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“Speak for Yourself”: Ovidian Women and the Suppression of Voice and Complaint in *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*

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“SPEAK FOR YOURSELF”: OVIDIAN WOMEN AND THE SUPPRESSION OF
VOICE AND COMPLAINT IN *METAMORPHOSES* AND *HEROIDES*

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ABSTRACT

Ovid's portrayal and attitude towards women is one that is particularly puzzling and contradictory throughout his *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*. Recent scholarship on Ovidian literature is only divided on whether or not Ovid's intentions within these two works were to sympathize with the Roman woman's experience or to reinforce the lack of female representation in Roman society; however, I argue that Ovid fails to achieve empathy for the Roman woman. In *Heroides*, these women are pining and tragic, often meeting some terrible fate shortly after being abandoned by their suitors and putting forth a complaint. Conversely, women in *Metamorphoses* also issue complaints, and as a result, are raped, mutilated, and transformed. In both texts, female desires and voices are ultimately rejected or invalidated in some manner that ridicules or objectifies the woman. The combination of euphemistic language and avoidance of words like "rape," a lack of female agency and choice, dehumanization and violence on women, as well as stereotypical presentations of female characters all point to Ovid's ventriloquization of female voice, complaints and desires. All of these are utilized to silence women and female complaint under Roman patriarchy, reaching a male audience, and less so a female one.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Everyone will enjoy this first modern translation by an American poet of Ovid’s great work, the major treasury of classical mythology, which has perennially stimulated the minds of men.” This line resides on the back of a modern print translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* by Ralph Humphries. It is enticing to its male audience—promising “food on the table” and “real blood on the ground,” as well as love tales of “men, women, and the gods.” While the blurb assures “everyone” will admire the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, the question of the extent to how much this applies to *all* readers remains—what of women? Although the text may be an appealing find to a male figure, there is hardly any room for women’s passions or desires, and the theme of “love” is much more sparse than the blurb attests to. It is Ovidian tradition that has so largely shaped the forms and modalities of complaint—a tradition in which has deemed the complaints of women as a negatively feminine engagement. It is through Ovid that we can recognize the forms of women’s complaint he puts forth in a variety of his works, and how the female voice is something ventriloquized by men, thus birthing the Ovidian tradition that has made its way into Early Modern English literature.

Ovid’s portrayal of women is fascinatingly puzzling, and one to be noted. In retrospect, a modern-day reader can make sense of why Ovid portrays his female characters in the manner that he does. When Ovid was writing, women were considered to be an entity that was secondary to man, and 19-20th century CE scholars and other text

material affirms this. In his “The Role of Women in the Roman World,” Mark Cartwright (2014) notes the “almost exclusively male source material dealing with a male-dominated Roman world,” (para. 1) which exemplifies Ovid’s, as well as many other male scholars, potential attitude towards women, who retained a specific role in Roman society enforced by a dominating patriarchy. As a result of her predisposed role and the Romans power over women in their society, Ovid seems to reinstate these expectations in his poetry, emphasizing the female as an object meant to be pursued by a man. At the same time; however, there are moments within his texts that blur a critic’s perception of Ovid’s view of women. This only complicates Ovid’s case more, and raises the question of how much Ovid is a sympathizer or objectifying women.

This essay will explore literature on the various forms of complaint within the Ovidian tradition and the multiple interpretations of his myths, primarily turning to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*. The essay will present the literature chronologically, tracking the development, attributes, and critical issues of Ovid’s works as a genre of female-voiced complaint poetry, by means of considering if Ovid was truly sympathetic to his female audience, or if his works were merely a vessel to reinforce the silencing of women and their complaints. Within presentation of the current literature, I will then argue how Ovid’s portrayal of the female voice in *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* is ventriloquized and intended to mock the Roman woman’s female experience, as well as her voice.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conventionally in Ovid's poems, complaining women are portrayed as "problematically" feminine—a woman who is wronged, hurt, or isolated makes a complaint to a man—typically her straying lover—and is completely ignored, and often met with a tragic fate by the end of the poem. Nancy Ciccone develops this pattern of abandoned women in works by Ovid in her "Ovid's and Ariosto's Abandoned Women," (1997) where she tracks the usage of female complaints in *Heroides*. In *Heroides*, women complain in a manner that follows this structure and are never given a resolution. These women have no "practical reasoning" (Ciccone, 1997, p. 3) and are unable to find solutions to their problems; rather than attempting to alleviate the source of their complaint, they turn to letters and write instead. While she suggests that women only have a voice in written letters in *Heroides*, Ciccone (1997) further argues that Ovid puts forth a "muddled" message in the letters by his female characters. Within the text, there is a duality that exists in the complaint,

On the one hand, the female speaks of her grief in first person, direct discourse.

On the other hand, the master artisan formally articulates by means of rhetorical figures and metrical dexterity a literary artifact. As a result, the female speaker's internal emotional state is staged from the external vantage point of artistry separate from a controlling, imperial narrative (p. 3).

