

Jennifer Larson, *Greek Nymphs. Myth, Cult, Lore*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, 380 p.

Jennifer Larson, Associate Professor of Classics at Kent University, approaches in this study a religious field little researched by scholars in the past years, their scientific interest favoring the intellectual apprehension of the divine through the sacred text and the decrypting and reconfiguring efforts of the elite cultural representatives of those times. The nymphs have been associated almost exclusively with the rural and pastoral ethos and therefore have received little attention from the ancient scholars and consequently from the modern researchers, and the interest manifested by the scholar-poets of Alexandria in the Hellenistic period for local religious folklore didn't change the general contemporary habitual indifference. Along with only a few other mythical figures, the nymphs survived Christianity and its dichotomy between good and evil and its subsequent dual classification, transformed into the *neraides*, in themselves carriers of the ancient fictional patterns of the old nymphs.

The first chapter deals with the fundamental mythological characteristics of the nymphs, starting with the traditional taxonomy and ending in the nymph's image in the Greek poetry, while having dealt with the relationship between nymphs and the landscape and how *nympholepsy* meets divination. The terms nymph and naiad are juxtaposed and the typical nymph names contain the element "nais" or end in the suffix "-rhoe" (or the flowing movement of the water). The nymphs are daughters of gods but not all of them have an unlimited lifespan, immortality being interchanged with the lifespan of the natural element which the nymphs represents. They are ambiguous, aggressive, sensual, untamed entities, predisposed to a high degree of eroticism which sometimes ends with the death of the sexual human counterpart. The nymphs have often been the center of attention of the social "deliverance" as eponyms, constituting divine genealogies. They are always associated with a water source and therefore provided fresh water, thus accumulating healing and divination (inspiration) valences. They play a diversity of roles, from nurses to members of the divine cortege, the *kourotrophic* function being the most important in the cultic experiences. Nymphs always dwell and are associated with natural wild places, from the spring and the mountains to the caves and the famous *locus amoenus*, all these *topoi* having symbolical relations with the female anatomy: *kepos* (garden), *leimon* (meadow), *delta* and *pedion* (plain) and so on. Narrative and cultic motives juxtapose the nymphs with satyrs, sylens, herding and pastoralism, caves, trees, bees and honey. Least but not last, *nympholepsy* denotes that particular and peculiar mental state defined as acute perception and verbal ability that occurs as a result of one's presence in the vicinity of nymphs.

The second chapter is structured as to identify and to ascertain the authentic relationship between the ancient pastoral deities and the modern *neraides*, through analysis of the patterns of interaction, the tales of capture and abduction, the association of certain nymphs with trees and the stories which involve nymphs and herdsmen. Today's researchers are puzzled by a few problematic questions, like whether the contemporary *neraides* are morbid descendents of the ancient nymphs or how can the present deities be understood in their rich significance through the old ones. The Modern Greek folklore reduced the term "nymphē" to the simple and exclusive denotation of the brides, while the sinister *neraides* became members of a larger mythological category, the "exotica" or "things outside or beyond", negative and obsequious beings. "Daimones like the *neraides* survived because they resisted Christianity more successfully than the Olympians, being more basic to people's daily lives", although they didn't escape its strict and dogmatic dual partition. Further on, Jennifer Larson depicts legends and tales of capture and abduction by the ancient nymphs, in examples such as the stories of Hylas and Bormos, the abduction of young nubile by *neraides*, the controversial capturing of nymphs by mortal heroes, such as the legend of Thetis and Peleus and also narratives concerning the relationship between the nymphs and the trees and what

happens if one cuts down or helps a tree survive a lethal danger. She also specifies legends which involve the interaction between nymphs and herdsman, from Daphnis to the Trojan Paris, stories that form the quintessential matter of the Greek pastoral and bucolic tradition. In addition, the author extracts a few patterns traceable from antiquity to the modern folklore, such as the dominant theme of the actual or virtual sexual relationship between a mortal male and a superhuman female or the transforming of a number of girls into the nymphs playmate. The contemporary traditional lore sees the *neraides* as a fictionalizing of the danger that comes from infidelity or from impure bastards, as well a mythological and poetical image of the hidden and also forbidden sexuality, and all this merges somehow with the image of the *antic nymphs*.

Within the textual boundaries of the third chapter, Jennifer Larson depicts the particular relationship between the major gods and goddesses and these wild superhuman entities and their significance and somewhat inevitable role in women's life. On one hand we see that there's a sort of ambiguity in what concerns the nymphs and the *sylens* or *satyrs*, as they have been known in the archaic period as the natural sexual counterpart of the nymphs. In time the latter became ridiculous figures of an unstrained and blunt sexuality, while the nymphs remained themselves. On the other hand Dionysus establishes a different non-sexual image of the nymphs as mothers, entities that nursed him while he was an infant on mount Nyssa. The nymphs come into conjunction also with Hermes, Apollo and Pan, a late bestial and exuberant nature god who won consideration after the battle of Marathon in 490.

Of great importance is the *kourotrophic* status of the nymphs, as they unquestionably played a significant role in young female's life. In the classical Greece, women's existential feature was built exclusively around fertility and, thus had to bare a number of rituals in order to stimulate healthy childbirth. A lot of votive dolls dedicated to the nymphs were found in caves and altars and this precipitates us in the understanding of women's life cycles. In this respect these supernatural entities shared their part with goddesses such as Artemis or Aphrodite.

The following chapter deals with the nymph's lore in the Greek world and, with the information of the last chapter, "Caves of the nymphs and votive iconography", traces a few lines of understanding this mythological reality through archeological evidence.

This is with no doubt the most extensive and reliable study on the tradition of nymphs from antiquity to the modern times and, in respect of the new cognitive perspectives it brings to light, it may be a cornerstone in the study of ancient and contemporary religion.

Georgian Sas