The Nymph in the Doorway:
Revisiting a Central Motif of Aby Warburg’s Study of Culture

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Many decades after his death, Aby Warburg’s disruptive model of cultural studies has generated extraordinary resonance. In particular, Warburg saw the effort to secure order and rationality, notably through recourse to the “afterlife” of antiquity, as inevitably compromised by upsurges of ecstatic and impulsive action and attitudes that are themselves—this is the crucial point—already inherent in the classical legacy. As often noted, in his study of an outstanding case of the recovery of classical antiquity, the Florentine Renaissance, Warburg applied the Nietzschean dichotomy of Apollonian and Dionysian principles.¹ This informed his opposition to a unitary conception of classical art as striving for balance and harmony, a conception rooted in the still authoritative formulations of Johann Winckelmann. Instead, Warburg focused on the recurrence, in religious as well as secular imagery, of elements subversive of any such idealizing conception.

A recurrent motif in Warburg’s researches was the nymph, the ninfa fiorentina, on which he planned a major publication. The project never came to fruition, not least as a result of Warburg’s descent into incapacitating mental illness, followed by his death in 1929.² With her vehement movement and flying hair and/or ribbons, the nymph motif in fifteenth-century Florentine imagery embodies Warburg’s famous concept of the pathosformel (“pathos formula”), evoking or even imitating the ancient motif of the ecstatic young woman, as exemplified in the maenad, a familiar figure in classical art and myth.³ In a larger and relatively ahistorical perspective, however, the nymph expresses a tension inherent in civilization itself. Indeed, as Kurt Forster noted, this conception of the unsettling presence of the nymph is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud’s cultural critiques, though Warburg did not express explicit interest in Freud’s ideas.⁴

In this paper the focus is more modest. Through an exploration of images that were crucial to Warburg’s project and in which nymph figures are included, I address the expressive or even semiotic work that such figures perform within specific pictorial contexts, whether narrative or broadly allegorical in type. Needless to say, such an inquiry requires looking beyond these images to a different order of context, “the social frame,” notably in terms of the reference to or even articulation of the self-representational interests of patrons, as well as particular approaches to ancient sources and models on the part of Renaissance artists and Warburg himself. In this connection it is important to note an apparent disjunction between two major dimensions of Warburg’s own scholarly work. On the basis of extensive archival researches, Warburg explored

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¹ The literature on Warburg is enormous. For a brief account of the impact of Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy, see Ernst H. Gombrich, Aby Warburg: Eine intellektuelle Biografie, trans. Matthias Fienbork (Hamburg: Philo, 2012), 33.
the cultural context of the commissioning of works of art, with a particular focus on the patronage of leading families of the Florentine bourgeois elite. In imagery produced in this milieu, Warburg noted the occasional occurrence of Dionysian elements, as in the centaur motif, discussed below, inserted into the Sassetti tombs in Sta. Trinita (fig. 1), as well as into other artifacts in Sassetti possession.5


However, a fascinating aspect of Warburg’s project is the stubborn disjunction, or even tension, between his studies of a concrete historical moment and his attention to a motif—the nymph—found in diverse epochs but without any concrete connection between temporally distinct examples. In Warburg’s own terms, the contrast is that between Ausdruckskunde (“discipline of expression”) and Kulturwissenschaft (“science of culture”).6 By highlighting recurrent tensions in disparate cultures, indeed, the discourse around the pathosformel tends to collapse the diachronic into the synchronic dimension. In Warburg’s own work and in various scholarly projects building on it, this was certainly productive. In this paper, however, I explore pictorial contrasts, or even tensions, more immediate than those noted by Warburg, which seem to carry sociopolitical implications that he passed over.

Warburg first explored the nymph motif in his early study of Botticelli, to whom he attributed a well-known series of Florentine calendar prints (“Children of the Planets”).7 As Warburg noted, the nymph in such imagery involved an “idealization” of representations of young women in Burgundian and related courtly art. In a lecture of 1905,8 on the other hand, Warburg discussed an image, not produced by a Florentine artist, which explicitly shows a pair of frenzied women engaged in violent action; in this respect they are far from idealized or related to courtly imagery (fig. 2). The violent physicality of the women in the drawing, an early work of Albrecht Dürer (born in 1471) firmly dated to 1494, provided Warburg with a crucial visual

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stimulus in his elaboration of the notion of *pathosformel*. The women are engaged in an attack on the ill-fated mythical poet Orpheus, whom they will shortly beat to death and tear limb from limb. According to the ancient sources for the story, the poet’s assailants are maenads, female devotees of Bacchus known for their ecstatic and often violent excursions through wild territory far from the constraints of city or family.

especially as the manner of the representation of the women raises questions about the category “maenad,” in particular its relationship to that of “nymph.”11 In the ancient sources, both maenads and nymphs occur as adherents of Bacchus and participants in his mysteries, but the distinction between them is generally maintained. Most notably, they play different roles in the mythic accounts of the god’s “biography”: nymphs nursed the infant Bacchus (as related, e.g., in the Homeric Hymn to Dionysos), while maenads are devotees of the wandering adult deity.12 In many sources, moreover, the ecstatic frenzy of the maenad is a temporary state; she is a “normal” woman who succumbs to the power of the god, according to the literal meaning of “ecstasy.”13 In origin, at least, nymphs are nature spirits, associated especially with fresh water and geographical features; they have permanent status as minor deities. However, some nymphs are associated with the god Pan as well as with Bacchus, in whose entourage they appear alongside fauns, satyrs, and simiae.14 In the case of such nymphs, who may look and behave like maenads, the distinction between the two categories becomes uncertain, as in the case of Vergil’s nymphs who “howl on the high mountains” during the violent storm that accompanies the illicit “marriage” of Aeneas and Dido (Aeneid 4.168).

The ideal distinction between nymphs and maenads comes into clearer relief on the basis of the different actions typically associated with each. In their wanderings through forest and mountain, maenads hunt wild animals, while certain nymphs, especially the subset that serves the goddess Diana, also take part in hunting. But, especially in view of attitudes no less widespread in antiquity than in the Renaissance, hunting as practiced by Diana is an eminently civilized activity;15 this is certainly not the case of the brutal massacre and dismembering of animals, and occasionally humans, carried out by maenads. More obviously, the maenads’ frenzy disposes them to aggression, while nymphs tend to be subject to assault, whether successful or not. Ovid’s Metamorphoses, in particular, is full of examples (I mention the case of Oreithyia below).

