

## Nonnus's Nicaea and Punishing Female Masculinity

Nonnus, writing as a Christian in the fifth century CE, prominently featured narratives of sexual violence, both attempted and completed, within his *Dionysiaca*. Through these narratives, Nonnus portrays sex as a punishment for women. In the story of the huntress Nicaea in Books 15 and 16, Nonnus uses sexual violence to comment on the sexual norms and gender roles present in earlier pastoral novels, which often championed romantic equality and sexual reciprocity (Konstan 1994, 64). Nicaea, rather than conforming to the gendered expectations for novelistic heroines, is a masculine, violent figure who murders her suitor, Hymnus, to protect her virginity. Hymnus also subverts novelistic masculinity, desiring not an equal partnership with Nicaea but his own sexual submission and masochism. They are both punished for their perversions of gender and sexual norms. Nicaea murders Hymnus, and, as punishment for this crime, Dionysus rapes Nicaea. This paper will focus on the character of Nicaea in relation to pastoral romances, Nonnus's portrayal of her masculinity, and the reasoning and effect of her rape by Dionysus.

At the beginning of the narrative, Nonnus introduces Nicaea as a masculine virgin, foregrounding her rejection of sex and her adoption of masculine roles, portrayed as aggressive and violent. Although she is “unknowing of Aphrodite” (ἀπειρήτη Κυθερείης), the shepherd Hymnus, representative of the pastoral landscape featured prominently in romances like Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*, becomes enamored with her (*Dion.* 15.172). Hymnus obsesses over Nicaea's wild appearance, which causes him to neglect his flock—a scene typical of pastoral romances (Hadjitoffi 2008, 119). Overtaken, he steals Nicaea's hunting equipment to revere in her stead. Placing himself in a passive role, he strokes and kisses the tips of her arrows,

evoking her masculinity through the focus on her weaponry. His worship takes on a sexual tone, using her weapons as a phallic replacement for her body (Newbold 2016, 205).

When he confesses his love for her, he prostrates himself and begs for her to kill him. Disgusted with him, she complies and kills him, shooting him through the throat. The murder disrupts the idyllic world, now left for dead in the form of the archetypal pastoral lover (Shorrock 2001, 142). As punishment for this murder, Dionysus rapes Nicaea. He, like Hymnus, becomes enamored with her, dreaming of serving her as a slave and gleefully imagining the pain he might feel if she strikes him in anger. Nicaea rejects him, but as she flees, Dionysus entices her to drink from a river he has polluted with wine, making her drunk. Now intoxicated, Nicaea faints, and Dionysus rapes her in her sleep after Nemesis encouraged him to avenge Hymnus's murder.

Thus, Dionysus punished the violent masculinity and the militant virginity of Nicaea. Nonnus has perverted the pastoral world, narrating its death and punishing its murderer with sexual violence. This pastoral death concludes with the triumph of Dionysus over Nicaea, superseding the pastoral world, which could not win Nicaea. As a result, the story of Nicaea entails a dismissal of the classical pastoral genre, characterizing its expression of female sexual agency as perverse, violent, and in need of correction by Dionysus and his literary mode.

### Bibliography

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