Ciccone (1997) pursues this idea by pointing to various epistles in *Heroides*; Dido to Aeneas for example. Ovid presents Dido as “domesticated...without a context” (p. 3). She is exploited and displaces “practical reasoning,” which is why she fails to take action against her predicament. Readers may notice a female’s complaint through a masculine lens, where Ovid has decided to depict his female subjects in a way that is paralleled to his reality—women as secondary, unable speak up, and seemingly useless without a man. This reading, as Ciccone suggests, *contextualizes* Dido, placing her at the backdrop of a larger historical context that suggests Roman women’s inferiority to Roman men. On the ladder, “their very voices sidestep dominant traditions and foster a minority discourse” (Ciccone, 1997, p. 3) illustrating Dido and other women from *Heroides* as occupying some agency outside of their historical framework. In this vein, Dido is *decontextualized*, allowing her a voice and removing her from the greater controlling narrative. Ciccone (1997) tracks this happening throughout *Heroides*, which suggests Ovid is both removed and empathetic towards his female audience. Because there are many “holes in the middle” (p. 4) of Ovid’s poems, a woman’s complaint may be interpreted as both a way of empowering the female subject, but also ridiculing her, if the complaint may be mocked through a male’s perspective.

Moreover, Llewelyn Morgan also comments on the masculine nature of epics in his “Child’s Play: Ovid and His Critics” (2003), and how Roman epics, as a genre, create a model of the “Roman Order” in and outside of the home, and within gender. He contends that,

‘Roman order’ and male authority, in other words, are one and the same thing, and find a profound resonance in the epic genre (p. 67).

Morgan (2003) suggests that Ovid's acknowledgement of this and the usage of the genre shows his "amused interrogation of the epic genre" (p. 67). Ovid destabilizes the gender norms of the typical epic; Morgan points to Ancaeus during the Calydonian boar hunt in *Metamorphoses*, who is characterized as a "full-blown" masculine figure, and the boar as representative of the thing that acts against the hero, which "goes on to consider the possibility that the precise circumstances of Ancaeus' death, gored in the groin, have a special appropriateness" (Morgan, 2003, p. 67). Ovid presents masculinity in the "crudest manner" (p. 68) possible as a means of subverting the epic as a genre and devaluing heroic masculinity. Ovid does this by walking the line with the rules and conventions of the epic; instead he,

adopts...this unorthodox epic. Epic's proper mode of speech was masculine: grave, serious, self-important. But the mode Ovid deploys is typically its polar opposite: flippant, playful, and given to puerile sexual humor (Morgan, 2003, p. 68).

Rather than reading Ovid's portrayal of masculinity as sympathy and as him siding with men, Morgan advances that Ovid is being humorous, exaggerating and mocking the hyper masculine "Roman order." Morgan (2003) provides another example, turning to Actaeon when he wanders upon a bathing Diana. Specific details, such as Diana's "height...of impeccable epic pedigree" (p. 68) once again reject the male subject's masculinity, and in this case, allot it to the female figure. Ovid finds humor in the "ethos of mischievous impudence, in the face of figures conventionally deserving of respect: a great man, a goddess, Virgil, Homer" (Morgan, 2003, p. 69). He subverts the "Roman order" and instead develops his own ideas about gender and society.

Morgan (2003) then advances Ovid's multiple critics, including one delivered by Seneca at *Naturales Quaestiones*, who accuses Ovid "of a violation of literary decorum" (p. 70), one of the major criticisms of *Metamorphoses* across the ages. According to Morgan (2003), Seneca's "core criticism is inappropriateness...Ovid is accused of childishness" (p. 71), as the entire content of *Metamorphoses* is filled with "boyisms" that lack critical knowledge and control. Ovid's,

'schoolboy pyrotechnics', with its suggestion of a child playing with fireworks, captures nicely the notion of dangerous irresponsibility...he lacked a sense of what was fitting: it is characteristic of children (according to stereotype and, as it happens, in actual fact) not to possess an appreciation of the proper value of things (Morgan, 2003, p. 72).

The evidence presented here somewhat confirms the previous evidence; however, it also offers new insight on Ovid's attitude towards women, and perhaps why and how they put forth a complaint in his works. On the one hand, this affirms the theory of Ovid's empathy towards his female audience; in playing with the rules of the epic (unmanning a man by a boar), Ovid creates a kind of humor that is inverse of the epic's function—rather than a woman being ridiculed, it is a man who is scorned. One reading of this could suggest that Ovid is attempting to revoke the power of the masculine edge that is emphatically present in the epic genre, and instead grant it to the women, giving them agency and a voice in their complaints. However, this evidence could also reject that of previous literature. Ovid's humor could be less of a sympathy towards women, and more of a playful, boyish humor, that is directed to the epic genre overall. In other words, Ovid could be generally mocking typical conventions and his own artistry with the genre.

The humor that is ever present in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* may come off as playful, flippant even, which would ultimately reject any agency given to complaining women, and instead causing more of a spectacle of them. Ovid's flippancy may only equate to an unserious and superficial attitude towards ideas and norms of the sexes, which only reinforces them in the epic.

