

From Nymph to Nymphomania: 'Linear Perspectives' on Female Sexuality

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De nymphomania is the title of Johann Nietner's dissertation, which he submitted to the University of Erfurt in 1694. Nietner's 64-page long (or short) treatise deserves attention because it is one of the first texts to introduce the term 'nymphomania' for a disease that since the times of Hippocrates had figured under the name 'hysteria' or 'furo uterinus'.¹ By the eighteenth century nymphomania had become well established as a synonym for 'furo uterinus' in most of the major medical lexicons, for example Johann Jakob Woydt's *Schatzkammer Medicinisch-und natürlicher Dinge* (first published in 1701) or Albrecht von Haller's *Medizinisches Lexicon* (1756). Both register the term 'nymphomania' but refer the reader to 'furo uterinus' for its description.² This practice suggests that the introduction of the term nymphomania does not indicate the discovery of a new disease, rather it reflects changes in the perception of the female genitalia – that is, the clitoris and labia (the so-called nymphae) – and helps to make visible a significant part of their history.

Nymphomania and nymphae

Nietner defines nymphomania as a 'delirium accompanied by an extraordinary desire for copulation'.³ The symptoms range from sadness, restlessness and melancholy to delirious sexual agitation. The *Medizinisches Lexicon* describes nymphomania as an excessive form of compulsory heterosexuality: 'They [the nymphomaniacs] constantly fall in love with men; as soon as they see or think of them they lose their mind: ... They exhibit their bodies without any shame, they challenge men, run after them even on the streets, they attack them like wild beasts'.⁴ As the *Schatzkammer* explains, nymphomania is most often caused by 'a lack of sexual intercourse; and this

is why virgins and widows as well as those whose husbands are weak suffer from this disease'.⁵ The heterosexual context of the disease is further reflected in its therapy. The *Schatzkammer* recommends sexual intercourse 'as the nicest and most successful therapy'.⁶ For widows or religious women, who were supposed to live a celibate life, genital massages by a physician or midwife were recommended.⁷ In nosology and therapy, nymphomania did not differ from hysteria. What was new here about nymphomania was its etymology. In contrast to hysteria or furor uterinus – terms that refer to the uterus – nymphomania draws attention to women's external genitals. According to Nietner, nymphomania goes back to 'the Greek νυμφη which the anatomist calls nymphæ or clitoris'.⁸ The usage of the term nymphomania thus seems to reflect previous anatomical discoveries about the existence of the clitoris (nymphæ) and the function of the labia minora (nymphæ) since the middle of the sixteenth century.⁹ Realdo Colombo, the self-declared discoverer of the clitoris, described it as 'women's seat of lust and enjoyment'.¹⁰ And Tobias Peucer notes:

The use of the *clitoris* is to wake up venus from her sleep; for its upper part is so very sensitive that it is appropriately called love-apple.... The *nymphæ* bring great joy and pleasure in intercourse, they grow bigger and therefore cause a pleasurable titillation when touched by the male member.¹¹

But what exactly is nymphomania's relationship to nymphæ and nymphæ? To answer this question I want to take a closer look at the medical descriptions of nymphæ and nymphæ. In 1756 the *Medizinisches Lexicon* offers the following account:

Nymphæ, or *water lips*, the inner, small lips of the female pudendum.... They very much resemble the beard or red pieces of flesh which hang from a cock's chin It is assumed that they both lead the passage of the urine in such a way that it does not wet the feet and enhance sexual pleasure because of their sensitivity; and both assumptions are very probable.¹²

The *Medizinisches Lexicon* did not invent the strange comparison between nymphæ and a cock's wattles. Almost a century earlier, Elias Wallner, in his translation of Bartholin's *Anatomia Reformata*, had noted that they 'resemble the shape of a cock's comb'.¹³ Other anatomists, however, saw the nymphæ in a very different light. Helkiah Crooke associates them with the world of the water nymphs:

