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

Charles Burroughs

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

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.

² Tobias Leuker, "'Ameto' vor der *Primavera*—Die *ninfa fiorentina* zwischen Giovanni Boccaccio und Aby Warburg," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 87 (2005): 197.

³ On Warburg's *pathosformel* as such, see Moshe Barasch, "'Pathos formulae': Some Reflections on the Structure of the Concept," in *Imago Hominis: Studies in the Language of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 119–127; Marcus A. Hurttig and Thomas Ketelsen, eds., *Die entfesselte Antike. Aby Warburg und die Geburt der Pathosformel* (Cologne: Walther König, 2012); Colleen Becker, "Aby Warburg's *Pathosformel* as Methodological Paradigm," *Journal of Art Historiography* 9 (2013). Accessed Online February 20, 2016 <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/becker.pdf>.

⁴ Kurt W. Forster, "Aby Warburg: His Study of Ritual and Art on Two Continents," October 77 (1996): 15.

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



Fig.1 Giuliano da Maiano, Tomb of Francesco Sassetti, Sta. Trinita. Detail: Sacrifice Scene of Putti with Centaurs. From Siro Innocenti, *La Cappella Sassetti a Santa Trinita a Firenze* (Florence: Giusti, 1998). Permission through Wikimedia Commons:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giuliano_da_maiano,_decorazione_della_tomba_di_francesco_sassetti,_sacrificio_di_eroti.jpg#/media/File:Giuliano_da_maiano,_decorazione_della_tomba_di_francesco_sassetti,_sacrificio_di_eroti.jpg

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

⁵ Aby Warburg, "Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunctions to His Sons," in idem, *The renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 244; Louis Rose, *The Survival of Images: Art Historians, Psychoanalysts, and the Ancients* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 51. For the centaur motif in Sassetti's ex libris page in a manuscript of Aristotle's (and Pseudo-Aristotle's) writings on ethics and economics (Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, Pluteo 79.1), see the online catalog of the exhibition *Animali fantastici*, BML, 2007, accessed January 20, 2016: http://www.bml.firenze.sbn.it/animalifantastici/LaBibliotecainMostra/Schede_ing/pag8.htm

⁶ Karen Ann Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 245.

⁷ V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 114–130; Dieter Blume, "Children of the Planets: the Popularization of Astrology in the Fifteenth Century," *Micrologus: Natura, scienze e società medievale* 12 (Florence: Sismel Edizioni Del Galluzzo, 2004): 549–563.

⁸ Aby Warburg, "Dürer and Italian Antiquity (1905)," in idem, *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 553–558. Barasch, *Imago Hominis*, 121, gives the date as 1906.

stimulus in his elaboration of the notion of *pathosformel*.⁹ 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



Fig. 2. Albrecht Dürer, *The Death of Orpheus*, 1494. Pen and brown ink, Hamburg Kunsthalle, Photo: Christoph Irrgang. Art Resource, NY ART178005.

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.¹⁰

At first sight, the frenzied violence represented or merely implied in Dürer's drawing certainly justifies their characterization as maenads. The matter is not so simple, however,

⁹ Warburg, "Dürer and Italian Antiquity (1905)," German text in Aby Warburg, "Dürer und die italienische Antike," in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gertrud Bing (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1932), 443–445; also in *Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen*, ed. Dieter Wuttke (Baden-Baden: Koerner, 1992), 125–133. For the inclusion of the print in Warburg's picture atlas, see his panel 57, "Pathosformel bei Dürer, Mantegna, Kopien, Orpheus, Hercules, Frauenraub, Überreiten in der Apokalypse, Triumph," in idem, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, vol. 2, ed. Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), 104–105. Among recent discussions I note Barasch, *Imago Hominis*, 120–124; Avigdor W. G. Posèq, "Left and Right Orientation of a 'Pathosformel' in Dürer," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 16, 1 (1996): 7–17; Helmut Puff, "Violence, Victimhood, Artistry: Albrecht Dürer's *The Death of Orpheus*," in *Gender Matters: Discourses of Violence in Early Modern Literature and the Arts*, ed. Mara R. Wade (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 68; Marcus A. Hurrting, Introduction, in *Antiquity Unleashed: Aby Warburg, Dürer and Mantegna*, ed. Stephanie Buck and Andreas Stolzenberg (London: The Courtauld Gallery, 2013), 13–22.