Critics have also taken a feminist approach to works by Ovid, suggesting the texts provide a positive lens for its female readers. Ashley Hess does exactly this in her "Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a Feminist Text," (2020) in which she advocates for Ovid's portrayal of "female idols" within the myths. While mythology in the form of an epic is centrally male-dominated, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* can be established as a feminist epic, highlighting the empowerment of female characters within the text. The activities and pastimes of women in *Metamorphoses*, such as "weaving, singing competitions, and generally expressing a more varied selection of emotions than their male counterparts," (Hess, 2020, para. 3) point readers to the notion that Ovid attempts to shine light on the Roman female society and day to day life. Hess (2020) even draws on the contemporary tool of the Bechdel Test (test typically used in film to determine if the piece is inclusive to females) to make the case that *Metamorphoses* would, in fact, exceed the criteria of the test, "the Bechdel Test indicates that Ovid's inclusion of women is even more pronounced than some modern texts" (para. 3).

Additionally, Hess highlights how women in the text "stick together," and generally bond together as a means of looking out for one another against the patriarchy and male power. Hess draws on this idea of female bonding as Ovid's way of

highlighting his interest in their recreational and oratory activities in Roman society.

Hess (2020) contends that,

Not only does the inclusion of typically female activities and the satisfaction of the Bechdel Test make this text feminist, women, goddesses and mortals alike, are also seen protecting one another. The display of female pastimes gives representation to the work women did in their societies during the time in which this epic was written...he also provides examples of women protecting each other or goddesses protecting mortal women and other goddesses (para. 8).

The stories of Procne and Philomela, Telethusa and her daughter, Medusa and Minerva, and Diana and Arethusa to name a few, exhibit mortals and goddesses protecting each other from violent and controlling men. Furthermore, “communication plays a vital role in *Metamorphoses* because Ovid creates female characters who find innovative ways to communicate despite their rapists’ attempts to silence them” (Hess, 2020, para. 13). This allows women in *Metamorphoses* not only a reclamation of their agency despite being silenced by their male oppressors, but it also depicts the character’s resilience and determination after experiencing a tragedy. By giving female characters the ability to narrate along with a voice, the reading of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as a feminist text is supported.

Hess’s argument throughout “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as a Feminist Text” (2020) contradicts that of the other studies that develop Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* as anti-feminist and female complaints as ventriloquized by men. Although women and their pastimes are characterized as overtly “feminine,” Hess rejects the idea that Ovid puts forth his female characters this way as a means of ridiculing or objectifying them.

Rather, their ability to voice their complaints, concerns, and bond together empowers them as female, illustrating Ovid's ability to sympathize with the Roman woman, and his interest in their daily life. Ovid's representation of women is proto-feminist, and embodies the realistic qualities of women. Where his male characters are "one-dimensional" (Hess, 2020, para. 8), the women are dynamic, resilient, and empowered, which only points to *Metamorphoses* as a female epic.

While Hess makes an admirable claim for the women in *Metamorphoses*, I would argue that the same instances she presents as examples are hardly proto-feminist, and that the content of those stories can only reject her argument. Look to "The Story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela," for example. In this story, Tereus and Procne are a married couple who live in Thrace. After five years of marriage, Procne attests to Tereus that nothing would make her happier than to see her sister, Philomela. Tereus obliges and travels to Athens to retrieve Philomela, instantly becoming lustful for her. As a result of his desire, Tereus makes plans to abduct Philomela and take her against her will. Upon their arrival in Thrace, Tereus assaults and rapes Philomela. After he assaults her, Philomela curses him, to which Tereus promptly cuts off her tongue, and tells Procne that she has died, abandoning her. A year passes before the two sisters are finally reunited, to which she is made aware through the tapestry Philomela weaves. Both enraged, Procne then devises a revenge plot by murdering Procne and Tereus's son Itys, and feeding him to Tereus. By the end of the story, all of the characters are turned into birds—Tereus a hoopoe, Procne a swallow, and Philomela a nightingale.

Dani Bostick (2018) also provides a feminist approach to Ovidian literature when discussing *Heroides*. In her "The Voice of the Heartbroken," Bostick (2018) comments

on Ovid's success in portraying female "emotions associated with abandonment and unrequited love" (para. 5). She argues against scholarship that paints Ovid's representation of women as "caricaturist" and instead contends that he does not strip female characters of their dignity, but provides an accurate description of what heartbreak looks like. She gives Ovid's female characters the benefit of the doubt and questions a woman's alternative means to unhappiness when abandoned by her significant other, "how is a woman supposed to feel when she wakes up on a desolate beach and realizes the man for whom she sacrificed is sailing away?" (para. 6). One epistle Bostick references to in defense of this is Epistle 9, "Deianira to Hercules." In this instance, Deianira writes to Hercules complaining of his infidelity and pursuit of another woman, Iole. As she mocks him, her anger and feelings of betrayal quickly turn to guilt as she realizes Hercules lay dying from a poisonous robe she sent him out of rage. Upon her realization, she is overcome with guilt, and kills herself by the end of the epistle. Bostick contends this provides example of Ovid's display of a wide variety of "emotions and reactions" (para. 14) that are appropriate and in-tune with the Roman female experience of infidelity, further suggesting Ovid's success in capturing these emotions could potentially come from his own experience with heartbreak. Bostick also comments on what she describes as Ovid's accurate presentation of ungrateful men and female sacrifice in *Heroides*, drawing on examples like Phyllis and Demioophon, Dido and Aeneas, Jason and Medea, and Theseus and Ariadne. In each of these epistles, the women have made some sort of sacrifice for the men they love, only to be abandoned or rejected by the end of the epistle. Bostick (2018) claims their abandonment is Ovid's way of providing a commentary on not just ungratefulness and betrayal, but on the reality of relationships,