The nymphæ leade the urine through a long passage as it were between two walles, receyving it from the bottome of the cleft as out of a Tunnell: from whence it is that it runneth forth in a broad stream with a hissing noise, not wetting the wings of the lap in the passage; and from these uses they have their name of Nymphes, because they joyne unto the passage of urine, and the neck of the womb; out of which as out of fountaines (and the nymphes are said to bee presedents or dieties of the fountaines) water and humours do issue: and beside,

because in them are the venereal delicacies, for the Poets say that the Nymphes lasciviously seeke out the Satyres among the woods and forests.¹⁴

Peucer refers to the same metaphorical context when he notes that the ‘nymphae have received their name because they are situated around the urethral orifice like two water goddesses’.¹⁵ At first glance both metaphorical descriptions seem to be worlds apart, but in fact they are connected by processes of displacement within and between art and medicine during the seventeenth century. At the core of these displacements is the figure of the water nymph.

Nymphs/nymphae

In Greek and Roman mythology water nymphs were virginal goddesses that represented the divine power of water. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines them as ‘semi-divine beings, imagined as beautiful maidens inhabiting the sea, rivers, fountains’. For the function of the nymphs, their ambivalent relation to water is especially important. On the one hand, the water of their dwellings, which was also considered as their gift to humankind, symbolises purity, fertility and sexuality, therefore ‘they embody nature’s regenerative power and were considered sources of fecundity’.¹⁶ On the other hand, because of its elasticity, water was regarded as a symbol of lascivity and feminine eroticism, and in particular water in motion was known for its masturbatory potential.¹⁷ In Renaissance art, water nymphs figure prominently in pictures, texts, music and architecture (especially fountains), where they convey a sense of idealised and eroticised nature.

Representations of Diana, goddess of chastity and fecundity, bathing with her nymphs were especially popular.¹⁸ Lucas Cranach alone painted at least six different versions of the *Nymph of the Spring*, the most famous of which is now housed in The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (Figure 11.1).¹⁹ The sexual symbolism of this painting is ambivalent. The picture shows a beautiful, eroticised female nude sleeping by a fountain; and, although her eyes and pubic hairs are covered by a transparent veil symbolising her chastity, the two partridges at her feet as well as the fountain by which she rests represent sexual lust. And yet, the quiver hanging on the tree seems to suggest that she belongs to Diana’s chaste circle. Finally, the inscription at the upper-left part of the picture, which reads, ‘Here I sleep, nymph of the spring; do not disturb my sleep’ [*Fontis nymppha sacri somnum ne rumpe quiesco*] is ambiguous because *rumperere* not only means ‘to disturb’ (the nymph’s sleep) but also ‘to tear apart’ (her veil) and in this sense the inscription contains a barely disguised invitation to rape. Cranach’s painting



11.1 Lucas Cranach, The Elder, *The Nymph of the Spring*, 48.5 x 72.9 cm, oil on canvas, after 1537.

allows for another reading as well: in the context of anatomy's appropriation of the nymphs to describe both the female external genitals and women's erotic pleasure, the representation of the spring might be regarded as a visualisation of the anatomical nature of the nymphae *before* anatomy. In fact, Crooke's description of the nymphae reads like a version of Cranach's painting, if one substitutes spring for nymphae and water for urine: 'the nymphae [the spring] leade the urine [water] through a long passage as it were between two walles, receyving it from the bottome of the cleft as out of a Tunnell: from whence it is that it runneth forth in a broad stream with a hissing noise'. Envisaged in this way, the connection between anatomy's nymphae and the mythological world of the water nymphs fabricated by Crooke and Peucer is more than a metaphorical reference/reverence. Connecting water nymphs and the female genitals was not confined to the realm of anatomy. In Martin Opitz's famous 'Schäfferey von der Nimfen Hercinie' the narrator remarks that 'whosoever drinks from the clitoral fountain shall not like the smell even of wine anymore'.²⁰