¹⁰ For Ovid's account of the story of Orpheus, see *Metamorphoses* 11.20–43, and on Pentheus's conflict with Bacchus, *ibid.*, 3.511–76; Christine M. Kalke, "The Making of a Thyrsus: The Transformation of Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*," *The American Journal of Philology* 106.4 (1985): 409–426. On Ovid's metaphoric use of maenad imagery, see Stephen Hinds, *The Metamorphosis of Persephone: Ovid and the Self-Conscious Muse* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 75–77.

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 *sileni*.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 (*Bilderreihen*). 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-

¹¹ On nymphs in general, recent discussions include Monique Halm-Tisserant and Gérard Siebert, “Nymphai,” in *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* (LIMC), ed. Christoph Ackermann and Jean-Robert Gisler (Zurich: Artemis, 1997), 8:891–902; Jennifer Larson, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Irad Malkin, “Nymphs,” in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1056.

¹² Guy Hedreen, “Silens, Nymphs, and Maenads,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 114 (1994): 47–69, esp. 49–50.

¹³ The Liddell and Scott dictionary (ad voc.) gives the basic meaning of ἔκστασις as displacement. The term has currency in contemporary philosophy of mind; see Philip Vannini and Dennis Waskul, “Body Ekstasis: Socio-Semiotic Reflections on Surpassing the Dualism of Body-Image,” in *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*, ed. Philip Vannini and Dennis Waskul (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 183–200.

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

¹⁵ Edward Berry, “Introduction: The Culture of the Hunt and Shakespeare,” in idem, *Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–37, notes the fervent condemnation of hunting by the early sixteenth-century humanist Cornelius Agrippa, but this found little resonance among contemporaries (25–26).

¹⁶ Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (*Gesammelte Schriften: Studienausgabe*, part 2, vol.1), ed. Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 26–27 (panel 7), esp. nos.1 and 3.

¹⁷ Aby Warburg, “The Entry of the Idealizing Classical Style in the Painting of the Early Renaissance,” in *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg’s Projects*, ed. Richard Woodfield (London: Routledge, 2001), 26–27.

hunters” Judith or Salome.¹⁸ It is true, however, that in one of the panels of his *Bilderatlas* (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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ As Moshe Barasch has noted, however, the *pathosformel* is not an iconographic motif, and the relevant gestures and expressions may have very diverse significance.²¹

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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴

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.²⁵ As noted above, it was made congenial to medieval readers through moralizing—or allegorizing—versions and commentaries;²⁶ Orpheus, for example, became a

¹⁸ Aby Warburg, “On *Imprese amorose* in the Earliest Florentine Engravings,” in *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 169–83; idem, *Der Bilderatlas*, 86, panel 47 (“Ninfaals ... Kopfjägerin”); Leuker, “Ameto vor der *Primavera*,” 199. Noting the range of beings brought by Warburg under the “nymph” title, Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 104–105, explains this by claiming the nymph not as a symbol, limiting its meaning, but as a paradigm of life in motion.

¹⁹ Warburg, *Bilderatlas*, 26–27, panel 7 (Napoleon’s apotheosis is no.10). See Salvatore Settis, “Aby Warburg e il demone della forma. Antropologia, storia, memoria,” *La Rivista di Engramma* 100 (2012). Accessed online January 15, 2016. http://www.egramma.it/eOS2/index.php?id_articolo=1139

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.

²² Paul Barolsky, “As in Ovid, So in Renaissance Art,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51.2 (1998): 451–74; idem, *Ovid and the Metamorphoses of Modern Art from Botticelli to Picasso* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

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.

²⁴ Elizabeth M. Young, “Inscribing Orpheus: Ovid and the Invention of a Greco-Roman Corpus,” *Representations* 101.1 (2008): 5.

²⁵ Elisabeth Schroeter, “Orpheus in der Kunst des Mittelalters und der Renaissance. Eine vorläufige Untersuchung,” in *Blick auf Orpheus: 2500 Jahre europäischer Rezeptionsgeschichte eines antiken Mythos*, ed. Christine Mundt-Espín (Tübingen: Francke, 2003), 111–120, summarizes medieval use of Orpheus imagery.

²⁶ “Ovid: Giovanni Bonsignore: *Ovidio metamorphoseos vulgare* (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the Vernacular),” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006). Accessed online February 10, 2016 at <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/22.16> (July 24, 2015)

Christ figure.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹



Fig. 3. Anonymous Ferrarese artist, *Death of Orpheus*, late 15th-century. Engraving. Hamburg Kunsthalle. Art Resource, NY ART306699.