In Warburg’s discussions, the categories of “nymph” and “maenad” are effectively fused, most strikingly in the visual material assembled in his famous montage panels (Bilderatien). A further, formally similar motif aligned with or even assimilated to the maenad figure is the type of the winged Roman victory, as found, for example, on the Arch of Constantine;16 Warburg emphasized such imagery because it seemed to him to counter the notion of classicism, inherited from Winckelmann, as a “unified current” and characterized by simplicity and grandeur.17 In an early essay as well as in the late Bilderatlas (panel 47) Warburg, indeed, not only connects the maenad, nymph, and victory but also associates them with biblical figures like the “head-

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14 See, e.g., Horace’s Hymn to Bacchus (Odes 2.19.3).


hunters” Judith or Salome. It is true, however, that in one of the panels of his Bilderalatlas (panel 7), Warburg associates the Roman victory figure mostly with Roman objects and images, such as triumphal arches and medals, expressive of imperial power and representing in some cases the apotheosis of the absolute ruler; here he includes Napoleon alongside ancient examples. In the recurrent tendency to deify rulers, a political dimension is certainly present, but Warburg apparently never articulated such implications of his juxtaposition of images. As Moshe Barasch has noted, however, the pathosformel is not an iconographic motif, and the relevant gestures and expressions may have very diverse significance.

As Paul Barolsky has insisted in many publications, the cultural context of the Renaissance was crucially shaped by the availability of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and by its vast repertoire of expressive gesture, often associated with extreme situations. Warburg emphasized the importance of allegorizing treatments of the Metamorphoses that, though medieval in origin, maintained their popularity; by the end of the 15th century, however, the Ovidian text, accompanied by a helpful commentary, was readily available. By far the most important ancient source for the story of Orpheus is Ovid’s richly detailed account spanning two of the fifteen “books” of the Metamorphoses (10 and 11; for Orpheus’s death see 11:1–66). As Elizabeth Young points out, Orpheus the ur-poet is an “internal surrogate” for Ovid himself. Orpheus’s story occupies a crucial position within Ovid’s poem, more so as the transition from the protean world of Greek myth to the celebration of Roman cultural, as well as political dominance under Augustus, following the apotheosis of Julius Caesar to heaven as a new star.

The succession of cosmological, aetiological, and political material, enlivened by marvelous though sometimes awful narratives, ensured the success of the Metamorphoses as a foundational text in medieval culture. As noted above, it was made congenial to medieval readers through moralizing—or allegorizing—versions and commentaries; Orpheus, for example, became a

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20 According to Ulrich Port, “Pathosformeln 1906–1933: Zur Theatralität starker Affekte nach Aby Warburg,” in Theatralität und die Krisen der Repräsentation, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001), 230, Warburg tended to see the meaning of an expressive motif as determined not by some inherent or “natural” quality but by the specific cultural context in which it recurs. This certainly is not true of his approach to the ninfa.

21 Barasch, Imago Hominis, 125–127.


23 The text of the Metamorphoses with commentary by the pugnacious scholar Raffaele Regio was published in Venice in 1493 and in Paris in 1496; it appeared with an index in 1501. For Ann Moss, Renaissance Truth and the Latin Language Turn (Cambridge and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 243, the substitution by Regio’s edition of allegorizing versions marks a crucial shift in literary sensibility characteristic of the period.


The 14th-century “moralized Ovid” retained popularity well into the 16th century, providing edification as well as entertainment to its readers, for whom this was a work to take seriously in ways Ovid’s modern audience might not endorse. With the diffusion of printing in the late fifteenth century, a stream of editions, some with illustrations, began to appear, and the poem came to serve as an important iconographical resource for painters. Assuredly Dürer had access to the authentic Ovidian Metamorphoses, not least thanks to his close relationship with his godfather, the very successful Nürnberg publisher Anton Koberger, who maintained close links with Italian printers.

In the case of Dürer’s drawing of the death of Orpheus, however, the major source was visual, probably a lost drawing by Mantegna known to us through a somewhat crude Ferrarese print, which deviates in important respects from Ovid’s account (fig. 3). Moreover, it is the

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nymph motif in Dürer’s drawing that especially diverges from Ovid’s text; ironically, the
description of maenads in the Metamorphoses offers a stronger version of the pathosformel than
the image of “maenads” that drew Warburg’s attention.

The image of a maenad presented in Ovid’s account of Orpheus’s death is consistent with a
host of references in ancient literature. Maenads are—or at least are represented as—female
devotees of Bacchus, god of ecstasy, who separate themselves from their community in a state of
frenzy, in which however they perform a fairly standardized ritual. A kind of identifying badge
of a maenad is the thrysus, a light wand topped by a pinecone and entwined with ivy;
brandishing their thyrse, maenads wander among forests and mountains, sometimes covered in
the skins of animals they have killed and dismembered with their own hands. As he often does,
however, Ovid provides his own twist to the familiar narrative. He first presents Orpheus playing
his lyre and performing his poetry amidst a veritable arboretum of trees and an array of creatures,
as well as stones, physically drawn to the spot by the poet’s voice and music (Met. 10.86–
108, 143-44). The attack on Orpheus begins when a maenad hurls her thrysus at him, but when
this does no harm, the women resort to other weapons; first they throw stones (hitherto part of
Orpheus’s audience), but then they invade nearby farmland where they drive off the peasants
plowing a field. After killing and dismembering the plow oxen, the women use the farming
implements abandoned by the escaping peasants to carry out the fatal attack (Met. 11.35). The
discarded thrysus, substituted by hoes and similar tools, symbolize the women’s transition from
participation, as true maenads, in Bacchic ritual to the performance of autonomous violence
entirely for private reasons; their victim has spurned their sexual advances. Consistently, Ovid
calls the women sacrilegae (Met. 11.41).

A further unusual, indeed unique, element in Ovid’s account of Orpheus’s death is his
insistence on the murderous women’s ethnicity; he identifies them (Met. 10.2 and 11.3) as
members of a fairly obscure Thracian tribe, the Cicones. Following tradition, Ovid also
describes Orpheus himself as Thracian or rather, specifically, as rhodopeius (Met. 10.11),
associating him with the extensive mountain range, known in antiquity as Rhodope, that
dominates the region (today the range is divided between Greece and Bulgaria; the ancient name
persists in Greek, Bulgarian, and Turkish). Other associations of the region in the
Metamorphoses evoke Ciconian savagery rather than Orphic artistry: mountainous Thrace is the
setting for the atrocities of the story of Philomela and Procne, aristocratic Athenian sisters who
take revenge on Philomela’s charming but fundamentally barbaric Thracian husband Tereus for
luring her sister to Thrace, raping her, and cutting out her tongue. The sisters take advantage of
the regular Bacchic festival in Thrace when “at night the slopes of Rhodope resounded loud with
clashing of shrill cymbals” (Met. 6.589); on the way to committing their own terrible deed, they
disguise themselves in the traditional outfit of bacchantes, which Ovid describes in detail.