The mythological figure of the water nymph, as role model for the mapping of female sexuality, is more than a topos. Rather, these borrowings point to a collective cultural fantasy about the nature of female sexuality. In other words, anatomy's appropriations suggest that the nymphs figured as the embodiment of the seemingly forgotten knowledge about the anatomy of female erotic pleasure during the Middle Ages. However, the introduction of the nymphs into anatomical science changed their nature significantly: during the seventeenth century the erotic pleasures of the nymph(a)e came to be different from those of the nymphs. Despite the striking similarities between Crooke's anatomical rendering of the nymphae and Cranach's *Nymph of the Spring*, the differences are clear. Crooke emphasises the heterosexual pleasure of the nymphae, comparing them to the 'nymphs lasciviously seek[ing] out the satyres among the woods and forests'.²¹ In Cranach's painting the nymph's heterosexuality is neither obvious nor necessary. It is not clear at all *whose* genitals are being represented in the painting and several readings are possible. First, the spring represents the nymph's own pudendum. In this view the picture displays her sexual autonomy and self-sufficiency as she enjoys the stimulation of the erotically charged water running past her nymphae. Second, the spring might be read as the sleeping nymph's desire for another woman's nymphae. In this reading, the picture stages a homoerotic fantasy. Third, if the viewer of this picture is a woman her gaze may touch the body and genitals of the sleeping nymph. Thus in Cranach's picture the representation of the nymph's sexuality exceeds a male heterosexual claim on female sexuality. This is, of course, not to say, that Cranach intentionally painted a masturbatory, even 'lesbian' picture. Rather, as Patricia Simons has noted, 'the very sensual anarchism or slipperiness of the visual image may

encourage *deviant* and *perverse* possibilities we have not yet allowed ourselves to see'.²² Connecting Cranach's nymph to the anatomists' nymphae may seem 'perverse', but considering Crooke's and Peucer's appropriation of the nymphs for their own anatomical writing the 'perversity' of my reading reiterates the 'perversity' of early-modern science. And Cranach's picture is no exception to the rule – numerous Renaissance paintings focusing on mythological scenes from the life of Diana and her nymphs are even more explicit.

According to ancient Greek and Roman mythology, Diana lived with her nymphs in a chaste community where men were not permitted. As Christine Downing has noted, Diana 'is the goddess most intimately associated with female embodiment' and sexuality.²³ The story of Actaeon who accidentally came upon the grotto where Diana and her nymphs were bathing and was immediately transformed into a stag, and the story of the nymph Callisto who was expelled from the circle when her pregnancy resulting from a rape by Jupiter was discovered, both emphasise the autonomous and homoerotic sexuality in Diana's band.²⁴ These stories were extremely popular during the early-modern period and there exist a great number of pictorial, verbal and musical representations, some of which 'could so stress their [the nymphs'] exclusive femininity that marriage and maternity were explicitly disavowed'.²⁵ A sixteenth-century painting clearly emphasises this sexually charged, auto- as well as homoerotic atmosphere. Although art historians have claimed that the image shows Diana expelling Callisto from her train, this title was only added in the nineteenth century.²⁶ In contrast to Titian's well-known rendering of the subject, in this painting the discovery of Callisto's pregnancy does not seem important to the nymphs; with the exception of Diana, no other woman seems to be interested in her condition. Two nymphs are enjoying their bath in the mighty waterfall, which clearly is the centre of the spacious grove, while others are either getting ready for or have just finished their bath. Diana herself, who is being tenderly embraced by one of her companions, seems more concerned than angry. Moreover, the nymphs enjoy touching themselves: to the right, one of the nymphs caresses her pudendum with a cloth, while another one, whose face we are not allowed to see, masturbates at Diana's feet.