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).³⁰ Moreover, it is the

²⁷ Friedrich Ohly, “Typologische Figuren aus Natur und Mythos,” in *Ausgewählte und neue Schriften zur Literaturgeschichte und zur Bedeutungsforschung*, ed. Uwe Ruberg and Dietmar Peil (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 1995), 473–507.

²⁸ On Lorenzo de’ Medici’s illuminated copy of the 1474 edition of Ovid’s works, see the Newton Library Catalogue, Cambridge University Library. Accessed online (July 24, 2015)

<http://collpw-newton.lib.cam.ac.uk/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=425064>. From 1500 to 1599 about one hundred illustrated versions of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* appeared in print. Also Grundy Steiner, “Source-Editions of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1471–1500),” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 82 (1951): 219–231.

²⁹ Christoph Reske, *Die Produktion der Schedelschen Weltchronik in Nürnberg* (Mainz: Harrassowitz, 2000), 1:1–5; David Price, *Albrecht Dürer’s Renaissance: Humanism, Reformation, and the Art of Faith* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 12, 37, 102; Walter Gebhardt, “Nürnberg macht Druck! Von der Medienhochburg zum Printzentrum,” in *Lust auf Bücher: Nürnberg für Leser*, ed. Marion Voigt (Nürnberg: Deuerlein, 2005), 11–43.

³⁰ Giuseppe Scavizzi, “The Myth of Orpheus in Italian Renaissance Art, 1400–1600,” in *Orpheus, the Metamorphoses of a Myth*, ed. John Warden (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 120–23; Betsy J. Rosasco, “Albrecht Dürer’s *Death of Orpheus*: Its Critical Fortunes and a New Interpretation of its Meaning,” *IDEA. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle* 3 (1984): 19–42. See also note 4 above.

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.³¹ 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 *thyrsus*, a light wand topped by a pinecone and entwined with ivy; brandishing their *thyrsi*, maenads wander among forests and mountains, sometimes covered in the skins of animals they have killed and dismembered with their own hands.³² 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 *thyrsus* 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 *thyrsi*, 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.³³ 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).³⁴ 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.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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 Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 103 (1972): 473–494.

³² Christine M. Kalke, "The Making of a Thyrsus: The Transformation of Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*," *The American Journal of Philology* 106.4 (1985): 409.

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, "Procne, Philomela, Tereus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: A Narratological Approach," *Antichthon* 37 (2003): 32–51.

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 Hades³⁹). 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 Dürer 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. Dürer 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

³⁷ Diskin Clay, “Plato and Greek Myth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. Roger D. Woodard (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 213. On the ancient myth, see Larson, *Greek Nymphs*, 66.

³⁸ Tmolus (Turkish “Bouz Dagh”) is a mountain range on the south of Sardis, forming the watershed between the basins of the Hermus in the north and the Cayster in the south. It is the source of the gold-bearing river Pactolus and was celebrated in antiquity for its wine production. William Smith, ed., *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography* (London: John Murray, 1854). Accessed online February 3, 2016.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0064:entry=tmolus-geo>

³⁹ Schroeter, “Orpheus in der Kunst des Mittelalters und der Renaissance,” 133.

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 gerichtspraxis kaiser Karls—Constitutio 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.

⁴⁵ Aby Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'" (1893) reprinted in idem, *Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen*, 11–64. Warburg's insight is fundamental for subsequent research; see Charles Dempsey, "Mercurius Ver: The Sources of Botticelli's *Primavera*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 31 (1968): 259–260; Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 161; Frank Zöllner, "Zu den Quellen und zur Ikonographie von Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera*," *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 50 (1997): 131.

⁴⁶ Warburg, *Bilderatlas*, 57 no.33; Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor*, 41.

⁴⁷ Scavizzi, "The Myth of Orpheus," 117–118.

⁴⁸ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 109.

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."⁴⁹ In this passage, accordingly, Ovid challenges any binary contrast of order and disorder, while celebrating the subversion of political authority embodied by Pentheus.⁵⁰ Perhaps as a result, Pentheus does not appear in Renaissance iconography, beyond illustrations to the *Metamorphoses*⁵¹ (although there seems no reason to accept the suggestion that Dürer's lost model represented *The Death of Pentheus*⁵²). 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ For Warburg, as Giorgio Agamben has noted, this polarity "afflicts the West with a kind of tragic schizophrenia."⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ A notable case is the cultural politics of 16th-century

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, Metatheater, 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.