In his account of the fate of Orpheus, Ovid implies that the Ciconian women belong to a
community of which Orpheus is not a member, as indeed Pliny expressly states. References in the
Metamorphoses to the Cicones, or rather to Ciconian territory, are rare, but a striking case

31 The present discussion owes much to Charles Segal, “Ovid’s Orpheus and Augustan Ideology,” Transactions and
32 Christine M. Kalke, “The Making of a Thrysus: The Transformation of Pentheus in Euripides’ Bacchae,” The
33 In his extensive account of the peoples of Thrace, Pliny (Natural History 18.11) refers to the Cicones as no longer
existing. He locates their former territory at the mouth of the river Hebrus. He also names the tribe of Orpheus’s
ancestors, the Sithonii, whose territory adjoins the Black Sea, very distant from the Hebrus, which flows into the
Aegean Sea.
34 The context is the refusal of the god of marriage to bless the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice, as if the groom’s
ethnicity and the site of the ritual, in Ciconian territory (10.2), precluded this.
35 On the episode, see Philip S. Peek, “Proene, Philomela, Tereus in Ovid’s Metamorphoses: A Narratological
36 Pliny, Natural History 18.11. See n. 32 above.
involves the lair of Boreas, “icy tyrant” and god of the north wind (*Met. 6.679-721, esp. 710*). It is to his Ciconian redoubt that Boreas brings the nymph Oreithyia, kidnapped from the royal palace in Athens, according to a myth that Plato addresses with considerable skepticism in a famous passage; there is an obvious parallel with the story of Philomela, also an Athenian princess.\(^{37}\) Though Ovid doesn’t assert it, it is a reasonable assumption that Boreas’s homeland is no less harsh than the god himself, and inhabited by an appropriately rough population. Certainly this is consistent with Ovid’s account of the Ciconian women’s role in Orpheus’s death and dismemberment, especially their murderous use of agricultural tools.

Even if the women are described as maenads, Ovid emphasizes Bacchus’s own displeasure at their destruction of a poet dear to him; he punishes them by turning them into oak trees, as if assimilating them completely to the rough Ciconian landscape. He then sets off with a “better band” of followers (*Met. 11.86: meliore choro*), leaving the Thracian mountain forests for the vineyards of far more civilized, gold-bearing Lydia and Mount Tmolus, an important site of the Bacchic cult.\(^{38}\) A further indication of the Ciconian women’s cultural backwardness—at least from a somewhat sophisticated perspective—is the motivation given by Ovid for their ferocity toward Orpheus. Following the death of his beloved wife Eurydice, Orpheus’s sexual preference had shifted to boys, in consequence of which he spurns—fatally—the advances of the Ciconian women (while also exhibiting disregard for “normal” circumstances, as in his highly irregular descent, alive, into Hades\(^{39}\)). Moreover, in a world in which all other animate and inanimate beings are held enchanted by Orpheus’s song, an additional sign of the women’s coarseness is that they loudly drown out the sound of the poet’s voice and lyre as they make their assault (*Met. 11.15-19*).

For readers of the *Metamorphoses*, well acquainted with the maenad motif, there was no need for a detailed description of Orpheus’s assailants. Any visual artist, however, would necessarily have to literally flesh out the story, not least by characterizing the participants, though certain economies were advisory. Ovid’s account evokes a frenzied mob of anonymous women, but the Dürrer drawing and its source include just two women, who attack the poet from each side as he vainly pleads with them and seeks to fend off their assault. Dürrer departs from his source, or at least from the Ferrarese print, in two ways that suggest some knowledge of Ovid. First he sets the scene in a forested landscape, rather than adjacent to a flourishing city. Secondly, the women’s motivation is not apparent in the print, while Ovid makes it clear by a banner attached to the tree in front of which Orpheus crouches; the inscription identifies Orpheus as the founder of pederasty.\(^{40}\) Echoing both ancient and contemporary usage, the banner recalls the script attached to a pillory—or indeed a cross—identifying the crimes of a presumed malefactor subjected to public humiliation, or worse.\(^{41}\)


\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) For a 16th-century English case of the pillory combined with a placard as punishment for a sexual offence, for which the pillory was often applied, see John Briggs et al., *Crime And Punishment In England: An Introductory History* (London: Routledge, 2005), 38, 64–65. In German lands methods of punishment were regularized under Charles V in the so-called Carolina; on the pillory (Pranger), see Josef Kohler and Willy Scheel, eds., *Die peinliche gerichtsordnung kaiser Karls—Constituto criminalis carolina* (Halle: Verlag Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1900), 40–41, section 85.
The focus is certainly the poet, who has dropped his signature lyre on the ground in front of him; despite Orpheus’s death it will continue to play, just as his severed head will continue to sing, guaranteeing the future of poetic song (Met. 11.51–52). Meanwhile a frightened cupid (or putto) flees the maenads’ violence, as well, perhaps as the threat of heterosexuality that they represent. Depicted as young and attractive women in whirling, frenzied action, the two maenads are dressed not in animal skins, as Ovid describes them (Met. 11.3–4), but in long flowing tunics gathered at the waist and accompanied by flying ribbons, Warburg’s bewegtes Beiwerk. Nor do they wield either thyrsi or agricultural implements; Dürer follows the Italian prototype by placing club-like staves in their hands.42 In their rather stylish violence, Dürer’s women correspond to the image of the nymph presented by an author, and in a text, of great importance to Warburg: the Florentine poet and philologist Angelo Poliziano, whose play Favola d’Orfeo was perhaps known to humanists in Nürnberg. Poliziano promulgated the idea of the nymph simply as a young and beautiful woman, rather than the minor divine being or nature spirit of ancient mythology.43 Effectively following the cue provided by Dürer, Warburg’s discussion of the Orpheus drawing includes no explicit recognition of the discrepancy between Poliziano’s nymphs and Ovid’s Ciconian women. Even if the maenad is a highly fluid category,44 the distinction between maenads and nymphs, as I will argue below, turns out to be one of cultural or even social difference.