Thomas Heywood's play *The Golden Age*, first performed in 1609, contains another rendering of the Diana and Callisto story that features homoerotic desire between women.²⁷ When Callisto is admitted to the circle, Diana calls for a 'princess in our train, / as yet unmatch'd to be her cabin fellow, / and sleep by her' (Act II, scene 1).²⁸ When she is told by her handmaid that they 'all are coupled / and twinn'd in love, and hardly is there any / that will be won to change her bedfellow', Diana rules that she must wait 'till the next arrive: She that is next admitted of our train, / must be her bed-

companion'. When Jupiter, who has arranged to be next, joins the circle in the guise of a woman, Diana's handmaid advises her to abstain from heterosexual intercourse by all means:

You never shall with hated man atone
 But lie with woman, or else lodge alone ...
 With ladies only you shall sport and play,
 And in their fellowship spend night and day ...
 Consort with them at board and bed,
 And swear no man shall have your maidenhead.

As Valerie Traub has noted, Heywood's representation of the story 'poses "sport and play" between women as a chaste alternative to penetrative sex with "hated man"'.²⁹ Jupiter's rape of Callisto thus appears as an act of violence and aggression which sharply contrasts with 'the loving bonds between women'.³⁰ As far as female homosexuality in Diana's circle is concerned, Joachim Wtewael's 1607 painting *Diana and Actaeon* could not be more explicit (Figure 11.2). In this image Actaeon disturbs two nymphs who are engaging in sexual practices: one woman tenderly strokes the inside of the other's thighs while at the same time her right hand caresses her own breast.

The drama and paintings discussed here do not condemn the nymphs' masturbatory practices and homoerotic pleasures, although masturbation was regarded a sin and female homosexuality was a crime in most European countries. As Simons and Traub suggest, the discourse on chastity to which these pictures belonged served as a 'veil' under which female sexuality that did not fulfil heterosexual prerogatives could be represented and consumed – for a while, at least. Although anatomists appropriated without hesitation the sexually-charged world of the nymphs for their anatomical mapping of female sexuality, they also significantly modified that sexuality. Correggio's painting *Leda and the Swan* (1530–32) is a striking example of how anatomy silently altered the world of the nymphs (Figure 11.3). Referring to Euripides' *Helena*, the picture represents a particularly sexist version of Leda enjoying being raped by Jupiter in the guise of a swan. I do not want to expand here on the mythological aspects of this painting; nonetheless, it provides important insights into the history of the clitoris.

'As long as a swan's neck'

Although anatomists celebrated the discovery of female erotic pleasure, they also grew anxious about its sexual possibilities.³¹ Anatomy books report cases of monstrously enlarged nymphae and clitorises that allowed women to imitate men, and seduce and have sex with other women. Peucer notes that both nymphae and clitoris might grow to such enormous lengths that they



11.2 Joachim Wtewael, *Diana and Acteon*, 58 x 79 cm, oil on wood, 1607.



11.3 Antonio Allegri Correggio, *Leda and the Swan*, 152 x 191 cm, oil on canvas, c. 1530–32.

obstruct intercourse and thus have to be excised. He adds, however, that an enlarged clitoris is much more ‘inconvenient for congress’ than an enlarged nymphae because it is harder than the nymphae.³² In fact, the clitoris was regarded as a female penis that, as Jane Sharp notes, ‘will stand and fall as the yard doth and makes women lustful and take delight in copulation’.³³ For some anatomists like Crooke or Bartholin an enlarged clitoris was particularly troublesome because they regarded it as the locus of female homosexuality. As Bartholin states: ‘sometimes they abuse the clitoris as if it were a penis and they lie with other women’.³⁴ It is because of this homoerotic disposition that Bartholin and many of his colleagues refer to the clitoris as ‘contempt of men’.³⁵ By the beginning of the seventeenth century, this ‘contempt of men’ was made culturally intelligible in the monstrous figure of the ‘tribade’ – a woman who because of her enlarged clitoris desired and had sex with other women. Crooke, for instance, describes her as an abuser of the clitoris: ‘And this part it is which those wicked women do abuse called Tribades (often mentioned by many Authors, and in some states worthily punished) to their mutuall and unnaturall lustes.’³⁶ As Traub notes, ‘It is not the “tribade’s” inconstant mind or sinful soul but her uniquely female yet masculinized morphology that propels her to engage in illicit behavior’.³⁷ As a result doctors recommended nymphotomia (that is, the excision of nymphae and/or clitoris) as a measure to ensure normal, heterosexual intercourse between men and women.³⁸

