

Nymph Mania:

J. W. Waterhouse's *Femme Fatales* and Victorian Anxieties About Shifting Gender Dynamics

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## Thesis

J. W. Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* (Fig 1) provides a valuable insight into late 19th century anxieties about shifting gender power dynamics. Through its depiction of the *femme fatale*, we are introduced to the Victorian "New Woman" as a nymph: a deceptively beautiful woman characterized by her long, unbound hair, who, beneath her demure exterior, is morally corrupt and wild and uses her sexuality to manipulate and overpower men. Re-examining the implicit ideology of this painting is necessary to understand how it mirrors more recent anxieties around sex and gender power dynamics. I argue that its temporary removal in 2018 by the Manchester Gallery was not a dangerous step toward art censorship, but a successful attempt at prompting open discussion around this misogynistic artistic archetype and its place in our current society.



Figure 1: Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs*, 1896

## Introduction

John William Waterhouse's (1849-1917) *Hylas and the Nymphs* has hung in England's Manchester Gallery since it was purchased from the artist in 1896. The painting captures an episode from the Greek myth of Hylas, one of Heracles's companions and lovers. This scene depicts the moment before his death at the hands of lustful nymphs, while he gazes at them, beguiled by their charms. The watery beauties float about the water's edge like auburn-haired lilies, offering pearls and coquettish looks to lure the poor youth away from shore; however, their firm grasps on his arm and tunic betray a far less innocent nature.

In early 2018, the painting was removed from its display in the room titled "In Pursuit of Beauty" as part of a new exhibition with artist Sonia Boyce. After starting conversations with gallery staff about how art is selected, displayed, and interpreted, the artist staged a gallery "takeover" around the questions of gender the works raised.<sup>1</sup> Visitors were encouraged to leave sticky notes in the space the painting once occupied expressing their "responses to the action that would inform how the painting would be shown and contextualized when it was rehung."<sup>2</sup> They were invited into the now-visible workings of museums and their curators, to become active participants in the new presentation of the piece.<sup>3</sup>

Although the removal did receive much support and prompted thoughtful discussion, it also saw some backlash that cried 'censorship' and saw it as an erasure of history. Critics argued

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<sup>1</sup> Higgins, Charlotte. "The Vitriol Was Really Unhealthy': Artist Sonia Boyce on the Row over Taking down Hylas and the Nymphs." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, March 19, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/mar/19/hylas-nymphs-manchester-art-gallery-sonia-boyce-interview>.

<sup>2</sup> "Presenting the Female Body: Challenging a Victorian Fantasy." Manchester Art Gallery. July 19, 2018. Accessed June 2019. <http://manchesterartgallery.org/news/presenting-the-female-body-challenging-a-victorian-fantasy/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Manchester Art Gallery Collection." Manchester Art Gallery. Accessed May 2019. <http://manchesterartgallery.org/collections/search/collection/?id=1896.15>.

that to remove art from the walls, even for a week, was not social progression but regression.

They perceived a level of censorship, if not akin to Nazi Germany, then certainly heading down a slippery slope.<sup>4</sup> The critics' emphasis was widely placed on what they saw as a puritanical "fig leaf" reaction to the nymphs' half-nakedness, as if that were the only offending quality of their depiction. Visitors mourned the loss of a favorite painting and requested its return. After one week, the painting was returned with a new display plaque acknowledging the Victorian power relationships perpetuated in the narrative and the gallery's openness to questioning how they display and reconsider such vestiges of another time.

This piece does hold historical significance as an insight into a prevalent ideology of the time and place of its creation. It would be imprudent to ignore its role as a tool in support of the dominant gender power structure. We are a visual species, and "appeals to the eye play a significant role in the production and circulation of ideology."<sup>5</sup> This is exactly why the refusal to acknowledge how that ideology is still alive is to let it continue to circulate through inherited visual culture. Social regression is not being able to critically examine and reconsider agents of an oppressive ideology. This paper will give Waterhouse's *Hylas* appropriate scrutiny in the socio-cultural context of the reigning ideology it reflected and perpetuated. Special consideration will be given to the first women's rights movement; the sexual connotation of nymphs; and the

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<sup>4</sup> Community Letters. "Banning Artworks Such as Hylas and the Nymphs Is a Long, Slippery Slope | Letters." The Guardian. February 02, 2018. Accessed May 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/feb/02/banning-artworks-such-as-hylas-and-the-nymphs-is-a-long-slippery-slope>.

