BOUGUEREAU'S *NYMPHS AND SATYR*: A NEW INTERPRETATION

by

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Erin Walsh Anderson

November 2011
I dedicate this master's thesis to Arthur T. Griffith. Your love, support, and brilliance give me strength and great happiness.
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William-Adolphe Bouguereau's sensual painting *Nymphs and Satyr* (1873) has long stood as a sign of bourgeois frivolity, and an anti-avant garde work often dismissed by artists and critics alike. The subject matter is often incorrectly labeled as being in ideological conflict with Modern works of the period, which were steeped in honest visual representations of daily life. Recent scholars have interpreted the nude female figures in this painting as evidence of nineteenth century female economical and sexual emancipation. No painting can escape polyvalency throughout its lifetime, and therefore will encounter multiple interpretations within the changing cultures it inhabits. This thesis uses theoretical paradigms introduced by psychoanalysis and feminist art historians to seek the truth in the plurality of meanings assigned by cultural determinants. Viewers, regardless of period, are inescapably bound by their own experiences and thus, no singular construction holds universal meaning.
INTRODUCTION

The art object is a kind of vehicle for ideology, or history, or psychology, all of which are produced somehow and elsewhere. Not only do we have to grasp that art is a part of social production, but we also have to realize that it is itself productive, that is, it actively produces meanings. Art is constitutive of ideology; it is not merely an illustration of it. It is one of the social practices through which particular views of the world, definitions and identities for us to live are constructed, reproduced, and even redefined.¹

William-Adolphe Bouguereau's painting, *Nymphs and Satyr* (1873), serves as an archetypical image of French Academic painting that mesmerized internationally elite collectors by its classically composed, explicitly sexualized fantasies of old world delight (figure 1). It originally hung in the Salon of 1873 amid paintings of similar taste and design, though was immediately snatched up by American entrepreneur John Wolfe, who brought it to New York to hang in his home gallery alongside paintings by Bouguereau's academic contemporaries. In 1882 the painting became the chief attraction of New York City's premier gentleman's club, the Hoffman House, drawing many new types of people, including women, into the bar to gaze upon its exquisite surface. Throughout the years, this painting has stood for the frivolity of the bourgeois, or an anti-avant garde work dismissed by the period known for breaking ground through its honest visual representations of modern daily life. Recent scholars have interpreted the nude female figures in this painting as evidence of nineteenth century female economical and sexual emancipation. The painting has itself become a sign that the working or economically free nineteenth century women whose gaze signified a tacit approval or identification

with the nude figure. It has been represented as an object of empowerment for the new economic freedoms that were accessible to the contemporary working women, who could now enter the male dominated space to view what was previously considered for his eyes only.\(^2\) No painting can escape polyvalency throughout its lifetime, and therefore will encounter multiple interpretations within the changing cultures it inhabits. The task is to seek the truth in the plurality of meanings assigned by cultural determinants.

The production of *Nymphs and Satyr*, like much of the beaux-arts tastes, reflected the typical male artist's point of view, certain to gratify overwhelming desires of nineteenth century connoisseurs. Despite this fact, the work must also be allowed to break free from its past context so that it can accommodate a new interpretation applicable to the twenty-first century viewer. My examination tests the limits of psychoanalytic and feminist approaches by applying them to Bouguereau's complex nineteenth century French painting.

Bouguereau produces a fetish through his conception of three highly sexualized nymphs overpowering a resisting satyr. Using William Pietz's concrete paradigm, a theory of materiality and object agency emerges through the concept of art as a fetish for both artist and object.\(^3\) In *Nymphs and Satyr*, the treatment of the fetish object by the

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\(^3\) William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 9 (Spring, 1985): 5-7. Pietz argues that the fetish is not a proper object, particularly not
artist is raised twice: first by the way in which the artist incorporates several layers of meaning in the painting, and second by its physical construction. A metaphor for the creative performance of the painter is seen through the difficulty in creating a delightful scene of gendered chaos within the context of social upheaval. The painting as produced by the artist responds to and brings order into the collection of possible meanings formulated by the set of signs that define the cultural order of his time.

Feminist theory is imperative to bringing *Nymphs and Satyr's* significance into contemporary discourse, given the male construction. Contemporary art historians describe nineteenth century male artists' approach to female subjects as follows: women are objects of male artistic desire and manipulation, whether they are painted in academic or avant-garde mode. "Woman" can no longer be seen as a fixed, pre-existing entity or frozen image transformed by patriarchal or historical circumstance. Rather, she is a complex, lively, and problematic signifier, mixed in messages, resisting fixed interpretation or positioning despite the numerous attempts made in visual representation. Women indeed found their voice, both silently and brazenly behind patriarchal control. My aim is to produce a liberated viewer of *Nymphs and Satyr*, more able to access a new set of signs applicable to the informed twenty-first century.

Feminists have exposed new avenues for social conflict studies in which gender distinctions play a principle role, and art history has led the way in this. The way in which signs signify depends on the environment the image is displayed in and who solely phallic, with its own singular significance, rather a much more complex system dependant upon historical conditions and social forces.

4 See Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, T.J. Clark, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, et al.
controls the visual linguistic system. There is a clear connection between the fashion-conscious woman of the nineteenth century who obliged and even delighted in the patriarchal controlled gaze over how she presented herself in public, and her experience of returning that gaze as the informed object of spectacle. The engagement in everyday performances within social spaces cannot be ignored as one of the most basic elements of viewing a nineteenth century painting. The meanings ascribed to *Nymphs and Satyr* have evolved throughout its exhibition history, which reflect both modes of display and audience agency.

Bouguereau emerges as an artist acutely aware of the paradoxes of his age, exploring the relationship between external and internal reality. *Nymphs and Satyr* depicts the elegant social veneer, which conceals disturbing underlying dramas. The painting is layered with ironic subtexts alluding to the undercurrents of a highly materialistic, class-conscious age in which gender roles and the relationship between the sexes were shifting dramatically. This research raises many questions about the types of women constructed by the male artist in the late nineteenth-century and how these projected values were received by viewers, and what resonance their values are to the dramatically shifting cultural environments of the twenty-first century. My intention is to explore the sphere in which this image of women gave credibility to the zeitgeist of the nineteenth century bourgeois consumer, calling upon visuality, imagination and
identification with an image that began with male designed femininity, but lives on to produce new meanings within cultural discourses.\footnote{Meike Bal has advanced a theory of feminist reading that she calls 'hysterics,' which aims at recovering the repressed, the unsaid, and interprets the distorting signs of the female experience in 'Visual Rhetoric: The Semiotics of Rape,' in \textit{Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition} (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991).}
Nymphs and Satyr hung at the 1873 Salon amid academic and progressive paintings produced that year. At the time of his death, William Bouguereau was simultaneously the most reviled and beloved of French artists. Progressive painters and critics, who saw in his paintings all that was wrong with the official French world of art, scorned him. While critics such as Edgar Degas disliked what academic work symbolized, he admitted admiration for Bouguereau, in that he and other painters of his camp did not take themselves as seriously as the avant-garde, rather played to the market. Nymphs and Satyr points to the cultural conflict within the bourgeois public sphere between feminine modesty and moral self-discipline on one hand and ownership, amusement, and display on the other. Bouguereau himself stated that he was a man of tradition, studying and honoring only beauty of the human body as put forth by the artists of the Italian Renaissance.