How did anatomists see, or rather imagine, these enlarged female genitals? As Bartholin writes: ‘It is absolutely true and it is not natural and it is monstrous that it grows to the length of a goose’s neck.’³⁹ Bartholin’s remark refers to a case described by the Swiss anatomist Felix Platter whose observation soon became a popular topos in the anatomical writing about the clitoris. Peucer even reports ‘Platter testifies to having seen one as long as a swan’s neck’.⁴⁰ In this context it is striking that, although the visual representation of the body’s structure and interior was an important feature of early-modern anatomy, books do not contain illustrations of enlarged nymphae or clitorises.⁴¹ However, Correggio’s depiction of Leda, albeit painted before the anatomical rediscovery of the clitoris, gives us a visual impression of the clitoris’s sexual and erotic possibilities, and carries a suggestion that the nymphs embodied knowledge of the female genitals and female erotic pleasure. But, while the anatomical discourse fashioned the enlarged clitoris and the desire it instilled into a monstrous thing, and while doctors recommended nymphotomia in order to discipline female sexuality, in Correggio’s *Leda and the Swan* no such condemnation (or operation) is implied. On the contrary, as in the case of Diana and her nymphs, the mythological content seems to cover up for the homoerotic dimension. In other words, the appropriation of the nymphs by the anatomical discourse

must be considered as a normalising gesture that fabricates heterosexual practices as the norm and homosexual practices as deviant. Obviously anatomy found inspiration in art. The question, then, is where does this interest in the clitoris and nymphae in both art and science come from and what is the significance of the negotiations between art and science?

It is important to keep in mind that the deconstruction of the nymphs by anatomy cannot be regarded as a conscious act of the individual anatomist. Rather, the treatment of the nymphs is part of the 'culture of dissection' that Jonathan Sawday has described. For Sawday, dissection means more than the fragmentation of the corpse by the anatomist, indeed, he takes it to describe a social and cultural activity that includes a 'violent reduction of parts: a brutal dismemberment of people, things, or ideas'.⁴² The term 'culture of dissection' suggests that anatomy, with its new focus on dismemberment and partition, is at the centre of this 'network of practices, social structures and rituals' and Sawday identifies *Anatomia*, the goddess of division, as 'the emblem of this culture'.⁴³ It is, however, important to note that anatomical dissections did not *cause* a different perception of the female genitals. After all, anatomists had performed dissections of the female body since the end of the thirteenth century, albeit not quite as frequently as in the early-modern period, without 'discovering' the nature of female sexual pleasure.⁴⁴ When more than 200 years later the meaning of the female genitals, as well as the nature of female erotic pleasure, became so important to anatomy, it was not because anatomists for the first time since antiquity had opened up and looked into the female body, but because they *saw* this body *differently*. As we shall see, the reintroduction, and improvement, of linear perspective into European culture at the end of the fifteenth century led to new perceptions of female sexuality. The culture of dissection is not an effect of anatomy, rather anatomy became so important because it offered the opportunity to provide a body for this new vision.