<sup>5</sup> Jaffe, Audrey. "Spectacular Sympathy: Visuality and Ideology in Dickens's A Christmas Carol." *Pmla* 109, no. 2 (March 1994): 254-65. doi:10.2307/463120.

Qtd in Sanchez, Adriana E. Dorado. *The R/Evolution of the Victorian Femme Fatale*. Master's thesis, University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, 2016. Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, MI. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2076658097/previewPDF/9FA7B99FFB4A455DPQ/24?accountid=14523>

significance of nakedness, the natural environment, and unbound hair in association with women in Victorian art.

### **The Victorian Femme Fatale and the Women's Rights Movement**

The hazards of female sexuality are constructed by Greco-Roman and Christian myth and legend, which were popular inspirations for Pre-Raphaelite paintings. From the first woman Eve, to Waterhouse's naiads, there is a wealth of literary and pictorial "evidence" reflecting and promoting the assumption that women are by nature dangerous. Art in the West has long been used as a tool to regulate women's behavior, by idealizing roles that were expected and encouraged, such as faithful wife and loving mother, and criticizing the roles that were seen as a threat to male dominance, such as the witch, prostitute, or seductress.<sup>6</sup> This ideological construct is also unvested in controlling women's sexuality. Though this was far from a new practice in the nineteenth century, fears of women's unbridled sexuality in the second half of the century reflected Victorian anxieties about shifting power dynamics. The revolutionary potential of the growing Women's Rights Movement was recognized all too clearly by those in power. This was a period of great societal change with a looming threat to the dominant patriarchal structure in the form of women's mobilization. By the late 19th century, women in England were gaining legal independence with the right to acquire and control property, whereas previously any rights they had were relinquished to their husbands upon marriage. Women were demanding not only a place in public and political spheres, but also reform of the domestic sphere, fighting against

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<sup>6</sup> Sanchez, Adriana E. Dorado. *The R/Evolution of the Victorian Femme Fatale*. Master's thesis, University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, 2016. Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, MI.<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2076658097/previewPDF/9FA7B99FFB4A455DPQ/24?accountid=14523>

domestic abuse and obstacles to petitioning for divorce.<sup>7</sup> They were also marrying later or not at all, entering the workforce, and having fewer children.<sup>8</sup>

Though fighting for the rights held by men, the Women's Rights Movement was conditioned by the Victorian notion of separate spheres, and even those Victorian feminists did



Figure 2: 1909 postcard

not see men and women as equals. They fought for equality in the eyes of the law, and the freedom to pursue activities of their choosing, which were often still expected to be distinct from those of men.<sup>9</sup> By this time - the 1890's - a new generation of suffragettes had emerged who argued that women deserved the vote for the very reason they were different from men.<sup>10</sup> However, men feared a complete role reversal. They feared a future which saw women working and campaigning for rights in a more independent, public role, leaving their husbands with the housework. This is an imagination evidenced by

hyperbolic suffrage-era postcards featuring emasculated house-husbands (Fig 2) and masculine, even violent, suffragettes. Men feared a loss of power, masculinity, and identity when confronted by women's growing independence. Familiar only with the long-standing unequal power structures of patriarchy, men were afraid that if women gained power, they would start treating

<sup>7</sup> Caine, Barbara. "Feminism, Suffrage and the Nineteenth-century English Women's Movement." *Women's Studies International Forum* 5, no. 6 (1982): 537-50. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(82\)90095-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(82)90095-4).

<sup>8</sup> Groneman, Carol. "Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (1994): 337-67. doi:10.1086/494887.

<sup>9</sup> Caine, 540.

<sup>10</sup> Hansan, J. "Women's Suffrage: The Movement." Social Welfare History Project. February 07, 2019. Accessed June 2019. <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/woman-suffrage/woman-suffrage-movement/>.

men in the same way men had been treating women. This was a zero sum game. Every inch women gained was perceived as power surrendered over by the patriarchy. This fear is why there was such a strong backlash by the male-dominated establishment, which struggled to prevent a complete loss of control ending with men as the oppressed.