Bouguereau's work reflects his admiration for his artistic predecessors, to whom he gave great credit, travelling extensively for three years around the Italian cities and countryside, sketching the works by the Italian Renaissance artists. "One has to seek Beauty and Truth, Sir! As I always say to my pupils, you have to work to the finish. There's only one kind of painting. It is the painting that presents the eye with perfection,

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6 According to Michel Foucault, the submissive power and not the hierarchical power of sexuality in the nineteenth-century was the physical excitement and enticement. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (New York: Random House, 1978): 48.
the kind of beautiful and impeccable enamel you find in Veronese and Titian. An early reviewer stated, "M. Bouguereau has a natural instinct and knowledge of contour. The eurythmie of the human body preoccupies him, and in recalling the happy results which, in this genre, the ancients and the artists of the sixteenth century arrived at, one can only congratulate M. Bouguereau in attempting to follow in their footsteps...Raphael was inspired by the ancients...and no one accused him of not being original." Bouguereau verbalized his admiration for Titian often, and one easily sees Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr* echo the high emotional content of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-25).

Bouguereau made his figures the agent of his eccentric version of the academic-classic tradition. In this sense he accepted the common theme in late nineteenth century bourgeois culture of the woman as a key source of social degeneration and the loss of heroism. The nymphs embody the potential forces of decadence with the upheavals in actuality resultant from the male’s submission and yielding up of his spiritual and intellectual qualities, manifested in his satyr-like form. It is in her animal nature, eager to mate and play with woodland creatures that reveal woman's true nature and incapacity for spiritual growth. Darwin himself suggested that the presence of women's multiple breasts implies a link with our primal ancestors, thus providing "scientific" evidence for the fin-de-siècle treatment of women as inherently animal-like. This female proximity to nature and behemoths is a commonplace in pompier art. The bacchante, the intoxicated, sex-starved creature of antiquity appeared with monotonous regularity in pompier paintings,

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7 Bartoli, 220. Bouguereau, on painting only beautiful in art and for him art is the beautiful.
as seen in Bouguereau's *Bacchante* (1863), who has fallen down in drunken glee and amorously playing with a goat (figure 2). When suggestively juxtaposed with bestial creatures, the salon audience would not have missed the point that all women are victims of uncontrollable sexual desires. The larger question remains whether women viewed this painting as a projection of fantasy or a locus for identifying with the larger paternal gaze.

The painting was shown at the 1873 Salon with the title *Nymphs and Satyr* and a quotation from the first century Latin poet Publius Statius, “Conscious of his shaggy hide and from childhood untaught to swim, he dares not trust himself to deep waters.”

Statius is describing the predicament of Pan who is cheated of his quarry, the nymph Phoebe, when she takes refuge in a lake. At no point in the poem is the god dragged into the water, and it seems possible that Bouguereau invented this humorous episode in order to create this male-sought revenge. He shows us a light-hearted ambush in which the unfortunate non-swimmer is literally pulled into the stream, with no chance of escape as reinforcements stand guard in the woods behind. Patricia Merivale speculates that Bouguereau quite literally painted the Pan story from Philostratus’ *Imagines*, which would have been available in a translation from Goethe of 1818. She explores the paradox of a goat-god’s double nature – that of beast and man – whose characteristics Bouguereau must have been delighted to contrast with the fleshy, marbly limbs of his notorious nymphs.

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Surrounded by the luscious greenery provided by the dense forest, the canvas is a construction of illuminated figures. With her arm waving high up in the air, the nymph in the upper left hand side of the central group beckons her cohorts to the ensuing drama. The theatrical energy of the past is evoked by this eloquent gesture, perhaps derived from allegorical imagery of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-25) and again in *The Rape of Proserpina* (1621-22) (Figures 3 and 4). Bernini's metamorphosis of desire and pursuit reflects the dramatization of the Baroque's interest in erotic desire, which has its basis in both visual and poetic art.11 While the nymph's gesture corresponds generally in pose with Bernini's sculptural groups, Bouguereau's excited nymphs delighted by the reversed seizure have replaced his emotionally distressed young women. Despite the nymph's delicate nature, the motion is capable of bearing the weight of symbolic reference to dramatic climax, sparkling with emphatic linear energy. Her opposite hand, tightly grasped around the satyr's horn has been interpreted as her grip around the phallic symbol of domination, indicating fetishistic reclaiming.12 Her balanced form indicates a deliberate emphasis on the vertical axis of the central group. She calls over her shoulder to the barely discernable nymphs that watch from across the misty glen, utilizing the

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11 The three dimensional rendering of form and movement is reminiscent of some of Bernini's most famous works at the Palace Borghese in Rome, such as *The Rape of Proserpine* and *Apollo and Daphne*, though I found no scholars who have made a direct relationship between the sculptures and Bouguereau's finished painting. See Damien Bartoli and Frederick Ross, *William Bouguereau*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Antique Collector's Club, 2010): 248. Bouguereau visited Rome early in his career for an extended stay in order to study first hand the Renaissance painters and sculptors. It is evident in many of his works wherein he followed the same approach to composition, form, and subject matter.

12 Scobey, "Nymphs and Satyrs," 52. Scobey describes the entire act for the nymph as an orgasmic climax.
leverage of the satyr's convenient horn to maintain her balance. It is evident in looking at Bouguereau's sketches that he toiled with how best to illustrate balance among the group, settling on the more dramatic and intentional gesture (figure 5).

The nymph pulling the satyr's left arm appears to be the most genuine and innocent, and we rely on her expression to gauge the interaction. Her face is soft, not strained, rather calmly endearing, familiar, as she pulls his arm effortlessly to her body, while her opposite hand wraps around the nape of his neck, willing him in her direction. Bouguereau's studies for the painting indicate the degree to which he agonized over the biomechanics required for her legs and thighs to maintain steadiness, and harness control (figure 6). A loose, pure white cloth wraps around her elbow, as it precariously falls across her body and opposite thigh, veiling her otherwise exposed genitalia. Her body is jaggedly revealed to us behind limbs, cloth, and almost through the satyr's own heavy legs. Her rosy cheeks and lips against pale white skin, and silken hair bound by a blue ribbon reference the cosmetically enhanced woman, juxtaposed within the same figure, the natural and unadorned woman, unaffected by an otherwise jostling event. The duality within this one nymph is captivating.

