5

The Lives of Women

The Feminine Gender

We saw in chapter 3 that Teiresias had the unique experience of downward transformation from male to female and engineered his return to male status. Although he also reported to Jupiter and Juno that women had more pleasure than men from sexual intercourse, he clearly believed the privileges of masculinity outweighed these (unexplained) pleasures. Similarly, young Hermaphroditus clearly feels that he has been victimized by his transformation from male to epicene, that is, having sexual characteristics of both genders. In Ovid's time, as usually now, men enjoyed a superior status to women and believed it was their entitlement. In two other tales the metamorphosis is a sex change, one eagerly desired, from female to male, but the motives for desiring this change are completely different.

The story of Iphis (9.666–797) is determined first by socioeconomic and later by emotional need. A poor man, Ligdus, from Phaestos in Crete told his pregnant wife that he hoped she would have an easy delivery and bear him a son: since he could not afford to rear a daughter, a female child would have to be killed. This was

not unusual in the ancient world, where fathers needed their sons' physical labor or earning skills and would have to pay a dowry in order to get their daughters married. Girl babies might be abandoned in the hope that some childless person or slave dealer would rear them. In romantic comedies a wife might secretly rear a girl if her husband was away from home, and this is what Telethousa did with her child, bringing her up as a boy and giving her the unisex name Iphis.

In the Greek version of this myth mother and daughter were saved from the father's anger by the intervention of Leto (Latona), but Ovid changes both the goddess and the story. First, it is Isis (protectress of women) who appears to Telethousa before the birth, promising her help in saving the expected baby girl. Second, Iphis actually reaches puberty and is betrothed by her father to her school friend Ianthe, with whom she is in love, as is Ianthe with her future "husband." Ovid gives to Iphis an extended soliloquy expressing, along with her fear of discovery, her deep distress at what she sees as an unnatural love. (Greek and Roman society did not accept lesbian relationships with the tolerance they displayed toward relations between man and boy.) Her mother desperately postpones the wedding until it is inevitable, then she and her daughter supplicate Isis for the promised help. The goddess fills the temple with happy omens, and as they leave, Iphis develops a longer stride, her features and body grow stronger, and her hair becomes shorter—in short, she has become a youth. Rejoicing, they dedicate gifts to Isis with the inscription "The boy Iphis has paid with gifts the vow he made as a woman." Then Venus, Juno, and Hymen, god of marriage, assemble to bless the union.

The other sex change has a more painful origin. Virgil had introduced among the women of the underworld Caenis, who became the warrior Caeneus, then returned in death to her original gender (*Aen.* 6.448). In Ovid's Trojan sequence Nestor compares the invincible warrior Cycnus, son of Neptune, with the warrior Caeneus (12.189–90). He explains that there was once a beautiful Thessalian girl, Caenis, who rejected all her suitors but was surprised alone on the seashore and raped by Neptune. When he offered

her a wish, she answered that she was entitled to a great favor in return for a great wrong. She wanted never to experience rape again: "grant me not to be a woman!" And as she spoke her voice deepened (11.203–5), and the god gave her the added power of not being penetrable by any weapon: no steel could kill her. Later, in the extended brawl caused by drunken centaurs at the wedding feast of Pirithous, Caeneus performed valiant feats, killing five of them (12.459). Then a giant centaur, Latreus, insulted him as a former woman, telling him to leave war and go back to spinning. His spear and sword shattered against Caeneus's body, and Caeneus plunged his sword into his enemy. Even when all the centaurs converged upon Caeneus, they could not inflict any wounds until they buried him with uprooted tree trunks, crushing him into the ground. Nestor quotes two versions of the warrior's death: that he was finally forced down through the earth into Hades, or, as the prophet Mopsus declared, that he soared up to heaven as a bird (12.522–31). Mopsus's final tribute, "hail, once great glory of the Lapiths and now unique bird of your kind," may seem to avoid the anticlimactic return to feminine gender, but Ovid equivocates: in Latin birds are treated as feminine in gender.

