

20 March, 43 BCE:  
*Ovid Is Born*

Diane Middlebrook

NOTE FROM DIANE MIDDLEBROOK'S  
LITERARY EXECUTORS

"Ovid Is Born" is the first chapter of *Ovid: A Biography*, an experimental work by Diane Middlebrook (1939–2007) combining research on Roman life with fictional renderings of key moments in the Roman poet's life. As originally conceived, the book was to contain nine chapters, each designed to represent turning points in the arc of the poet's life story. Since almost nothing has been recorded about the life, exile, and death of Publius Ovidius Naso, each chapter would not only integrate details of contemporary Roman culture and history with imagined scenes, the narrative would also draw on the fragmentary autobiographical moments as they figure in the *Metamorphoses*, as well as in *Amores* and *Tristia*. These three intersecting strands would create a complex portrait that captured the poet's extraordinary career. Ovid's poetry had been a lifelong passion of Middlebrook's, a poet and scholar who had taught the *Metamorphoses* throughout her career as a professor in the Stanford University English department, beginning in 1966.

Had her progress with this book not been halted by cancer, it seems nearly certain that *Ovid: A Biography* would be in print by now. As it was, Middlebrook recognized in the fall of 2007 that she would not have time to complete the full project as she imagined it. She began to transform her chapters into a shorter book, *Young Ovid*, a multilayered study of Ovid's early years that would take this provincial young man from his birth (the scene published here) to the

dramatic moment in which he “narrowed his stripes,” abandoning his expected path to a legal career and the Roman senate – a role for which he would have worn a toga with broad stripes—for the narrow-striped toga of the poet.

In the end, *Young Ovid*, too, had to be abandoned. Although Middlebrook remained deeply absorbed in her writing and research for the book until the final weeks of her life (the work served her as welcome escape from the discomforts of illness and treatment), she was not able to complete its four chapters. Members of her family, along with friends and former colleagues, attempted a number of times to assemble the fragments Middlebrook left behind into a publishable whole. However, we all agreed that the results did not meet the very high standards Middlebrook would have set for herself, as brilliantly on display in her earlier biographies: *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1992), *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billie Tipton* (1999), and *Her Husband: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, A Marriage* (2003).

As Diane Middlebrook’s literary executors, we are working to bring the completed sections of the project into print; we are delighted to have the opportunity to place “20 March, 43 BCE: Ovid is Born” in *Feminist Studies*. In this piece, Middlebrook weaves together a vivid depiction of midwifery, labor, and childbirth in Ancient Rome with the equally striking thesis of her book: that Ovid the poet was born into a community of women that formed the context for the young Roman boy’s early childhood.

In preparing this text for publication we have made light edits and minor revisions, primarily to the endnotes, but also, occasionally, to the translations. The unpublished, unedited drafts of the Ovid biography, as well as other materials from Middlebrook’s professional career, are on deposit in the Feminist Theory Archives of the Pembroke Center at Brown University, where they are available for in-house research.

Leah Middlebrook, Nancy K. Miller  
Literary executors on behalf of Diane Middlebrook’s estate

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*The midwife watched the laboring woman discreetly from a chair in the corner of the room, resting and readying herself for what was to come. The mother had by now undergone many hours of acute and exhausting discomfort before entering this current stage of transition, in which the cervix was approaching its full dilation, accompanied by ferocious pain. Strangled cries rhythmically escaped her clenched teeth as she writhed, wringing her hands.*

*The midwife, a well-trained Greek freedwoman, had seen many a child into the world and knew that success in delivering the baby would depend partly on psychological preparation of the mother, who needed to be surrounded by expectations that she would survive this ordeal, though the midwife knew all too well the possibility that she would not survive it. So the birthing room had been arranged to promote an atmosphere of normalcy. There were two couches in the room: the low, flat bed on which the woman lay in labor, and the other, piled with soft cushions where she would rest after delivery. The light was dim, its only source the brazier; water and oil stood warming on a nearby shelf, ready for cleaning the newborn, a sign of trust that the baby too would survive. Meanwhile the soft lighting would serve to protect the woman's modesty.*

*But the birthing couch was hard, and the hour was late, and the laboring woman, fixated on her pain, was now barely aware of her surroundings. How much more delay could she tolerate before weakening and giving up? The midwife oiled her left hand once again and reached up into the birth canal — she had previously cut her nails very short, to increase the sensitivity of her fingertips, and to avoid scratching the woman's tender membranes. Yes, the cervix was ready: dilated by a full handspan. It was time to invoke the power of the gods. Dramatically, she rose from her seat and signaled to the three attendants she had brought with her into the birthing room, selected from the large staff of household slaves and freedwomen in the Ovidius family villa — literate women, well-spoken, well-groomed, and well-mannered. That they had no training in midwifery was irrelevant: they were the mother's work companions in daily life. During the early hours of labor, these attendants had distracted their mistress with local gossip, while the midwife ministered to her physical comfort.*

*They now began a soft repetitive chant, casting incense into the brazier while imploring goddesses to hasten safe delivery of the child: Dispatet, Mena, Lucina, Diana Hythia, Egeria, Prosa, Manageneta, the Dii Nixii, all protectors of women. The prayers culminated*

in a libation to the goddess Latona, whose own struggle giving birth to the glorious twins Apollo and Diana had made her the principal divine overseer of human childbirth.

The midwife did not take part in these devotions; hers was a more practical role. She raised the mistress in her arms, and stripped the sweat-stained, bloody coverlet from under her body. She cleansed the woman's nether parts with warm water and wiped her with a damp sponge, then brushed the drenched hair away from her eyes. These ministrations were hygienic, but they had a ritual purpose too, marking the point of transition into the last stage of labor. The midwife told her mistress that she must now move to the birthing stool that stood ready nearby and, from that moment on, must keep her eyes fixed on the midwife's face, following instructions, no matter how severe the pain. The baby's head was beginning its descent. The mother would have to push when indicated, and hold back when indicated, and breathe in rhythm with the contractions.

The attendants helped the mistress rise to her feet, then seated her on the crescent-shaped stool. They covered her belly and feet with cloths warmed in oil. Then they strewed the floor with crushed, sweet-smelling plants that were abundant at the vernal equinox: barley grass, apple blossom, quince flowers, lemons, cucumbers. The scents of the juices from these plants were thought to revive a person's strength.

Meanwhile, the midwife had donned a large linen apron. Seating herself on a low chair opposite the woman's knees, she locked her eyes on the woman's face, speaking in a low, comforting voice while reaching with her left hand deep into the aperture of the birth canal, massaging and dilating the cervix. For the next hour, after each contraction had passed, accompanied by the mother's irrepressible screaming and groaning, the midwife again massaged the orifice, to keep it fully dilated, always telling the laboring woman when to push, when not to push. The attendants assisted from either side, gently pressing the mass of the belly downward after the muscles unclenched.

The high, solid back and stout armrests of the birthing stool gave leverage as the woman braced herself to bear down, but its most important feature was the access it permitted to her lower body. When the midwife's fingers at last located the amniotic sac that encased the fetus, she guided it forward and downward, then waited for the next contraction. 'Now,' she said, in a firm voice, and the laboring woman once again gripped the armrests of the birthing stool and pushed hard, and harder still, shouting in pain, until the flesh of the peritoneum tore with a gush of blood. Suddenly the womb's waters too poured between her legs, mixed with urine and feces, and the crown of the baby's head could be felt in the opened passageway. Luckily, this was the mother's second child, and this last part of her labor was likely to be short. Another and another powerful push from the mother, and the head appeared, its black hair slicked into damp waves. The midwife gently groped her way back into the birth canal and found a shoulder, then pulled and turned the little body while arms and trunk and crotch and legs

emerged, streaky with shredding vernix, and swathed in blood. The midwife lifted him away from his mother's legs, and the cool air passing over his body caused him to gasp, then expel a gratifying howl.