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14 The female toilette became a recurring theme in French visual vulture. Paintings of toilettes participated in an even more complex interplay of self-referential signs. The toilette is framed as a place - a temporal place as much as a physical one - of transformation and desire. Rather than an intimate, private moment, a woman's toilette was a performance before a large audience. Cosmetic enhancement is illustrative of the French moral ambivalence toward beauty, fashion, and luxury goods, and at the same
The nymph at the bottom right of the canvas gives the viewer full access to her backside, and only a profile view of the top third of her face. The nymph's exposed breast is almost touched by the satyr's outstretched fingers of his right hand. Both of her hands secure the satyr's arm as she, too, utilizes her weight, to gain momentum against the satyr, pushing firmly into forest floor. Her derriere is curvaceous and feminine, owing to the utterly female corporality of her naturally shaped lower body. In this nymph, we grasp the realities Bouguereau produced through her emphatic movement and access to the space she encompasses. Bouguereau joins the long-standing tradition of artistic obsession in creating perfect, naturally rendered skin and movement. This construction lends the viewer a keen ability to circumnavigate the painting as is similarly activated in many of Bernini's sculptural works.

The nymph who stands on the highest ground in the composition clutches a branch with her right hand as she pushes down onto the satyr's head with her left hand. Her body responds to forcible pressure on the satyr, though she seems to balance delicately on one foot, she appears rather sturdy, enclosing the group at the edge of the glen. The branch she holds sweeps leaves, scarcely screening her body, revealing only the filtered light through delicate foliage of the forest. The reinforcement of pressure applied to the satyr's body is emphasized by the nymph's palm against the top of his head.

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15 See Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); esp. 41-61. See also boudoir scenes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly of mistresses to the monarchy and aristocrats.
The glimpse of blue sky behind the right arm of the nymph indicates the action taken by the nymphs who close in on the satyr, a glimmer of hope that is lost now by his captivity and ultimate demise.

The background nymphs hidden behind the hazy atmosphere of the forest, appear anxious; they do not move forward to aid the nymphs in the foreground, rather excitedly observe the drama unfold before them with poised agitation, one standing upright while the others crouch forward as if ready to spring into action and join the ensuing struggle. According to formal analysis, these onlookers complete an insistent triangle between them, the central group, and the viewer. The viewer is allowed to enter the space as a voyeur, indicated by the acceptable, permanent voyeurs in the distance. Few artistic themes have offered so satisfying an opportunity for legitimized voyeurism. *Nymphs and Satyr* is a delicious display of the female nude, energetically and passionately heightening the erotic appeal with the presence of the sexualized satyr.

The satyr has forever struggled against the nymphs in hopes of avoiding certain peril, as he is tragically unable to swim. His downturned ear and wide eye read alarm and apprehension. His weight pulls him backwards, away from the water and uphill toward the optimistic glimpse of the safe sign of blue sky. The satyr's hands are bound by the nymphs' grips, as a symbol of forbidden sexuality. He focuses straight ahead, carefully avoiding eye or intentional body contact with any of the nymphs - the satyr is left lacking with bound hands and head that prohibit both touching and looking.

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16 Scobey, 51.
Bouguereau makes clear allusion to the goddess Diana's garden of protected virtue, indicated by the presence of both nympha who surround a body of water, and the sexually aggressive intruder. While it has already been established that Bouguereau was an admirer of Titian's technique, a case is made here for the adaption of Titian's version, *Diana and Actaeon* (1556-9), where the image of a stag-headed man is iconographically related to the persecution of virtue (figure 7). The satyr, who looks alarmingly more like a man than a fierce beast, symbolizes the controlled eroticism that Actaeon is said to have lost for a brief moment to passion. In the version of the story by Nonnus, in *Dionysiaca V*, Actaeon's actions are described as "the wild daring of a lovesick man." Driven by passion like a wild beast, he is transformed into one. Though Bouguereau is clearly depicting a satyr in place of the famous character of Actaeon, the satyr maintains his sign as a seeker of love and desire. Only a viewer will decide if the satyr was the

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17 We have seen the motif of a stag attacked by hunting dogs assigned to the background of Titian's mythological scenes, such as that of the *Pardo Venus* (date), where it is placed behind the satyr accosting a voluptuous nude. See Simona Cohen, *Animals Disguised as Symbols in Renaissance Art* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008): 186-7.

18 Numerous works of art from the archaic and classical periods represent the figure of Actaeon fully bearded. Despite this being a typical look for a mature man of Actaeon's age in the myth, the transformation of the hero as suggested by a deerskin and/or stag's horns works visually to relate satyr-qualities to Actaeon's moment of guilty excess. See Carl C. Schlam, "Diana and Actaeon: Metamorphoses of a Myth," *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 1984): 87-88. Not coincidentally, the so-called Pan Painter and the Painter of the Wooly Satyrs, both of ancient Greece, are known for several depictions of this myth. These were later copied onto Roman frescoes and reliefs. It is also worth mentioning the tradition of Actaeon caught watching Diana through the reflection in the water, as water, or perhaps the captured gaze, is feared of the resisting satyr in Bouguereau's canvas.

The relative success or failure of high art in France at the mid-nineteenth century was often measured by the quality of its nudes. The nude was the decisive vehicle for the creation of "the ideal" in art and Venus, goddesses or nymphs were the consummate subjects. Furthermore, Venus's association with the sea from which she was born played an important role in linking her myth to common nineteenth century conceptions of women and femininity. Bouguereau's painting, *The Birth of Venus* (1879), is an example of popular and official artistic taste for the idealized portrayal of the perfect nude figure (figure 8). Bouguereau's Venus has an innocent yet sensually seductive and erotic about her, seen through the eyes of the nymphs, centaurs, and cherubs who gaze upon her with admiration. When painted successfully, Venus was meant to be an idealized figure in which female sexuality and the productivity of the female body was brought under control. The figure of Venus thus posed the fundamental challenge to the male artist wishing to display his transformative power or mastery over the subject. Feminism threatens to open up the idea of Venus, beyond the bounds of her mythological

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20 The Death and the Bath became types, endlessly referred to and reproduced, often with no special skill or meaning. Both of these aspects, the insatiable voyeur and the sensuous bather, are important elements to consider when looking at nineteenth century images of classical origin.


story, to break the mold of ideal form and to say that this imagery signifies codes of sexuality and desire.

The late nineteenth century painter's charge was to construct a relation between the body as real - the flesh of a modern woman - and the body as a sign, formal and generalized meant for a token of composure and fulfillment. Many of the artists and writers of the 1860s used Ingres' *Venus Anadyomène* (1848) as a classically rendered nude of perfection, oftentimes paying homage to it directly (figure 9). No viewer can deny the accessibility of Ingres' Venus, demonstrated by her languidly stretched arm, precariously laid over her tiny head, her jutted hip implying sexual availability, which came in the nineteenth century to represent sexual content legible in an unembarrassed way.²³ For example, Eugène-Emmanuel Amaury-Duval's *The Birth of Venus*, highly celebrated in the Salon of 1862, directly followed Ingres' sign though simplifying the composition to just a nude form, while grandly generalizing the respectable version of the idealized female (figure 10). These pictures create content among the academic set that supported *Nymphs and Satyr*'s banishment from modern discourse on significant works beyond the emptiness of the bourgeois taste.