and how “personal sacrifice and indebtedness do not guarantee perpetual happiness and stability in a relationship” (para. 21) Overall, Bostick (2018) contends that Ovid should receive more credit in his portrayal of abandonment and the emotions associated with heartbreak, in that he aptly represents the “pain of women suffering” (para. 24) and gives his female characters a voice.

Alison Sharrock plays devil’s advocate when discussing the case of Ovid and *Metamorphoses* as feminist or anti-feminist in her “Gender and Transformation: Reading, Women, and Gender in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (2020). She notices Ovid’s particular attention to the female’s psyche, but questions the extent to which “this attention can be regarded as truly sympathetic and empathetic, and to what extent it is objectifying” (Sharrock, 2020, p. 33). Sharrock (2020) argues that both exist in *Metamorphoses*—a metamorphosis of gender occurs more in the women’s experience compared to men’s, yet there is also a great emphasis on power relations that “make certain kinds of metamorphosis a negatively feminizing process” (p. 33). The findings in Sharrock’s argument both confirm and reject works by Ovid as anti-feminist. From one angle, Sharrock presents Ovid’s female characters as entities meant to be pursued by men—she is objectified, silenced, wronged, and her complaint is always subverted or ignored. This particular portrayal of women only proves Ovid as a product of his society, and develops the reading of *Metamorphoses* as anti-feminist. If Ovid objectifies the female body within his epics, then a female character’s complaint is no more than a negatively feminine activity that is mocked through the mouths of men. Conversely, a reader must consider the metamorphosis of gender that happens for women (and more so, at that) above the men in the text. The emphasis on female characters as being dynamic

and evolving contradicts the reading of Ovid as anti-feminist, and instead allots them an agency that gives them a voice in the face of their straying lovers, rapists, and oppressors. This interpretation only muddies the interpretation of Ovid's works more, provoking consideration of Ovid as empathizer or ventriloquist to women's complaint.

CHAPTER 3

STEREOTYPING THE FEMALE

I believe Ciccone's argument in her "Ovid's and Ariosto's Abandoned Women" (1997) advances a good point to an extent—the women's ability to tell stories through written word does show a reclamation of power; however, I see Ovid's "empowerment" of women as secondary in his intentions within the epic. I would suggest that Ovid only grants this agency so that he might withdraw it, and further ventriloquize a complaining woman. Turning to Ovid's *Heroides* and the case of "Dido to Aeneas," we can see how this is evident. In this letter, Dido addresses Aeneas's abandonment of her, and pleads to him that he remain in Carthage with her. This letter follows the typical Ovidian framework of a complaint—a woman is wronged by a man, so she complains. By the end of the letter, she is ultimately met by some demise, and her complaint is always unresolved.

The particular instance with Dido is interesting because Ovid vacillates between ventriloquism and empathy. In Epistle 7, Dido's character seems to follow gender stereotypes—she is portrayed as pining over an absent man, and there is little to her character outside of her grief and fascination with Aeneas. She is written as a tragic character, she describes her anguish and her wasting away after Aeneas's departure. Her anguish is noticeable when Dido confesses her feelings for Aeneas despite his parting:

I am all ablaze with love, like torches of wax tipped with Sulphur, like pious incense placed on smoking altar-fires. Aeneas my eyes cling to through all my

waking hours; Aeneas is my heart through the night and through the day

(Showerman, 1931, para. 4)

Here, Dido seems to speak positively of her and Aeneas's relationship, as she comes off as a devoted woman in love; however, there are aspects of the language here that would contradict her devotion. Dido's description of herself as being "ablaze," like "smoking altar-fires" discerns that their relationship is unhealthy in some manner, and more than likely doomed. The description of Dido's eyes clinging to Aeneas "through all...waking hours" paints the image that Dido is obsessed with Aeneas; she presents herself as desperate, as wasting away, as grieved, all of which are bad traits for a queen. As a result, Dido's character is static—there is nothing redeeming or empowering about her, and her character even seems to progressively get worse by the end of the epistle.

However, Ovid does choose to make Dido queen; she is a queen of Carthage, and while being a queen and maintaining a kingdom would typically be a powerful trait in a woman, I have suggested how Ovid characterizes her as more concerned with her straying lover than her kingdom. Where Ovid seems to grant Dido agency, he ultimately retracts that agency, as Ovid takes the one admirable characteristic of Dido and makes her ambivalent towards that attribute. In the end, Dido chooses love over her duty, whereas Aeneas does the opposite. Not only is Dido unconcerned with her kingdom, but the fact that she takes her own life at the end of her complaint is problematic. Dido's only agency comes from her status as a queen, and Ovid assures that he takes that power, as well as her life, once she finishes her complaint. With no resolution to Dido's

complaint by the end of the epistle, Ovid paints the picture that even powerful women can be silenced.