The Ubiquity of Rape

Ovid has no doubt of the insult done to Caenis, but the sheer brevity of the account of her rape and of other reports where women are seen, lusted after, and possessed in a line of verse speaks for the commonness of such assaults. The poem began with Apollo's attempted rape of Daphne (saved by becoming an impenetrable tree) and continued with Jupiter's rape of Io, Pan's attempted rape of Syrinx, and Jupiter's rape of Callisto, who is cruelly rejected by Diana when her pregnancy becomes apparent. As Arachne's tapestry demonstrated, gods took what they wanted, and divine rapes were the origin of Perseus and many other heroes. One instance deserves a query in passing: the so-called rape of Proserpina in book 5. Dis certainly intends sexual rape but, as the story is told, it seems still

possible for Demeter to regain her child after he has carried her down to Hades: the negotiations with Jupiter seem to imply that she is still a virgin, and the "marriage" is validated only by the fact that Proserpina has eaten the pomegranate seeds in the house of Dis. Rape language is far more explicit in the god's violation of the brave nymph Cyane, who tries to block his chariot's path: "urging on his dreadful team he buried his royal scepter, hurled by his powerful arm into the depths of her pool, and the stricken earth opened a path into Tartarus" (5.421–3). Cyane both is, and is not, her pool, and the inconsolable wound in her heart that melts her into weeping waters is perhaps only a metaphorical rape. Certainly, there are enough physical ones ahead of us. But after book 5 the rapes of mortals or nymphs will be by demigods, by natural forces like river deities or the North Wind, Boreas (6.702–10), by the centaur Nessus (9.108–33), or even by mortals. Only one case—the almost incidental double rape of Chione by Apollo and Mercury (11.303–10)—is inflicted by the usual gods.

Most of us hear and read more about rapes than we would wish, but sexual pursuit is so recurrent in *Metamorphoses* that Ovid's achievement of variety is an index of both his skill and his audience's taste. Let me illustrate from one frustrated rape, as experienced by the escaped victim, and one uniquely horrible narrative of rape and sexual abuse.

First, for one of the typical rapes and attempted rapes by a natural force, our informant is the nymph and huntress Arethusa, who (as readers of Ovid would see it) tempted providence by going bathing (5.572–641). She describes with leisured detail how she found clear waters that flowed without eddies, where willow and poplar provided shade and were themselves sheltered by sloping banks. Slipping off her clothes, she submerged herself naked in the waters and began to swim. Then she heard a voice from below the surface and climbed in terror on to the nearest bank. She describes how the river god Alpheus accosted her as she hesitated at the water's edge. "'Where are you hurrying, Arethusa?' he called in a hoarse voice out of his waters: 'Where are you hurrying?' I ran, naked as I was, for my clothes were on the other bank. This just made him more eager and panting: being naked made me seem easier to take. I kept running like this and the savage fellow kept closing in on me, as doves flee the hawk with trembling wing, and as the hawk pressed upon trembling doves" (5.599–606). In a long nightmare chase over a number of named Arcadian landmarks, she sees his shadow looming (Alpheus is still to be imagined as a man) and hears his footsteps; in despair she begs Diana for rescue and is enveloped by the goddess in a cloud. But Alpheus circles around questing for her. Now she feels the terror of lambs in the sheepfold as the wolf howls outside, and suddenly she finds herself melting until she becomes a stream. But this lays her open to his other, watery form. Guessing her identity he turns himself into his own stream to unite with her. In this crisis Diana cleaves open the ground for Arethusa to submerge into underground caverns and reach Ortygia, the island site of Syracuse, where her spring emerges again into the daylight (and can still be seen, spouting fresh water only a few feet from the sea).