The midwife laid the wailing infant on a pillow in her lap while she stroked the mother's breasts to induce contractions of the womb in order to deliver the afterbirth, and staunched the heavy bleeding that could kill the postpartum mother in minutes. Then she motioned the attendants to wash her, and move her to the comfortable couch. Meanwhile the midwife prodded and stretched the newborn's limbs for evidence of deformities, and investigated all of his orifices for defects. It was she who would determine whether he was worth rearing, or whether he should be removed at once from the family home, for exposure on some outlying midden. When she had finished her inspection, she nodded assent, severed the umbilical cord, then stripped the blood from the stump and tied it off with a short length of wool thread. At last she turned to her mistress, holding the baby up to view and lifting her own voice above his cries: "Praise the gods, you have another son."<sup>1</sup> And high over the villa, Lucifer, the morning star, shone in the dawn sky<sup>2</sup> — a heavenly recipient of that newborn voice, which was now firmly in the world, once and for all.

This was a story he liked to hear again and again, a few years later, standing at his mother's shoulder while she sat at her spinning and weaving. The tale was as gory as any battle. And it was a story he really shouldn't have been told, since the birthing process was a woman's mystery, never witnessed nor discussed by male members of the household. He wanted to be the exception, to know exactly what happened, and she would tell him, amused by his persistence, talking while she worked. Holding a clump of wool in one hand while the thumb on her other hand pushed out and twisted a single thread,<sup>3</sup> blending one strand with another, she could wind it long and unbroken onto a spindle, just the way she spun a story, making it last as long as she wished. She would recite passages from the epics of Homer, having memorized them in childhood herself.<sup>4</sup> She would tell him the myths and legends about Rome that children were supposed to hear at an early age, to shape their ideas about the world that they would govern.<sup>5</sup> When she told the little boy about the day he was born, she would point at his belly button to prove that the story he liked so much was absolutely true, not a myth. A human body had grown inside another human body, then burst forth whole and perfect, to be tied off in a knot: there it was, the permanent evidence of an amazing transformation.

INEVITABLY, THE STORY OF HOW Ovid transformed himself into an immortal begins on the day he was born. In ancient Rome, more women died in childbirth than men died in war. The infants too

were at great risk of early death; of all the babies born the year Ovid was born, half who survived infancy would not live beyond age ten.<sup>6</sup> A good deal of what might be described in our days as magic thinking—fine-tuned transactions with the deities that governed a household—accompanied child rearing; but a good deal of practical experience would have gone into the midwife's ministrations to baby Ovid during his first hours of life, as well.

Immediately after his birth, he would have been thoroughly bathed, his whole body sprinkled lightly with salt, then washed in lukewarm water two or three times. While he was immersed in the last ablution, the midwife would remove the mucus from his nostrils and throat, clean his ears, and open his anus for the excretion of meconium. The tied-off umbilical cord would be doubled over and covered with a clump of fleece dipped in olive oil, then centered on his body to encourage a well-shaped navel.

Now he was ready for his first swaddling, a process that was meant to complete the process begun in the womb, of shaping the body. The whole purpose of swaddling was to encourage, from the outset of life, the development of a well-proportioned adult body.<sup>7</sup> Swaddling was a complicated task that needed practice and concentration, because some parts of the body would require compression in order to achieve their "natural" form, while other parts required looseness. The binding began with the infant's hands. Long strips of soft woolen cloth were wound over the fingers—extended to keep the hand flat—and up the middle of the hand to the forearm and upper arm; compression was applied at the wrist, looseness at the armpit. Broader strips would be wrapped around the thorax. Then the legs were bound, loosely around the upper thighs and calves, more tightly at the knees, instep, and ankles. The bandage would cover the very tips of the toes, as it had covered the very tips of the fingers. Pieces of wool were wrapped into the joints at the ankles, the knees, and the elbows, to avoid ulcerations. Then the whole body would be wrapped into a fairly tight package that held the arms at the infant's sides, and joined the legs and feet together in a straight line. Finally, the head would be wrapped: either encircled by a bandage or draped with a small shawl.<sup>8</sup> The baby would continue to undergo just such swaddling after a bath, for as long as the first sixty days of its life.

The process of unswaddling would be equally deliberate and methodical, extending over several days. First the right hand would be unbound, to encourage right-handedness. Other parts of the body would be unbound gradually, depending on the state of firmness each had achieved.

It is worth grasping in detail this practice of immobilizing, then gradually freeing the infant, since it was not only fundamental to the "shaping" theory of childrearing practiced by Romans, but was also the crucial, very first step in the process of interrupting the dyadic bond between a newborn and its mother and integrating the baby into the household. A woman's main responsibility was to produce a male heir for the family into which she married. Soon after his birth, the infant would be set along the path to assuming a place in imperial Rome, a highly structured society. As part of that process, mother and baby were separated in a systematic way from the start of life. For example, the midwife would not have put the washed and swaddled baby at his mother's breast that day. A child's principal supplier of nutrition for the first years of life was a usually a wet nurse. Romans viewed the process of feeding an infant correctly as continuous with the process of preparing it for adult life; and in a manner similar to the interventions of the midwife, the wet nurse played an important role in shaping a baby into a Roman. Thus Soranus, the author of an important tract on the subject, gives explicit counsel about the condition of the breasts and of the milk the wet nurse should possess, but his primary concern is her age and character. The wet nurse should not be, for example, a superstitious person, susceptible to "fallacious reasoning," lest she expose the child to dangers associated with ecstatic states, which sometimes cause "trembling like mad."<sup>9</sup> She should drink no alcohol until the child has attained a certain age and strength, and she should abstain from sex, lest her sympathies be drawn away from the infant. She should, if possible, be Greek, "so that the infant nursed by her may become accustomed to the best speech."<sup>10</sup>

Contracting for a wet nurse indicated the family's confidence in the viability of the coming child, and the first swaddling expressed the midwife's vote of confidence in its soundness. But next, having swaddled the baby, the midwife would seek out the presumptive father and lay it "on the ground" before him. According to Roman

custom, the father would then take the infant up into his arms. The name for this ritual was “*tollere liberos*,” literally, elevating or raising the freeborn child. If for any reason the father refused, the baby would not be permitted to enter the family. It would be exposed outdoors, in some location where it might well be found and raised as a slave, or treated as the child of parents themselves unable to bear children. In any case, its fate would be of no further interest to this father. But once the infant had been “raised,” its acceptance into the family was assured. A flame could now be lit on the family altar, and prayers initiated with the hope of keeping the newborn alive. And a wreath could be hung on the door of the villa to announce the birth to the whole community.<sup>11</sup>

#### A BABY IN THE FAMILY

Acceptance by the father, as well as the thriving of the newborn baby in the house of the Ovidii, set him on the path to assuming a position in a respected Roman family; however, other rituals needed to be performed to confirm his transition from “nature to culture,” so to speak. Nine days after the birth of a son (eight days after the birth of a daughter), a bloodless sacrifice would be conducted at a gathering of friends and extended family, with offerings burned before the family’s household gods. This religious ceremony, called the *dies lustricus*—day of purification—was meant to purge the infant of the pollution associated with birthing. The *dies lustricus* was a major family celebration, but it also involved the elite members of the town in which the child was born, and the guests would have brought the family abundant gifts of congratulation.

The ritual would culminate in bestowing a name on the baby. Publius Ovidius Naso was the name given to this newborn son on that day. Freeborn Romans had three names. The *praenomen* was the personal name, used at home and among intimates. The Romans had very few first names to choose from—only about eighteen were in existence in the year 100 BCE—so there were already many Publiuses in the world. Ovid may have received the name as a tribute to another family member, but the *praenomen* Publius would at the very least differentiate him from his brother, who, being the firstborn son in the family, was likely to have been named after the father.<sup>12</sup> Had there been girls in the family, they would be given, as



*praenomen*, the feminine version of the father's *nomen*; so all of Ovid's sisters would very likely have been named Ovidia, and known around the house by a nickname (though Ovid mentions no sisters).

The last two of these three names were common to the family. The *nomen* "Ovidius," which he received that day, referred to the family's *gens*, or clan. Ovid's *cognomen* "Naso" meant "nose," which suggests that some ancestral Ovidius had a big endowment of that feature, or maybe a too-curious disposition, nosiness, and that the family carried the comic burden ever after.<sup>13</sup>

At the name-day ritual, a son or daughter also received a *bullā*. This was a large, round pouch-shaped pendant in which good luck charms had been sealed. In an affluent family, the *bullā* might be made of gold, but its purpose was not ornamental; it enabled anyone who looked at the wearer to identify, even at a distance, a child's status as freeborn.<sup>14</sup> Baby Publius Ovidius Naso would wear his *bullā* steadily until reaching manhood, at around age fourteen. Along with the *bullā*, he might also receive on his name-day a number of other protective amulets by which the family hoped to keep him alive. Despite the educated Roman's skepticism toward superstition, charms were employed along with every other protective device.