Furthermore, it is essential to consider spaces in Dido's epistle in relation to her kingdom. Throughout the letter, Dido is stationary, and never leaves the confines of where she is writing her letter to Aeneas. Considering the classical context, it is assumed that Dido is within the private realm, where Aeneas is outside of it, in the public space. In her "Gendered Spaces in Ovid's *Heroides*," M. Catherine Bolton (2009) comments on this phenomenon in the epistle,

Dido, although a woman who has suffered displacement in the past...does not move outside her house with Aeneas...Even this small displacement destroys Dido's happiness, as even she is quick to recognize. She does not follow Aeneas down to the shore as he leaves, however; she does not seek to join him in his travels; and she does not pursue him across the sea (p. 277).

Thus, Ovid follows tradition in regards to classical female identity and mobility. Dido's inability to leave the private domain only strengthens the argument that Ovid is unsympathetic to women's complaint. If Ovid were to allow Dido to complain publicly and outside of her own room, he would present himself as more sympathetic towards Roman women, and in turn succeed at validating Dido and her complaint.

Consequently, the only context in which Dido references to her kingdom is when she tries to convince Aeneas to stay in Carthage. In her epistle, she asks, "and does new-founded Carthage not touch you, nor her rising walls, nor the scepter of supreme power placed in your hand?" (Showerman, 1931, para. 3). Dido presents herself as a victim in her plea to Aeneas, attempting to persuade him to stay. Throughout the rest of the

epistle, Dido only extends her plea, and expresses her wish to die, even going as far as describing her oncoming death in graphic detail. She writes,

Over my cheeks the tears roll, and fall upon the drawn steel—which soon shall be
stained with blood instead of tears. How fitting is your gifts in my hour of fate!
You furnish forth my death at a cost but slight. Nor does my heart now for the
first time feel a weapon's thrust (Showerman, 1931, para. 17).

The “drawn steel” Aeneas gives Dido becomes personified as she claims that Aeneas has essentially killed her by his absence. Her personification of the knife displays Dido's willingness to accuse Aeneas if it means he will stay in Carthage. At this point in the story, it becomes evident how Ovid is using Dido's character to play on female stereotypes, in this instance, that women will victimize themselves as a means of manipulation of their male partner. It is precisely this fact that proves that Ovid is less sympathetic of the Roman female's experience, and more so ridiculing their complaints. Readers can understand this by looking at the extreme to which Dido goes to keep Aeneas from leaving. Her threat to end her life is an inexcusable one, and it creates a negative interpretation of the Roman woman. Ovid's characterization of Dido and her actions potentially lead to generalizations that all women will threaten to end their lives if they become somewhat upset. The boundaries Ovid pushes Dido to cross craft an unappealing image of a complaining woman, one that only produces a dangerous and inaccurate generalization of women.

In a similar vein, Ovid also crafts Dido's character as someone who rarely takes action. While there are instances in the epistle where Dido appears to assert herself and question Aeneas, she fails to ever act on her words. For example, Dido asks Aeneas,

“What can you charge me with but love?...If you shame to have me your wife, let me not be called bride” (Showerman, 1931, para. 15). Dido seems to reclaim some of her dignity only to allude to her oncoming death in the next lines, “If you yield not, my purpose is fixed to pour forth my life,” (Showerman, 1931, para. 17). The incongruity between Dido’s words and her actions fail to give her agency as a character. In fact, her inconsistencies may even label her as unstable—her emotions seem uncontrolled and sporadic. Ovid’s seems to poke fun at these emotions; he sets forth the idea that women are incapable of resilience and controlling themselves, and further reinforces the male authority in Roman society.

CHAPTER 4

MY BODY, MY CHOICE: FEMALE TRANSFORMATION AFTER COMPLAINT

The idea of transformation (as well as the loss of the human form) as a way to claim the female voice is one to be considered in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The stories of "Apollo and Daphne" and "Pan and Syrinx" are two similar cases that provide account of women who undergo total transformations in order to escape rape. In Daphne's myth, the nymph is pursued and pined after by Apollo, who falls in love with her instantaneously after Cupid vengefully strikes him with one of his arrows. Unable to control his lust for the nymph, Apollo chases after Daphne relentlessly, despite her pleas remain chaste as a maiden. As she attempts to escape Apollo, Daphne begs for some reprieve and conveys her willingness to give up her body if it means avoiding rape. Just as Apollo is about to catch her, she is transformed into a laurel tree by her father, resulting in the complete loss of her human form. Similarly, in the myth of Pan and Syrinx, the wood nymph attempts to guard her virtue while she is accosted by an eager Pan, who like Apollo, immediately falls in love with her upon seeing her. Syrinx runs away from Pan until she reaches a river surrounded by other nymphs, to whom she begs them to transform her. Once Pan is in arms reach of Syrinx, her human form is then transformed into the reeds found on a river bank.

Apollo and Pan's pursuits only exemplify Ovid's rejection of the Roman woman's thoughts, desires, and complaints. In Daphne's case, Ovid presents her as a victim of

“vengeful spite” (More, 1922, para. 1) between two men; this implies that Daphne can only be the object of the male gaze and by default, lacks agency as a female character.