The dual nature of the river god gives a surreal intensity to the chase, in which even Arethusa's divine protectress has to intervene twice, finally sending her belowground in a rescue curiously antithetical to the rape undergone by the other water spirit, Cyane. The victim's narrative commands attention both by its vivid description of landscape and by its constant change of natural medium.

The first—and only—rape by a human comes in the transition from divine vengeance to the evils that humans inflict on each other—*homo homini lupus* (man on man like a wolf)—in book 6. Ovid combines the worst crimes in the dreadful tale of incest, murder, and cannibalism which starts when the barbarian king Tereus of Thrace rapes the sister of his wife, the Athenian princess Procne (6.424–674). Their story had been made into a tragedy by Sophocles; though this play is lost, a surviving excerpt conveys the anxieties of the new bride—of any bride—taken from her home to live among foreigners and alien gods. Tereus, at first loving, returns to Athens at his wife's request to fetch her beloved sister Philomela for

a visit. But once he sees her he is possessed by lust. Her family have entrusted her to him, but once he has her in Thrace Tereus drags her into the deep forest and takes the defenseless virgin by force as she cries out, weeping and trembling and appealing in vain to the gods. As with Daphne, Ovid applies the imagery of predator and prey to Tereus, who is like an eagle with a hare (516–7), and to Philomela, who trembles like a wounded lamb shaken from the wolf's jaws or a dove dreading the eagle (6.527–30). When she finds her voice, she curses him for destroying all the bonds of family and threatens to denounce him to man and nature. He draws his sword and grabs her by her hair to strike, but instead of killing her,

he seized
Her tongue with tongs and with his brutal sword
Cut it away. The root jerked to and fro;
The tongue lay on the dark soil muttering
And wriggling, as the tail cut off a snake
Wriggles, and as it died, it tried to reach
Its mistress' feet. Even after that dire deed
Men say (could I believe it), lusting still,
Oft on the poor maimed girl he wreaked his will.
(6.556–62, tr. Melville)

There is no more gruesome picture in Ovid's entire work, unless perhaps it is the terrible moment still to come when Procne, in revulsion and vengeance on Tereus, embraces and slays her little son, like a tigress slaying a young deer (624–42).

In one sense, however, the story of Procne's revenge is a beginning. Unless we count the demented Agave, she is the first woman in Ovid's narrative to plan and commit murder, and the first of a series of women to dare criminal acts. This euphemism must stretch to cover the sequence of virgins driven to action by love from the young Medea in book 7 to Scylla in book 8 to the incestuous urges of Byblis in book 9 and the incest of Myrrha consummated in book 10. But it will be better to postpone these dangerous lovers until the next chapter.

Becoming a Mother

In real life and in Ovid's epic women's lives continue beyond their sexual flowering, past rape, seduction, or marriage to conception, childbirth, motherhood, and, in tragic cases, the premature loss of beloved children. Ovid devotes more concern than most poets to the mother and child during gestation and labor (see, e.g., 7.125–7; 10.510–4; 15.216–21). We saw how Semele's pregnancy by Jupiter provoked the cruel hatred of Juno and led to the miraculous incubation of her posthumous child, Dionysus, in Jupiter's thigh. Juno was no less jealous of Latona, whom she drove across the Aegean in a desperate quest for a place to give birth. In book 6, an old Lycian connects a mysterious altar in a marsh with the story of Latona's flight from Juno (6.332–81). The floating island of Delos consented to stay still while she gave birth to the twins Apollo and Diana beneath a palm tree, but Juno drove her on and she came, carrying her twins, to Lycia. Because she was parched with thirst and the eager twins had drained her milk, she begged the reed gatherers to let her drink at their lake but they refused. Although she supplicated them, promising gratitude, they abused her and deliberately muddied the waters. So Latona cursed them to perpetual life as amphibians and they became frogs.