⁵² Andrea Pinotti, *Memorie del neutro: morfologia dell'immagine in Aby Warburg* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001), 109.

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.

⁵⁵ Warburg makes the comment in a diary entry of April 3, 1929: the nymph and the river god symbolize respectively manic and depressive states, the extremes of the "schizophrenia of the West." See Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 575; Karl Königseder, "Aby Warburg im 'Bellevue,'" in *Aby M. Warburg: "ekstatische Nymphe—trauernder Flussgott: Portrait eines Gelehrten,"* ed. Robert Galitz and Brita Reimers (Hamburg: Dölling and Galitz, 1995), 76.

⁵⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," in idem, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 89–103, esp. 97.

⁵⁷ Claudia Lazzaro, "River Gods: Personifying Nature in Sixteenth-Century Italy," in *Locus Amoenus: Gardens and Horticulture in the Renaissance*, ed. Alexander Samson (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 70–94.

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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.”⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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,⁶³ who famously gave it a new context in his “picture atlas” (panel 46).⁶⁴

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

⁵⁸ Aby Warburg, “I costumi teatrali per gli intermezzi del 1589. I disegni di Bernardo Buontalenti e il Libro di Conti di Emilio dei Cavalieri,” first published in *Atti del Regio Istituto Musicale di Firenze* 23 (1895): 133–146, and in *Gesammelte Schriften* 1, ed. Gertrud Bing and Fritz Rougemont (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1932): 259–300. See also, Peg Katritzky, “Aby Warburg and the *Intermedi* of 1598: Extending the Boundaries of Art History,” in *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg’s Projects*, ed. Richard Woodfield (London: Routledge, 2014), 209–258; Peter Vergo, *That Divine Order: Music and The Visual Arts from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 2005), 89.

⁵⁹ Lazzaro, “River Gods: Personifying Nature,” 75–77.

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

⁶¹ Agamben, “Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science,” 90.

⁶² On the *pathosformel* in general, see now Claudia Wedepohl, “Von der ‘Pathosformel’ zum ‘Gebärdensprachatlas’: Dürers *Tod des Orpheus* und Warburgs Arbeit an einer ausdrucks-theoretisch begründeten Kunstgeschichte,” in *Die entfesselte Antike. Aby Warburg und die Geburt der Pathosformel*, ed. Marcus A. Hurrting and Thomas Ketelsen (Cologne: Waltherr König, 2012), 33–50; Salvatore Settis, “Pathos und Ethos, Morphologie und Funktion,” *Vorträge aus dem Warburg-Haus* 1 (1997): 33–73; idem, “Aby Warburg, il demone della forma: antropologia, storia, memoria,” *Engramma* 100 (2012); Accessed online September 12, 2015.

http://www.english.it/eOS2/index.php?id_articolo=1139; Leuker, “‘Ameto’ vor der *Primavera*, 195–203;

Giovanni Careri, “Pathosformeln: Aby Warburg e l’intensificazione delle immagini,” in *Aby Warburg e le metamorfosi degli antichi dei*, ed. Marco Bertozzi (Modena: Panini, 2002), 50–62; Becker, “Aby Warburg’s Pathosformel.” Accessed online January 12, 2016, at:

<http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/becker.pdf>

⁶³ Warburg, “The Entry of the Idealizing Classical Style,” 7–32.

⁶⁴ On the panel, see Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor*. The panel is available online on the Cornell University site *Mnemosyne: Meanderings through Aby Warburg’s Atlas*, ed. Christopher D. Johnson, under the rubric “Domestication,” with commentary by Andrea Pinotti, “Nymph. ‘Hurry-Bring-It’ in the Tornabuoni Circle.” Accessed online March 2, 2016. <http://warburg.library.cornell.edu/panel/46>

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 Schnellbring or Eilbringitte

