

PLURABELLE

Selected material from various copyright and open sources.

Women Becoming or Turned Into Trees / Plants / Flowers

Nymphs

Nymphs are female nature deities in ancient Greek mythology and folklore. They are generally regarded as personifications of nature, are typically tied to a specific place, landform, or tree, and are usually depicted as maidens. They were often seen as having healing properties. Other divine powers of the nymphs included divination and shapeshifting. Nymphs, like other goddesses, were immortal except for the hamadryads, whose lives were bound to a specific tree. Desirable and promiscuous, nymphs can rarely be fully domesticated, being often aggressive in their mortal affairs.

Nymphs in the Forest, Paul François Quinsac



Daphne

The nymph Daphne became the unwilling object of infatuation of Apollo, who pursued her relentlessly. When Apollo finally caught her, Daphne prayed for help from the earth goddess Gaia (in Hyginus's version), or the river god Peneus of Thessaly (in Ovid's version), who immediately commenced her transformation into a laurel tree. "Her prayer was scarcely finished when she feels / a torpor take possession of her limbs— / her supple trunk is girdled with a thin / layer of fine bark over her smooth skin; / her hair turns into foliage, her arms / grow into branches, sluggish roots adhere / to feet that were so recently so swift, / her head becomes the summit of a tree; / all that remains of her is a warm glow." Ovid I, 754 – 62. Various operas have resulted, including *Dafne*, by Jacopo Peri and Jacopo Corsi (1598); *La Dafne*, by Marco da Gagliano (1608); *Die Dafne* by Heinrich Schütz (1627, lost); and *Daphne*, by Richard Strauss (1938).

Apollo and Daphne, Bernini, 1622 - 25

Thumbelina

Illustration by Vilhelm Pedersen

In the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, a woman yearning for a child asks a witch for advice, and is presented with barley, which she plants. A tiny girl named Thumbelina emerges from its flower. One night, Thumbelina is carried off by a toad who wants her as a bride for her son. With the help of a fish and a butterfly, Thumbelina escapes. When winter comes, she is given shelter by an old field-mouse and tends her dwelling in gratitude. Thumbelina sees a swallow who is injured while visiting a mole, a neighbor of the fieldmouse. At the end of winter, the mouse suggests Thumbelina marry the mole. Thumbelina finds the prospect of marrying the mole repulsive, even though he impresses her with his knowledge of ancient history and other matters. Thumbelina sees little choice but to agree, but at the last minute, she escapes by fleeing to a far-off land with the swallow. In a sunny field of flowers, Thumbelina meets a tiny flower-fairy prince more to her liking. They eventually wed. She receives a pair of wings to accompany her husband on his travels from flower to flower, and she receives a new name, Maia.



Girl Becomes Tree Becomes Girl

In this Karnataka folk tale from India, there once lived a poor woman with two daughters. The younger daughter decided to help her impoverished family. She and her older sister performed a ritual which required two pitchers of water—one to transform the younger to a tree and the other back to human form. Her older sister plucks flowers from the transformed tree, making sure that she doesn't damage the tree, and then converts her younger sister back to human form. They weaved the fragrant flowers into garlands and sold them at the king's palace. One day the prince discovers the garlands in the palace. He followed the girls back to their house. He hid behind a tree and saw the secret origin of flowers. He asked his parents (king and queen) to marry the girl. After the wedding, several nights passed without the prince speaking to her or touching her. Then he makes his demand: she must do her transformation for him. Ashamed, she relents and performs the ceremony. Her envious sister-in-law watched the transformation one night and forced her to transform into a tree and then broke her branches and plucked her flowers. When the princess changed back to human form, she had no hands or feet. She crawled into a gutter. Next morning a wagon driver spotted her and rescued her. He covered her naked body. The ruined daughter was brought to the palace, bathed, healed, and placed at the main door for decoration. The prince, distraught at her wife's disappearance, had assumed that she left him due to his arrogance. He turned into a beggar and wandered across the country. After a long time, the prince, haggard and unrecognizable, returned to the town. He was bathed and fed. One day the prince saw the half-body of his wife. He immediately recognized his lost wife. She asked him to perform the ritual and fix all her broken branches, and to transform her back to human form.