Art of the time produced by and for the establishment showed not just the presumed (domestic) ideal for women to follow, but it also demonized of those women who chose to stray from the standard expected of them, who wielded the power they held, whether as objects of male desire or as people with natural human rights.<sup>11</sup> A return to classical myth romanticized the ancient power dynamics on which Western society had been built, while simultaneously condemning role-breaking “wild women” as threats to public safety. Prominent feminist art historian Linda Nochlin writes: “the function of ideology is to veil the overt power relations obtaining in society at a particular moment in history by making them appear to be part of the natural, eternal order of things.”<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the most powerful ideology can be the most subtle, because it is already pervasive and widely accepted. Myth also normalized the constructed belief in the deceptive character of women. This doctrine became a truth that was timeless, transcending culture. And this was the type of person who wanted to be allowed to vote!

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<sup>11</sup> Sanchez, Adriana E. Dorado. *The R/Evolution of the Victorian Femme Fatale*. Master's thesis, University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, 2016. Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, MI.<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2076658097/previewPDF/9FA7B99FFB4A455DPQ/24?accountid=14523>

<sup>12</sup> Nochlin, Linda. *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1989. p. 2. Qtd in Sanchez, Adriana E. Dorado. *The R/Evolution of the Victorian Femme Fatale*. Master's thesis, University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, 2016. Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, MI.<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2076658097/previewPDF/9FA7B99FFB4A455DPQ/24?accountid=14523>

## Nymphs and Female Sexuality

The nineteenth century introduced into Victorian English consciousness the term “nymphomania” to diagnose excessive female sexuality. Promiscuous women were now being seen as medical cases rather than delinquents, and nymphomania was now potentially grounds for institutionalization.<sup>13</sup> This afforded women even less agency in their perceived wrongdoing. Nymphomania was now a societal ill to be “fixed,” a disease that could plague even the most virtuous wife. This believed moral failure had been a topic of medical debate since Plato’s musings on the “wandering uterus,” an attempt to attribute various physical and psychological ailments to female sexual frustration.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the re-ignition of attention at this time highlights an increased concern with female sexuality. Symptoms warranting a diagnosis now included adultery, flirting, homosexuality, and having a higher libido than one’s husband.

However, in attempts to construct and classify female sexuality, contradictions arose. Nymphomania was at once a failure of women to uphold expectations of feminine modesty and appropriate response to male desire, and the inextricable nature of women, which was believed to be defined by their reproductive organs. This misguided medical explanation for the source of most women’s diseases—their generative organs—fell within the realm of diseases long written off as Plato’s “hysteria” of an empty womb. Even if Plato’s writings were no longer viewed as scientifically sound, the idea of women being defined by a need to procreate was used to justify

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<sup>13</sup> Luta, Isabella. "Nymphs and Nymphomania: Mythological Medicine and Classical Nudity in Nineteenth Century Britain." *Journal of International Women's Studies, Bridgewater State University* 18, no. 3 (February 2017): 35-50. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/55b9/5fc3f4010fcf2c08ae0b642f762ce3566d56.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Adair, Mark J. "Plato's View of the 'Wandering Uterus'." *The Classical Journal* 91, no. 2 (1995): 153-63. Accessed March 26, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/3298478](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3298478).

their limitation from social and economic roles and promote their restriction to the home, as wives and mothers.<sup>15</sup> They were still seen as nothing more than wombs for their husbands.

At the same time, “nymphomania” was used as a keyword in newspaper advertisements selling erotic volumes, so it held not just a dangerous meaning but a titillating one as well.<sup>16</sup> Women condemned as troublesome deviants could still be sexualized for the pleasure of men who could avail themselves of mistresses, up until one’s own wife was afflicted and her conjugal faithfulness was threatened. The term had entered the public consciousness in a more popular cultural than medical understanding, and, like the femme fatale, the nymphomaniac both excited and alarmed.

The term nymphomania is the female counterpart to satyriasis, the excessive sexual desire of men. Interestingly, this ancient disease is described as bringing about physical change in its victim, turning them into an animal-human hybrid known as a satyr. Satyrs were often depicted in ancient Greek art sporting horse tails and goat legs, animalistic creatures of the wild. Nymphs, on the other hand, were minor deities who were indistinguishable in appearance from beautiful, harmless human women. So, too, could any woman be driven to sexual excess, by nature, and even the most docile-looking daughter or wife could at any moment turn into a wild nymph. Due to the taboo surrounding public discourse of female sexuality, it is difficult to explore why “nymphomania” became the term commonly used to describe this medical condition. The meaning ascribed at the time to the “nymph” of nymphomania is ambiguous, just like the nature of the nymphs themselves in the art of the period. One sure fact is that nymphs are portrayed in Greek myth closely associated with sex, as either active or passive sexual beings.