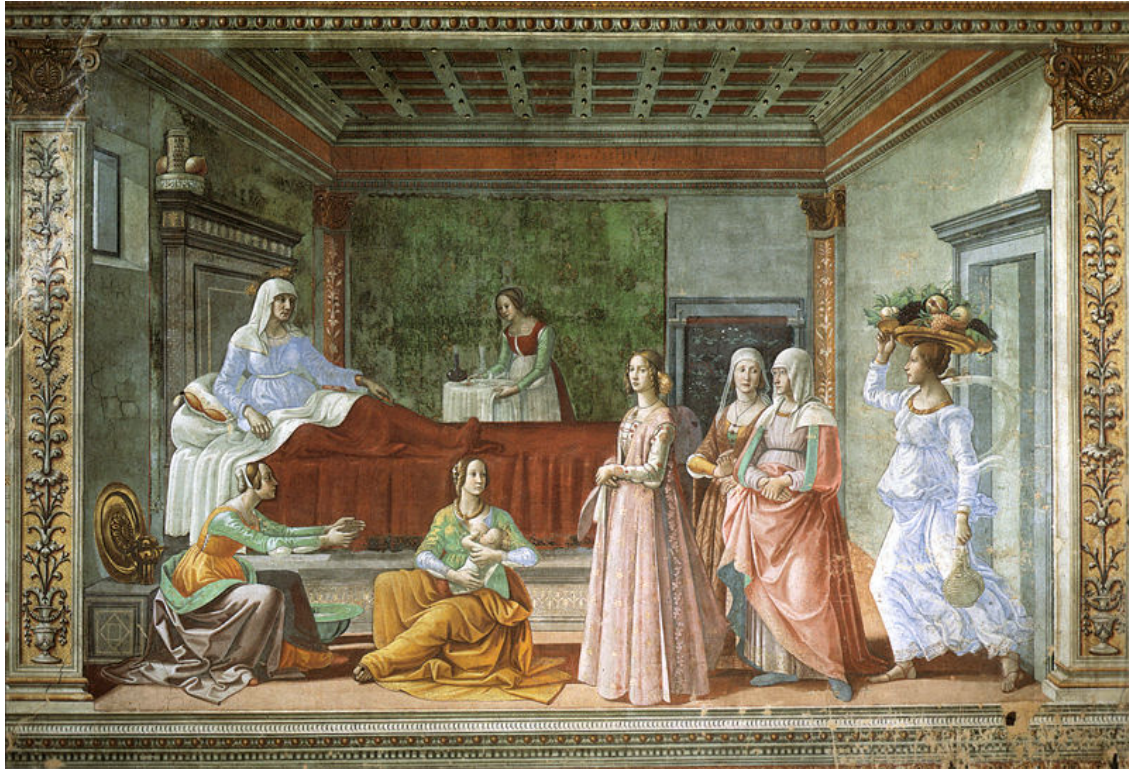


Fig. 4. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of St. John the Baptist*, Fresco, 1485–90. Tornabuoni (or Tornaquinci) Chapel, S. Maria Novella, Florence. Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali, Art Resource, NY ART424647.

(“Miss Quickbring”) 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 gesturality 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

⁶⁵ Ronald G. Kecks, *Domenico Ghirlandaio und die Malerei der Florentiner Renaissance* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2000), 309.

⁶⁶ Kurt W. Forster, Introduction, in Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 15 (for Forster, Warburg’s characterization is made “wryly”); Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor*, 137–138. For the girl as Eilbringitte (evidently a pun on the woman’s name Brigitte), see Warburg, *Bilderatlas*, 84–85 no.46.

⁶⁷ Aby Warburg, “Lo stile ideale anticheggiante nella pittura del primo rinascimento,” in *La Rinascita del paganesimo antico*, ed. Gertrud Bing (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1966), 300–301.

narrative of the saint's life.⁶⁸ This perhaps explains the neglect of Warburg's insight in recent monographic discussions of Ghirlandaio's oeuvre.⁶⁹

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' Medici⁷⁰). 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.⁷¹ 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.⁷² 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.”⁷³

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

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.

⁶⁹ Kecks, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, 308–309, does not mention Warburg in his discussion of the Birth scene, though he praises (47) Warburg's iconological researches, especially on the Sassetti Chapel, as still valid. Jeanne K. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 8–9, dismisses, as outmoded, Warburg's view of the nymph figure in the *Birth of the Baptist*.

⁷⁰ Alessandro Salucci, *Il Ghirlandaio a Santa Maria Novella: la Cappella Tornabuoni: un percorso tra storia e teologia* (Florence: Edifir, 2012), 36. Salucci does not mention Warburg.

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 gnene chiede, per mostrare a quelle donne la novità che in sua vechiezza 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.