With the bestowal of his name and the presentation of the *bullā*, the arrival of Publius was official: the family's hereditary line had been extended by a son. In this family, and for young Publius especially, one more detail was significant: the new son was exactly one year younger than his brother.

#### ONE OCCASION, TWO CAKES

Since the imaginative treatment of others in Ovid's poetry is highly empathic, understanding him as an artist requires looking for evidence about the relationships he formed early in life. Among these, very important was Ovid's relationship with this brother. He spells it out in a poem:

.. I was born, in the year both consuls perished  
at Antony's hands; heir (for what that's worth)  
to an ancient family, no brand-new knight promoted  
just yesterday for his wealth.  
I was not the eldest child. I came after a brother

*born a twelvemonth before me, to the day  
so that we shared a birthday, celebrated one occasion  
with two cakes, in March, at the time  
of that festival sacred to armed Minerva. . .*<sup>15</sup>

Roman births were formally recorded by the day and the hour, for the purpose of casting their horoscopes.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the family records would have dated the birth years of Publius and his brother by the names of the men who held the consulship in Rome, since these were, conveniently, one-year appointments that were meant never to be repeated.<sup>17</sup>

But the lines quoted here reference the Roman calendar of festivals: both boys were born on the second day of *Quinquatrus*, the five-day festival dedicated to Minerva, March 19–23.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, poetry does its thinking in metaphors; the few lines Ovid wrote about his brother are richly metaphorical and communicate very efficiently a set of relationships that prevailed between the brothers as Ovid wishes us to see them. This is particularly true when we look at the original Latin for some of the verses quoted above:

*nec stirps prima fui; genitor sum fratre creatus,  
qui tribus ante quarter mensibus ortus erat.  
Lucifer amborum natalibus affuit idem.*

His brother's distinction of being the firstborn — significantly different from Ovid — dissolves in the cyclic motion of the morning star, *Lucifer*, which returns on the day of Ovid's birth to the exact position it occupied in the heavens when his brother was born, making these brothers at once the same and different from each other. In deviation from the Roman social norm, the two boys were equally cherished within the family, it would seem. "One occasion with two cakes": both were celebrated in the family circle. And Roman legal statutes decreed that they would inherit equal shares of property (along with any other siblings) at the time of their father's death.<sup>19</sup> But, yes, the boys *were* distinct. The lines just quoted preface a reference to their education; here, again, they appear as equal but different:

. . . We began  
*our education young: our father sent us to study  
 with Rome's best teachers in the liberal arts.  
 My brother from his green years had the gift of eloquence,  
 was born for the clash of words in the public court;  
 but I, even in boyhood, held out for higher matters,  
 and the Muse was seducing me subtly to her work.*<sup>20</sup>

The boys are sent to study together, and both are given the best education. Ovid attributes an inborn talent to his brother that, like Ovid's talent for poetry, was a gift of high-level linguistic fluency. But the brother's gift expressed itself in aggressive argumentation, "the clash of words." This skill was quite different from the one Ovid portrays himself as cultivating from the youngest age. Was the brother's inclination toward argument a part of his nature? Or was it shaped by his position as the elder of the two? As will emerge later in this story, "not the eldest" is an important detail in Ovid's account of his relationship to his brother. The core of every ancient family was the presence in the household of three generations of males: the *paterfamilias*, his son, and the son's son. That is why Virgil made this triad central to *The Aeneid*, his epic account of the founding of Rome: Aeneas escapes from the burning city of Troy with the household gods in his baggage, carrying his elderly father on his shoulders and leading his son by the hand. Along the way, his wife disappears and is mourned, but the surviving trio of males constitutes the foundation of a new household.

The twelve-month gap that separated the Ovidius sons would have been a distinction without much difference for the next six years of their lives, though, since their proximity in age would have made it efficient for the household to treat them as if they were the same age. Once the ceremonies welcoming the newborn boy into Roman society were over, baby Publius would have joined his toddling brother in the care of a staff of women, overseen by their mother. The two little sons in the house of Ovidius Naso, therefore, would have formed their first significant relationships not just with their biological mother, but with the several female attendants into whose care they were entrusted. A swarm of household slaves, mainly female, would also have surrounded them from birth, and in

addition, they were watched over by a host of divinities, all of them female. The goddess Opis, or Ops, oversaw the way the midwife laid the child on the ground, to be raised by the father; Levana was at hand when the child was lifted. Cuma rocked the cradle, while Carmenta lullabied him. Vegetanus hushed him when he cried. Rumina made sure the baby took the breast; later on, Polina helped him drink from a cup, and Edura taught him how to eat solid food. Osslago and Carna worked within the baby's growing body, giving it strength. Stilinus, or Statanus, showed toddlers how to walk, Fabulina showed them how to talk, Camaena taught them how to sing. Paventia protected them from childhood terrors.<sup>21</sup> From an early age, the children would have been taught stories about the ways these invisible goddesses influenced the human world, and they would have been shown the proper ways to pay respect. It was all part of shaping them into Romans.

#### BOY AND FATHER

They were shaped; and they grew; and they were shaped again. Throughout Ovid's poetry, but most notably in *Metamorphoses*, nature causes characters to weave their own paths through the rules, codes, and taboos that structure society. The unpredictability—even the undecidability—of nature is an element that makes this poem, which was composed in some of the most exacting Latin meters to be found, so vivid. The world of *Metamorphoses* is full of forests and animals whose lives are intimately understood by the poet; and the familiarity of Ovid's narrating voice when he describes them suggests that they had been in his world from boyhood. Some of them were dangerous (wild boar, bears, and wolves are still to be found in the forests of the Abruzzi).<sup>22</sup> The men of Ovid's family and community would hunt in those forests with nets and spears,<sup>23</sup> in the same way that in *Metamorphoses*, the mythic prince Actaeon hunts game on the slopes of an unnamed mountain where he meets a dreadful fate at the hands of the goddess Diana. Others were nurturing. Ovid also writes of a chilly spring called Hippocrene on Mount Helicon, to which the militant goddess Minerva retreats after leaving the sickening carnage of a battle. He describes a fenced orchard passionately tended by the nymph Pomona. He assigns to Jove himself an attachment to the idyllic countryside the poets called Arcadia.

These and other striking settings in Ovid's epic have venerable literary pedigrees that we are intended to recognize. Yet Ovid's narrator speaks with a warm, personal voice, too: just such springs and orchards and forests were Ovid's childhood haunts. We can hear this warmth in the playful voice of the narrator describing the way that Jove oversaw the restoration of Arcadia after a catastrophic fire has come close to destroying heaven and earth:

*Then the Almighty Father conducted a tour of inspection  
around the walls of the sky, in case the great fire's impact  
had caused them to weaken and crumble down. When he  
saw they were still  
as strong and stable as ever, he turned his attention to earth  
and the works of mankind. Arcadia, where he was born, engaged  
his particular care. He revived the fountains and rivers which still  
were reluctant to flow, put grass on the soil and leaves on the trees,  
and ordered the blackened forests to burst once more into green.  
As he busily came and went, an Arcadian virgin suddenly caught his fancy. . .*<sup>24</sup>

The image of Jove as an ad hoc farmer would have amused Ovid's contemporary readers, since spending weekends and hot weather in a country villa was a way that prosperous city-dwelling Romans retained a sense of maintaining a living connection to their idealized past.

