong sex addict. Celebrities are regularly diagnosed with the same affliction. It seems that we are still obsessed with nymphomania, a psychiatric condition invented in the 19th century to control female desire.

At that time, a woman could be diagnosed with nymphomania simply for having erotic dreams – for experiencing any desire whatsoever. The cure was bloodletting and cold baths and, if that didn't work, confinement in an insane asylum. Nymphomania was a specifically female disease; the male equivalent – satyromania – was less frequently diagnosed.

Nymphomania was named after the nubile young nymphs



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of the classical world, who frolicked around streams and rivers, in woods and grottos. These minor deities existed outside the polis and therefore outside the usual standards of sexual behaviour. They represented nature – sensual and untamed. Today they might be diagnosed with "hyper-sexuality".

A new display, Bodies of Nature, has just opened at Tate Britain. It explores the figure of the nymph in late 18th and early 19th century paintings from the museum's collection. There are works by famous artists such as Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough as well as those who have been overlooked, notably Thomas Stothard. Charmingly, many of the lesser-known works are damaged; their surfaces are cracked and worn, which makes them more likeable. The curation is idiosyncratic; it brings to light the relationship between the classical world, the Enlightenment, and today, and highlights the fetishes that we have in common. I enjoyed it a lot.



'The Vintage' by Thomas Stothard (Sam Drake)

At first glance, the paintings may appear to be little more than sentimental, soft-porn pastoral scenes, nostalgic for a lost "golden age," as Reynolds deemed it. But they offer a fascinating insight into the sexual mores of a Europe undergoing seismic change. The advances of science were throwing religious belief into doubt. There were revolutions in France and America. And the invention of the disease of nymphomania pointed to society's terror of the emancipation of women, which was nascent but growing.

Several of the paintings suggest a reversal of traditional hierarchy. Solitary, hapless men are shown as emasculated – shorter and weaker than the all-female nymphs, who mostly operate in gangs. The nymphs



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appear floaty, fragile, and feminine, but they are wilful. They seduce men, and dominate them. In this way, they predate the vengeful femmes fatales that the pre-Raphaelites so loved to paint, as well as the harsh ugliness of the prostitutes in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907).

One of the most palpable fears expressed in the paintings is that of women working together. This is evident in a coloured lithograph by the French artist Achille Devéria (circa 1838). It refers to the myth of Hylas, who was abducted by three naiads – water nymphs – and forced to live underwater with them. Devéria has depicted the naiads dragging the poor Hylas downstream. He is passive; his eyes are rolled up like a martyred saint. The nymphs appear at one with the water; their bodies flow with the current, expressing its inevitable rhythm. Hylas is powerless – feminised. All the nymphs are topless and one wears a bottle-green skirt, akin to the tail of a mermaid. Indeed, they recall the sirens of Homer's *Odyssey*, who lured men to their deaths with their deadly song.

Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in England in 1792. It was followed three years later by the first English edition of *Nymphomania, or a Dissertation Concerning the Furor Uterinus* by the obscure French doctor DT de Bienville, which was hugely influential. De Bienville made the radical claim that desire begins in the imagination, and blamed female nymphomania on the rise of "luxurious novels" and "amorous songs".

Women who spent too much time alone, reading, were particularly at risk. The paintings that show women alone here, however, are pornographic, rather than introspective. The nymphs do not seem to have an inner life; rather, they exist as objects of titillation, their privacy trespassed upon by the viewer.

This is the case in several depictions of nymphs bathing. One of the most striking is William Etty's *Musidora: The Bather 'At The Doubtful Breeze Alarmed'* (exhibited 1846), which appears like a high-brow peep-show. Inspired by the popular poem "The Seasons (Summer)" (1730) by James Thomson, the painting shows the nymph Musidora alone and bathing in a woodland stream. Her hair is wet and her breasts are exposed. She is half seen, half unseen. It seems as though she is aware that she is being watched. Significantly, she is looking away from the viewer.

In the classical world, nymphs were supposed to avoid being seen by mortals. If a mortal did see a nymph, he risked an attack of nympholepsy – a kind of epileptic seizure. Such were the perils of lust. By forcing the viewer into a position of voyeurism, Etty is playing with this danger. We can't help but look at her – and presumably we must suffer as a result. Again, desire is provoked and then punished. Nympholepsy also had spiritual pretensions – it referred to "the yearning for something elusive and intangible."

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As women outside society's usual rules, nymphs were aligned in the popular imagination with prostitutes. In these paintings, eroticism is transgressive, urged on by the nymph herself, whose creamy, sumptuous flesh seems designed to give and receive pleasure. In Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert similarly describes the adolescent object of his love/lust as a "nymphet". He says that he is driven insane by "this mixture in my *Lolita* of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity". Like *Lolita*, many of these nymphs seem to offer and withhold pleasure at once. The female is idealised as a coquette, while the male is absolved from taking responsibility for his own – predatory – desire.



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Joshua Reynolds's *A Nymph and Cupid* (exhibited 1784) is the most complex example. It is the only painting on display which shows the nymph looking directly back at the viewer, though she is covering half of her face with her hand. Only one eye – sultry, sly – is visible. She appears to be in an outdoor boudoir of some kind – rich red material is draped above her, protecting her from the open sky, which is painted in electrifying shades of green. Nymphs typically appeared at high noon or in the middle of the night – points of intense heat or darkness – but this is dusk.

As night falls, the viewer's imagination is invited to roam over the possibilities of the coming hours. In this way, the erotic imagination of the nymph is allied to the erotic imagination of the viewer. She is performing a striptease – or promising one. While Reynolds's nymph is topless, her lower half is covered with pale chiffon. Her game is part concealment, part exposure. Cupid tugs at one end of the dark green bow tied around her waist, seemingly unclenching her, and thus fulfilling the viewer's desire.

All the works here are by male painters, except for one – a small etching and aquatint on paper by Caroline Mary Elizabeth Wharncliffe, which is unremarkable and doesn't suggest her sex in any way. This is not a fault of the curators, but a symptom of the time. It was men who created images of women, who crafted how they were

after two months

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seen and, in turn, how they saw themselves. And it was men who diagnosed them as mad. To be a nymphomaniac in this period could simply mean that you were healthy.

*BP Spotlight: Bodies of Nature, Tate Britain, London SW1 (020 7887 8888) to 19 October*

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