⁷² Jennifer Cavalli, “Deschi da Parto and Topsy-Turvey Gender Relations in Fifteenth-Century Italian Households,” in *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600–1530*, ed. Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 140; Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor*, 100.

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.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶ 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."⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

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.

⁷⁵ Aby Warburg, "Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunction to His Sons," in idem, *Renewal*, 451–465.

⁷⁶ Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 244–245. See also Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 156–158; Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor*, 48.

⁷⁷ Sidney J. Freedberg, *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 25; Selma Holo, "A Note on the Afterlife of the 'Crouching Aphrodite' in the Renaissance," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 6/7 (1978/1979): 29.

⁷⁸ On panel 46 dedicated to the "Nympha," 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.

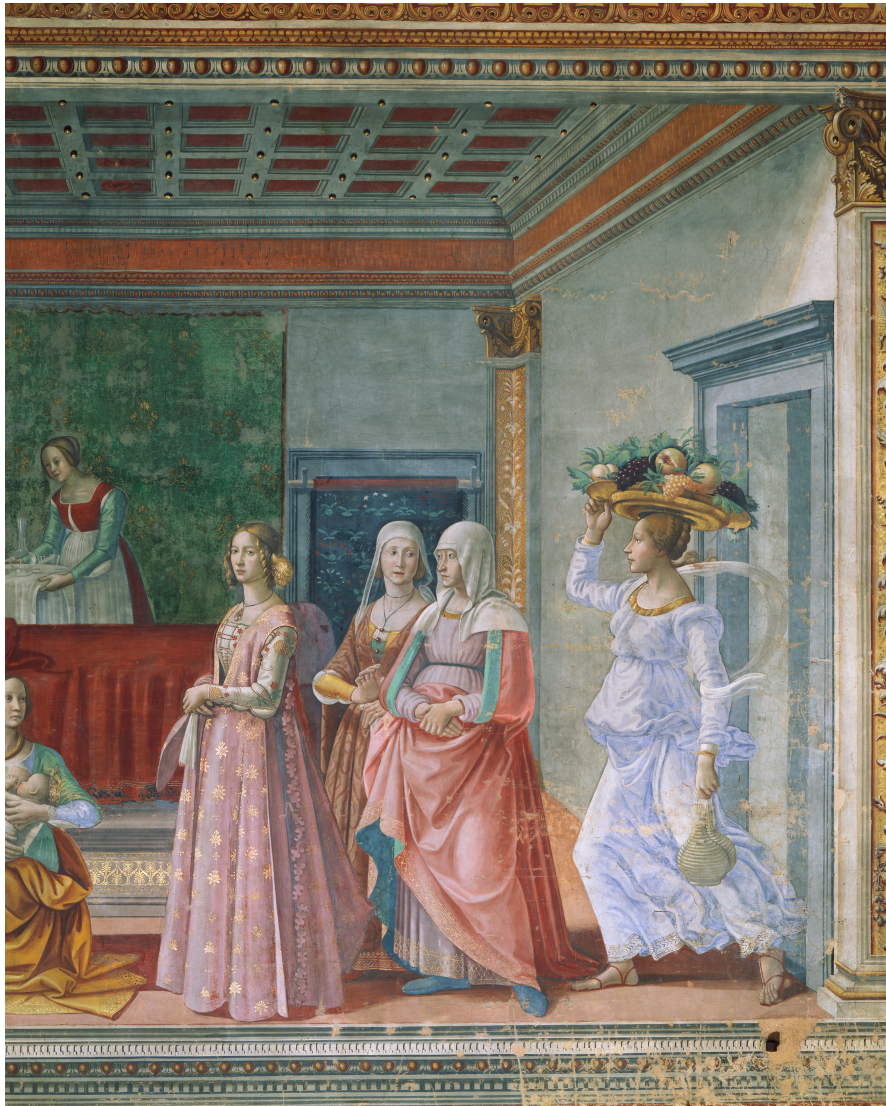


Fig. 5. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of the Baptist*. Detail, The Visiting Women and the Girl Bringing Refreshments. Fresco, Tornabuoni Chapel, S. Maria Novella, Florence. Scala/Art Resource, NY ART56985.

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.”⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

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.⁸² 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.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ High on the rear wall a frieze of putti makes a more refined reference to the family's fertility.

⁸² Warburg, "Lo stile ideale anticheggiante," 300.

⁸³For 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.