It is again Juno who tries to obstruct Alcmene when she is in labor with Hercules. In the Greek version she persuaded the Fates to watch the woman in labor with crossed arms to inhibit birth, but they were tricked by a loyal servant girl, Galinthias, who told them Alcmene had delivered her child, so that they relaxed their arms and Hercules could come to birth. The Romans revered Juno herself as "Lucina," goddess of childbirth, so she needed no help from the Fates. Many of Ovid's most vivid narratives are told by their subjects: Alcmene herself recalls (9.281–323) how she was straining in labor and called on Lucina for help. But Juno had seated herself on the altar by the house door, out of sight, pressing her left leg under her right knee and holding her crossed arms with fingers interlaced, muttering spells to block the birth. When Galanthis (as Ovid names

her) saw Juno outside, she addressed her, "Whoever you are, congratulate my mistress, who is delivered and has her wish." Juno is deceived, but when the maid laughs at her trick, the goddess turns her into a weasel, the domestic beast which supposedly gave birth through its mouth. The story is told in an intimate moment between Alcmene and her daughter-in-law Iole, as they adjust to the news of Hercules' final apotheosis. Ovid seems to know the world of women in the family, and not just the world of pretty and promiscuous girls.

But Iole too has a tale of metamorphosis: the fate of her sister Dryope. Here too the pathos of the story has been created by Ovid's changes. In the version of her transformation reported from Nicander, Dryope was raped by Apollo and gave birth to a boy, Amphissos. When Amphissos was an adult, he dedicated a temple to the nymphs, and when Dryope went to worship at the temple, she was changed into a nymph, and a mysterious poplar tree grew up beside her—or perhaps by her pool. But Ovid starts after the rape, with Dryope now a happy mother and wife of Andraemon (9.328–93). Iole herself went with Dryope and her child, still suckling at the breast, to gather garlands for the nymphs by the lake. As Dryope picked lotus branches to give her son, Iole saw blood ooze out. Here Ovid has grafted another metamorphosis. This lotus plant was actually the nymph Lotis, transformed to save her from Priapus's lust (but Priapus is frustrated in the version of Ovid's *Fasti*). Although Dryope recoiled in distress at the bloodshed, she began to take root, and bark rose up to cramp her limbs; even her arms became branches, and the milk dried up in her breasts. Neither Iole nor Andraemon could prevent it, and soon only her face remained human. As with dying farewells in opera, the length (twenty-one lines) of Dryope's last speech slightly detracts from the pathos of her obliteration, as does her identification with the tree she is becoming. First, she protests her innocence of any malice: if she is lying, then may she lose her leaves and be hacked by axes! She begs her husband to protect her from scythes and nibbling sheep, but her last words ask them to stand on tiptoe to embrace her and lift up her son for a farewell kiss; then they should no longer resist but let the bark cover her eyes and mouth.

Ovid was surely writing for a female audience and shrewdly allowed the touch of comedy to dilute the otherwise painful narrative. Too many young mothers died in childbirth for an episode like this to be without emotional resonances. And the same risk of provoking real sorrow lurked behind the last of the four themes I have selected for this chapter: the grief of mothers at the deaths of their warrior sons and more helpless daughters.

The Mother Bereaved

In Ovid's Rome, as in classical Greece, it was the mother's role to close the eyes of the family dead and lay out the body. Once it left the house the duties of cremation or burial were taken over by the son or male next of kin. It was seen as normal for the younger generation to bury their parents, and tragic for the parent to have to bury the child, but warfare made this reversal of natural order only too common. A death became more tragic if in some way the family was prevented from completing the ritual for the dead, and this is the key to several of the scenes in which Ovid dwells on the bereaved mother's sorrow. Thus, when Phaethon is struck by the thunderbolt, Clymene does not know where to find him but scours the world in order to bury his body. When she (with his sisters) reaches the scene of his death, the nymphs have already buried him and inscribed his epitaph, so Clymene is reduced to embracing his name on the cold tomb. His sisters prolong their mourning for so many months that they are transformed into weeping poplars (2.340–66); a similar transformation turns the weeping sisters of dead Meleager into birds (8.533–46).