Of course, Ovid's father was a soldier-farmer, as well. It is tempting to read in the figure of Jove, father of the gods, signals about Ovid's own father. While the early part of a Roman childhood was predominantly governed by the mother, a Roman father was a force in his young children's lives. He was expected to take an active role in shaping a son, particularly, helping the young boy acquire the kinds of self-control that Romans associated with rectitude. According to most scholarship on this subject, the training was expected to be strict, and its purpose was to mold the growing child in the idealized image of his ancestors.<sup>25</sup> The few but pointed remarks Ovid makes about his father in his poetry indicate that an old-fashioned ethos was preserved in the family governed by the senior Ovidius Naso. Ovid's father was the next best thing to immortal: he lived to the ripe old age of ninety. He was probably already in his late forties by the time Ovid was born, and very likely had already become

the *paterfamilias* of the Ovidius Naso family, which is to say that his authority in the household was unquestionable. The *paterfamilias* was the family's eldest male. In Roman law, he held absolute power over every member of the family; he even had the right to kill or order the deaths of those who were related to him or were his property, and his action could not be legally challenged. *Pater potestas*, this was called: father-power. Ovid frequently refers to Jove as "father of the gods," making the parallel explicit.

But parents do not only shape children deliberately. They also do so unconsciously. In every way, they are larger and stronger; yet they are also subject to violent passions and furtive urges that we call "childish." Rank is communicated, and judgments are handed down; punishment is administered, sometimes unfairly. Children absorb, and cope with, these aspects of their parents' behavior without necessarily understanding it. And children must not question the authority that looms over them from on high.

We might expect to find the imprint of this sort of unconscious emotional "instruction" in Ovid's poetry, and we do: of these parental characteristics, Ovid was to formulate the gods who populate *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's epic poem is a repository of complex family relationships, many of which are set forth with great psychological insight. Notably, it contains a small population of interesting fathers. Two in particular stand out when we are trying to think about Ovid's biography, Ovid's world, because each departs from a well-established Roman code of fatherly conduct. One occurs in the tale of Phaëton, reputedly the son of Apollo, the sun god. They meet for the first time when the boy approaches the god with a question about his origins: is Apollo really his father? Apollo, in order to prove his authentic claim to paternity of this tender boy, brashly promises Phaëton that he will grant any request.

.. his father removed the circlet of sparkling  
 rays which adorned his head, commanded the youth to come nearer,  
 and folded him close in his arms. "You are truly mine," he assured him.  
 "Denial would do you injustice, and Clymene did not deceive you.  
 Away with your doubts! Now ask me whatever favor you will,  
 and I shall bestow it. To witness my promise, I call on the Stygian  
 marsh which the gods must swear by. . . ' 26

Being a god, Apollo cannot revoke a promise, and so Phaëton gets his wish to drive the chariot of the sun across the sky for one day. Phaëton comes close to destroying the whole heaven and earth before he crashes and burns.

Another too-indulgent parent is Peneüs, the river god and father of the nymph Daphne—a young beauty who loves to roam the woods capturing animals. Daphne has just become of marriageable age; for a Roman girl, that would be about twelve years old. Her father reminds her that she owes him a son-in-law and a grandson. Daphne hates the prospect of marriage, but rather than resist openly, she offers a shrewd argument in favor of remaining free. The goddess Diana's father—Jove—permitted his daughter to remain a virgin; couldn't Peneüs—who was after all a god, himself—regard this as a precedent, and grant her the same privilege? If Peneüs had been a strict Roman father he would not have been susceptible to this flattering comparison, since it was the duty of girls from respectable families to marry and bear children. Unwisely, Peneüs grants Daphne's wish, and lets her continue to roam the woods unhampered, as though she were a mere girl and not a desirable young woman. She crosses the path of the young god Apollo who, instantly smitten, chases her down. Daphne throws up her arms and appeals to Peneüs to take away the body that has caused her so much fear, and she is turned into a laurel tree.

In both of these stories, Ovid supplies convincing emotional coloration to the dyads of child and parent. The parents are shown to be foolish—even though they are gods—because their wish to be loved and admired distracts them from their obligations as fathers. Apollo desires to taste the simple pleasure of a status denied to the gods: care of the young. Thus, as Phaëton approaches the throne, Apollo removes the dazzling diadem that signifies his divine status. He wants to embrace Phaëton as a mere father may embrace his son.<sup>27</sup> Peneüs is also blameworthy, in permitting himself to be made a co-conspirator in his daughter's unsuitable desire never to leave his household. And in each case, the child gets away with forbidden behavior by manipulating the father's emotions. The children are shown to be foolish, too, but merely because they are adolescents; their stories are moving because we understand that, in asking to be exceptional, each is undergoing a failed metamorphosis into an adult. Phaëton is





*like showers of rain; and a constant roar is returned from the distance.  
This is the dwelling, the mansion, the innermost shrine of the mighty  
river-god. . .*<sup>29</sup>

Peneüs as a deafening waterfall casting its mist high as the tops of trees: this is an image of irrepressible emotion erupting from its inmost source, to embrace its object. The passage has an oddly abrupt effect when encountered as a transition moment in the forward drive of the epic, but when its significance is tipped back into the story, one meaning of the metaphor grows vividly evident: it is an approach through images to a depth of feeling that cannot successfully be represented in actions such as the covering of the face.

#### AT MOTHER'S SIDE

For the first seven years of life, however, fathers were figures who exercised their power in the background. Usually, a very young child had little contact with his father. It wasn't until a male child lost his baby teeth, at around age seven, that he would be turned over to men in order to be educated. Young children were educated by their mothers and nurses; and since Ovid and his brother were born only one year apart, it is likely that they were educated together at first, with their mother as teacher. Ovid's brother would have moved on to being tutored by men a year before Publius did, leaving the younger boy alone with his mother for an important year in his development. From internal evidence in Ovid's poetry, it can be proposed that closeness to his mother mattered in the formation of Ovid's imagination; and it may be that the year he did not have to share his mother's attention with an older brother mattered the most of all.

No references to his mother appear in Ovid's work, aside from a remark that she died after his father's death. But a few things about her can be assumed with confidence. First, she was younger than her husband, very likely by a whole generation. Ovid's mother was probably no older than twenty and perhaps as young as eighteen when she married; although women were eligible as soon as they began menstruating, they did not normally marry until their late teens. She was probably not the father's first wife, and perhaps Ovid had half-siblings, sisters born to an earlier mother, whom he does not

mention. His own mother probably bore only two male children who survived: the way Ovid describes his brother, although scant of details, indicates that he was the only other male child in the family. Whether or not these assumptions are faithful to the unknowable facts, they are faithful to the emotional tone of Ovid's comments about his family life.

Ovid's mother would not have lived a life of luxury. She would have been responsible for managing the household. If she brought a large dowry into the family, she might also have occupied herself with business interests as well. But no matter what other work she performed, one of her most important roles was overseeing the early education of her children. We have begun to track the figures that society set to work to separate a newborn from its mother, but mothers still played an important role in shaping their children into Romans. Ovid's mother would guide her children in correct usage of Latin and Greek while they learned to talk (all wellborn Roman children were bilingual), and she would introduce them to reading, writing, and arithmetic at elementary levels. In the early years of a child's life, the inculcation of Roman values was likely to have been accomplished by telling stories with moralizing messages in them. This would have been a painless accompaniment to one task that we may be pretty sure Ovid's mother performed, because it was work that almost all Roman women performed: spinning and weaving.

Women were responsible for manufacturing all of the clothing, draperies, and linens in the household. Roman girls learned the complex, demanding skills of spinning and weaving while they were young and practiced them all their lives; demonstrating proficiency was an aspect of a young woman's bridal ceremony. The night before her wedding, she dressed ceremonially in a tunic and a yellow hairnet she had woven herself on a special loom; the next day, after the marriage ritual, a member of the bride's entourage would carry her spindle and distaff to her husband's home, indicating that this was now the setting of her life and work. A lifetime of spinning and weaving was one of the occupations that caused a woman's death. Women often used spittle to moisten the thread, inhaling small fibers and lint that could eventually produce pulmonary diseases.<sup>30</sup>

Spinning and weaving was work that women sometimes performed collectively. It could be tedious and repetitive; in preparation

for spinning, the wool, flax, or other raw material would have been cleaned and combed, possibly dyed, then rolled into a loose ball. The upper end of the distaff—basically, a long pointed stick—was pushed into the ball, and the lower part gripped under the left arm (and sometimes tucked into a belt for support). With the right hand, the spinner drew out and twisted the fibers in a single continuous motion, using a moistened index finger and thumb. The resulting thread, as it lengthened, was twirled onto the spindle—basically, a short pointed stick.<sup>31</sup> This was mindless work once one got the hang of it, but across many cultures, and to this very day, women have preserved a special way of passing the time while engaging in it. They converse and tell stories, “spinning tales.” Ovid has given us a lively picture of women spinning, weaving, and storytelling in *Metamorphoses*, where a household of women (the daughters of Minyas, who are devotees of Minerva) decide to sit at home with their work while the rest of the women in the community take part in violent rituals honoring Bacchus.