Bouguereau indicated that *Nymphs and Satyr* was directly influenced by the Statius invented myth. In the story familiar to many of the visitors to the Salon in the nineteenth century, Diana rescues the nymph Phoebe from rape by Pan and turns her into

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²³ T.J. Clark notes the language used by this painting that would have been used by artists such as Cabanel, Amaury-Duval, and Blanchard. See T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984): 121-127. For an analysis of Bouguereau's direct quoting of Ingres' painting, see also Wissman, 58-60.
the plane tree in Melior's garden. It is here within the painting that we see a strange reversal of the myth. While it is not unusual for salacious satyrs to chase virtuous nymphs, it is here within our painting that we see a strange reversal of the ancient myth. We see a new nymph, not the innocent object of the past, rather a sexually aware, potentially sadistic creature whose passions have been realized enough to emerge from behind the mask of civility and purity. I hold that Bouguereau saw himself as the satyr in this reversed vision of nineteenth century male construction, where the male has lost control and the women appear to have gained reason through power.

Bouguereau complemented the nineteenth century gendered social behavior with visual rhetoric that plays out in *Nymphs and Satyr*. Its titillating scenes of sartorial love exemplify the spectacle found in the nineteenth century public sphere veiled by the masks of nature and mythology. A device of dupery designating the secret motives in the game of love through skillful manipulation of multiple countenances is treated here as the signal of insatiable women who frolic around nature's setting. Our nymphs act as fleshy seductresses, corralling the defenseless satyr, while capturing the male viewer's attention. When taken as a whole, Bouguereau's construction seeks to disguise the overwhelming reversal of power between genders.

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SECRET DESIRES: FETISHIZING NYMPHS AND SATYR

Contemporary art practice views the female body as commodity fetishism in modern culture. Objects are revealed as provocations to desire and possession, which venture into distinctive arenas first and foremost that stand for virtually all forms of cultural representation. William Pietz wrote of fetishism:

The fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is above all a 'historical' object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event. This object is 'territorialized' in material space (an earthly matrix), whether in the form of a geographical locality, a marked site on the surface of the human body, or a medium of inscription or configuration defined by some portable or wearable thing...This reified, territorialized historical object is also 'personalized' in the sense that beyond its status as a collective social object it evokes an intensely personal response from individuals. This intense relation to the individual's experience of his or her own living self through an impassioned response to the fetish object is always incommensurable with the social value codes (whether in a way that reinforces or undercuts) within which the fetish holds the status of a material signifier. It is in these 'disavowals' and 'perspectives of flight' whose possibility is opened in the clash of this incommensurable difference that the fetish might be identified as the site of both the formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness.26

In identifying where and how a fixation unfolds in the conflicting dialogue between individual attachments and the adherence to valued social objects, Pietz also inadvertently points to the disruptive relationship between psychoanalysis and consumer Marxism by examining social behavior, passions, and object fixations within the bourgeois public sphere. Pietz also states that fetishism is fixed in time and place, commemorating a founding moment in the collective consciousness as laid out by Freud.

26 Pietz, 12-13.
Feminist essentialism is challenged in the fetishism that resists a stable phallic referent. Characterized by Michel Foucault as the "model perversion" of nineteenth century clinical discourse, fetishism played, and continues to play, a significant role within the history and epistemology of sexual codes. Three models of fetishism - anthropological, Freudian, and Marxian - all define the fetish as an object endowed with a special force or independent life. For this exercise, I will deal with two explicit theories of fetishism: Freudian overvaluation and Marxian transference.

At first glance, it is easy to identify Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr* within the discourse of fetishism. The painting contains an encounter between different cultures and, more precisely, different investments in the object. These occur between the desired subject matter of the delightful and delectable nymphs as well as the beautifully painted and highly desired French commodity. Bouguereau looked upon *Nymphs and Satyr* as his masterpiece. In a thickly wooded glade four frolicking nymphs are seeking to pull by way of arms, ears, horns and hair, a resisting satyr into a stream. The shallow scene is enhanced by the lusciousness of the dense forest. On the upper left hand side of the composition we see one nymph, posed as if climbing down from a rock to join in with the activity, as one hand grasps a branch as if to support her weight while the other is used to emphasize force onto the head of the struggling satyr. Another nymph takes firm hold of

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29 Earl Shinn, *Art Treasures of America* (Philadelphia: G. Barrie, 1879): 200. Shinn describes this as part of a conversation Bouguereau had with art collector John Wolfe who bought *Nymphs and Satyr* even before it was hung at the Salon.
his horn with one hand, and with delightful abandon, throws her other hand upward while
calling to three or more nymphs who we can scarcely see by a stream of sunlight
watching the action from across the glen. These nymphs appear to be entertained by the
same playful scene before us. Another nymph wraps her hand around the satyr, almost
guiding him from the back of his neck as she pulls his left arm and gazes, almost
innocently into the face of her victim. The final nymph, seen advantageously from
behind, clutches the satyr's right elbow and hand, luring him into the stream. One of the
satyr's hooves is already wet and he clearly wants to go no further with these forceful
creatures. The palpitating flesh of the seductive nymphs is titillatingly juxtaposed with
the furry dark skin of the satyr.

Looking at highlights from the Salon of 1873, one can understand how the
different structures of the painting narrative operate for the viewer. So many of the
works at the Salon provided a kind of public theater in which, through the disguising
strategies of narrative, male artists could play out what often became psychosexual
drama. This venture was one in which women existed by definition as the passive
recipients of fantasy rather than the creators of it. For example, a highlight in that
year's Salon, which hung just above Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr*, was Pierre Puvis de
Chavannes' *L'été* (1873), a grandiose painting of utopian dreams in an idyllic pastoral
setting (figure 11). It is openly concerned with the ideal family life, but plays down
sentimentality in favor of classical republican values of beauty through the half-naked,

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nurturing mother goddess figures, which visually serve the patriarchal structure.

Chavannes' statuesque figures in delicate pastel colors exhale the classical calm of antiquity, a dramatic contrast to the deep, luscious oils of Bouguereau's prancing figures further juxtaposing two different roles of nineteenth century women as desired by the male viewer.\(^31\)

Nineteenth century discourse on public nudity and nakedness is required to determine whether a female audience could identify with the context of Bouguereau's nymphs. T.J. Clark describes the dominant conventions of the female nude in France in the 1860s. He provides a disarmingly straightforward definition of a nude: "[it] is a picture for men to look at, in which Woman is constructed as an object of somebody else's desire."\(^32\) Again, Bouguereau's *The Birth of Venus* (1879) represents the idealized version of the nude form for Salon viewers of the late nineteenth century, centered on matters of propriety and desire (figure 8). This painting embodies the ideals of academic art in its careful modeling, polished surface, and mythological subject.\(^33\) Clark's analysis is based on a perceived blurring of the naked and the nude. Desire is never absent from

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\(^32\) Clark, 131. Clark and John Berger have exhausted the difference between nude and nakedness. Nakedness is a set of signs that mark material reality, while the nude transcends that historical and social existence, and is a kind of cultural disguise, see Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation: Penguin Books, 1972): 146.