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<sup>15</sup> Groneman, Carol. "Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (1994): 337-67. doi:10.1086/494887.

<sup>16</sup> Luta, 36.

They hold an inconsistent role as both aggressor and victim. To Waterhouse, that made them an even more attractive mystery, demure and available, yet dangerous, inhuman and unknowable creatures.<sup>17</sup> It also made them the perfect metaphor for the constructed view of the actual Victorian New Woman: weak-natured, yet dangerously strong in numbers; enchantingly beautiful, yet too masculine. This contradictory nature did not cancel itself out in the eyes of the dominant ideology, but rather showed that women were also duplicitous and unreliable.

### **Women in the Wild Environment**

True to his name, Waterhouse painted many women in watery scenes. The murky pools and rocky seas allude to the mysterious, unknowable nature of the female subjects and the danger of that mystery. The pairing of women and nature has more significance than mere aesthetic value. The Victorian idea of “separate spheres” to describe the social place of men and women normalized the limiting of women’s choices to the domestic realm.<sup>18</sup> The very appearance of Waterhouse’s women unaccompanied out of doors is cause for concern. This detail alone hints that these are feral women outside the structure of civilization. Since classical antiquity, women have been associated with wildness, excess, and emotion as opposed to men’s culture, moderation, and intellect. The Ancient Greeks saw women as having more in common with the animal kingdom than civil society, in the same category as animals, slaves, and foreign peoples: those subordinate to Greek men.<sup>19</sup> Waterhouse’s nymphs are no exception. They are the very embodiments of the disorder and lawlessness of nature.

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<sup>17</sup> Luta, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Kerber, Linda K. "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9-39. doi:10.2307/1889653

<sup>19</sup> Kostuch, Lucyna. "Do Animals Have a Homeland? Ancient Greeks on the Cultural Identity of Animals." *HUMaNIMALIA* 9, no. 1 (2019).

The environment in *Hylas* is very dark, lending contrast to the nymphs' pale skin. The trees and bushes are obscured in shadow, with small bursts of color from white and yellow flowers. It lends a dangerous, mystical air to the story, in direct contrast with the nymphs' playful, innocent appearance, belying a darker nature. Even the flowers have a sinister connotation to Victorians who knew their associated meaning.

Floriography, or the language of flowers, was very popular in Victorian France, England, and North America. The idea originated in part from Ancient Greek and Roman lore, and it was spread by the publication of hundreds of books listing the names of plants and their corresponding meaning.<sup>20</sup> *Hylas*'s nymphs are surrounded on all sides by water lilies. Water lilies belong to the family *Nymphaeaceae*, named for the nymphs which inhabit the same forest ponds and lakes. The nymphs seem to be human versions of lilies themselves, from their porcelain skin to their long hair, which dips beneath the surface of the water like the trailing, barely-visible stems of the lilies. Creeping tendrils of plants like water lilies are used by other Victorian artists such as Aubrey Beardsley to suggest the dangerous entrapment of feminine charm.<sup>21</sup> Like the lilies, the nymphs hardly disturb the surface of the water, with barely a ripple betraying any movement.<sup>22</sup> In their hair is seen budding yellow water lilies, *nuphar lutea*. Yellow lilies were known in the language of flowers to symbolize "falsehood".<sup>23</sup> In Christian tradition, white lilies embody purity, but by the Victorian period, they had taken on a more sinister

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<sup>20</sup> Loy, Susan. "Spread of Flower Symbolism: From the Victorian Language of Flowers to Modern Flower Emoji". Brunn S., Kehrein R. (eds) *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map*. (November 2018): 1-24.

<sup>21</sup> Goldhill, Simon. *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Noakes, Aubrey. *Waterhouse*. London, England: Chaucer, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Greenaway, Kate. *Language of flowers*. London, England: F Warne, 1846-1901. <https://archive.org/details/languageofflower00gree/page/26>

meaning with their association with dark, stagnant water. The nymphs are pure of heart only in appearance: lurking just under the surface is their true character.<sup>24</sup>

### Monstrous Women

Nymphs are not the only non-human women Waterhouse pulls from classical mythology. Even his monsters are beautiful, deceptively: from Odysseus's sweet-singing sirens (Fig 3 and 4) to the cursed enchantress Lamia (Fig 5 and 6), monsters are depicted as beguiling young maidens