If Warburg neglected the un-Ovidian, or even anti-Ovidian, aspects of Dürer’s representation of maenads, it was certainly not for lack of knowledge of the poet’s oeuvre, fully apparent already in his early dissertation (printed in 1893) on Botticelli’s Primavera, with its well-known citation of Ovid’s Fasti.45 In 1927, Warburg prepared a montage of images (Bilderreihe) illustrating the late medieval and Renaissance reception of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, with emphasis on the pathetic aspect of Ovid’s narratives, which describe or at least imply exaggerated gestures and other bodily responses to strange and untoward circumstances.46 In the article on the Dürer drawing, however, Warburg located the immediate inspiration of the drawing not directly in Ovid’s poetry so much as filtered through humanist culture, especially Poliziano’s Favola d’Orfeo. The play was performed in 1480 in Mantua, where Mantegna supposedly produced the original of the Italian print of the poet’s death, and where, in the so-called Camera degli Sposi (completed c.1474), images of the Orpheus story still exist.47 As Gombrich noted, the connection Warburg perceived between performance, in this case, and image developed into one of the major themes of his scholarship.48

In some ways, Ovid’s ironic, even subversive approach to traditional stories anticipates Warburg’s attitude toward classicism. A remarkable example concerns a different band of maenads. Ovid relates (Met. 3.528–733) the cruel fate of Pentheus, King of Thebes, at the hands of maenads, in this case angered by his refusal to acknowledge the power of Bacchus, as memorably presented by Euripides in The Bacchae, an important intertext for Ovid. The devotees of the god, including the king’s own mother, are of markedly higher social status than the Ciconian women; in their frenzy they tear the king limb from limb, believing him to be a

42 The lack of thyrsi is noted by Puff, “Violence, Victimhood, Artistry,” 68.
43 Leuker, “‘Ameto’ vor der Primavera,” 198. Larson, Greek Nymphs, 268–269, discusses the late ancient Orphic Hymn to the Nymphs as presenting a more generalized image of nymphs.
44 As pointed out, e.g., by Puff, “Violence, Victimhood, Artistry,” 69.
46 Warburg, Bilderatlas, 57 no.33; Johnson, Memory, Metaphor, 41.
lion, a beast of the wildest landscape. In their deluded condition, they do the god’s bidding, in contrast to the Ciconians, who know very well what they are doing, and why; it is the vehemence of their act, not the act itself, that is driven by their maenadic state. Nevertheless, though Pentheus is obviously a victim of the women’s frenzy, Ovid presents him as hardly an innocent victim: he is beast-like and “psychologically and morally warped.” In this passage, accordingly, Ovid challenges any binary contrast of order and disorder, while celebrating the subversion of political authority embodied by Pentheus. Perhaps as a result, Pentheus does not appear in Renaissance iconography, beyond illustrations to the Metamorphoses (although there seems no reason to accept the suggestion that Dürer’s lost model represented The Death of Pentheus).

Evidently, there were limitations to the Renaissance interest in antiquity. Warburg of course knew the story of Pentheus, whose fate he includes among motifs connected with the maenad figure. In his essay on the Death of Orpheus, in particular, he emphasizes the kinship of Pentheus’s and Orpheus’s demise, though without noting the maenads’ different motivations. Warburg’s focus, at least for heuristic purposes, on an example of opposed psychic states, understood as operative in society as much as in the individual, did not lead to a critical analysis of possible political implications of literary or visual imagery. This is especially true of his study of the nymph motif; indeed, in a symptomatic comment, Warburg drew a distinction between the “ecstatic nymph” and the “mournful river god” as polar examples of the contrasted psychic states whose co-presence he studied in Renaissance culture. For Warburg, as Giorgio Agamben has noted, this polarity “afflicts the West with a kind of tragic schizophrenia.”

It is perhaps symptomatic that Warburg hardly returned to the theme of the river god, nor did he elaborate on the contrast of the god with the nymph. Without reference to Warburg’s work, Claudia Lazzaro has explored the political connotations of Renaissance interest in images of river gods, notably as vehicles of the self-representation of authoritarian regimes and of their celebration of territorial consolidation. A notable case is the cultural politics of 16th-century

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49 I quote the comment of William S. Anderson in his edition of Ovid's Metamorphoses, Books 1–5 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 389. As pointed out by Dan Curley, Tragedy in Ovid: Theater, Metaheater, and the Transformation of a Genre (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 100, Ovid’s Pentheus meets his end not off stage, as in Euripides, but like a wild beast in the amphitheater, a victim of the standard Roman entertainment known as venatio (wild beast hunt). Given their own enthusiasm for blood sports, Renaissance readers probably picked up on this echo.

50 For Svetlana Boym, Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 52, the play stages “the delegitimization of power.”

51 A possible exception is a drawing by Marco Zoppo (British Museum 1920,0214.1.21) identified as the Death of Pentheus; Lilian Armstrong, The Paintings and Drawings of Marco Zoppo (New York: Garland, 1976), 282–287; A. Roesler-Friedenthal, “Ein Porträt Andrea Mantegnas als alter Orpheus im Kontext seiner Selbstdarstellungen,” Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana 31 (1996): 179, fig. 21. Warburg, Bilderatlas, 90–91, panel 49, no.9, identifies the scene (he illustrates a later engraving based on the Zoppo drawing as the Death of Orpheus). The victim’s pose is clearly related to that of Orpheus in the Dürer drawing. It may be the lion skin that the figure holds that determines the identification.


53 Johnson, Memory, Metaphor. Warburg mentions Pentheus in panel 42 of the Bilderatlas, devoted to extreme emotion, but he doesn’t include an image; Warburg, Bilderatlas, 76. Ancient, but only ancient, images of Pentheus’s death appear on panel 5; Warburg, Bilderatlas, 22.

54 Warburg, “Dürer and Italian Antiquity,” 553.


Tuscany under the proto-absolutist rule of Medici princes, whose auto-celebratory festivals, making extensive, if ephemeral, use of classical mythology, were of particular interest to Warburg. In garden settings, as Lazzaro shows, the regime deployed river god imagery, often thematically related to festive ephemera, which united mythological and geographical resonances, and which addressed less exclusive audiences.

In Renaissance imagery river gods often retained these specific topographical associations, underlying particular connections between place and power. Nymphs sometimes appear in designed landscapes alongside river gods, and might well belong in the same ideological context. In spite of the well-attested tradition of images of the sleeping nymph, Warburg, on the other hand, focused on a specifically maenadic type of “nymph” as emblematic of a broad later 15th-century predilection for expressive figures in rapid motion. As Agamben has argued, Warburg’s pathosformel, maximally embodied by the nymph, “designates an intertwining of an emotional charge and an iconographic formula, in which it is impossible to distinguish between form and content.” This “formula” is associated, however, not only with bodily motion but also, even especially, with Warburg’s “bewegtes Beiwerk,” the aerial play of fluttering ribbons and drapery. In such cases, the merging of form and content insisted on by Agamben becomes problematic, in part because the derivation of a nymph from the wild maenad of antiquity, at least in the literary tradition, is in the end compromised rather than confirmed by the presence of such decorative and enlivening flourishes.

