

Pache, C. O. 2011. *A Moment's Ornament: The Poetics of Nympholepsy in Ancient Greece*. New York, Oxford University Press. vi, 213 p. Pr. \$74.00. ISBN 9780195339369.

Despite the knowledge about Greek religion acquired in recent years much is still to be learned about the contours of the sacred in ancient Greek society. By relating the recurring phenomenon of nympholepsy to visual and literary representations of divinities who fall in love with mortal men Corinne Ondine Pache's *A Moment's Ornament* (the title is from Wordsworth's poem "She Was a Phantom of Delight") opens up a fresh approach to this terrain.

Material frequently treated in isolation—poetic texts, caves frequented by nympholepts and their followers, and material culture, particularly Attic vase painting—when seen together leads Pache to conclude that "nympholepsy and the poetic narratives of goddesses falling in love with mortal men can be understood as two manifestations of the same phenomenon" (p. 78), and as a means of memorializing "encounters with the supernatural" or at least as an articulation of "an essential truth about the bond between gods and mortals and between myth and ritual in ancient Greece" (p. 183).

One must stretch a bit to use ancient poetry as evidence of bonding between humans and nymphs. Yet, since nymphs and muses are similar in many ways, the inspiration of poets can be likened to the heightened awareness and eloquence associated with possession by nymphs. Accordingly, Pache's first chapter examines Hesiod's *Theogony*, especially its puzzling ending (lines 963ff.), a catalogue of goddesses and the men they loved. Pache does not so much try to defend the authenticity of these lines, as to ask how, if genuine, they affect the interpretation of the poem as a whole. She argues that "encounters between the divine and human realms frame the *Theogony*", and that the theme of human creation early in the poem turns out to mean that "men become fully human only when they grow to be objects of desire for goddesses" (p. 15). Be that as it may, the examination of the ending of the *Theogony* calls attention to a motif that recurs often in Greek literature, Eos' love for mortals, such as Tithonos and Kephalos (lines 986ff.). The child of her union with Kephalos, Phaithon, is taken up by Aphrodite—the only time in the *Theogony* that a mortal is 'seized' by a goddess—and made her temple servant (*neopolos*, line 991).

The episode is important for Pache because she posits that Olympian goddesses and nymphs are essentially similar; hence Phaithon's role as a *neopolos* shows a link between myth and cult, and a parallel if not a model for the veneration of nymphs by historical nympholepts. Phaithon is an exceptional case, since when a goddess abducts a human, he often permanently disappears from earthly view. Another exception to this generalization may be found in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (lines 100-2) where Anchises promises to build an altar and make sacrifices to a woman whom he does not yet recognize as Aphrodite. In Pache's

view, these passages provide a basis for historic nympholepts to understand “their real-life experiences” (p. 90) and to setting up cults in honor of the nymphs.

These real-life experiences are discussed when Pache turns to the evidence about historic individuals who call themselves ‘nympholepts’ or describe close relationships with nymphs. The evidence comes primarily from three places where nymphs and related divinities were honored: the caves Archedamos embellished on Mount Hymettos, his younger contemporary Pantalkes near Pharsalos in Thessaly, and later Onesagoras at Kafizin on Cyprus. Inscriptions and carvings in these caves provide our most specific evidence about this form of possession. (Stories of being taken hold of by a nymph are also told of Bakis and Melesagoras, and Plato has Socrates worry about such possession in *Phaedrus* 238c-d.) While nympholepsy could be a terrifying experience, it also conferred practical benefits and prestige, as the Pantalkes poem attests: “The nymphs made Pantalkes a distinguished man (*andra . . . agathon*), the nymphs who tread upon this land, they made him their overseer.” (p. 54)

Caves also mark many of the turning points in the *Odyssey*, including the encounter with Polyphemos and the return to Ithaka (Pache p. 95). Pache skillfully explicates Homer’s treatment of these episodes, not least Odysseus’ encounter with the nymph Kalypso. At her cave (*Od.* 5.155, 9.29ff.) Odysseus dallies, tempted by immortality, until he at last resumes his voyage home.