. . . only the daughters of Minyas  
 stayed indoors and marred the feast with their untoward housecraft,  
 drawing the wool into thread and twisting the strands with their thumbs,  
 or moving close to the loom and keeping their servants occupied.  
 One of the daughters, while deftly spinning, advanced a suggestion:  
 “While others are idle and fondly observing their so-called festival,  
 we are detained by Minerva, who better deserves our attention.  
 But why don't we also relieve the toil of our hands by telling  
 stories of different kinds and take it in turns to speak,  
 while the rest of us quietly listen? The time will go by more quickly.”  
 Her sisters approved the idea and asked her to tell the first story.  
 Then she pondered which of the many tales that she knew  
 was the best one to choose. . .<sup>32</sup>

She settles on the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, “not commonly known as yet.” She recounts it “spinning her wool the while.”<sup>33</sup>

The storytelling of these sisters occupies many pages of the poem, and Ovid has shrewdly represented the plots and themes as those most beguiling to women: romances. The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe is followed by the tale of how Leucothoë and Clytie both fell

helplessly in love with the sun god Apollo and how he rewarded their infatuation. The next storyteller offers the well-known account of how the cuckolded Vulcan entrapped the adulterous lovers, Venus and Mars, with a cunning golden net. Homer had put the story in *The Odyssey*, but the Minyan storyteller gives it local color by emphasizing the similarity of Vulcan's handiwork to the "thinnest of wool threads," such as those flowing from the hands of the sisters themselves. Last, the daughters of Minyas hear the tale of the nymph Salmacis, who, maddened by passion for a beautiful boy, was changed into a part of his body, creating a being who was "neither woman nor boy, [but] seemed to be neither or both"—a hermaphrodite.<sup>34</sup>

We "overhear" these stories, seated as we are by the narrator amid the storytellers at their looms. Each of the daughters appears to have in her memory a large stock of romances; we are permitted to watch each one deciding aloud which tale to tell, titillating her auditors with possibilities not pursued. Perhaps we are even meant to notice that in the repertory of the weavers all of the stories center on the love-interest of nobly pathetic females. And we also witness the way the storyteller sets up her audience, and how the audience responds. To the tale of Mars, Venus, and Vulcan, they behave rather like enthusiastic members of a book club, avidly discussing the implications of the tale as if the gods were actual people:

. . . *their ears were captivated by the amazing event.*  
*Some said it could not have happened, some pointed out that true gods*  
*Could do anything; but Bacchus was not one of them.*<sup>35</sup>

At this point in *Metamorphoses* one begins to learn something quite distinctive about the artist Ovid became: at some time in his life he had observed women talking to each other in the absence of men. Was it in childhood that Ovid's imagination was captivated by what went on among women sitting together over their spindles and their looms? If Ovid's poetry is original in its treatment of fathers, it is unique in ancient literature in its representation of the social world that women created for themselves within the household, a world largely concealed from the attention of men. Women of all ages and kinds appear and interact with one another in Ovid's tales, enriching the world of the poem and broadening its emotional and social

reach. If an unwelcome man should arrive on the scene, interrupting the women, this world would immediately fold itself up and away out of sight. A male child of less than seven years, however, might have been a tolerated exception.

#### MINERVA

Quite often, the protagonists of these stories are competitive women, none more so than the character of the Roman goddess Minerva, patroness of all crafts, especially weaving. It is in Ovid's extensive writing about Minerva that I think we might locate an argument for the influence of Ovid's mother on the development of his art—to see certain details as referential to the mother who provided his first years of instruction in the skills of reading and writing.

The argument would begin with the observation that Ovid's treatment of Minerva is distinctly possessive, possibly because his birthday, March 20, fell on the second day of *Quinquatrus*, the major Roman holiday dedicated to the goddess. Later in life, he also made the goddess his neighbor, in a manner of speaking. During the reign of the last king of Rome prior to the founding of the Roman Republic, an important temple had been built on the Capitoline Hill, honoring the triad of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva.<sup>36</sup> When Ovid became wealthy enough to establish a home in Rome, he did so in the vicinity of the Capitoline.<sup>37</sup>

Minerva was an ancient deity in the Roman pantheon, a goddess apparently derived from an Etruscan precursor. By the first century BCE in Roman culture, the identity of Minerva had been merged with the identity of a Greek counterpart, Pallas Athena, on the basis of her intellectual skill at making war—as distinguished from the mindless aggression represented by Ares, who was called Mars by the Romans. Ovid uses the names Minerva and Pallas Athena interchangeably in his poetry. Ovid's reference to the differences between his brother and himself suggest that he identified with the goddess's skillfulness in sublimating aggression to achieve an artful outcome.

In another of the poems of *Tristia*, he directly compares his poems with the goddess, because they are like "Pallas, who was born without any mother . . . they are my offspring who form my posterity."<sup>38</sup> As another telling point, Ovid's commentary on *Quinquatrus* in *Fasti*, his poem about ancient Roman religious holidays, doesn't mention

that his own birthday fell on the day *after* the birthday of Minerva. Indeed in *Fasti*, he ducks under her mantle in an undisguisedly personal argument that his own work belongs to the category of handicraft along with that of weavers, cobblers, carpenters, and other artful makers of useful objects. The passage is worth quoting in full.

The first day of *Quinquatrus* is bloodless and gladiators may not engage in swordplay:

*The reason? That's Minerva's birthday:  
To Pallas now pray, boys and delicate girls.  
Whoever appeases Pallas will be skilled in his craft.  
When Pallas has been appeased, girls will learn  
to card wool and unload full distaffs.  
She also teaches how to run the shuttle through the warp  
and she packs the loose work with the reed.  
Worship her, you who remove the spots from soiled clothing.  
Worship her, whoever prepares dye-vats for wool.  
No one will be a good cobbler against the will of Pallas,  
be he cleverer than Tycheus who made Ajax his shield.  
And be his hands a match for Epeus of the Trojan Horse,  
if Pallas is angry, a carpenter will be all thumbs.  
You too, who drive off diseases with Apollo's skill,  
bring the goddess a few gifts from your fees.  
Teachers, don't you despise her either, despite your lost income  
on this school holiday (she recruits new pupils),  
and you who employ the burin, or paint encaustic pictures,  
or make stones plastic with your skillful hands.  
The goddess of a thousand crafts, she is surely a goddess of poetry.  
If I deserve it, may she befriend my endeavors.<sup>39</sup>*

This catalogue insistently associates Minerva with the kind of art-making in which the mastery of technique is regarded as the greatest achievement. Technique must be learned from the elders. Moreover, Ovid often refers to the loom as “*tela*,” which is a synonym for “weapon”—another reason why the loom is an appropriate object of patronage for general-like Minerva. But consider also that weaving is associated by etymologies with Apollo’s stewardship of the bow and the lyre. According to linguistic scholars, “the word [lyre]

itself probably derives from the Indo-European word *kerkolyra*, which in turn originates from the verb *krekein*, to pass a shuttle across threads.<sup>40</sup> Thus the bow, the lyre, and the loom share the characteristic of requiring the management of strings or threads.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the word for a loom's sley (*pecten*) is also the word used for the plectrum, the lyre's plucking device.<sup>42</sup> Ovid was an avid pursuer of etymologies, and knew the subtle underground connections among the instruments of art: the bow, the lyre, the loom. They connect Apollo and Minerva as patrons of the art of poetry; and they also connect Minervan skills with the intimate domestic sphere of a house's women and its youngest children.