Figures 3 and 4: Waterhouse's *The Siren*, 1900, and detail from Waterhouse's *Ulysses and the Sirens*, 1891

in various states of undress. Lamia, typically imagined in this period as a woman with the body of a snake, sheds her monstrous form to appear as a beautiful young woman with only the snake's skin, like a twisting, gilt shawl, hinting at her true nature (Fig 3.) Even alone, seemingly unobserved by men, she preens and admires herself for her own benefit, perfecting her human

<sup>24</sup> Mancoff, Debra N. *Flora Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art*. New York, NY: Prestel Pub, 2003.

disguise (Fig 4.) No matter the wickedness of their character, every horrid female monster is gracious and beautiful. This duplicitous nature—for it is a natural, gendered quality of these monsters to deceive and manipulate—makes them only more dangerous. Lamia has nothing but the snakeskin wrapped around her waist to allude to her monstrous form—who can fault her human lover for falling tragically in love with her? The choice of beautiful monsters also blurs the line between fantasy and reality, monster and maiden. These paintings serve as a real warning not against faeries and demons but against the most beautiful of human women.

Although Lamia is seemingly harmless looking at her reflection in a pool, and the small, slender nymphs pose no obvious threat to the enchanted Hylas, their bared breasts betray their threatening sexuality, their deviance from the virtuous Victorian ideal woman. The nymphs are not human—they have no sense of shame surrounding nakedness, and thus their standard of morals is not on par with those of civilized Christian Victorians. They—both the nymphs and human women—are creatures associated with the untamed natural world. This alone should be a warning against falling for their charms.

There must have been something that drew Waterhouse to the femme fatale, these dangerous female icons. There is no evidence in the form of journal



Figures 5 and 6: Waterhouse's *Lamia*, 1905 and 1909 versions

entries or letters that clarifies why he painted such powerful women, but he seems to be both enchanted and frightened by them to an almost obsessive degree. This is one reason why the Victorian femme fatale was in vogue, from sirens to enchantresses: they evoked simultaneous fear and desire in male viewers. They excited. His women's bold sexuality is alluded to but not aggressively flaunted. Reaching out to grab Hylas while staring directly into his eyes, Waterhouse's nymphs are bold for Victorian women, but they are also depicted as playful and delicate, almost fragile temptresses. Even as deadly victimizers, these women are still passive in that their main role is to be looked at as beautiful objects of male desire.<sup>25</sup> Waterhouse was concerned with soft, accessible art.<sup>26</sup> His half-dressed nymphs and mermaids titillated buyers without offending Victorian decency.

### **Victorian Nakedness and Sexuality**

The Victorian era saw a growing concern for the justification of nude figures in art. With the rise of photography, pornography was becoming more accessible and its potential to corrupt its audience's sexual morality was cause for alarm. In 1885, the Royal Academy found itself at the center of controversy surrounding its unusually high volume of female nudes.<sup>27</sup> Victorian moral sensibilities, exemplified by new "obscenity laws" penalizing the publishing of pornography, would have required the separation of sex from the nude, and the term "nude" itself elevated these pieces beyond crude sexual spectacle.<sup>28</sup> It was still all about sex, but no one

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<sup>25</sup> Silver, Carole G. "Waterhouse Revisited." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 1 (2011): 263-69. doi:10.1017/s1060150315000492.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, Alison, and Marsh Jordan. *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality, and Art*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Feather, Jessica. "1885 The Female Nudity Debate." *The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: A Chronicle, 1769–2018*. May 30, 2018. <https://chronicle250.com/1885>.

<sup>28</sup> Luta, 41.

wanted to admit it, and so the veil of “aesthetic ideal” was drawn over such nudes. “Nude” did not mean naked, and so neither will I use the terms interchangeably.

Classical pretexts were another way of excusing artistic nudes, as Greco-Roman sculptural nudes were considered the highest of “high art.” A return to classical narratives was one way to legitimize erotic art as indeed art, as Classics were the basis of an elite education. These paintings could be admired on a more “educated” level by a class of elites who were unlikely to be corrupted by a debased interpretation of such images.<sup>29</sup> However, in ancient Greek artistic production male figures such as Hylas were traditionally depicted in heroic nakedness while female figures were clothed or at least partly covered, so the veil of classical decency is thin here. This reversal comes from a Christian equation of nakedness with shame, which led to an aversion to showing male figures unclothed. Women, however, could be undressed to further sexualize and objectify them. Victorian Christian moral standards and gender roles were still very much at play in this illustration of classical myth.