\(^33\) Venus was a popular subject for painters at the end of the nineteenth century. Bouguereau's pays homage by the resemblance this painting has to one of his favorite Italian artists' works, *The Triumph of Galatea* (1512) by Raphael.
the nude; the genre itself is a guide for man's desire and woman's desirability; the nude is displaced and no longer an attribute of women's unclothed form. Although the naked and the nude are not here structured within an oppositional pairing, they represent a greater degree of cultural mediation, with nakedness still representing the more transparent signs of class and sexuality, the nudes in Bouguereau's painting was considered acceptable social nudity.

The nude in western art typically invites a permitted gaze due to its classical and idealizing tradition of representation within the cultural norm in which the nude is categorized as a framework. For example, Bouguereau's nymphs are clearly of a classical, mythological tradition, therefore they can exist as a cultural "other," despite their sensual, ivory white skin. However, this particular type of sensuality was developed in France during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, referred to as "Beaux Arts," emphasizing an anti-classical rendering of very soft flesh under exaggeratedly pink and white skin.\textsuperscript{34} Bouguereau's critics could never deny the public acclaim he received for his uncanny ability to make his figures look so real that their fleshy bodies could literally be touched. Chavannes posed a visual challenge to the academic figure in \textit{L'été}. He offered semi draped female figures standing and reclining, moving with rigid formality rather than natural animation. Bouguereau, on the other hand, paints porcelain skin that is delicately smooth, and hair that falls gently in ringlets over their backs. He uses drawing and modeling to correct the imperfections of a natural body but leaves

enough detail in the nipples and a hint of pubic hair to allow for the viewer's titillation, and escape classical references to unblemished sculpture. The painting reflects the language of the artist by being bound up in the same story of sexual difference that all academic art is founded on. In paintings of the nineteenth century women are seen as "other," as an object, not subject. In a way she represents the unconsciousness of the male because she is always the object he is looking at and never is she able to speak for herself. In this phallocentrism, there is a central, stable meaning defined largely by men who assert their power to name and control reality with their masculinity even when viewing fantasy. Called "risqué" by a critic-friend of the artist at the 1873 Paris Salon, the nudes were described as voluptuous without being lewd, performing in accordance with masculine desire through feminized "elegant gestures".35

A viewer may be provoked to critically reconsider the placement and meaning of the female figures. In the narrative of Nymphs and Satyr, there exists a visual stimulus for a woman to see herself as an object of aggressive fantasy, but is secure in her role as the aggressor.36 The interpretation Scobey gives to the nymph who grasps the satyr's horn as a sign of sexual gratification seems to suggest the nymph's triumph over the traditionally dominant beast. However, this view gives undue agency to the nymphs,

35 Bouguereau's childhood friend, architect Charles Garnier wrote in defense of a rude comment made at Bouguereau at the Salon. See Bartoli, 220.
36 Women were taught to cultivate modesty and conformism, and to flee the individual self-assertion attendant upon "standing out." Yet they were simultaneously believed to be naturally coquettish, driven to differentiate themselves from their rivals and capture public attention. The public gaze was also capable of bestowing social rewards of adulation and envy. See Miranda Gill, Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth Century Paris (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 53 - 57.
who were conceptualized by the nineteenth century male artist, obsessed with the ideal, fleshy feminine objects, enacting the aggressive fantasy for voyeuristic pleasure.

A more challenging position from which to identify both artist and viewer is within Jacques Lacan's paradigm of the mirror stages, based on social and cultural determinants.\(^{37}\) The interesting relationship between the idea of "looking" itself balances ambivalently on the line between observing the artist's painting as metaphor of the artist being observed. However, the paradox of canvas as mimesis of reality might be stated in the following way: when a painter sets out to create the equivalent of a mirror reflection, his own position before the canvas becomes problematic. Indeed, to maintain the conceit that the painting reflects reality with the fidelity of a mirror, the painter is compelled to figure his own body within the tableau, or pictorial ensemble, as though he had stood before an actual mirror and grafted its spectacular image onto the canvas.\(^{38}\) Within his complicated cast of *Nymphs and Satyr*, Bouguereau is the "scopophiliac," or voyeur who arrests the oscillation of gazes by permanently cancelling or repressing the opposing position of a singular male gaze.

Within this exercise, we seek to deny the usual conventions of "looking" in which an observer views an image frontally from a limited range of viewing angles. The original voyeur, the trespassing satyr, has been captured and thus becomes an intrinsic participant within the course of viewing. The nymphs function like the orientation key on a map, indexing the viewer's equivocal orientation in regard to the painting's represented


object. Bouguereau casts the viewer in an active role in which the conventional relationship to the object of vision is literally thrown "off-center" by identifying with the nymphs in the corner. The viewer has now "joined" the painting, rather than be a passive observer relegated before the physical plane of the canvas. In identifying with the observing nymphs, the viewer is implicitly within the canvas, delineating said position along the scope of the painting from which s/he experiences an intimate relationship with the object of the gaze.

Bouguereau’s painting is without a doubt an object of fantasy. The erotic subject matter features a satyr surrounded by excited nymphs, while the canvas's sensual tactile qualities appeal to the gazing voyeur. If Bouguereau saw himself as the captured satyr, he, too, created an image, which is misrecognized as the self in a way of confirming the fiction of ego. The fetish is a libidinal investment in an object indispensable for sexual gratification, subject to the gaze. It dazzles the spectator and fixes the voyeur’s eyes by way of seduction. Once the body image is coded as female, we are hastened into the domain psychoanalysis has insisted we project- the processes of sexual difference in which an image - the woman [the body of lack] - is ultimately a detached and unfixing sign in a phallocentric system of sexual differencing. The fetish masks its origins within the spectacle that the image beholds, fixating on the nymphs who play a castrating

39 See Mieke Bal’s analysis of Rembrandt’s insertion of his own identity within his self-portraits and in some of his male subjects in Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
40 Griselda Pollock, "Feminist Mythologies and Missing Mothers,” in Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): 148. The fetish is clinically defined as a substitute object, simultaneously disavowing and commemorating the penis as missing from the maternal body.
fear-raising role within the narrative. Although Freudian theory, popular within
nineteenth-century scholarship, insists on the impossibility of female fetishism, feminist
scholars have argued that a woman may absorb patriarchal values as her own and thus
become a fetishist. The female fetish in the painting appears to be captured by the
delighted nymphs. However, this substitutes as the lack, which signifies the male fetish
rather than the female's fetishization of an ideal body, which does not identify a lacking
phallus.