There is nothing stereotypically maternal in the symbolism of Minerva that appears in *Fasti*, but neither is the catalogue of her influences merely ornamental. In Ovid's volumes of love poems, the goddess does not take shape as an interesting figure. In *Tristia*, however, we find an image of her that is maternal. Crossing the Gulf of Corinth in a ship called the *Minerva*, heading toward Thrace on his way to exile, Ovid personifies the vessel and makes of her an indomitable and comforting protector:

*I have (may I always keep!) blonde Minerva's protection: my vessel  
bears her painted casque, borrows her name.  
Under sail she runs well with the slightest breeze; her rowers  
speed her along when there's need for oars.  
Not content with outstripping any companion vessel  
she'll somehow contrive to overhaul  
any craft that's set out before her: no storms will spring her timbers,  
she'll ride tall waves like a flat calm;  
first met at Cenchreae, harbour of Corinth; since then  
the faithful guide and companion of my flight,  
kept safe by the power of Pallas though countless hazards,  
across endless gale-swept seas. Safe still —  
I pray! may she thread vast Pontus's entrance-channel  
and enter the waters of the Getic shore.<sup>43</sup>*

The imprint of the mother in Ovid's Minervas and Pallas Athenas does not reside in her ability to protect him, however. The strongest evidence for the argument that Ovid's relationship to his mother

has been displaced into his representations of Minerva may be found in *Metamorphoses* Books V and VI, where she is not merely a deity but a character with a complex psychology, one that references the mother in striking ways.

The emergence of Minerva as an important character occurs midway in Book V. In the preceding pages, she has been a silent observer of her brother Perseus as he wreaks bloody havoc at his own wedding and amuses himself by turning the guests to stone by baring the head of Medusa to their helpless eyes. Here is the passage where Minerva reenters the story:

*"A rumor has come to my ears of a fountain that started to gush  
when the earth was struck by a hoof of the winged horse sprung from Medusa.  
Hence my arrival. I wanted to see this amazing spring,  
as I witnessed the horse's birth from the blood of his Gorgon mother.'  
Uránia answered: 'Whatever your reason for coming to visit us  
here in our home, kind goddess, we feel great pleasure.  
The story you heard is correct: the winged horse Pegasus started  
our spring'; and she took Minerva down to the sacred fountain.  
Slowly admiring the waters which Pegasus' hoof had created,  
the goddess surveyed the clusters of grand, primeval trees,  
mysterious caves and grass bejeweled with myriads of flowers.  
She declared that Memory's daughters were truly blessed in their dwelling  
as well as the arts they ruled. Then one of the sisters addressed her:  
'Minerva, goddess who fitly could join our musical company,  
had not your own fine qualities marked you out for yet greater  
tasks, your praise of our arts and our home is truly deserved.  
Ours is a happy lot, if we could but be sure of our safety. . .'<sup>44</sup>*

The Muse goes on to tell how the artfulness of these sisters had recently defeated the strategies of a violent rapist. A clever rhetorician, as we might expect, she tunes her song to the ears of her militant auditor very successfully. After listening to the account of their victory, the goddess wants more! She asks about a bird she hears calling in a human voice from the trees. Clearly, her attention has been captured, and another story—another battle story—is forthcoming. Then the teller interrupts herself to ask Athena slyly whether the Muses are boring her.



*“Such was the song which [the competition] sang as she played on her lyre.  
 We Muses were called upon to respond — but perhaps you haven’t  
 the time or the leisure to lend an ear to our own performance.’  
 ‘I’ve plenty of time,’ Minerva replied, as she took her seat  
 in the shade of the forest. “Now sing me your song from beginning to end.”<sup>45</sup>*

And so indeed does Pallas stay seated for the rest of this long book of the epic, hearing time and again how female artfulness has overcome myriad challenges to female interests. And the longest story of all is a mother-story, the tale of how the goddess Ceres rescued her daughter Persephone from the King of Hades.

Ovid has here shrewdly made Pallas Athena into a receptive listener to the specific tales the Muses choose to tell her, but he has not told us why; we are supposed to think about why this normally impatient goddess is so susceptible to the influence of her surroundings and to the hospitality she receives on Helicon. Here is an explanation: the Muses — who are given the epithet “daughters of Memory” by Ovid — were all fathered by Jupiter, as was Pallas Athena. But according to the tradition, Pallas herself knew no mother. She was conceived by Jupiter with the goddess Metis, “intelligence” in the Greek pantheon; but Jupiter, having received a warning that his next offspring would be a son who would overthrow him, swallowed Metis so that her pregnancy could not come to term. In the fullness of time, Jupiter experienced a great headache. His head split open, and out sprang Athena, fully grown and armed. And though she could claim no mothering, she had received through her maternal line a great endowment of intelligence.

It is one of the beautiful ironies of *Metamorphoses* that in Book V Athena becomes the recipient of tales told by daughters who are also her sisters by paternal lineage but in no other way; and that through these sisters is transmitted a female world Pallas does not share, one in which daughters speak of the conflicts and problem solving of which stories are made; and that the makers of these grand poems are those great patronesses of the arts, the Muses themselves.

When Pallas finally leaves Helicon, at the end of Book V, Ovid makes the lingering effects of the storytelling she has heard the substance of his transition:

*[Pallas] had lent her ears to such words  
 And had approved the songs of the [Muses] and their just anger.  
 Then to herself: 'To praise is not enough: let me be praised myself,  
 and not allow my godhead to be scorned without punishment.'  
 And she turned her mind to the fate of Maeonian Arachne  
 who, she had heard, did not yield to her in renown for skill  
 at working wool.<sup>46</sup>*

And thus opens one of the great stories about art-making in Western literature: the challenge of a goddess by a mortal artisan.

Arachne is a young, unmarried woman from the working class: her father is a dyer of wool; her mother is dead. The narrator tells us that Arachne was born into a family of *plebs*, or *plebians*, the Roman name for the class of citizens without political rights: Romans who can't vote or hold office. By this anachronism, Ovid breaks Arachne out of the frame of mythic time and places her in his own. It is only a glimpse, but a significant one. For "Arachne" is not merely a suspenseful and cautionary tale about the need for respecting the gods, it is about the standards by which art is evaluated, and it is a story—like Ovid's own—about how a talented young person from the provinces, an "outsider," trumps a socially disadvantaged class position through artistic mastery.<sup>47</sup> Arachne, too, lives for her art, and although she is humbly born she is ambitious to make a name for herself by her talent as a weaver. Indeed, so great is her skill at handling her materials at every stage of preparation and execution that even the nymphs—who are demigods—come from field and river just to watch her. The narrator tells us:

*The nymphs used often to leave their haunts, Mount Tmolus' vines  
 or the banks of the river Pactólus, to gaze on Arachne's amazing  
 artistry, equally eager to watch her handwork in progress  
 (her skill was so graceful) as much as to look at the finished article.  
 Perhaps she was forming the first round clumps from the wool in its crude state,  
 shaping the stuff in her fingers and steadily teasing the cloud-like  
 fleece into long soft threads. She might have been deftly applying  
 her thumb to the polished spindle. Or else they would watch her embroider  
 a picture. Whatever she did, you would know Minerva had taught her.<sup>48</sup>*

The undeniable genius of Arachne is signaled by the status of her audience here. The nymphs are the quality in this neighborhood. It seems relevant to note also that the nymphs are females. Their estimation of Arachne must be understood to represent informed and reliable witness, along with, perhaps, a helping of female solidarity.

Minerva has learned that Arachne not only denies owing her skill to anyone, including the goddess, but also boasts that she would gladly enter into a competition with her, if the goddess accepts the challenge. So Pallas decides to test Arachne. Disguised as a feeble old woman, she cleverly scolds Arachne both for disrespecting old age and for impiety toward the goddess:

*Minerva disguised herself as a hag with hoary locks  
and hobbled along with a stick to support her tottering frame.  
She spoke at once to Arachne. "Not all old age's effects,"  
she said, "are to be despised; experience comes with the years.  
So take a little advice from me: you should aim to be known  
as the best among humankind in the arts of working with the wool;  
but yield the palm to Minerva, and humbly crave her forgiveness  
for boasting so rashly. The goddess will surely forgive if you ask her."  
Arachne looked at her sullenly. . .*<sup>49</sup>

Her taunts reveal Arachne's specific vulnerabilities; a young woman who has no mother, an unmarried woman in a world where child-bearing was a woman's most significant obligation, and an artist from a small town in the provinces. Pallas tells the defiant girl that she should know her place (as a woman), and give credit where it is due (for her skill as an artist); but Arachne sneers, "Go tell that to your daughter-in-law, or your daughter, if you have one."<sup>50</sup> By her response to unsolicited advice, we note that Arachne holds herself angrily aloof from the obligations of womanhood as well as from the duty of honoring the gods. Now angered, Pallas reveals herself and accepts the girl's challenge.