Even Ovid’s introduction of her character in the myth affirms this:

Daphne, the daughter of a River God
Was first beloved by Phoebus, the great God
Of glorious light. ‘Twas not a cause of chance...

That she was fated to torment the lord of light (More, 1922, para. 1).

Daphne’s introduction in the first few lines designate her as a woman who does not entirely belong to herself. The primary facts we learn about Daphne’s character is that she is a god’s daughter, and that she is being pursued by a male immortal. Because she is presented as a “daughter of a River God” (More, 1922, para. 1) and the conquest of a man’s desire, readers can deduce Ovid’s enforcement of ancient Roman authority and patriarchy that claimed women belonged to men. In either instance, Daphne is the object of two men’s wills, leaving her as a static character whose existence is purely confined by the male figures around her.

After Apollo is struck by Cupid’s arrow and begins to pursue Daphne, the narrative shifts its focus on to her as she is “Rejoicing in the woodland hiding places” (Humphries, 1955, p. 17). As she flees from him, the narrator describes how:

She had many suitors, but she scorned them all;
Wanting no part of any man, she travelled
The pathless groves, and had no care whatever
For husband, love, or marriage. Her father often
Said, “Daughter, give me a son-in-law!” and “Daughter,

Give me some grandsons!” But the marriage torches

Were something hateful, criminal, to Daphne,

So she would blush, and put her arms around him,

And coax him: “Let me be a virgin always;

Diana’s father said she might. Dear father!” (Humphries, 1955, p. 17).

At this moment in the narrative, Ovid advances Daphne’s complaint—she preaches her desire to remain chaste as a follower of Diana, only to have those desires ultimately rejected—primarily by her father and then by Apollo’s advances. Daphne’s case becomes even more harrowing considering her father’s willingness to yield to her to wish to remain chaste. Just as she is introduced in the opening lines of the myth—as belonging to her father—it is evident that Daphne’s father likely serves as the primary male figure who facilitates her voice. Working under this assumption, it becomes surprising that Daphne’s father is so easily persuaded by her and willing to hear her out; it is even more surprising that he relents to her desire to remain chaste. Unlike other male characters, Daphne’s father ultimately allows her a voice and adheres to her complaint, even if he disagrees with her primarily. While her father’s willingness to give her a voice seems like a redeeming moment for Ovid, the effect has quite the opposite. Just as Daphne’s complaint is validated, Ovid only relinquishes that voice as Apollo begins his pursuit of the nymph. Daphne may have been granted one man’s approval, but at this point in the narrative, she faces an even greater threat to her voice. Ovid seems to be ridiculing the idea of female silence and a lack of agency with voice, in that he evokes notions that females will always be silenced by another male figure; if not their fathers, then another suitor, or even rapist.

Ovid continues to play on this idea when Daphne's transformation happens. There is something to be said about the symbolism behind Daphne's transformation in relation to Ovid's failure to show empathy for the female complaint. The change in Daphne's human form not only results in the loss of her voice entirely, but it also immobilizes her. Her silence, along with her immobility, proves her inability to escape male authority, and the power of the male voice in silencing and defining that of the female. Her immobility only affixes to Daphne's failure to receive recognition in her complaint, illustrating how her case serves as a specific instance of ventriloquism on Ovid's part. As he invalidates her complaint, Ovid depicts humor towards male jocularity at the female characters' expense.

While it is already disturbing that Daphne believes transforming herself into something inhuman is the only way to escape rape by Apollo, the events that transpire after her transformation are only even more harrowing. In her final moments as a human, Daphne feels choiceless, and she and reader alike understand the only way to avoid Apollo's advances are to "Change and destroy the body which has given / Too much delight!" (Humphries, 1955, p. 19). Once the transformation is finalized, and Daphne's body becomes "closed with delicate bark" (Humphries, 1955, p. 19), readers are meant to understand that Daphne has successfully escaped the lustful god's advances just in time before he can rape her. However, even in her form as a laurel tree, Apollo still manages to claim Daphne,

He placed his hand
Where he had hoped and felt the heart still beating
Under the bark; and he embraced the branches

As if they still were limbs, and kissed the wood,
And the wood shrank from his kisses, and the god
Exclaimed: “Since you can never be my bride,
My tree at least you shall be! Let the laurel
Adorn, henceforth, my hair, my lyre, my quiver
(Humphries, 1955, p. 20).

Here, Ovid only retracts Daphne’s agency as a character. Although she seems to be faced with impossible circumstances, Daphne still exhibits the ability to make a choice—she is ultimately the one who makes the decision to undergo transformation as she is chased by Apollo. While her sacrifice of her human form serves as a symbolic moment that represents the extent of abuse Roman women experienced as well as their desperation to prevent it, Ovid ridicules this sacrifice when Apollo takes her as *his* tree, persistent in his conquest of Daphne even in her inanimate form. Apollo makes it clear that his love for Daphne has not changed despite her transformation, and that he will “at least” have some part of her. His taking of the laurel from her branches represent his claiming of her body, thus rendering Daphne’s transformation meaningless—Apollo still remains as an authoritative male figure that has power over her.