In Waterhouse’s painting, Hylas, the human male subject, is instead the only clothed figure, dressed in a blue tunic and red sash. He is not of the nymphs’ realm; he hails from the cultured world. His clay amphora, a man-made object, also marks him as of what would be seen as a more complex, advanced people. The nymphs are adorned only in flowers; aside from a handful of pearls, they have no possessions. This reflects a Greco-Roman and Victorian view of women as naturally wild and needing to be tamed, educated, and civilized by men. In this case, the nymphs’ nakedness is not only a sign of inferior culture but also a disguise (in bare skin) that makes them seem harmless. They appear as innocent, wide-eyed young women. They are

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<sup>29</sup> Luta, 42.

literally unarmed, their bodies soft and petite, their nakedness vulnerable. At first glance, they present no obvious threat to Hylas, which only makes them all the more treacherous.

In contrast to classical myths of the abduction of women (the norm in ancient Greek and Roman mythology), the emphasis here is placed upon female desire, which makes these nymphs even more subversive and dangerous. As women, they rely on sexual charm rather than physical strength to capture their victim, who approaches willingly. Victorian women were viewed as the weaker sex, who resorted to the devious weapon of sexuality to get their way with men. However, discussion around Victorian women's sexuality was polarizing, trying to reconcile the "virgin and whore," unable to decide whether the nature of women's sexuality was inherently innocent or lascivious. The nymphs, blurring the distinction between the two, posed a threat to this restrictive ideology.<sup>30</sup> Critics of the time sought to find childlike purity in the nymphs' expression, denying any implied abduction or even lust. The nymphs' desire is "imagined more as a dreamy hopefulness" than anything predatory, writes Simon Goldhill.<sup>31</sup> The nymphs' direct correlation to real Victorian women makes the depiction of female desire so threatening. This was the reversal of gender roles that so terrified men. Female desire was so vilified in Victorian society that they could not even bear to acknowledge its existence in Waterhouse's painting. Even though this role reversal was so subversive, the public reaction proved Waterhouse's message of the danger of this reversal to be already deeply ingrained in the dominant ideology of the time.

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<sup>30</sup> Goldhill, Simon. *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Goldhill, 53.

## Unbound Hair and Loose Morals

The same neatness, order, and discipline expected of Victorian women was also extended to their hair. Having well-kept hair was at once a social virtue, an assertion of women's compliance with her role, and a means of keeping her there. The required maintenance of long hair, which was expected to be styled at least twice a day and to suit every occasion, was a way of regulating women's lives and preventing unruliness. Fashionable Victorian men, on the other hand, including Waterhouse himself, sported freely growing beards and short, practical hair as a sign of manhood. While women had to be cultivated and controlled and were expected to spend countless hours disciplining their hair, men were naturally perfect and free with a much simpler grooming routine that reflected an active lifestyle of important pursuits.<sup>32</sup>

Pre-Raphaelite artists, in their romantic depictions of beautiful women, have a sexual, almost obsessive fixation on their long, unbound hair. Even though Victorian women were expected to put in the effort to maintain carefully composed hairstyles, Euro-American art has a tradition of shaming women's vanity. Depictions of Waterhouse's *Lamia* or Rosetti's *Lady Lilith* brushing their shiny lengths of hair (Fig 6) may morally condemn the dishonesty of a made-up appearance or excessive preoccupation with one's own beauty. They also focus on the unboundedness of the women's hair and evoke the danger of tentacles or snakes of a monster like Medusa's hair. These women are not in the process of



Figure 7: Waterhouse, circa 1886

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<sup>32</sup> Ofek, Galia. *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

taming their hair, they are shown grooming with their hair flowing freely. The brush does not tame the hair but freely exposes its full length and volume. Not only are these villainesses vain, but they are powerful. They exist independent of men, and exercise control over their beauty and sexuality, subverting standards for the Victorian woman. Lilith's expression as she stares into her mirror reflects this. One can sense in the artist a fear of what comes of women holding themselves in high regard and not letting themselves be tamed or disciplined. Lilith, according to some Jewish and Christian traditions, was the first woman, who was created at the same time as Adam and flew from the Garden of Eden after he refused to recognise her as his equal. She was thereafter cursed to roam the earth as a night-demon, a succubus who steals children and rapes men while they sleep.<sup>33</sup> Rossetti's Lilith appears in no way demonic, but she retains the role of seductress with her long hair, and the infamy associated with her name. This may be pre-curse Lilith, her wickedness not yet brought from inside to out. Like the nymphs, she becomes even more dangerous through her perfectly human appearance. The first woman, also the first female demon, was evil just for being so bold as to refuse to be subservient to her partner. And she looks just like a modern Victorian woman, thus evoking the notion of female nature itself being intrinsically devious, disobedient, and dangerously vain.