Though Freud insisted that women were incapable of fetishistic fantasies, scholars
have identified the possibility of female desire to obtain fantasies. The displacement
and fetishistic conversion takes the whole of the female form into a fetish, a substitute for
what appears lacking on the maternal body, the phallus. Laura Mulvey applied this to the
female star in cinema:

This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty
of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in

41 Scobey locates the painting as a desirable subject for the consuming Victorian woman,
who obsessively collects objects as if masquerading. See Laura Mulvey’s “Visual
42 Sarah Kofman, The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud’s Writings, trans. by
43 Psychiatrist Gatian de Gaeton de Clérambault also declared that women can't be
fetishists in 1908. Alfred Binet, Moreau de Tours and Magnan and Charcot among others
conducted several studies wherein women were studied in which most of the women
were determined to have 'sexual madness' while the minority were discovered to have
their own determined female perversions. Only one study out of twenty-four omitted
women's propensities to sexual pathology. See Alfred Binet, "Le fétichisme dans
l'amour," Revue philosophique 24 (1887): 143 - 67; Jean-Martin Charcot and Valentin
Magnan, "Inversion du sens genital," Archives du neurologie 3 (1882): 53-60; and Jann
Matlock, "Masquerading Women, Pathological Men," in William Pietz and Emily Apter's
itself…Fetishistic scopophilia can exist outside the linear time as the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone.⁴⁴

The bridging of woman with beauty can thus be explained in terms of fetishism dependant on the fantasy by which we encounter the patriarchal regime of sexual difference not lacking. The privilege of the gaze upon the female figure that characterizes Bouguereau’s nymphs offer the meaning or failure of meaning to produce knowledge about female perspective. The painting includes signs that could be intended to signify erotically nude female bodies as desirable objects for a masculine sexuality. But the relations between these signs do not ensure a full meaning. Their signification is stalled; the spectator’s gaze is fixated upon a fetish, a luring fantasy, exquisite skin and beauty, the encircled male and the phallic horn. The exposure of female as a powerful non-male excites voyeurism, yet she provokes danger as much as she exudes sexuality to the unwilling satyr. The painting is structured by the phenomenon of splitting the male and female spheres but articulates the anxieties that go with them. Passion without love bespeaks an autonomous female sexuality in a social system in which love signifies women’s submission to legal control, moral control, and definition of her sexuality by men. A predatory appetite implies that these female fantasies will not grant their prisoner gratification of the power of the phallus to fulfill (and thereby define) female sexual needs.⁴⁵ The female fetish works on two levels: the consumer good, the slick and

⁴⁴ Mulvey, 14-15.
brightly ornamented canvas, and the anthropological "other" that the satyr is - both male and mythological creature - that the nymphs virtually "control" the gaze over.

Studies were conducted in the nineteenth century to determine the agency of the female in recognizing and acting out her own fetishes. A fine example of the nineteenth century female appropriation of that fetish is in the Countess de Castiglione’s numerous photographs of her body, intended for her own consumption, thus identifying with the male invested fetish (figure 12).46 Solomon-Godeau states "one of the most conspicuous features of commodity culture is its sexualization of the commodity, its eroticization of objects, which in turn inflects, if not determines, the psychic structures of consumer desire."47 While her argument is purely theoretical, with little evidence of the countess' intentions, the appropriation of erotic images normally reserved for women of questionable backgrounds suggests female agency in her description of desire. We can

in clinical realism. Rousseau, in particular wrote about how the physical body of the woman serves as the object of fixation for the man's emotional state of which these attributes are the exterior translation; he loves the proud, contemptuous woman who "crushes him at her feet with the weight of her royal rage." Rousseau's relationship between image making and orgasm - what he called la dynamogenie - led to a new genre, that of literary perversion. Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, notorious for their virulently misogynistic view of the female species placed them on par with the animal order in the evolutionary chain. They capitalized on sensational descriptions of the insatiable sexual urges of women. While there is no certainty that Bouguereau was familiar with or by any means emulated the language of these texts on his canvas, I want to explore a basis for grounding acceptable female eroticism in the late nineteenth-century social sphere of female consumption.

now locate this particular female fetish within the male fetish. The position *Nymphs and Satyr* held within the emergent female consumer culture transfers into the merging of two fetishisms: the fetishism of patriarchy, grounded in the corporeal body and the commodity fetishism of capitalism, grounded in the means of production and the social relations they engender.\(^48\) It is within *Nymphs and Satyrs* that we begin discovering nineteenth century accumulations of the fantasy body of the beautiful, worldly woman, endlessly observed and scrutinized and in the fantasy body of women as prostitute, who symbolizes both seller and commodity; in the dancer or actress, the spectacle within the spectacle, who embodies a circulating good. These three fetishisms converge in and around the representation of the structured feminine within and powered by patriarchy, which we can also identify in Bouguereau's painting: the exotic nymphs, the gender reversal of the "other," and the capturers of the gaze.\(^49\)

Fetishism is the term Marx used to characterize the capitalist social process as a whole, which applied to both men and women. At the very least, his employment of this word was a vivid way of suggesting to his readers that the truth of capital was to be grasped from a perspective alien to that of bourgeois understanding. Scobey identifies the painting within the "Ladies' Mile" in New York City at the fin-de-siècle while attributing its effect to the economic upturn in consumer goods purchased by women. Scholar Jann Matlock focuses on the commodity fetishism of clothing and costumes, particularly as the women acted out "obsessions" in nineteenth century France, which

\(^{48}\) Scobey examines the social and cultural behaviors of the Gilded Age female within the constructs of consumerism on Ladies’ Mile. He discusses the “economically free” female who adorns herself with luxury and fantasy.

\(^{49}\) Solomon-Godeau, 269-70.
was later translated into the American "Francophilia." Within her studies, Matlock identifies a particular female fantasy in which the woman becomes the man, endowing herself with the same sexual power and control that has been exerted against her. Women such as the actress Sarah Bernhardt appropriated the guise of men not to play at sexual appeal but simply to enjoy the ability to expand her dramatic repertoire and incorporate feminine sensibility into some of the tragic characters written exclusively for men.

Fashion and makeup exaggerate certain pleasing forms of the body and create "psychic illusions" that generate excitement for those who are obsessed with ornamented women, and women, who are motivated by the power they have discovered by costuming themselves. Just as women began to gain control over female fashion, there was a notable increase in women shoplifters and kleptomaniacs. Some doctors attributed the rash of department store thefts to the capriciousness of hystericseven, menstrual syndromes, menopause, or their coquettish instincts. While this demonstrates female empowerment over the commodity, it is still problematic in assuming that all women identified with clothing or costuming fetishes.

It is precisely women's style which feminist critics have appealed to in their attempt to challenge women's exclusion from fetishism. Sarah Kofman has suggested that feminist theorists steal back fetishism as a prerogative of female narcissism. Naomi

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50 Though Matlock's essay focuses mostly on cross-dressing fetishes, her information helps to locate a particular female fetish for consumption. See Matlock, 31-61.

Schor has posited irony as the trope of feminist fetishism, insisting on the power of women's appropriations of female, not male, masquerades. Embracing the irresistible cult of consumption, women succumbed to the desires for masquerade, spectacle, and theater, which increasingly lured women into the public sphere at the turn of the century. They were seduced into collecting delightful objects that hypnotized the viewer into believing it was essential to their identity. In the case of the Bouguereau painting, the fetish was in a mythology that existed only in virtual reality, a delectably shiny object from a stylish culture, where women could determine gender relations, or control the "other."