A further consideration is the context in which “nymphs” occur. Dürer’s drawing illustrates a story that expressly involves maenads as key participants in the action. In the Florentine cases on which Warburg focused his attention, on the other hand, nymph figures occur as contrasting elements within larger pictorial economies, in which their connection or even relevance to the action represented in a scene is, or can be claimed to be, especially problematic. A specific case of the deployment of the nymph motif within such an image especially fascinated Warburg, who famously gave it a new context in his “picture atlas” (panel 46).

The image in question is Ghirlandaio’s fresco of the Birth of the Baptist in the Tornabuoni Chapel in S. Maria Novella in Florence (also known as the Tornaquinci Chapel), which is


60On Warburg’s “rhetoric of motion,” see Johnson, Memory, Metaphor, 49–52.


situated behind the high altar and serves as the *cappella maggiore* of this extremely important church (fig. 4). As Roland Kecks notes, the birth of the Baptist was the only saint’s birth celebrated by the Church, perhaps especially in Florence, in view of the reverence due to the city’s patron saint.⁶⁵ From the right a girl, a figure especially admired by Giorgio Vasari, rushes into the birthing room. Warburg jokingly dubs this figure Fräulein Schnellbrin or Eilbringitte (“Miss Quickbrin”) and identifies her, doubtless more seriously, as a “maenad as lying-in attendant.”⁶⁶ At the same time, however, Warburg notes that, exclusively in formal terms, the hurrying girl echoes a victory figure on the Arch of Constantine, though he also cites classical images of nymphs probably known to Ghirlandaio that carry fruits or flowers and whose clothing billows out behind them.⁶⁷ This homely victory is accordingly a nymph figure, a *ninfa fiorentina*, par excellence; with her vivacious gestural she fully embodies the *pathosformel*. Whatever Warburg’s larger theoretical ambition, however, questions arise about the specific dramatic role of this “nymph” within an image of the Birth of the Baptist as an incident within a multi-scene

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narrative of the saint’s life. This perhaps explains the neglect of Warburg’s insight in recent monographic discussions of Ghirlandaio’s oeuvre.

As a servant, the girl performs a specific function in the scene, as Warburg saw, but she is marginal to the main event, dominated by the mother and baby, as well as by women of high status, as Warburg supposed, with the features of members of the patron’s family (in a recent book on the frescoes, Alessandro Salucci identifies the young woman conspicuously looking out at the viewer as an idealized, posthumous portrait of Lucrezia Tornabuoni, mother of Lorenzo de’ Medici). In a depiction of a birthing room set in an affluent household, any artist might be expected to draw on local knowledge to include one or more bustling servant girls (though not necessarily in the shape of ninfe fiorentine) as appropriate accessories, no less than a bed or a basin. Because of his remarkable emphasis on the material world of the Florentine elite and the staff required to maintain it, however, Ghirlandaio was a special case, as is made clear in Vasari’s biography of the artist, which includes a quite detailed account—amounting to a short ekphrasis—of the two birth scenes in the cycles of John the Baptist and the Virgin. Moreover, Vasari specifically mentions, as an important ritual of childbirth in Florence, the bringing of refreshment for the exhausted mother and for the other women in attendance; this is what the servant girl is doing, either at the behest of the women in front of her or as a member of the birth mother’s household. Of course, not even Vasari could address the wealth of description in which the painter specialized as the creator of images, in Sidney Freedberg’s formulation, of an “orderly and meticulous realism.”

The presence of the serving girl in The Birth of the Baptist is therefore justified in functional terms (an anonymous reader attractively suggested she might also be symbolic of the foreseen role of the Baptist, the ultimate outdoors figure). Formally, however, she is a unique and intrusive figure, as is often noted. A rhetorically trained observer might characterize the girl’s contribution in terms of the familiar device of amplification, a necessary procedure for artists working from textual sources. The interior imagined by Ghirlandaio as John’s birthing room is certainly a space of amplification, though less elaborate than the magnificent setting, on the opposite wall, of the birth of the Virgin Mary (fig. 6), in a room boasting a classical frieze of

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68 Here I expand the critique of Warburg’s approach in Damian Dombrowski, Die religiösen Gemälde Sandro Botticellis: Malerei als pia philosophia (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010), 106. Warburg himself expressly articulates the idea of a universal dichotomy; he mentions, e.g., “the clash between energy and constraint that so often governs the course of artistic evolution.” See Warburg, “Picture Chronicle of a Florentine Goldsmith,” in Warburg, Renewal of Pagan Antiquity, 167.
71 Giorgio Vasari, Le vite, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: Sansoni, 1906), 267: “the third scene . . . is the birth of St John, showing Elisabeth in bed with the neighbor women visiting and the wetnurse suckling the child; a clever motif in the painting is a woman joyfully calling the attention of the visitors to the extraordinary thing accomplished by the lady of the house in her old age; and lastly there is a woman bringing fruit and wine from the country, in conformity with Florentine custom. This is very fine” (Nella terza storia sopra alla prima è la nascita di S. Giovanni, nella quale è una avvertenza bellissima: chementre S. Elisabetta è in letto, e che certe vicine la vengono a vedere e la balia stando a sedere allatta il bambino, una femmina con allegrezza gnne chiede, per mostrare a quelle donne la novità che in sua vecchiezza aveva fatto la padrona di casa; e finalmente vi è una femmina che porta a l’usanza fiorentina frutte e fiaschi da la villa, la quale è molto bella). On the completeness of Vasari’s account, see Kecks, Domenico Ghirlandaio, 308.
73 Sydney J. Freedberg, Painting in Italy, 1500–1600 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 84.
putti that seems to echo the general theme of fertility and family regeneration celebrated in the scenes. With whatever ironical overtones, the Baptist, destined to wander the desert clad in camel hide, comes into the world in an interior space located, to all appearances, in a palatial residence. Accordingly the representation of the room relates closely to one of Warburg’s major interests, the cultural preoccupations and patronage of the Florentine merchant elite, especially in the case of his project on the Sassetti family.

Generally, however, amplification involves the insertion of elements consistent with a basic narrative, rather than, as in the case of the serving girl, conspicuously discordant. Warburg drew attention to what he saw as another sharply discordant element within the religiously orthodox surroundings of the Sassetti family chapel in Santa Trinita. He interpreted the Sassetti emblem of a centaur hurling a stone as a “nature spirit,” a pagan symbol of dynamic energy; as such it contributes to the chapel’s embodiment, in general, of the reconciliation of Christianity with the pagan world, including the irrational energies acknowledged in ancient art and literature. If the centaur is by no means merely an amplificatory element, in Warburg’s view, it is worth reconsidering his insistence on the decorative aspect of the serving girl in the Tornabuoni Chapel, which was located in a more prestigious location (S. Maria Novella was one of the great churches of Florence) under the patronage of a more important family than the bourgeois Sassetti.