The heterosexual vision

As Marshall McLuhan has argued, 'the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'.⁴⁵ What was linear perspective's contribution? First, perspective is a medium providing at once the 'correct' *perception* as well as the 'correct' *representation* of the world.⁴⁶ This vision is achieved by a reduction of the world to the point of view of the one-eyed, immobile, sovereign and detached, male viewer and its counterpart, the vanishing point. Albrecht Dürer in his *Entwürfe* explained that 'the division of things that one sees' was crucial to achieve the 'right vision'.⁴⁷ This division could be manufactured with the help

of the so-called ‘velum’, a grid made of very fine, transparent cloth put into a frame through which the artist looked at his object. Walter Ryff described the velum as a ‘pure, thin ... fabric of the most unadulterated fibre’.⁴⁸ The perspectival gaze produced dichotomies – for example: active/passive, male/female, subject/object – and thus was the medium in and with which the culture of dissection came to be realised. Linear perspective put the anatomist in a position from which to determine the ‘truth’ about the human body – after all anatomical dissections of humans were first performed for legal purposes⁴⁹ – and it is anatomy that provided flesh for the geometrical patterns of perspective. Renowned artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, Andrea del Sarto or Domenico del Babiere, who experimented with perspective, attended dissections and were responsible for the illustrations in many of the famous anatomy books.⁵⁰

What is true for the body is also true for sexuality. Linear perspective not only divides the visible world into binary oppositions, it also envisions seeing in terms of heterosexual reproduction. Teachers of perspective over and over again emphasised that the truthful representation of the visible world was based on images conceived in the mind, the so-called ‘*concetto*’.⁵¹ As Dürer noted, a good painter is full of concepts which he ‘ejaculates’ in and through his work and this will grant him immortality.⁵² Linear perspective allowed the artist – like God – to create the visible world by a pure act of will, and perspectival rules were meant to help the artist impregnate the unformed material with his own concepts. Consequently, the world perceived, as well as the images produced, were proof of the artist’s potency. Thus, looking becomes a form of heterosexual intercourse and the eye a transmitter of sperm. Consider Aristotle’s influential assumptions about the different roles and functions of men and women for the *Generation of Animals*: ‘male and female differ in their logos, because the male is that which has the power to generate in another ... while the female is that which can generate in itself, i.e. it that out of which the generated offspring, which is present in the generator, comes into being’.⁵³ And, he continues: ‘The male provides form and the principle of the movement, the female provides the body, in other words the material.’⁵⁴ In his *Disputations Touching the Generation* (1657) William Harvey stated that artistic creation and heterosexual reproduction were in fact one and the same for ‘the generation of things in Nature and the generation of things in Art take place in the same way... Both are first moved by some conceived form which is immaterial and is produced by conception.’⁵⁵

Envisaged in this way, the velum, this ‘purest’ and ‘thinnest’ of all fabric, functions as an artificial hymen awaiting the penetration of the artist’s gaze. Within this heterosexual matrix, sexuality is visualised and vision is sexualised. With the development and circulation of perspective in Europe,

gender and sexuality were increasingly represented in terms of (male) looking and (female) being looked at.⁵⁶ In this context the renaissance of nymphs in paintings, which took place from the second half of the fifteenth century onward, reflects perspective's focus on sexuality and reproduction. The nymphs represent the masculine concept of self-generation and sexualised vision while at the same time, some of these pictures resist heterosexuality and thus invite a queer gaze.⁵⁷ However, with the increasing visualisation of sexuality during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this particular kind of female sexual self-sufficiency and autonomy slowly disappears from both the canvases and anatomy. These displacements include the boisterous condemnation as well as the silent effacement of female homosexuality.

As Traub has shown, over the course of the seventeenth century, dramatists significantly change the meaning of the nymphs' sexuality in Diana's band. While, at the beginning of the century, Thomas Heywood depicted the nymphs' homoeroticism as natural, in later dramas this desire is staged precisely in order to be condemned. However, Callisto is not banished because she had sex with a man but because she had sex with a woman; Diana and her nymphs are chaste precisely *because* they are heterosexual yet virginal. This transformation is accompanied by a modification of the nymphs' environment, that is, of their sexual and erotic nature. In this context water is of special importance and in paintings these alterations are most clearly visible.