The myth of Pan and Syrinx similarly illustrates Ovid’s poor representation of women as a means of dehumanizing them. Like Daphne, Syrinx pleads for transformation as an alternative to rape, which leaves her speechless and inanimate:

But she despised the prayers of Pan, and fled
through pathless wilds until she had arrived
the placid Ladon’s sandy stream, whose waves

prevented her escape. There she implored
her sister Nymphs to change her form: and Pan,
believing he had caught her, held instead
some marsh reeds for the body of the Nymph
(More, 1922, para. 7).

Her transformation into river reeds leaves Syrinx's complaint (her unhappiness with being pursued) and vow to chastity also rejected by a male figure to which she is ultimately powerless against. As Pan "chances" Syrinx's desires, a modern reader can see how Ovid is careless with the female voice. Even in Syrinx's final moments as a human, she too, is unable to escape male authority, as she is claimed by Pan in her inanimate form. Syrinx's story is much shorter than Daphne's (the encounter between her and Pan only lasts a few lines) which also seems to demonstrate Ovid's dismissive nature of the female complaint. Ovid also elicits some form of communication between the nymphs and their pursuers while they are in their inanimate form. Nikki Bloch (2014) explains this "form of para-speech" (p. 7) in her "Patterns of Rape in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" as Daphne's leaves "seemed to consent, to be saying *Yes*" and Syrinx's reeds "made also / The echo of a sigh" (Humphries, 1955, p. 20):

While Daphne and Syrinx are able to escape rape, the fact that both Apollo and Pan claim ownership of their transformed bodies, Apollo by adopting the laurel tree as his own symbol...Pan by fashioning the reeds of Syrinx...represents their ultimate inability to escape the domination of men (p. 7).

The similarities between the two myths raise questions about Ovid's intentions with women in the epic. The similarity of the narratives may further suggest a jocularity with

the female complaint that Ovid seems more or less concerned about—one that is dangerous to the experiences of the Roman woman. Looking at Syrinx in her “role as Pan’s new instrument...any sounds that do emerge from her transformed body are controlled by the man she so desperately attempts to escape” (Bloch, 2014, p. 7). This instance particularly represents a lack of sympathy on Ovid’s part—where Syrinx seems to receive some agency in that she is given a choice (albeit an almost impossible one; neither rape or transformation are desirable) it is quickly stripped away by Ovid, who allots her a new role as the mouthpiece of her male pursuer. She is, quite literally, objectified, and in her inability to speak for herself, her transformation represents the impact and power dynamics of the Roman patriarchy’s expectations of women who were conditioned to remain silent and yield to male authority. To create a “good” woman, Ovid only dehumanizes female victims, to which he makes clear his opinion of the role of the Roman woman, and how he viewed them as the facilitation of male desires.

CHAPTER 5

EUPHEMISTIC LANGUAGE: AVOIDING “RAPE”

A close look into the language Ovid uses in not just the myths of Pan and Syrinx and Apollo and Daphne, but other narratives within the epic extend the way he euphemizes female character’s complaints and even their rape. In his “Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*,” Leo C. Curran (1978) comments on Ovid’s tendency to gloss over occurrences of rape in the epic with euphemistic language:

Although there are some fifty or so occurrences of forcible rape, attempted rape, or sexual extortion hardly distinguishable from rape, one would scarcely guess the fact from reading most of the commentaries...or the retellings of Ovid’s stories...refusing to take rape seriously, glosses over unpleasant reality and prefers euphemism to the word rape (p. 214).

Curran’s argument is applicable to Daphne and Syrinx, where Ovid utilizes language such as “love is incurable,” “love makes me follow,” and “who it is you charm” (Humphries, 1955, pp. 18-19); however, his argument is apparent in many of the other narratives in *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* where women experience unwanted advances or their desires are invalidated. For example, in epistle 5, “Oenone to Paris,” Oenone never uses the word “rape” to describe her assault by “The swift Satyrs” and “Noble Tros” (Kline, 2001, paras. 60-61)—instead writing that “the prize of my virginity” was taken from her. Epistle 16, “Paris to Helen” describes Paris’s “passion” for Helen and how he is “on fire with love”

(Showerman, 1931, para. 2). Jove tells the maiden Io she is “worthy of the love of Jove/ And sure to make some lover happy in bed” in the myth of “Jove and Io.” All of these examples take away from the women’s traumatic experience, as well as their ability to project their own voice.

Other euphemisms such as “took her,” “passion,” and “burning,” to name a few, provide further examples of where Ovid attempts to justify female violation and assault. The term “love” is also frequented in a problematic manner; it is used as a way of justifying rape. This language embellishes the entirety of *Metamorphoses*, which brings up questions concerning the extent to which Ovid’s empathy reaches his female characters. While some may say Ovid’s intention with euphemistic language is to describe and comment on the female experience in a way that reaches a male audience and gains their sympathy for women, cases in the narrative might say otherwise. In his avoidance of words like “rape” and “violation,” Ovid almost immediately dismisses the women’s assault. This dismissal only allows for the assumption that Ovid was unwilling to comment on the severity of female violence and the suppression of voice, meaning that he was not concerned with the Roman woman’s experience. Ovid only displays a carelessness with female voice that exemplifies his ventriloquism of their complaints—if Ovid wanted to truly bring attention to violence on women and their ignored voice, he might actually describe their emotions and the dehumanization associated with their assaults. If Ovid cannot “take rape seriously” (Curran, 1978, p. 214), then it must be impossible for him to empathize with the Roman woman.