I suggest that Bouguereau's painting, like the Freudian fetish, is a structure of ambiguity, which on the one hand, can point to social contradictions of modernist painting, and, on the other hand, tends to a psychic splitting of the subject between objectified women's bodies and the control over the beastly male. This may serve to negate the artist as maker and the painting as medium, but they do affirm the subject, that is to protect voyeuristic interests, specifically as it pertains to capitalist apprehension of objects as possessions and scopophilic pleasure in human figures as sexual objects.
READING NYMPHS AND SATYR THROUGH FEMINIST THEORY

A liberal bourgeoisie society, which proclaims itself the beacon of liberty and equality for all, while simultaneously preventing the enjoyment for equal social and economic rights, cannot be seen as anything but discriminatory. Art historians tend to divide themselves between different schools of thought introduced by Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock in the 1970s and 1980s. Nochlin stated that women were weakened by a lack of opportunities and institutions, while Pollock claimed that patriarchal ideology and social conditioning weakened women. While both women have contributed enormously to the discourse, Pollock's approach in examining patriarchal structures best supports ideologically within this discussion.

*Nymphs and Satyr* belongs to a dense network of interconnected discursive practices. This exercise focuses on two separate and distinct constructions: the mythological nude and the nineteenth century woman. In its generous display of nudity and continued context of male elite entertainment, it represents a range for feminist criticism against the nude in art for its objectification of women. Early feminist theory invoked the ideologically shared and common aspects of women's physical and psychic lives, which, it was claimed, could form the basis for a female aesthetic. Although this

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52 Ibid, 50.
54 Rita Felski in her discussion of feminist literature in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* defines the feminist public sphere in terms of "a series of cultural strategies which can be effective across a range of levels both inside and outside existing institutional structures."
tendency has been criticized for invoking an essentialist view of femininity, it utilized a means to recognize the aesthetic around the concepts of woman and the body, even while acknowledging that femininity was socially and historically constructed.\textsuperscript{55} Within contemporary feminist theory, we can challenge the aestheticization and sanitization of the female body within patriarchal culture and break open the boundaries of this regime of representation to reveal woman's body as matter and process, as opposed to form and status.\textsuperscript{56} The informed viewer of the twenty-first century, who decodes the reversal of roles in nineteenth century public sphere within the canvas of \textit{Nymphs and Satyr}, may produce a new interpretation that can release the painting of its strict association with bourgeois taste of the Belle Époque. This flexibility highlights the anxieties played out in the visual language/culture of the nineteenth century male artist.

Female viewing of the nude genre, widely considered to be the most highly regarded forms of artistic achievement, was further complicated by the fact that the male artist enjoyed almost complete dominance over the subject.\textsuperscript{57} Control over access to the nude was instrumental in the exercise of power by an art based upon an ideal of the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Lynda Nead uses feminist art to discuss the boundaries necessary to be broken and how feminist artists utilize these theories in \textit{The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality} (London: Routledge, 1992): 60-70.
\item Marcia Pointon has discussed the historical problems in describing the nude in academic genre: see \textit{Naked Authority: the Body in Western Painting 1830 - 1908} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 12.
\end{enumerate}
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human body. Official exclusion from the nude model ensured that women had no means to determine the language of high art or to make their own representations of the world, from their point of view, and thus to resist and contest the hegemony of the dominant class or gender.

Undoubtedly, *Nymphs and Satyr* resonates with female domination. The nude figures clearly direct the canvas as the primary objects on which to fix the gaze. The dreamy light dancing across the pure and delectable skin of the dancing nymphs, the mist that softens the depth of the forest, and the water of which the uneasy satyr is hoping to avoid articulates the painting. The prompt actions of pulling and pushing the pesky satyr complicate the nude's traditional position as a passive object. It is a painting that emphatically appeals to primary visuality and the loaded interactions between the figures.

Although I have indicated the realistic qualities to *Nymphs and Satyr*, it cannot be denied that they are historically conditioned patriarchal mythic structures, sated with messages that promote the exploitation and production of the nineteenth century women.

Bouguereau’s painting points to the cultural conflict within the bourgeois public sphere between feminine modesty and moral self-discipline on one hand and ownership, amusement, and display on the other. Women were held responsible for the social representation of family and class throughout this period but were also saddled with the

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58 Pollock's paradigm...
59 Seen in several traditions including within Bouguereau's own oeuvre.
60 According to Michel Foucault, the submissive power and not the hierarchical power of sexuality in the nineteenth-century was the physical excitement and enticement. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (New York: Random House, 1978): 48.
tasks of defining the national and the self. One critic noted of *Nymphs and Satyr* at the Salon of 1873, "the faces of these *creatures spirituelles* do not indicate the innocent naiads of the stream or dryads of the wood, but simply a new role for the informed Parisian woman of the nineteenth century." Although it is unclear who constituted an "informed Parisian woman" and what new role she was thought to have assumed, it is significant that a certain sector of women were thought to be capable of reading the imagery in a sophisticated and markedly modern way.

Traditionally women in classical imagery are not violent instigators, rather victims of sexual aggression. However, the women's vigorous actions in this painting seem to indicate they are the aggressors, not prizes to be won. The very theatricality and worldliness of the canvas at once indulged and undid its scenario of male submission. There is a performance enacted that this painting might have evoked desire in the female viewer, however it cannot be separated from its male construction or from the male dominated spaces from which it was viewed. Therefore it would be more accurate to read Bouguereau's painting as an invitation for women viewers to privilege the female figures and derive meanings from the activities they saw reflected in the nymphs under male allowances.

A reading of Edouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) draws on a more complex reworking of a similar dichotomy, the masculinist myths of modernism as he

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63 As the pinnacle of his argument, Scobey hypothesizes that this is why women feel empowered in nineteenth-century New York society.
considers the social realities of modern life (figure 13). He directs the Realist painting practice to a complex set of negotiations of the ambiguous class formations and class identities, which emerged in Paris society. Modernity is presented as far more a sense of being "current" - modernity is a matter of representation and major myths - of a new Paris for recreation, leisure and pleasure, of nature to be enjoyed at weekends in suburbia, of the prostitute taking over the streets and of fluidity of class in the popular spaces of entertainment. The key markers in this mythic territory are leisure, consumption, the spectacle, and money. It is within these sights that Manet lived, worked, and pictured himself. In *Nymphs and Satyr*, the parallel between the vulnerability in the nymphs' nudity and the aggressive power over the satyr that they activate is elaborated on the basis of similarly playful displays of social gender interaction of the nineteenth century.