While in earlier paintings water is abundant, later paintings show the gradual drying up of their grove.⁵⁸ This dryness is significant because, as I have indicated, water, especially running water, symbolised the sexual energies of the nymphs and was central to their nature; hence, the lack of water in later paintings implies an alteration of this nature. In Louis de Boullogne's *Diana Resting* (1707) the water in the nymphs' grove has been reduced to a little puddle useful for nothing more than a footbath (Figure 11.4). Sometimes there is so little water it is hard to speak of a spring at all. The increasing dryness in these paintings also suspends the association between nymph and nymphae or clitoris. At the same time, clothes become more important: in contrast to the earlier paintings I have discussed, later pictures show Diana and her nymphs either fully dressed or draped with cloth in such a way that direct skin contact between them is prevented. While these paintings certainly represent erotic relationships between women, they do so by focusing on their chaste rather than on their sexual dimension. To put it differently, while in earlier paintings the discourse of chastity served as a veil to represent and consume female homoeroticism, in later paintings female homoeroticism is represented *as* chaste.⁵⁹

Another version of the nymphs' chastity, this time by keeping the water flowing, can be found in Opitz's aforementioned *Schäfferey*. In this text, three



11.4 Louis de Boullogne, *Diana Resting*, oil on canvas, 1707.

poets, while on a journey across the *Riesengebirge* during the Thirty Years War, all of a sudden encounter the nymph Hercinie ‘who in a fresh grotto or cave lay on her left arm ... dressed in a subtle and transparent veil, her hair adorned with a green wreath and draped in a foreign fashion, and in her right hand she held a container of very white marble out of which ran a small creek’.⁶⁰ Unlike Actaeon, who is severely punished for surprising the nymphs at their bath, the travellers are greeted with a song and, what is even more surprising, they are invited to visit the grotto. Upon entering the grotto, the three poets are impressed by the waterfalls: ‘When we came into the cave, we could not see anything else but water of the purest kind ... we found ourselves in a very cool grotto out of which not only this water came running, there were other streams surfacing through hidden paths and arteries of the rocks.’⁶¹ Surprised and overwhelmed, they ‘almost lost their hearing because of the loud noise and running of the cataract’. In another room – which ‘usually remains closed for male eyes’, as Hercinie tells them – they encounter nymphs occupied with ‘spinning, weaving and sewing’.⁶² Finally, they set foot in the inner sanctuary of the grotto: a room dedicated to the memory of the Schaffgotsch family’s male heirs who have secured and protected the wealth and freedom of the *Riesengebirge* and who are therefore honoured and cared for by the nymphs. As Hercinie explains to the visitors: ‘Their ancient blood, their virtue, their praiseworthy deeds and especially the quiet life which we have enjoyed with them as our guardians has earned them the erection of this memorial in our midst.’⁶³ In Opitz’s text the nymphs gather around male heroes whose accomplishments they commemorate and honour; their lodgings are characterised by male, not female potency. Thus, in the *Schäfferey* men become acquainted with the reassuring truth that the nymphs’ grotto actually is a sanctuary of male potency and fertility.

After having resurfaced from the grotto the poets continue their journey in search of the so-called ‘warm fountain’ whose water is said to possess magic healing powers.⁶⁴ Especially interesting is the description of the quality of its water: ‘In their midst there was the famous fountain with its spouting water generating a lot of tiny bubbles of a clear, transparent colour like a white saffire with a little bit of blue.’⁶⁵ This kind of water strikingly resembles descriptions of male semen. According to Aristotle’s influential version,

Semen, then, is a compound of pneuma and water (pneuma being hot air), and that is why it is fluid in its nature, it is made of water. Semen is thick and white.... The cause of the whiteness of semen is that it is foam, and foam is white, the whitest being that which consists of the tiniest particles, so small that each individual bubble cannot be detected by the eye.⁶⁶

Harvey’s observation that male sperm is ‘permeated with spirit by the fervency of coitus or desire and froth with the nature of spume’ clearly echoes

Aristotle's definition.⁶⁷ In the *Schäfferey* the nymphs of the spring do not possess any of the sexual autonomy their predecessors had. Instead of female fecundity and sexuality their water now symbolises male fertility and instead of being honoured themselves they exist to honour the male benefactor who erected the fountain or protects the grove.