Figure 8: Rossetti's *Lilith*, 1866-68

<sup>33</sup> Gaines, Janet Howe. "Lilith." Biblical Archaeology Society. April 17, 2019. Accessed June 2019. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/lilith/>.

The femme fatale, recognizing the power she holds over men, poses a threat to the Victorian status quo. Loose hair is the mark of the New Woman, independent and self-assured. Of course, this is not a positive depiction to the men portraying these women. Just as one would tame hair with a pin or braid, they would see women tamed and domesticated. Their independent woman was a lethal monster, her loose hair betraying her wild and dangerous nature.<sup>34</sup> It is no coincidence that all of Waterhouse's monsters appear as ideal beauties of the time (young, white, petite, pale, long-haired.) They are all very human, and their monstrous qualities are ones inextricable from the nature of any Victorian woman: wildness, duplicitousness, and unbridled



Figure 9: Waterhouse's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, 1893

sexuality.

Waterhouse's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, based on the John Keats poem of the same name, shows a woman pulling a knight closer with her long, loose hair, a symbol of her unbound sexuality and its destructive power. She gazes at him, seemingly entranced, just as the nymphs gaze up at Hylas. Her knight leans in, as if for a kiss, unaware he is being physically ensnared by that very hair that so attracted him. Other Pre-Raphaelite interpretations also choose to focus on the faerie woman's long, beautiful hair, to

which the poem only devotes the description "her hair was long."<sup>35</sup> The consistent attention to

<sup>34</sup> Allen, Virginia M. "'One Strangling Golden Hair': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lady Lilith." *The Art Bulletin* 66, no. 2 (1984): 285-94. doi:10.2307/3050418.

<sup>35</sup> Keats, John. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci: A Ballad by John Keats." Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44475/la-belle-dame-sans-merci-a-ballad>.

this detail is a way to allude to the woman's monstrous, fae nature. She may look like a beautiful maiden, and she may act transfixed by love, but she will never be tamed by any man, as her unbound tentacle-like hair reveals.

The same iconography can be applied to *Hylas and the Nymphs*. Like La Belle Dame, the nymphs' danger is not immediately clear, but their feral nature should not be underestimated. One nymph plays with her hair enticingly while her sisters tug at his clothes and arm, pulling their victim into the water. Their long hair does not flow freely and wildly, but follows the trailing of the lily stems. It is heavier, wetted and pulled down into the water, just as Hylas will soon be. Waterhouse chose to capture the exact scene when Hylas lets himself be entranced by the nymphs while they have yet to show him their true character. The tension of this climactic point of the narrative reminds the viewer to not be fooled by appearances: though they look like dainty beauties, these are not harmless women, nor faithful wives. They are wild, lustful beings whose sway over men holds the power to destroy them.

## **Conclusion**

In addition to recognizing the painting's original context, it is necessary to also observe the context that saw both praise and outcry over its removal. Manchester Gallery curator Clare Gannaway confirmed the removal was sparked in part by the #MeToo movement in the US and the UK. Our perception of the painting today is colored by this recent movement, which saw its own share of criticism stemming from fears of duplicitous women with the power to spell men's downfall. A campaign to empower survivors and bring justice upon sexual predators was spun by opponents as the dangerous and growing power of women to ruin men with a single lie. The

idea of the dangerous entrapment of female sexuality ran through this narrative, too. If women were not vengeful, they were attention-seeking; if they were not attention-seeking, they were overly sensitive and misguided about the difference between flirting and assault. Even still, the perception of women's nature was torn between being both too powerful and too delicate. The victim dynamic was flipped. Every woman was a potential threat, and every flirtation spelled potential disaster. Fear spread that anyone could find himself the modern Hylas, and the nymphs appeared, in the moment, just as harmless and inviting.