Do such stories provide, as Pache suggests, a model for the actions of real-life nympholepts? Although Odysseus’ experiences associate nymphs with caves, and with erotic relationships, Odysseus does not linger on, embellishing the cave, making offerings, establishing a cult or proclaim his contentment with the blessings of the nymphs. He moves on. In this respect Odysseus is no nympholept.

Still less do the three other ‘nympholeptic goddesses’ of the *Odyssey* provide a model for the nympholepts: Kirke, Leukothea and Athena. They are a diverse group, as Pache notes, yet none is called a *numphe*; none has a cave. Nor does Odysseus ever establish cults to honor any of them. Again, he moves on.

How then is one to explain the emergence of nymph cults in the Archaic period? Interestingly, the Polis cave on Ithaka has dedications from the 8th or 9th century before our era, a likely early instance of nymph worship. For the most part, however, the veneration of nymphs in caves is not attested in mainland Greece before the late Archaic or early Classical period—close to the time we begin to meet nympholepts such as Archedamos and Pantalkes.

Among the Hellenistic poets more changes appear. Stories such as those about Adonis or Daphnis become typical: a beautiful young man is “led to his death by his mysterious association with a nymph” (p. 155). Frequently, the mortal is pursued by the nymph and “enthralled, confused, thwarted and in some cases destroyed” (p. 156). He then “acquires his status as a figure of poetry through death and lament”

(p. 156), or, one might say, poets acquire a new inspiration by imagining such deaths, disappearances and lamentations.

This poetry is often situated in an imagined Arcadia or in the periphery of the Greek world, especially in Sicily where civic festivals in honor of the nymphs are attested and where then poets imagined “a radically new poetic landscape” (p. 159). Caves are less prominent, though springs and rivers run strong.

Hellenistic poetry about nymphs and their loves may also draw on a different model, a very ancient one. Pache helps her readers recognize that one narrative pattern, perhaps Indo-European in origin, gives way to another one from the ancient Near East. In the first a divinity, such as Eos, abducts or seduces a mortal lover. When the divinity is a nymph, the results can be benign, as they were among the historical nympholepts. But in the Hellenistic period, their mortal lover dies or disappears and the narrative emphasizes loss and lamentation, similar to what is attested in the Adonis cult, and can be seen even in the Gilgamesh epic.

Pache’s alertness to literary nuance helps her draw revealing distinctions of this sort. Less convincing are passages which sweep disparities together, goddesses and nymphs, real-life nympholepts and the creations of poets, early and late: “Daphnis’ forebearers are not only Adonis . . ., Tammuz and Dumuzi, but also the heroes Anchises, Odysseus, Kephalos, Tithonos and Phaithon, as well as Archedamos, Pantalkes and Onesagoras” (pp. 172f.). Distinctions between classical and Hellenistic, nymphs and Olympian divinities as well as social and class distinctions can be very revealing. If, for example, we follow Pache’s lead and bring into focus caves where nymphs (and Pan and other associates of the nymphs) were venerated but where no nympholept is reported, important questions emerge. How did such veneration develop and to whom did it appeal? Surely it did not start spontaneously. Some individual or group set about preparing them for worship, and encouraging others to enjoy the blessings such worship could confer. Devotees came and in many cases kept coming for centuries. Pache properly calls attention to one such cave near Phyle in Attika, the scene of Menander’s *Dyskolos*. Thousands of lamps and other offerings were found there, but no nympholept is mentioned. The Corycian cave on Mt. Parnassos (Pausanias 10.32) is another example, apparently a place of divination, more available to ordinary people than Olympian Apollo’s shrine a few miles away. The historical nympholepts known to us were not aristocrats, indeed they may best be understood as part of a widespread resistance to the domination of prestige and authority by aristocratic elites in the late Archaic and early Classical periods. If that is correct, the social role of poetry will be an important part of the ongoing effort to understand Greek religion and society. Pache’s work will be a good starting point into this puzzling and rewarding terrain.