If she is not merely amplificatory, then, the question arises as to how the serving girl contributes to the orderly realism that Freedberg rightly found in this and similar works by Ghirlandaio; in terms of the pictorial economy of the scene, how can we make sense of the marked contrast between the “maenadic” serving girl and the other women? First, we need to focus on the extreme contrast between the servant girl, depicted as rushing into the room, and the group of beautifully dressed ladies in front of her, who slowly proceed in a dignified manner toward the mother, as if about to greet and congratulate her. These women are much more typical of Ghirlandaio’s “static conservatism,” in the words of Freedberg, and his unwillingness “to describe physical mobility of a decided kind.”

In contrast to the ladies of leisure, the lower social status of Ghirlandaio’s serving girl is evident through the task she performs: with her right hand the girl steadies a tray that she carries on her head, laden with fruit, and holds a wineskin in her left, in the manner of a typical peasant woman, as Warburg emphasized in his nymph panel. However, she also stands out through her costume and her position in the scene (fig. 5). Dressed all in white, except for a gold-colored edging at her neck, she appears at the very threshold of the birthing room. The toes of her sandaled left foot, from which she has just transferred her weight to her right, touch the floor just in front of a doorpost. We see her, accordingly, in a kind of epiphanic moment at the entrance to the room, as she connects the somewhat airless interior with the world outside and its resources.

74 For Kecks, Domenico Ghirlandaio 308, the relative modesty of the bedroom in this scene makes it more realistic than the room of the Birth of the Virgin on the opposite wall.
78 On panel 46 dedicated to the “Nymph,” Warburg included alongside the image of Ghirlandaio’s serving girl his own photograph of a peasant woman carrying a load on her head; Gombrich, Aby Warburg, 558–560 with fig.150.
79 Epiphany is of course normally reserved for deities, but it is also a common motif in Greek literature especially of the Roman empire, and often associated with nymphs; Verity Platt, Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8. On the timeless, frozen quality of the other figures, see Kecks, Domenico Ghirlandaio, 308.
Accordingly the girl’s urgent motion inserts a temporal if not incipiently narrative aspect into what is otherwise a highly static scene, but for Warburg she may hint at darker imagery, as a sublimated reference to female figures—Judith or Salome—who hold not platters of fruit but severed heads, as “headhunters.”

In her active motion as well as her appearance, the servant girl stands out in relation not only to the dignified and rather expressionless women elsewhere in the painting, but also to the rational decor of the grand room in which the scene is set, with its gridded, perspectival ceiling and a geometric design on the far left adorning a chest or built-in bench, supporting precious utensils. In such an image of self-satisfied material comfort, Ghirlandaio’s treatment of affetti, which drew Vasari’s praise, can only apply to the serving girl.

80 Gombrich, Warburg, 287.
81 Cadogan, Ghirlandaio, 4.
The contrast between the serving girl and the two ladies just in front of her is emphasized not only by differences in dress (the ladies, evidently matrons, wear head scarves), but also by the way the matrons are framed against the dark background of an apparent tapestry contained within a stone frame of some kind. The two matrons seem to belong to the same group as the young, apparently unmarried woman in front of them; they may be neighbors, as Vasari reasonably surmised, and the mother raises herself up in bed to greet them. Otherwise, two women, whose status is unclear (one is perhaps the wetnurse), busy themselves with the baby, while a young, modestly attired servant girl, standing on the other side of the bed, sets carafes of water and wine in place, within easy reach of the mother. This servant’s simple red dress and white apron set her, Warburg’s “lying-in attendant,” apart from the rest of the group, especially from the girl carrying fruit.

Warburg’s designation is almost certainly wrong: more plausibly the girl in white is an emissary of some kind, sent to deliver sustenance to the mother. Here, accordingly, Dionysian motion is emphatically a marker of social position, though evidently not of social class, in view of the likely similar social position of the girl in white and that of the other servants, the real lying-in attendants. The girl in white belongs not to the urban household, at whatever level, or even to the city, but rather to a wider region (Vasari’s “villa”) encompassing the production, processing, and trading of the produce of farms and vineyards. As such, she comes from and represents the world of nature, or at least one closer to nature, than the circumscribed and formalized world of the palace of John’s parents (though the unmistakably phallic group of objects on the shelf high on the left-hand wall suggests an allusion to an earthier aspect of this bourgeois universe). Warburg connected the girl to an important aspect of the elite culture of the Florence of Lorenzo de’ Medici, in which vernacular and courtly elements mingled, as in Lorenzo’s carnival songs. The country retreats of the Medici, in some cases expensively improved by Lorenzo, were perhaps especially suited for such cultural mixing, as well as for food production. In addition, as Warburg suggests, the girl is a gift-bringer (in a sense she is a gift), perhaps embodying exchange between city and country among elite families. As such, as we will see, she is related to Botticelli’s group of the Graces.

A simpler echo of this case of the nymph as social “other” occurs across the chapel in Ghirlandaio’s cycle of the Virgin; in the birth scene (fig. 6) a servant girl is shown as energetically active—she pours water into the bowl—with her dress swinging behind her and ribbon-like elements flying. The girl is positioned, moreover, in front of the reclining mother, separating her from the other figures, and indeed the baby: this and her slanting posture, contrasting with the other figures, all upright and static, give her remarkable prominence in the scene, perhaps emphasizing the symbolic purity of the water, as of the Virgin herself. High on the rear wall a frieze of putti makes a more refined reference to the family’s fertility.

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82 Warburg, “Lo stile ideale anticheggiante,” 300.
83 For the beauty as well as utility of productive rural properties, see Raffaella F. Giannetto, Medici Gardens: From Making to Design (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 20.
84 Warburg’s panel 46 contains images of gift giving, notably no. 20, Sandro Botticelli, Venus and the Graces bring Gifts to a Young Woman (Giovanna Albizzi?), from the Villa Lemmi. Warburg, Bilderatlas, 82. For fruit, as well as paintings of fruit, as gifts, see Philostratus, Imagines, 1.31; 2.26, both titled Xenia (“Parting Gifts”), ed. Arthur Fairbanks (London: Heinemann, 1960), 122–125, 242–245.
85 I thank an anonymous reader for this suggestion.
Even more striking is the image, surmounting the Baptist cycle (fig. 7) and confronting the Assumption of the Virgin on the opposite wall, of Salome dancing at Herod’s feast. In this expressly princely milieu the maenadic Salome is an interloper; her vehement motion identifies her as a socially distinct, as well as disruptive, figure, within a setting whose corrupt character her appalling request for the saint’s head brings to light. It is worth noting that Ghirlandaio’s Dance of Salome appears above two scenes of the Baptist’s activity in the wilderness, among rugged rocks, producing a conspicuous contrast of luxuriously evil “inside” (Herod’s palace) and austerely good “outside” (the desert). This is of course a very different version of an inside vs. outside distinction from that of the Birth of the Baptist, though the similar structuring principle recalls Barasch’s point, mentioned above, of the contrasting meanings that can be ascribed to the pathosformel.