Women's empowerment is still widely viewed as synonymous with a direct attack on the security and liberty of men. Women's perceived power was greatly exaggerated to the extent that they could manipulate the law in their favor. This surge of women's unity and support was believed to endanger not just sexual predators but any innocent man who could one day find himself ruined for flirting with a woman too boldly. Many men felt threatened by this new political correctness and longed for simpler times where a man actively pursued a passive woman. Women were still expected to conform to a Victorian ideal, as demure receivers of men's advances. This dynamic is seen as the natural order of things, a constructed binary normalized by art and other instruments of ideology and still seen as something to be preserved. *Hylas*, even though it portrays female pursuit of a male interest, still supports this ideology by condemning this role reversal, with the death of the innocent protagonist serving as a warning against a sexual dynamic with women active, autonomous, enthusiastic, and in control. This dynamic terrified Victorian men who felt threatened by a gender role reversal and loss of power, and it seems not much has changed since.

This new-old fear about shifting gender roles surrounding sexuality constructed the post-MeToo idea of the new femme fatale, whose flirtation is dangerous, whose appearance is deceiving, whose role is not a passive one, whose innocuous femininity gives her the power to bend the law in her favor. These fears came with a confusion about traditional roles of romantic pursuit now criticised and about seemingly-new boundaries of consent and acceptable sexual conduct. However, the misogynist ideology unearthed by this debate is far from modern.

Ideology is not always overt. Researcher of Victorian literature Nina Auerbach writes, “A cultural myth thrives in large part because it lives below the formulated surface of its age; rarely does it crystallize into explicit gospel or precept which the conscious mind can analyze and reject.”<sup>36</sup> The popularity of misogynistic classical myths, the myth of the femme fatale, the archetypes of the seductress, the demoness, and the witch, have not died out because they have not been addressed for what they are. *Hylas and the Nymphs* does not spark universal controversy because it functions as a more subtle piece of accepted ideology whose message is so ingrained in our society it appears nonexistent. This subtlety in no way diminishes the potency of the painting’s gendered message; on the contrary, the message becomes stronger because the subtlety of its delivery allows it to remain unquestioned. True cultural progression means being able to re-contextualize pieces of history in our current society for the very reason that much of the context which sparked their creation is still with us today.

All history has something to tell us, and if we removed every piece of art which in any way perpetuates a misogynistic ideology, Western galleries would be bereft of innumerable beautiful works. It is impossible to seal off the present from the past, but the two do not have an

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<sup>36</sup>Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. London: Harvard U. Press, 1982.

immutable relationship. It is entirely possible to cherish a painting's aesthetic value and narrative content while also presenting it as a product of a dominant ideology which might not have such a welcome place in our own society. Sonia Boyce accomplished just this by opening an avenue of public discussion around the issue without censorship, welcoming all opinions and not fighting against the display of the painting itself but against how we romanticize and internalize its message. Waterhouse's nymphs are back in their place on the wall unharmed; it is the gallery that has changed.

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Figure 1, Waterhouse, John William, *Hylas and the Nymphs*, Oil on canvas, 1896, (Manchester Gallery), <http://www.jwwaterhouse.com/view.cfm?recordid=18>

Figure 2, Dunston-Weiler Lithograph Company, *Suffragette Series No 11*, Color lithographic postcard, 1909, <https://sites.uni.edu/palczewski/NEW%20postcard%20webpage/Dunston%20Weiler.html>.

Figure 3, Waterhouse, John William, *The Siren*, Oil on canvas, 1900, (Sotheby's Collection), <http://www.jwwaterhouse.com/view.cfm?recordid=3>.

Figure 4, Waterhouse, John William, *Ulysses and the Sirens* detail, Oil on canvas, 1891, (National Gallery of Victoria, Victoria, Australia), <http://www.jwwaterhouse.com/view.cfm?recordid=61>.

Figure 5, Waterhouse, John William, *Lamia* [on her knees], Oil on canvas, 1905, (Private collection, London), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/freeparking/752358805>.

Figure 6, Waterhouse, John William, *Lamia* [by the pond], Oil on canvas, 1909, (Private collection), <http://www.johnwilliamwaterhouse.com/pictures/lamia-1909/>.

Figure 7, Mendelssohn, Hayman Selig, photograph of J.W. Waterhouse, circa 1886, <http://www.johnwilliamwaterhouse.com/articles/photos-john-william-waterhouse/>.

Figure 8, Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, *Lady Lilith*, Oil on canvas, 1866-68, (Delaware Art Museum), <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lady-Lilith.jpg>.

Figure 9, Waterhouse, John William, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, Oil on canvas, 1893, (Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Germany), <http://www.jwwaterhouse.com/view.cfm?recordid=20>.