But the prototype of the mourning mother was Niobe, wife of Amphion, king of Thebes. In the last book of the *Iliad*, when Priam comes to beg Achilles to ransom the corpse of Hector, Achilles asks Priam to eat with him, "for even Niobe buried her children and put

an end to her mourning" (24.602–17). Ovid does not change the Homeric outline but adds local color and intensifies Niobe's offense. While she herself is the epitome of arrogance, her children's fate exemplifies the ruthlessness of gods ready to destroy innocent lives in their revenge upon an offender (as Euripides' Aphrodite destroyed Phaedra for revenge on Hippolytus, who would not worship her). After Pallas Athene's punishment of Arachne (see ch. 4), Niobe's punishment by Apollo and Diana for insulting their mother, Latona (6.148–312), will be followed by Latona's punitive transformation of the Lycian peasants into frogs (6.316–81) and Apollo's flaying of the rival musician, the satyr Marsyas (382–400; see ch. 4).

Ovid may have modeled his treatment on Sophocles' tragedy, known to us only from a damaged papyrus of the *hypothesis* (plot outline) and vivid fragments of dialogue and chorus. We saw in chapter 3 that Ovid's epic version of the death of Pentheus avoided the terrible last moments of Euripides' *Bacchae* when Agave comes to herself and realizes she has dismembered and killed her own son. Like Pentheus, Niobe refuses reverence to the goddess Latona and her children, Apollo and Diana, when other Thebans welcome them. With insufferable arrogance Niobe demands to be worshiped instead because of her royal birth and marriage, her beauty, and especially her fertility as the mother of seven sons and seven daughters, whereas Latona has only the twins. Upset by the possible loss of worship, Latona complains to her children, who promise her instant action. They fly unseen to Thebes, where the seven sons are riding and exercising outside the citadel (in Sophocles they were hunting). Each in turn is shot by unseen arrows, each, as Ovid describes them, with a different wound, even while they are trying to help their siblings.

Sophocles had represented Amphion as killed by Apollo when he tried to fight back in defense of his sons, but Ovid's Amphion kills himself in despair. This increases the contrast between husband and wife, as Niobe only becomes more arrogant and boasts that she still has more children than Latona (280–5). Now her daughters gather lamenting around the funeral biers of their brothers. A particularly grim fragment of Sophocles seems to be spoken by Apollo to Artemis (Diana), directing her aim: "do you see that frightened girl inside, cowering alone, trying to hide by the bins in the storeroom? Why not aim a swift arrow at her before she can escape in hiding?" (frag. 441a). Again Ovid diverges, switching from the more detailed account of the young men's deaths to dispatch the girls with frightening speed (ten lines, where the sons' deaths had required fifty!), until only one is left, whom Niobe tries to shelter with her body, uttering a desperate appeal. As she sits

> Amid her sons, her daughters, and her husband,
> All lifeless corpses, rigid in her ruin,
> Her hair no breeze can stir; her cheeks are drained
> And bloodless; in her doleful face her eyes
> Stare fixed and hard—a likeness without life. (6.301–5,
> tr. Melville)

Niobe's transformation—which the tragedy could only have encompassed through the prophecy of a deus ex machina—completes itself as her tongue and all her limbs stiffen, until her very flesh (and we should think here of her reproductive womb) is stone, yet she still weeps. There was a legend that Mount Sipylus in Niobe's native Phrygia was the petrified queen mother. Ovid boldly has the winds transport her home, where she is absorbed into the mountain peak whose streams are her ever-flowing tears.