Furthermore, the language in which male figures utilize throughout the narratives in *Metamorphoses* as well as *Heroides* continue to ridicule women’s voice and

experience by describing them as incorrect or invalid. For example, in Daphne's case, Apollo calls her a "foolish girl" (Humphries, 1955, p. 18) as she runs away from him, Hypermnestra is put in chains by her father for disobedience in epistle 14, and Jove tells Io, "do not flee me!" (Humphries, 1955, p. 21) as she seeks shelter away from him. Women within these narratives are too often unacknowledged or spoken down too; their desires are ignored by men who exert power over them, which Ovid clearly outlines as a tactic used by those men to silence women and obtain what they want by any means possible. Approaching Ovid's use of language through this patriarchal view further exhibits his "laid back" attitude and humorous traces of female suffering, affixing to Ovid's reasoning behind avoidance of language indicating assault.

CHAPTER 6

THE FEMALE BODY AND VOICE: VIOLENCE AND MUTILATION

“The Story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela” outlines the ease to which Classical men were capable of silencing women through violence and mutilation, and Ovid prescribes graphic images of Philomela’s assault and rape to show this capability. The idea of voice and silence is key to recognizing *Metamorphoses*’s anti-feminist intentions and his ridicule of complaining women in *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*. In her article, “Disarticulated Voices: Feminism and Philomela,” author Elissa Marder (1992) describes the relationship between the violence on Philomela and her inability to speak,

Unable to speak, Philomela weaves the story of her rape. Only after she has been raped and mutilated does Philomela attempt to write. Through weaving, she writes her story because she cannot speak, and the only story she has to tell is that she has lost her voice. She writes out of necessity and in response to violation, but that writing is bound by the terms of violation (p. 157).

Marder’s observation points directly towards and explains Ovid’s intention with the representation of Philomela’s character. Much like Dido, Philomela vacillates between having and lacking agency as a female character—on the one hand, her ability to weave, write, and communicate such as Hess (2020) contends seems admirable and perhaps establishes her as a resilient character; however, I argue that these alternative means of communication

are not empowering, but rather an extension of Ovid's ridicule of the female body and the female complaint. While Philomela's ability to convey her story through weaving and writing seems like a reclamation of agency, I believe that Ovid is only reinforcing gender ideals that women were secondary to men, and essentially had no power in their voice.

As Marder (1992) states, Philomela's communication is bound by her violation. She extends that "The severed tongue does not merely function as a narrative consequence of the rape, but rather becomes a figurative representation of it" (Marder, 1992, p. 158). So, despite her ability to communicate without speaking, she will never reclaim her voice as a result of Tereus's assault on her. Her severed tongue functions as a reminder that Philomela is literally and figuratively silenced—a metaphor that extends to the classical woman. Ovid's removal of Philomela's voice only factors into his play with the female complaint; he withholds a female character's voice only to reinstate it, but in a lesser and stripped manner.

Additionally, Procne and Philomela's revenge plot against Tereus rejects Ovid's sympathy towards the Roman woman. While Hess (2020) argues that the ability for these women to stick together and depend on each other represents Ovid's support of a unified female collective, I would assert that the extent to which the two sisters act against Tereus does the opposite. In *Metamorphoses*, Philomela and Procne come to the consensus that the best way to deliver justice is only to kill Procne and Tereus's son, Itys, and feed him to Tereus. While Procne seems to waver before committing the crime, she justifies her actions when she looks at her son,

The answer came to her as her son came in, young Itys.

She looked at him with pitiless eyes; she thought

How like his father he is! That was enough,
She knew now, what she had to do, all burning
With rage inside her (Humphries, 1955, p. 149).

These two sisters who are introduced as innocent victims become vilified by the end of the story, somewhat displacing the blame on Tereus to Philomela and Procne. How could a “good” woman kill her own son? Ovid raises this question to his readers knowing that his classical audience will place significantly more shame onto the women in this story. As wife, as mother, and as caretaker, everything about Procne and Philomela’s actions remove their status as “good” women, and ultimately disrupt the dynamics of a woman’s role in the Roman world. In the same way that Tereus has violated the Roman family structure in raping his sister-in-law, Philomela, both Procne and Philomela have also “violated the grounds of the patriarchal social order” (Marder, 1992, p. 159). This fact also provides rationale as to why all three characters are transformed into birds by the end of the story—Ovid is equating the crimes of all characters to prove that these women are just as inherently evil as their male abuser, and in turn, deserving of their divine fate. In an obvious manner, Ovid has withdrawn the two sister’s status as victims, advising—and perhaps warning—his male readers that even the “good” women are capable of evil and worthy of scorn.

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