Fig. 6. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of the Virgin*. Fresco, 1485–90, Tornabuoni Chapel, S. Maria Novella in Florence. Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali, Art Resource, NYART424648.

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.⁸⁶ 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 austere 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*.

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.



Fig. 7. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Dance of Salome above two scenes of the Life of the Baptist*. Fresco, 1485–90, Tornabuoni Chapel, S. Maria Novella, Florence. Scala/Art Resource, NY ART75235.

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.⁸⁷ 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).⁸⁸ In a painting that demands more of the viewer than the single images in Ghirlandaio’s fresco cycles, it is not a female figure

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.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.⁹⁰ The text in question is an extended passage in his calendar poem, *The Fasti*, in which Ovid considers the origins and nature of the Roman festival of Flora, the Floralia.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 (*Fasti* 5.195–222), though her status as matron does not essentially change her character: doubtless with her raucous festival in mind, Ovid (*Fasti* 5.333) insists that Flora is “not solemn,” as Botticelli’s image of her seems to echo this characterization.



Fig. 8. Sandro Botticelli, *La Primavera*, c.1484. Uffizi. Tempera on panel. Photo: Alfredo Dagli Orti, The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY AA343543.

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

⁸⁹ Damian Dombrowski, *Die religiösen Gemälde Sandro Botticellis: Malerei als pia philosophia* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010), 106.

⁹⁰ On Aby Warburg’s recognition, in 1893, of the *Fasti* passage and other classical texts as sources for the *Primavera*, see Frank Zöllner, “Zu den Quellen und zur Ikonographie von Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera*,” *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.

⁹¹ Charles Burroughs, “Talking with Goddesses: Ovid’s *Fasti* and Botticelli’s *Primavera*,” *Word and Image* 28 (2012): 75; T. Peter Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 1–11.

civilization itself. Far from Botticelli being too “pliable” (in German, “biegsam”) with respect to classical stimuli, as Warburg charged in his 1893 dissertation,⁹² 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” Chloris⁹³ (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.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ 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)⁹⁶ 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

⁹² Warburg, *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 141. The German text (“Botticelli war schon einer von denen, die allzu biegsam waren”) is quoted by Anna Guillemin, “The Style of Linguistics: Aby Warburg, Karl Vossler, and Hermann Osthoff,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69.4 (2008): 605.

⁹³ Lilian Zirpolo, “Botticelli’s *Primavera*: A Lesson for the Bride,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 12 (1991/92): 26: “her stance resembles that of a frightened and defenseless animal, . . . about to fall prey to the hunter”; she is “animal-like” (ibid., 27). Zirpolo also emphasizes the theme of the societal importance of authorized procreation.

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.

⁹⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Hestia-Hermes: The Religious Expression of Space and Movement in Ancient Greece,” in idem, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (London: Zone Books, 1983), 127–186.

⁹⁶ On the Graces in the *Primavera*, see Charles Dempsey, “Botticelli’s Three Graces,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 34 (1971): 326–330. Alberti does not name the Graces; instead he refers to their mention by the ancient poet Hesiod, *Della Pittura* 3.54, in idem, *Opere volgari*, vol. 3, ed. Cecil Grayson (Bari: Laterza, 1973), 95; idem, *On Painting*, ed. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 28. For an intelligent discussion of the implications, in terms of “economic” (i.e., about the household) and social thinking, of Alberti’s mention of the Graces, see James Lawson, “Alberti’s Third Grace: Familial, Moral and Civil Society,” *Albertiana* 17 (2014): 95–113.

the *Politics*.⁹⁷ 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”⁹⁸), 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰

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. On the importance of Aristotle's text in later 15th-century Florence, not least in vernacular translations and commentaries, see David A. Lines, *Aristotle's Ethics in the Italian Renaissance (ca. 1300–1650): The Universities and the Problem of Moral Education* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); idem, “Ethics as Philology: A Developing Approach to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in Florentine Humanism,” in *Renaissance Readings of the Corpus Aristotelicum*, ed. Marianne Pade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2001), 27–42.

⁹⁸ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). See also Edward Muir, “Presence and Representation in Italian Civic Rituals,” in *La ville à la Renaissance: Espaces—Représentations—Pouvoirs*, ed. Gérald Chaix (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008), 81–97. Muir doesn't cite Warburg (or Gumbrecht), who was clearly interested in the performance-like aspect of images, and in the overlap, involving a stronger sense of “presence,” between the experience of images and that of rituals.