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86 Cadogan, Ghirlandaio, 150, notes this and other examples of frenzied movement, introduced in her view for narrative purposes (apart from Salome she mentions the mothers in the Massacre of the Innocents). This does not work for the “nymph” figures.
As “nymph” figures, moreover, both Salome and the serving girl in the Birth of the Virgin fit more comfortably into their respective pictorial settings than the girl in white in the Birth of the Baptist, one by advancing and the other by amplifying a narrative. Warburg, for his part, acknowledged the strangeness and separateness of the girl in white in his picture atlas, in which he included a photograph of Ghirlandaio’s Birth of the Baptist alongside a detail of the girl. This displacement of the girl, involving her re-contextualization among various images of the “nymph,” certainly supported Warburg’s notion of unresolved tensions lurking within Renaissance artworks. At the same time it is symptomatic of his uneven interest in the social milieu of artworks; indeed, here Warburg’s interest in the nymph motif seems to have contributed to a striking neglect of its possible social implications.

Finally, Warburg’s initial interest in the motif was sparked by his study of Botticelli’s Primavera, in which he saw the figure of Flora as nymph-like, even if the artist obeyed his advisors and moderated her Dionysian character “too much” (fig. 8). In a painting that demands more of the viewer than the single images in Ghirlandaio’s fresco cycles, it is not a female figure

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87 Johnson, Memory, Metaphor, 100.
88 Gombrich, Aby Warburg, 128, expresses puzzlement at this point of view.
that embodies Dionysian vehemence but rather, as Damian Dombrowski notes, the wind god Zephyr.\textsuperscript{89} The latter’s swift urgency may well represent an alternate tendency in classicism; certainly Botticelli worked, as Warburg recognized, from an Ovidian text that refers to the rape of a nymph by the wind god, whose instinctual and even animalistic character is evident in the painting.\textsuperscript{90} The text in question is an extended passage in his calendar poem, \textit{The Fasti}, in which Ovid considers the origins and nature of the Roman festival of Flora, the Floralia.\textsuperscript{91} Ovid describes Flora’s own transformation: she was once the nymph Chloris, but becomes the deity Flora, the Roman goddess of Spring, presiding over a raucous festival much enjoyed by the Roman populace. Part of this transformation is Flora’s promotion from victim of rape to bride of Zephyr (\textit{Fasti} 5.195–222), though her status as matron does not essentially change her character: doubtless with her raucous festival in mind, Ovid (\textit{Fasti} 5.333) insists that Flora is “not solemn,” as Botticelli’s image of her seems to echo this characterization.


What is crucial here, however, is Zephyr’s place within a compositional order that associates him immediately with Flora, evoking Ovid’s tale of a marriage with important implications for the Roman ritual calendar. At the same time, Zephyr—and indeed the whole group of Zephyr, Chloris, and Flora—occupy an important position within the painting as a whole as counterweight to the figures, notably the group of the dancing Graces, who appear to represent

\textsuperscript{89} Damian Dombrowski, \textit{Die religiösen Gemälde Sandro Botticellis: Malerei als pia philosophia} (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010), 106.
\textsuperscript{90} On Aby Warburg’s recognition, in 1893, of the \textit{Fasti} passage and other classical texts as sources for the \textit{Primavera}, see Frank Zöllner, “Zu den Quellen und zur Ikonographie von Sandro Botticelli’s \textit{Primavera},” \textit{Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte} 50 (1997): 131. Warburg’s insights remain basic in contemporary scholarship, though he missed the Aristotle passage that I discuss below.
civilization itself. Far from Botticelli being too “pliable” (in German, “biegsam”) with respect to classical stimuli, as Warburg charged in his 1893 dissertation, in the Primavera Botticelli uses a range of sources to construct a highly original and profound meditation on major issues in political theory.

The essential expressive strategy in the painting is a kind of doubling of its structural logic, in that the general theme of the relationship of primitive instinct to a more orderly social world is stated twice. First wild Zephyr and “animal-like” Chloris (who becomes earthy Flora) enact the role of procreation in the household and its literal domestication; the reference to marriage connects the household unit to a wider social world, indeed to the city as a space of festive ceremony. As in the Ghirlandaio images, we encounter the contrast, again with different content, of “inside” and “outside”; the outsiders, Zephyr and Mercury, are male figures bookending a world of women—Zephyr as a swooping intruder and disinterested Mercury as the traveling god and patron of travelers traditionally contrasted, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has shown, with a stay-at-home female deity, protector of the household. There is a larger contrast, however, between the right and left hand sections of the Primavera, mediated by Venus at the approximate center: Zephyr’s Dionysian aspect is countered, most notably by the Apollonian and certainly very self-controlled figure of Mercury, the other adult male in the composition, placed in association with the Graces, who manage to be both nymph-like and almost as controlled as Mercury. Formally, moreover, the group of Flora, Chloris, and Zephyr is balanced by the other group of three figure, the Graces, though here there is a clear contrast in functional and indeed structural terms: the Zephyr group evokes a narrative, as told by Ovid, while the Graces’ gestures of giving and receiving symbolize a pattern of conduct and the ideal societal condition dependent on it. Indeed, both ancient and Renaissance sources (notably Seneca, De Beneficiis 1.3, and Leon Battista Alberti, On Painting 3.54) emphasize the idea of the Graces as an allegory, constituting, in a sense, a ready-made insert in the larger setting of Botticelli’s painting.

Beyond the contrasts inherent, even on a formal level, in the markedly paratactic composition of the Primavera, there is a coherence of style and even mood that asserts a relationship, even one of dependence, between its major constituent parts. Thus the Zephyr group presents the natural origin and basis of a more elevated conception of civil society, in turn symbolized by the Graces. Indeed in a long tradition of ancient literary references taken up by Leon Battista Alberti, the Graces enact, rather than merely symbolize, patterns of exchange and benevolence considered basic to any civilized society. The underlying schema is ultimately Aristotelian, reflecting the later fifteenth-century engagement with the Nicomachean Ethics and

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94 Many scholars associate the Primavera with marriage, indeed with the specific marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’Medici and Sofonisba degli Appiani: for marriage as a programmatic aspect of the painting, see Zirpolo, “Botticelli’s Primavera,” 24–28.