This same tendency to heterosexualise female sexuality can be observed in the anatomical discourse where, by the end of the seventeenth century, the nymphae and clitoris do not resemble Cranach's self-contained nymph or Correggio's aggressive swan but, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, 'a comb of a cock'.⁶⁸ Rather than possessing sexual pleasures of their own, clitoris and nymphae have been transformed into a kind of adornment serving to arouse women's and men's lust for heterosexual intercourse. It is at this point in history that the term 'nymphomania' is introduced in the anatomical and medical discourse. As the pathological 'other' of the chaste and heterosexual nymph, the nymphomaniac woman embodies the male fantasy of a woman whose well-being depends upon sexual satisfaction provided by men. At the end of the seventeenth century, both nymph and nymphomaniac refer to an invisible male voyeur whose potency and fertility they embody and make visible. The introduction of the term nymphomania marks precisely this transformation of the nymphae and clitoris into heterosexual and yet inconsequential genitalia.

The extent to which the heterosexual vision tends to naturalise the bodies and sexualities it helped to construct becomes evident in Sigmund Freud's theories on the development of femininity. In his 1931 essay 'Female sexuality' he writes:

We have long understood that the development of female sexuality is complicated by the fact that the girl has the task of giving up what was originally her leading genital zone – the clitoris – in favour of a new zone – the vagina. ... Thus in female development there is a process of transition from one phase to the other, to which there is nothing analogous in the male.⁶⁹

This shift of the girl's erotogenic sensibility from the clitoris to the vagina is caused by her 'acknowledgement' that she lacks the penis and thus 'grows dissatisfied with her clitoris'.⁷⁰ Although Freud was certain he had found the anatomical foundation for the development of female heterosexuality, he had to admit that he was not yet able to describe the biology of this development: 'We do not, of course, know the biological basis of these peculiarities in women.'⁷¹

In the light of the history of the nymphs and nymphomania, it seems obvious that Freud was not able to find an answer to this question because he was looking for *biology* where there is *culture*. As I have tried to show, the introduction of nymphomania into medical and anatomical discourse

indicates that the shift from clitoris to vagina, from auto- or homoeroticism to full womanhood, as Freud would have it, is in fact a *cultural* and *historical* process. This process tells us about the importance of visuality for female erotic pleasure – a relation that Freud fully acknowledged. In both Freud's and my own account, sexuality and vision cannot be separated. In 'Some psychical consequences of the anatomical distinction between the Sexes', Freud attributes women's erotic abandonment of the clitoris to the frustration the little girl experiences when she 'notice[s] the penis of a brother or a playmate, *strikingly visible* and of large proportions, [and] at once recognizes it as the superior counterpart of [her] own small and *inconspicuous* organ, and from that time forward fall[s] a victim to the envy for the penis'.⁷² The little boy, on the other hand, 'begins by showing irresolution and lack of interest' when he 'first catches sight of a girl's genital region'.⁷³ However, in fact it is the male's eagerness to gaze on the female genitals that gave rise to the cultural fantasy 'that the elimination of clitoral sexuality is a necessary precondition for the development of femininity'.⁷⁴ From this perspective, women's envy for the penis appears as a projection (in every sense of the word) of male clitoris-envy: 'It is absolutely true and it is not natural and it is monstrous that it grows to the length of a goose's neck.'⁷⁵

Notes

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