Rafinesque’s nymphs

José A. Mari Mut

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On the cover- The Dance of Nymphs. By Willam Gale (1823-1909)

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The inspiration for this short contribution was the statement made by Peter Bernhardt, on page 12 of his enjoyable *Gods and Goddesses in the Garden...* (2008), to the effect that botanist Constantine Samuel Rafinesque had made up “out of thin air” the names of four plant genera dedicated to nymphs whose names “no one has ever found... in the classic poems, plays, or books of mythology.”

Rafinesque dedicated to nymphs fifty plant genera, only seven of which can be matched to a nymph known from classic works. This situation has unavoidably led to educated guesses by researchers interested in the etymology of plant names. For example, Schultes and Pease (1963) suggest that *Adipe* may refer to the generally fleshy flower and *Cordula* to a club-shaped column, of orchids.

In an attempt to determine the origin of Rafinesque’s names, I extracted from Burkhardt (2018) 45 generic names dedicated by Rafinesque to nymphs. Given that with a single exception the names originated in Rafinesque’s *Flora Telluriana* and *Sylva Telluriana*, both publications were
browsed page by page and five more names were found, reaching the total of fifty.

I then began searching for the names on the Internet and it quickly became apparent that they did not originate in the names of the classic nymphs of antiquity, but rather on the names of what Van-Wright (2005) has called winged nymphs: butterflies!

All but six of the 50 names, and all but two of the remaining 44, can be traced to a butterfly included in two works by Johann Christian Fabricius published during the late 18th century. Rafinesque, who was also interested in butterflies (the family name Nymphalidae is credited to him), and who was contemporary with Fabricius during 25 years, had simply turned to the latter’s work for names to use for his many plant genera, just as Fabricius probably turned to other publications, and Linnaeus turned to classical works (Heller 1945).

The next page reproduces page 59 of the third volume of Fabricius’ *Entomologia systematica enmendata et aucta*... (1793). The names *Enothrea*, *Dirtea* and *Panope* correspond to three of Rafinesque’s plant genera dedicated to nymphs. *Hippia* was in use for a plant genus.


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The genera and the butterflies


**Almana** (Gesneriaceae) - Flora Telluriana 1838 vol. 4: 68. Butterfly: *Juniona almana* (Linnaeus) 1758 (Nyphalidae). See Fabricius 1793: 89.

**Amphione** (Convolvulaceae) - Flora Telluriana 1838 vol. 4: 79. Butterfly: *Dismorphia amphione* (Cramer) 1779 (Pieridae).

**Aplina** (Asteraceae) - Flora Telluriana 1838 vol. 4: 119. Not related to a butterfly. The plant is from Mt. Parnassus in Greece and the name is perhaps derived from *alpina*, meaning from a high, rocky habitat. For this name the author indicated for a nymph and simplicity; short, simple and easy to read names were favorites of Rafinesque.


**Bolina** (Melastomataceae)- Sylva Telluriana 1838 p. 101. Butterfly: *Hypolimnas bolina* (Linnaeus) 1758 (Nymphalidae). See Fabricius 1793: 126. Bolina was a mortal young woman who leapt into the sea in order to escape Apollo’s advances, who in response turned her into a nymph.

**Camonea** (Convolvulaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1838. vol. 4: 81. Butterfly: *Acraea camaena* (Drury) 1773 (Nymphalidae). Initially spelled *camoena*. See Fabricius 1793: 173. In Roman mythology, the Camenae or Camoenae were goddesses of childbirth, wells and fountains, as well as prophetic deities, equivalent to the Muses of Greek mythology.

**Cordula** (Orchidaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1838. vol. 4: 46. Butterfly: *Satyrus cordula* (Fabricius) 1793 (Satyridae). See Fabricius 1793: 226.


**Endeisa** (Orchidaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1837. Vol. 2: 52. Not related to a butterfly. In Greek mythology, Queen Endeis was the wife of King Aeacus and Achille’s grandmother.


**Enothrea** (Orchidaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1838. Vol. 4: 43. Butterfly: *Ariadne enotrea* (Cramer) 1782 (Nymphalidae). Fabricius (1793: 59) misspelled the name *enothrea*, which is how Rafinesque apparently copied it.

**Ethesia** (Liliaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1837. Vol. 3: 60. Butterfly: *Papilio ethesia* Drury 1782 (Nymphalidae). See Fabricius 1793: 249. By 1869 the species had been transferred to the genus *Eurytela*.

**Ethesia** (Acanthaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1838. Vol. 4: 63. Butterfly: *Papilio ethesia* Drury 1782 (Nymphalidae). See Fabricius 1793: 249. By 1869 the species had been transferred to the genus *Eurytela*.


Froscula (Orchidaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1838. Vol. 4: 44. Butterfly: Perhaps *Marpesia furcula* (Fabricius) 1793 (Nymphalidae). See Fabricius 1793: 79. Froscula may be based on furcula, which has other meanings in zoology.

Hecabe (Orchidaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1838. Vol. 4: 44. Butterfly: *Eurema hecabe* (Linnaeus) 1758 (Pieridae). See Fabricius 1793: 259. Hecabe was a nymph, one of the fifty Danaids, daughters of Danaus, king of Lybia. Hecabe was also a Trojan queen, mother of Hector.


Levana (Solanaceae)- Autikon Botanikon 1840: 15. Butterfly: *Araschnia levana* (Linnaeus) 1758 Nymphalidae. See Fabricius 1793: 256. In Roman mythology, Levana (from *levare*- to lift) is an ancient goddess concerned with childbirth, particularly with the process of raising the newborn from the ground unto the arms of the midwife or mother.
**Licinia** (Liliaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1837. Vol. 3: 57. Butterfly: *Papilio licinia* Cramer 1777 (Pieridae). See Fabricius 1793: 197. Now considered a synonym of *Enantia melite* (Linnaeus) 1763. There are at least six women in Roman antiquity named Licinia, one of them a vestal virgin.


**Melfona** (Lythraceae)- Sylva Telluriana 1838 p. 103. Not related to a butterfly or character in antiquity.


**Monustes** (Orchidaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1837. Vol. 2: 87. Butterfly: *Ascia monuste* (Linnaeus) 1764. See Fabricius 1793: 189. In Greek mythology, Monustes is a nymph, one of the fifty Danaids, daughters of Danaus, king of Lybia.


**Olgasis** (Orchidaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1837. Vol. 2: 51. Not related to a butterfly or character in antiquity. Olgasis is the ancient name for a region in Asia Minor, later known as the Kush Tagh (Ainsworth 1888: 377).


Papilio clytia Linnaeus 1758. Panope is a nymph in the Iliad.


Postuera (Oleaceae)- Sylva Telluriana 1838 p. 10. Not related to a butterfly or character in antiquity.


Zelmira (Marantaceae)- Flora Telluriana 1838. vol. 4: 50. Butterfly: Papilio zelmira Stoll 1780 (Pieridae). See Fabricius 1793: 197. This is the type species of the genus Apías.
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Literature Cited


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**Fabricius, J. C.** 1793. Entomologia systematica emendata et aucta... Vol. 3. 519 pp.


*Acraea quirina* (Fabricius 1781). *Quirina* Rafinesque 1838