Once the competition is underway, the two contestants are represented as equals. The narrator describes, at some length, the way that identical looms are set up and furnished with materials identical in delicacy and coloration; and how, "with robes hitched up to the girdle, / they moved their experienced arms, the labour lightened by

pleasure."<sup>51</sup> And when he tells us in great detail about the pictures they make, we find that they are equal in mastery, though very different in formal characteristics.

Pallas Athena weaves the story of how she won a competition with Neptune and became the patroness of Athens, in a contest witnessed by all the other Olympian gods. As Ovid describes the tapestry, it becomes clear that Pallas is a formalist whose imagery reflects the hierarchies of power among the deities. In the background, Jove, the tallest of the Olympian gods, stands in the middle of the grouping, with the other Olympians ranged to left and right. In the foreground stand the protagonists; Neptune on the left is balanced by Pallas on the right. He clefts a rock with his trident and seawater gushes forth; she strikes the ground with her spear and, in the very center of the picture, an olive tree springs up: the cause of her victory, mirrored in the amazed expressions on the faces of the gods. In each corner of the tapestry is a small depiction of mortals who had come to grief through transgression against the gods; the whole design is framed in olive branches.

In contrast, Arachne's design is based on an opposite aesthetic and an opposite point of view. Her forms swirl into and around each other, although each is cleanly shaped, and taken together, they convey a clear enough theme: the sexual transgressions of gods against mortals and against one another.

*Arachne's picture presented Európa seduced by Jove  
in the guise of a bull; the bull and the girl were convincingly real.  
The girl appeared to be looking back to the shore behind her,  
calling out to her friends she was leaving, afraid of the surging  
waves which threatened to touch her and nervously lifting her feet.  
Astérië also was shown, in the grip of a struggling eagle;  
Leda, meekly reclining under the wings of the swan.  
And there was Jove once again, but now in the form of a satyr,  
taking lovely Antiope, sowing the seeds of her twins  
.....  
All these scenes were given authentic settings, the persons  
their natural likeness. . . .<sup>52</sup>*

Jove, Neptune, Apollo, Bacchus, and Saturn are all depicted as deceiving seducers of goddesses as well as mortal women. Arachne's imagery is meant as a confident chastisement of these male deities, yet the whole tapestry is boundaried by a garland of twined flowers and ivy, its energetically fierce movement framed by a reminder that this is only a work of art.

Pallas looks at the splendid work of Arachne and flies into a rage. First she destroys the tapestry, then she begins beating the artist with her shuttle. Arachne, "too proud to endure it,"<sup>53</sup> attempts suicide. But Pallas prevents Arachne's death. Instead—a worse outcome, we are sure, from the point of view of Arachne—she shrinks Arachne's head into a tiny ball and swells her abdomen, rimming it with legs. The skillful fingers disappear entirely, along with the teeming brain. The genius-endowed mortal artist is changed into an instinct-driven arachnid from which mortals instinctively withdraw with disgust.

The goddess has proved that she is more powerful than Arachne. But she did not win the contest: "Not Pallas, not even the goddess of Envy herself could criticize weaving / like that."<sup>54</sup> It is irresistible to see in this story a defense of the mortal artist—indeed, an artist such as Ovid himself, one whose kind of storytelling in *Metamorphoses* is much closer to the artistry of Arachne than to that of Pallas Athene. Notably, several of the episodes depicted in Arachne's tapestry have been subjects in Ovid's epic up to that point, and that makes it possible to compare versions of the stories and to see that Arachne's highly artful depictions are expressions of an explicitly female outrage that is entirely absent in the same tales told earlier by the narrator of *Metamorphoses*.

Most remarkable of all is Ovid's representation of Pallas's reaction: she is unfair. In the contest, goddess and mortal are treated scrupulously as equals; they are given the same materials and they use the same techniques. But once she has been bested, Pallas breaks this rule. Her rage at Arachne is impulsive and exorbitant, rather than merely punitive. It arises from wounded pride and is not at all dignified. Why? Is it because she, being female herself, recognizes the justice in Arachne's outrage against the masculine gods, among whom Pallas stands as a kind of ambiguous exception? Is it because she, being motherless herself and knowing that Arachne is too, hoped to win Arachne over to accepting a daughter's position toward her?

Of course Arachne too is at fault. Arachne claims she has had no instruction, but this cannot be true, for she has grown up in a community of dyers who work in a most precious commodity; the extraction from murex shells of the purple dye used to signify social rank in Rome. This is a highly specialized craft, of which her father is a practitioner. She cannot have grown up in this environment without learning the required skills. And although Arachne's mother is dead, somebody began inducting Arachne into this female activity at an early age. This somebody had to be female, although Arachne does not acknowledge her, or them.

In what ways can this story be understood as an outlet in Ovid's work—possibly, probably, an unconscious outlet—for his relationship with his mother? No one will ever know anything at all about Ovid's relationship to his mother, but the presence in his poems of principal characters who are motherless suggests an interest in the roles that mothers—present or absent—play in shaping peoples' lives. We might also observe closely the way Ovid treats a complex of representations in his art. That complex includes, first, powerful female figures who act in a range of contradictory, even fickle, but realistic ways; second, major stories in which the social world is almost entirely female; and third, the presence of realistic female artists in Ovid's work. Aside from the Muses, all of the female artists in *Metamorphoses* are weavers, and in all of the stories that significantly figure weaving, the weavers are competitive storytellers: the daughters of Minyas, as we have seen; the story of Arachne, as we have seen. There is one other important example that we have not yet seen. This is the most brutally violent tale in all of *Metamorphoses*, the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela.

King Tereus of Thrace is the husband of Procne, who is the daughter of Pandion, the King of Athens. Procne bore Tereus a son, Itys. But on a visit to the court of Pandion, five years after his marriage to Procne, Tereus conceives a mighty lust for Pandion's younger daughter, Philomela. He takes her back to Thrace with him, ostensibly on a visit to her beloved sister; but when an occasion presents itself, he savagely rapes Philomela. She curses his treachery with all her might; to stop her voice Tereus cuts off her tongue, then rapes her again and again. He abandons her in a little hut, securely guarded, then returns to Procne with a sad story about how Philomela had died on

the trip to Thrace. Meanwhile, Philomela sets up a loom that is at hand in the house where she is held captive, and in purple thread weaves into the white warp a depiction of Tereus's crime. One commentator notes that the Ovid manuscripts contain the word "*Carmen*," meaning "song," for the textile Philomela wove. He then adds, "but Philomela's work was weaving, not poetry,"<sup>55</sup> and so editors substituted the word *notas*, which in most translations is rendered as "signs." But, as we recall, "*carmen perpetuum*" is Ovid's term for *Metamorphoses*, the epic he is "weaving," and the use of that term in the story of Philomela is almost certainly meant to chime in the reader's mind, signifying that a song can be considered a kind of writing, and thus can be woven as well as sung.

Philomela rolls and ties the tapestry and gives it to her one attendant, an old woman, with instructions to present it to queen Procne. The old woman arouses no suspicion when she carries the tapestry past Philomela's guards, or when she puts it directly into Procne's hands: how can an old woman be dangerous? Procne reads the tapestry and immediately understands it. Enraged and bent on punishing Tereus, she conceals her intentions in order to first rescue Philomela, which she does, under the cover of participating in a Bacchic ritual. Procne brings her sister back to the home she shares with Tereus. Then, in a frenzy, Procne casts about for a cruel form of revenge. When little Itys enters her chamber seeking to embrace her, she makes up her mind what to do. With Philomela's assistance, Procne murders her son, cuts him into pieces, and cooks him. After Tereus eats the stew, the sisters reveal their crime, and Tereus undertakes a violent reaction against them. But Ovid's narrator does not permit consummation of another cycle of vengeance. He calmly interrupts the action with three metamorphoses. The attacking Tereus becomes a hoopoe, the fleeing Procne becomes the swallow who nests in the eaves of houses, and Philomela becomes the nightingale who conceals herself in the darkness of the wood and sings only at night.