⁹⁹ The evolution of the modern frame, especially with regard to the design of devotional paintings, has been the subject of important recent discussions, especially the pioneering work of Christa Gardner von Teuffel; see her “From Polyptych to Pala: Some Structural Considerations,” in *La pitturanel XIV e XV secolo. Il contributo dell'analisi tecnica alla storia dell'arte*, ed. Henk van Os and J. R. J. van Asperen de Boer (Bologna: CLUEB, 1983), 323–344, and *From Duccio's Maesta to Raphael's Transfiguration: Italian Altarpieces and their Settings* (London: Pindar, 2005). See also Scott Nethersole, *Devotion by Design: Italian Altarpieces before 1500* (London: National Gallery, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Alexander Nagel, “Altarpiece,” in *Encyclopedia of Italian Renaissance and Mannerist Art* (London and New York: Macmillan Reference, Grove's Dictionaries, 2000), 1: 35–38; James Elkins, “Cult Images and the Cult of Images,” in *Renaissance Theory*, ed. James Elkins and Robert Williams (New York: Routledge, 2008), 95–114; Beth Williamson, “Altarpieces, Liturgy, and Devotion,” *Speculum* 79/2 (2004): 341–406.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Burroughs, “Greening Brunelleschi: Botticelli at Santo Spirito,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 45 (2004): 239–255, argues that in a painted altarpiece the artist addressed, not uncritically, key aspects of its architectural setting. On the relationship of the San Martino della Scala Annunciation (Uffizi, 1481) to its original site, see Damian Dombrowski, *Botticelli: ein Florentiner Maler über Gott, die Welt und sich selbst* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2010), 136; idem, *Die religiösen Gemälde*, 136: “Botticelli gehört zu den Künstlern, die ihre Gemälde sogar besonders genau auf den für sie vorgesehenen Platz abstimmten.”

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 enframing—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 part¹⁰²—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 *Primavera*; 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

¹⁰¹ Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁰² For belief in the gods as malevolent forces, see Joao de Pina-Cabral, "The Gods of the Gentiles are Demons: The Problem of Pagan Survivals in European Culture," in Kirsten Hastrup, ed., *Other Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 45–61.

¹⁰³ David Lumms, "Boccaccio's Three Venuses: On the Convergence of Celestial and Transgressive Love in the *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*," in *Literary Appropriations*, ed. Paul Maurice Clogan, *Mediaevalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 37 (2011): 86.

¹⁰⁴ Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 224, notes, "it is a curious fact that the Renaissance, in its most brilliant phase, produced no work in this field."

¹⁰⁵ On Poliziano's appointment to the Chair of Poetry and Eloquence in Florence, see Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 37; Peter Mack, *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric 1380–1620* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 165.

¹⁰⁶ Burroughs, "Talking to Goddesses"; Lew Andrews, "Botticelli's *Primavera*, Angelo Poliziano, and Ovid's *Fasti*," *Artibus et Historiae* 63 (2011): 73–84; Angela Fritsen, "Readership and Patronage: The Manuscript History of Ludovico Lazzarelli's *Fasti christianae religionis*," *Yale University Library Gazette* 4 (Jan. 2001): 93–104.

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.

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¹⁰⁷ On knowledge of the *Theogony* in the Renaissance, see M. L. West, “Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts of Hesiod’s *Theogony*,” *The Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 14.2 (1964): 165–189. For Marsilio Ficino’s translation, see M. Schumacher, “Marsilio Ficino,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), 6:67.

¹⁰⁸ On this, see Glenn W. Most, Introduction to the revised Loeb edition of Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), xxiii n.7.

¹⁰⁹ Barbara Weiden Boyd, “‘Celabatur Auctor’: The Crisis of Authority and Narrative Patterning in Ovid *Fasti* 5,” *Phoenix* 54.1/2 (2000): 64–98.

¹¹⁰ On the so-called kings and singers passage (*Theogony* 80–103), see Kathryn B. Stoddard, “The Programmatic Message of the ‘Kings and Singers’ Passage: Hesiod, *Theogony* 80–103,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 133/1 (2003): 1–16. As himself a poet, Poliziano would certainly have appreciated this self-conscious statement of the status of poetry. The scope of his engagement with Hesiod is notably evident in a long letter written to Pico della Mirandola; Anthony Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 130.

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