Illustration for *A Flowering Tree*, an opera by John Adams, libretto by John Adams / Peter Sellars

The Bay-Tree Maiden



In this Romanian folk tale, a prince began to cry six weeks before he was born. Nothing his mother did placated him until she promised him that he could marry Sanda-Lucsandra, a fair maiden who lived past nine lands and nine seas. When he grew up, he demanded that his parents marry him to her, and when the queen confessed she had made up Sanda-Lucsandra, he set out in search of her. He came upon a great bay tree. He heard a verse, and a beautiful maiden came out. He seduced her, promising to marry her, and sneaked away the next morning. He came to a castle, where the master claimed that his own daughter was Sanda-Lucsandra and a wedding was arranged. The maiden could no longer get back into the bay tree, and so set out in search of the prince. She traded her clothing with a monk. She came across a carriage where the prince was bringing his bride back. The prince told the story of seeing a maiden weeping in the meadow because a prince had seduced her, and she could no longer get into the bay tree. At his parents' castle, on the wedding day, the monk vanished. The prince went to

the room and found the monk hanging by the neck. When he went to cut her down, he realized she was the maiden and that he had not married the true Sanda-Lucsandra. He sent back the false bride and married the maiden from the bay tree.

The Silver Cypress Tree with Golden Fruit

In *The Silver Cypress Tree with Golden Fruit*, a folk tale from Turkey, a poor, childless woman takes a piece of wood, carves a likeness of a child and cradles it as if a baby. Her husband thinks her mad and throws the wooden image out the window. A cypress tree sprouts where it lands. Some time later, a prince and his retinue camp near the tree, and every night the prince notices that a silver and a golden candelabra switched positions. He stays awake one night and discovers that a beautiful maiden is the one responsible. She tells him she must not tarry until sunrise, and must return to her mother, the cypress tree. She and the prince talk the nights away, until he tells her he must say goodbye. On the appointed day, the prince departs before early dawn and leaves the maiden asleep. When she wakes up, it is already dawn, and she tries to return to the tree, but cannot. She wanders off and trades clothes with a shepherd, then goes to the king's court. They become companions, until the prince is set to be married on a certain day. The shepherd then asks the prince to prepare a room with a swinging bed, for he will hang himself. The prince goes to check on the shepherd and realizes "he" was the maiden from the tree. He stops her, and marries her.



Dryads and Oreads



In Greek mythology, the Dryads and Oreads are the nymphs of trees, groves, woodlands, and mountain forests. They are the spirits of the oaks and pines, poplar and ash, apple and laurel. For those known as Hamadryades, usually connected with river-side trees and sacred groves, a tree was born with her birth, to which her life was tied. While the tree flourished, so did its resident nymph, but when it died, she passed away. For this reason, both dryads and the other gods would punish mortals who harmed trees. Some maintain that a hamadryad is the tree itself, with a normal dryad being simply the indwelling entity, or spirit, of the tree. The life of a hamadryades is concurrent with that of its tree: one cannot exist without the other. The Epimelides are dryad nymphs that care for apple trees as well as sheep and goats. The homonymic names for an epimelias relates them to both fruit trees and flock animals giving them their dual role. Their hair is white, much like apple blossoms or undyed wool. Like other dryads, they can shape-shift from trees to humans. They are also known to be the guardians of the tree that the Golden Fleece was kept on. Notably, these nymphs are not a clearly defined category since various other types of nymphs were counted among them. The Meliae were usually considered to be the nymphs of the ash tree, whose name they shared. According to Hesiod, the Meliae (probably meaning all tree-nymphs) were born from the drops of blood that fell on Gaia / Earth when Cronus castrated Uranus. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the ash trees, perhaps meaning the Melian nymphs, are said to have been

the progenitors of the generation of men belonging to Hesiod's Bronze Age. The Meliae were nurses of the infant Zeus in the Cretan Dikti mountains, according to the third-century BCE poet Callimachus's *Hymn to Zeus*, where they fed him on the milk of the goat Amalthea and honey.

The Woodcutter and the Hamadryad Aigeiros, Émile Bin, 1870