Ovid must also include more complex tales of mothers like Procne, who kills her son by the rapist Tereus, or Althaea, who is driven by vengeance for her brothers to murder her own son, in retaliation for his killing them: such terrible conflicting emotions can only be resolved by suicide or metamorphosis. But he develops most fully the mourning of Hecuba, celebrated in the Euripidean tragedy named after her. In fact, her bereavements form the climax of Ovid's fall of Troy. Her tragedy begins after the deaths of Hector and his killer Achilles, when Priam too has been slain at the household altar, and Hector's son Astyanax has been thrown from the battlements of Troy. Only the women are left, and the youngest son Polydorus, who had been sent away for safety to King Polymestor of Thrace (13.429–38). Captured princesses, like all other

women prisoners, were allotted as slaves to the Greek chieftains, but Polyxena, Hecuba's only surviving daughter, is demanded as a sacrifice by a ghost, the dead Achilles. Echoing Euripides, Ovid reports (13.449–80) the nobility of young Polyxena, who refuses to be handled and dies freely with a spirit worthy of a princess. But he has streamlined the tragic sequence so as to subordinate even this human sacrifice to the grief of Hecuba, whose passionate speech devotes more attention to her own death in life as Ulysses' captive than to grieving for her daughter, who has won liberty in death (13.494–532).

Now a second loss overwhelms the bereaved mother. As she fetches water from the shore to wash her daughter's body, she finds the floating corpse of her youngest son, bearing Polymestor's murderous wounds. Here Ovid remodels Euripides' dramatic form to narrate Hecuba's emotional transformation from grief to bitter vengeance. Now she is as silent as Niobe, and her *dolor* (both grief and anger) consumes her tears; she freezes like a rock as she gazes for a second time at her dead child and then "arms herself with anger" (13.544). Revitalized, Hecuba carries out a deceitful revenge on the treacherous king, urging the other women captives to surround him as she gouges out his eyes. Finally, as she is stoned by the king's Thracian people in their fury, a physical metamorphosis follows the more important psychological transformation. It was an old tradition that Hecuba had been changed into a bitch because of her rabid cursing, and Euripides presents this in prophetic form at the end of his play (as he had the metamorphosis of Cadmus and Harmonia into serpents). Ovid's narrative incorporates the change and invokes the promontory of Cynossema (Dog's Tomb) as a monument to her howls of grief over the Thracian wilderness.

But the poet cannot leave Troy without restoring a less despairing mood, which he achieves by moving back to an earlier time, when the goddess Aurora mourned her son Memnon, killed in combat by Achilles long before the fall of Troy. Aurora's grief is altogether more self-centered, as she petitions Jupiter for some honor to her dead son to compensate for what she sees as neglect of her worship and ingratitude for her daily services to gods and men.

Jupiter assents, and as Memnon's body burns on the pyre, smoke begins to swirl, like mists arising from a river, and becomes a flock of birds, who take on military formations and fight a ritual combat over his tomb (13.576–619). Ovid has made only small changes to this Greek tale, but one is to call the birds Memnon's sisters, echoing the ritual role of mourning played by sisters (like the sisters of Phaethon and Meleager), and to assimilate the birds' annual migration and return to the Roman rite of *parentalia* on the anniversary of a kinsman's death. The tale also permits him to return to the present, with the morning dew that each day witnesses Aurora's continuing tears.

In singling out Ovid's representation of these phases in a woman's life, I have not, of course, meant to imply that the emotion of love, whether mutual or unrequited, is not also central to the lives of women. But this theme is too important, and Ovid's portrayal of love is itself too varied, to be confined within this survey. Let love, then, be the unifying theme of the tales considered in the next chapter.

Further Reading

Amy Richlin, "Reading Ovid's Rapes," in *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, ed. Amy Richlin (New York, 1992, 158–79); Genevieve Lively, "Reading Resistance in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," in *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on Ovid's "Metamorphoses" and Its Reception*, ed. Philip R. Hardie, Alessandro Barchiesi, and Stephen Hinds (Cambridge, 1999), 197–213; A. Keith, *Engendering Rome: Women in Latin Epic* (Cambridge, 2000), chs. 3–4.

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