Historical interpretation is based on the recognition that the past is different from the present. For example, we can easily identify *Nymphs and Satyr*’s original production from a time when women struggled under the patriarchal order, which served to determine their positions and behaviors within their society through its clear identification of nineteenth century aesthetics. This main strength of historical interpretation can, at the same time, have a problematic side effect. This manner of reading begins by assuming the strangeness or "otherness" of the particular horizon it seeks to understand. The presupposed otherness of the past allows us, or might even

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encourage us to project onto the past values or characteristics "we" do not consider to be part of our present-day self-image. For example, in viewing *The Gleaners* (1857), we are asked to understand the plight of the peasant-woman breaking her back for the tiniest scraps of wheat left behind in the fields (figure 14). Though the monumental painting signifies the physical act of labor for social relations in modern capitalist agriculture, the true historical weight of her undignified labor is lost to a contemporary viewer as much as the confines of a constricting corset would be to a bourgeois woman. While the impractical troubles of the bourgeoisie woman who chooses fashion and desire (the corset held erotic symbolism) over comfort is by no means comparable to the forced labor of the proletarian class, viewing often requires that a woman today identifies with both of these scenarios as though there exists some essential female quality that transcends time and class.\(^{66}\) Class identity can only denote the heterogeneous, isolated and conditional outcome of a play of discourses and articulations, regulated by other relations of difference.\(^{67}\)

Feminists often question the privilege given by psychoanalysis to the phallus/penis in which women lack and men have the symbolically privileged body, which explains the fascination with watching and looking. "Decency and virtue have been crowded from the ranks by indecency and licentiousness," wrote journalist, former

\(^{66}\) Nead, 63. As stated previously, there is discrepancy about essential gender identification though sex can be regarded as such. Both the corseted woman and the peasant working woman both held erotic symbols for the nineteenth century male viewer - that which is natural and motherly, and that which is urban, fashionable, and controls the gaze, which does not necessarily reflect a twentieth century viewer's reading.

actress, and women's rights activist Olive Logan in a widely read critique. "A coarse rage for nudity has ... come to be the ruling force in [our theaters]." The "public places" that Logan had in mind were the watering holes and clubrooms of sporting gents, places like the Hoffman House bar. She viewed the new theater as a concession to the regime of male voyeurism and female display ensconced there. Within *Nymphs and Satyr*, a viewer can locate the bourgeois definition of woman amongst her male peers, who manages to successfully capture the gaze. These women have special qualities that they embrace and flaunt, therefore a new reading from a female place of having can occur. The female figures in *Nymphs and Satyr* are erotic and human rather than clean and idealized and this is part of a popular aesthetic for coarse manners and dress in public spaces.

*Nymphs and Satyr* is unique in its allegorical revelation of the type of ideal woman in nineteenth century society. Emile Zola observes similar behavior in the modern Parisian woman, who defies the confines of traditional social values and behavior. *Nymphs and Satyr* appeals to the masses due to its reversal of traditional gender roles, disturbing the rules of patriarchal order. Bouguereau's figures mirror the anxieties felt by gender and class confusion on the streets of Paris in a safe, light-hearted,

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68 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference*. *Nymphs and Satyrs* made a stir because it expressed and contained transgressive female sexual power. This inversion of sexual power is traced by Scobey's directional description of the composition. However, he fails to follow this transgression into the structures of power. The females are performing the sexual fantasy and impulse for us, determined by the way in which to capture the fantasy of the male flâneur. See also Scobey, *Nymphs and Satyrs*, in his research on the types of people who frequented the Hoffman House bar.

69 This is discussed more in depth in chapter 2.

and delightfully subtle manner. While we may never be certain to what degree women achieved agency through this painting, it is clear that the seeds of empowerment were sown.
CONCLUSION

Each and every viewer brings their own cultural baggage to images, and therefore no fixed, predetermined, or unified meaning can be justifiable. In Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr*, the viewer may recognize a similarity between the continuum formed by the nymphs and the condemnation of Venus' passivity. While some scholars seek to free Venus from her role as an object owned by the passing viewer, so too should the nymphs be liberated from the same stigma that plagues the artist as the sole producer of meaning. The figures within the painting as well as the painting itself, function as fetishized objects, delighted and desired by the consumer of aesthetic pleasure. The production of meaning can never be singular, and therefore we must liberate traditional modes of looking to embrace more conceptual interpretations. Perhaps the playfulness admired in the "lucky" satyr will be changed to a more sadistic and antagonistic role of the nymphs who have reasserted themselves as keepers of their domain, who will, with great calm and rationale, execute those who have in the past harmed them. At the same time, I am fully aware of my own historical investments in writing this history.

Struggles over meaning are fought in a social arena in which power structures are in place. Allegory is a good example of a mechanism enlisting rhetoric to eliminate disturbing meanings. A mythical story and its representation refers to something other than itself, of which academic paintings of the nineteenth century were occasional to

71 Meike Bal, Paul de Man, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida (to name a few) use semiotics to deconstruct the elements of our every day codes to identify cultural bases.
reference. On the one hand, the nymphs could be seen as an allegorical representation of the modern nineteenth century woman who has asserted control over her public persona as a destroyer of the myth of uncontrolled passions. On the other, the allegory might represent the nineteenth century woman who sadistically kills passion through her role as the commodity fetish. Both of these scenarios demonstrate the fundamentally polyvalent nature of signs. If images and stories can mean something entirely outside of themselves, then there can be no limits, no constraints. A sign is not a thing but an event and exists in a historically and socially specific time and place. Sign-events take place under specific circumstances and according to a finite number of culturally valid, conventional, yet not unalterable rules.

As there is no common thread of essentialist feminine thought, the behaviors of the nineteenth century will not necessarily translate through the generations of women who come to view Bouguereau's work. However, in such relativistic distancing, relations with the past in the nature of repetition, similarity, or continuity are almost precluded by endorsing the strangeness of the past. The viewer's production is impossibly intertwined with each individual's own pre-text set of signs. And as it is impossible break free of these chains - the nymphs are simultaneously a sign, an allegory, and a fantasy.

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Figure 1: William Bouguereau, *Nymphs and Satyr*, 1873, oil on canvas. Collection of Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Massachusetts.
Figure 2: William Bouguereau, *Bacchante*, 1863, oil canvas. Private collection.
Figure 3: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1622-25, marble. Galleria Borghese, Rome.
Figure 4: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Rape of Proserpina*, 1621-22, marble. Galleria Borghese, Rome.
Figure 5: William Bouguereau, *Sketches of Nymphs (for Nymphs and Satyr)*, c. 1873, graphite on paper. Private collection.

Figure 6: William Bouguereau, *Sketches of Nymphs (for Nymphs and Satyr)*, c. 1873, graphite on paper. Private collection.
Figure 7: Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-59, oil on canvas. National Galleries of Scotland and the National Gallery, London.
Figure 8: William Bouguereau, *The Birth of Venus*, 1879, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Figure 9: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Venus Anadyomène*, 1848, oil on canvas. Musée Conde, Chantilly, France.
Figure 10: Eugène-Emmanuel Amaury-Duval, *The Birth of Venus*, 1862, oil on canvas, Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, Paris.
Figure 11: Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *L’été*, 1873, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Figure 12: Pierre-Louise Pierson, *Countess de Castiglione*, 1863-67, albumen silver print. Private collection.
Figure 13: Edouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Figure 13: Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
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