Moreover, the Dionysian aspect of Zephyr is crucial to a reading of the painting as both universal and closely aligned with concerns about the nature and origin of the state in a time of political and social change and challenge.

In conclusion, the Primavera is a work of an especially cunning artist. In Botticelli’s composition the representation of Dionysian vehemence—or at least the allusion to it—is specific to the organization and indeed the meaning of the work. It carries, in short, positional meaning; what matters, in the end, is the whole configuration and the unified message, if not meaning, generated within it. Moreover, the more the figures in a visual allegory appear as fully rounded individuals capable of inner-directed speech and agency, rather than as mere human signs (it might be appropriate here to follow Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s influential model of “presence”), the more expansive and open-ended becomes the image’s signifying potential. Perhaps inevitably, attempts to specify the meaning of the Primavera betray a tension between the recognition of such open-endedness, taking into account the expansive field of literary or mythological resonances conjured by the painting, and of the limitation of meaning or even allusion essential to any artwork.

As often noted, a key development in early Renaissance art (still involving mainly the production of religious images) was the emergence of a new type of relatively inconspicuous frame, the typically rectangular perimeter of a rationally ordered perspectival construction. In the case of religious art—by far the majority of Renaissance artistic output—this required a remarkable cultural shift, the abandonment of often elaborate, shrine-like surrounds echoing church architecture. It is easy to think of the new type of frame as mainly functioning as a barrier, separating a representation, however “realistic,” from the phenomenal world. It was also permeable enough, however, to allow inter-animation of various kinds. Indeed, certain artists, not least Botticelli, explored various ways of problematizing the disjunction of interior, fictive space, and the exterior setting, the space of the beholder.

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97 I believe, but cannot argue here, that the mention of the Graces in Book 5 (the “Book of Justice”) of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics is a crucial source for the Primavera; see for now Burroughs, “Talking with Goddesses,” 73.


Frames restrict content as well as space. In the case of Renaissance mythological images the question necessarily arises how much of the rich field of reference associated with any major pagan deity or narrative is retained once that deity or narrative is set into a new frame, which can be the literal edge of an image or other artistic work or—to move to metaphorical enframmement—a new cultural or social historical context. Already in antiquity some of the most canonical authors, from Homer to Ovid, deployed mythological figures and narratives with remarkable freedom, even frivolity, raising questions about the relation between the ancient myths as material for literary elaboration and invention (or simply as gist for story telling) and as part of a belief system supported by a range of ritual practices; did the Greeks indeed believe their myths?\(^{101}\)

As is often pointed out, for Renaissance artists and their advisers there was—for the most part\(^{102}\)—no question of belief, but they drew on two contrasting kinds of sources for their information on the ancient myths. On the one hand, the mythographic tradition provided useful information, largely abstracted from literary treatments. In the 15th century a key phenomenon was the continued popularity of Boccaccio’s *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, with its enumeration of multiple divine avatars, emphasizing the fluidity and variety of ancient conceptions of divine beings, but at the same time with a focus on an objective, “physical,” reality of certain major mythological figures, especially the planetary deities, in terms of their astronomical and cosmic associations.\(^{103}\) The great explosion of illustrated mythographic writing of the later Renaissance, which built on Boccaccio’s work and other early mythological encyclopedias, organized the rather chaotic material and made images and descriptions of mythological and allegorical beings available to artists.\(^{104}\)

All this was in the future in the late 15th century, when the diffusion of humanism fostered the direct engagement with classical literature, especially poetry, which became more accessible as new translations and commentaries appeared. In Florence, those with the interest and leisure could attend Poliziano’s public lectures on ancient literature, including in 1481–1482 a series on Ovid’s *Fasti*, a work that integrates a range of mythological narratives, accounts of public ritual, and political references.\(^{105}\) The humanist study of ancient texts gave new evidence of the expressive power of the ancient myths and, especially, of their capacity to be activated in new ways. The *Fasti* suggested ways in which mythology actively matters, especially at a moment of cultural transition and self-conscious reflection, such as late 15th-century Florence. As we saw, it was Warburg who recognized the crucial importance of the *Fasti* for the understanding of Botticelli’s *Prima vera*; later studies have demonstrated its much wider impact.\(^{106}\)

Not least through his interest in the Ovidian tradition, Warburg recognized a profound disjunction among the types of classical imagery that stimulated study and imitation on the part

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of visual artists, especially in the representation of the human passions. However, he underestimated the functionality of “Dionysian” motifs in the composition of a narrative, or implied narrative, especially in images involving a contrast of or tension between figures of different social position. In the Ghirlandaio Birth of the Baptist, the contrast in question lies beyond the ostensible subject matter, the representation of an event—or, if the birth is the event, its aftermath. As we have seen, Ghirlandaio drew on experience and local knowledge rather than any source text to fill out the scene and populate it with the socially differentiated actors expected to be present in a bourgeois birth chamber; in an all-female scene, indeed, the absence of gender difference makes social difference more obvious, stimulating reflection on the possible narrative implications of the fruit-bearing servant girl.

In the Primavera, there is famously no single source text, but rather a mélange of references and allusions. On the other hand, the tension contrived through the inclusion of especially striking “Dionysian” elements is surely basic to whatever the painting’s subject might be thought to be, as well no doubt as its intended effect. Certainly the painting betrays a high degree of self-conscious wit and inventiveness, as well as willingness to engage with and indeed to shape the afterlife of antiquity through a radical departure, as it turned out, in the history of painting. The three Dionysian figures (i.e., the Flora group, derived from Ovid’s Fasti) balance and especially contrast with the three Graces, nymph figures whose decorous dance is thoroughly un-maenadic, for all the fluttering “bewegtes Beiwerk.” Botticelli’s Graces evoke, or even cite, Alberti’s reference to the Graces in the Della Pittura, which in turn expressly cites Hesiod’s Theogony, the foundational work of ancient mythography and, as such, well known to 15th-century intellectuals.107 At the beginning of Hesiod’s poem, the Muses warn Hesiod himself, appearing as a character in his own poem, of their capacity to mislead him, if they so wish, as he sets out to articulate mythic accounts of the origins of the world and the gods;108 there are echoes of this as well in Ovid’s Fasti.109 In dealing with myth, in other words, there are times when the poet cannot rely on authorities but—as if led on by the gods themselves—has to improvise and invent. This is a serious endeavor: the muses inspire, says Hesiod, both poets and kings.110 There is good reason to suppose that such a conception inspired both Poliziano and Botticelli, as in different media they maneuvered between classical erudition and personal, social, and political tendencies and tensions of the time.

Bibliography