In *Metamorphoses*, then, weaving is sometimes used as a metaphor for song-making or storytelling; and it is the way that female characters assume the identity of artists of whom Pallas Athena is the patroness. She does not appear in the tale of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, it is true; but she resides in the culture of the readers Ovid was addressing and also in the body of art that Ovid was producing at the time,

where the metaphor of weaving is the vehicle by which he identifies the female artist.

But the narrator in *Metamorphoses* also has an overtly unusual relationship to the Minerva he has created as a character in his epic. Whenever Minerva appears in *Metamorphoses*, she is much more interesting than is necessary to the role she plays. She is large, majestic, beautiful, willful, and she has a penchant for inflicting unfair punishment—like all of the gods. Unlike the other gods in *Metamorphoses*, though, she also behaves mysteriously at times. We cannot answer the questions her actions instigate in Books V and VI: Why does she stand silent and nonparticipating at a wedding where her brother enacts a savage slaughter? Why does she flee that place so deliberately to investigate the fountain of Helicon? What emotions trigger her decision to seat herself under a tree, attentive to the Muses' stories of motherly love and sisterly collaboration against scheming men? Later, why does she pick a fight with Arachne, over whom she has an unfair advantage, and lose her temper when she cannot win the contest she insists on? The poem does not answer such questions, but their tantalizing existence leave us with a feeling for the enigma Pallas represents to the narrator, an enigma like that felt by the grown-up child remembering a woman adored, admired, and feared. I venture to guess that the goddess embodies Ovid's relationship to his first teacher, who, while working at her loom, set him on the path of the kind of storytelling so brilliantly on display in *Metamorphoses*, the craft of thumbing the turning threads into one endless strand.

#### NOTES

1. Details about the birthing process in this invented scene are drawn from the writings of "Soranus of Ephesus," a medical practitioner born in the second half of the first century CE and practicing medicine in Rome at the time that Trajan (CE 98–117) and Hadrian (CE 117–138) were emperors. We can extrapolate from Soranus's writings that midwifery was highly valued at the time, and its best practitioners were regarded as professionals. Ovid had been dead for a century when Soranus produced *Gynaecology*. But Soranus's advice about choosing a midwife, his instructions regarding the safe delivery of a baby, and his discussion of postnatal care of baby and mother are evidently based on close observation and careful



consideration of alternative methods. So while it is not possible to discover the exact practices that prevailed in Ovid's home on the night of his birth, it is possible to make some educated guesses. Soranus, *Soranus Gynaecology*, trans. and ed. Owsei Temkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 69–114.

2. In *Tristia*, Ovid writes, "*Lucifer amborum natalibus affuit idem*," which is translated in the Loeb Classical Library edition as "the same day-star beheld the birth of us both" (4.10.11). Ovid, *Tristia. Ex Ponto*, trans. A. L. Wheeler, ed. G. P. Goold (Loeb Classical Library, 1924).
3. Denis Feeney notes that at the opening of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid uses the phrase "*carmen perpetuum*" to describe the genre of his poem: not epic, but "a poem that has been drawn out the way a thread is drawn out in spinning." Ovid is situating his poem in an ongoing discussion of what constitutes modernity in the poetry of his day. Denis Feeney, "Introduction," in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), xxiii–xxiv.
4. Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence assert that "many upper-class girls were educated in literature and philosophy as well as more traditional skills such as weaving and managing a household, but," they acknowledge, "there is very little direct evidence for this." Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2002), 52. They cite E. A. Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta* (London: Routledge, 1999).
5. H. I. Marrou notes that the fundamental aim of the Roman education was to inculcate "respect for the old customs—the *mos maiorum*—and to open the eyes of the young to these, to get them to respect them unquestioningly as the ideal, as the standard for all their actions and all their thoughts, was the educator's main task. . . . In Rome it was not a slave but the mother herself who brought up her child . . . The mother's influence lasted a lifetime." H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 312–13.
6. Florence Dupont, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 110.
7. Soranus, *Gynaecology*, 114.
8. Descriptions of bathing and swaddling are paraphrased from Soranus, *Gynaecology*, 82–87.
9. Soranus, *Gynaecology*, 93.
10. *Ibid.*, 94.
11. John R. Clarke, *Houses of Roman Italy, 100 BC–AD 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 10.
12. Harlow and Laurence, *Growing Up*, 40.
13. The *cognomen* was the third name given the newborn, referring to the family branch, and was often utilized as a nickname. One historian observes that the *nomen* Ovidius was characteristic of the Paclignian

region and the *cognomen* Naso was genuinely Latin. “How long the family had made use of a *cognomen* is unknown—probably not long, for in the conservative mountain districts, two names, not three, were the rule in Ovid’s time.” A. L. Wheeler, “Topics from the Life of Ovid,” *American Journal of Philology* 46 (1925): 3.

14. Far more important to the Romans than the birthday of a child, the *dies lustricus*—the day when the baby was to be named—was a joyous occasion. The custom of handing down names to children was of great importance to Romans and their families. On the day of *dies lustricus*, *crepundia*—tiny metal trinkets—were strung around the baby’s neck by the guests. The clinking noise they made amused the child, similar to a rattle. In addition, on this day the child was given a *bullā*—an elaborate locket made of gold (for the wealthy) or leather (for the poor). It contained charms to ward off the power of evil *numina* (spirits) and was presented to the child on the day of birth. A boy removed his *bullā* only after he received his *togā virilis*, which signified his Roman citizenship. A girl only removed hers on her wedding day. See <http://library.thinkquest.org/26602/ceremonies.htm>.
15. Ovid, *Tristia* 4.10.9–14, in *The Poems of Exile: Tristia and the Black Sea Letters*, trans. Peter Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
16. “A child’s birth was evidently recorded not only by the day but by the hour, this being necessary for any astrological calculation concerning its nativity. A vast number of surviving tombstones record the length of the life by years, days, and, finally, hours.” J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 90.
17. In Ovid’s case, those consuls were the unlucky Hirtius and Vibius Pansa, casualties of the civil war that followed Julius Caesar’s assassination the year before Ovid’s birth (Caesar having been assassinated only five days before Ovid’s brother was born). Hirtius and Pansa died after the Battle of Mutina in which Antony had been defeated. See Peter Green’s introduction in Ovid, *The Erotic Poems*, trans. Peter Green (Penguin Classics, 1983), 18.
18. There are historical as well as metaphorical reasons for calling this pair of birthdays the “same.” Historically, this periodicity became possible with the reform of the Roman calendar by Julius Caesar in 45 BCE. Prior to that, notes the classicist Stephen Hinds, “no two successive instances of a named day in March (or any other month) could meaningfully be said to have dawned at Rome ‘on the same day’—in terms, that is, of strict annual recurrence. Thanks to a massive intercalation of extra days in 46 BCE, to make up for generations of misalignment between the solar and lunar time-frames, two brothers born on the ‘same’ day in March 46 and March 45 BCE would actually have entered the world more than 400 days apart.” See Stephen Hinds, “Dislocations of Ovidian Time,” in *La représentation du temps dans la poésie augustéenne*, ed. Jürgen Paul Schwindt (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2005), 221.

19. Karl J. Holkeskamo, "Under Roman Roofs: Family, House and Household," in *Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*, ed. Harriet Flower (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 126.
20. Ovid, *Tristia* 4.10.14-20, trans. Green.
21. An Oxonian, "Inferior Deities Attending Mankind from Their Birth to Their Decease," in his *Thaumaturgia, or Elucidations of the Marvellous*, first published in 1835, available as an ebook at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10088/10088-8.txt>.
22. Green, note to *Amores* in *Erotic Poems*, 2.16.
23. In her book *As the Romans Did*, Jo-Ann Shelton writes: "For the upper classes, however, who could easily afford to buy meat, hunting was a leisure activity, indulged in during a visit to one's country estate. Landowners probably invited friends to stay over for a few days to enjoy hunting parties. Some hunting involved the pursuit of the hunted animal either by horseback or on foot. In other cases, the hunters did not track down their quarry but simply waited in one spot while beaters with dogs drove the animals into nets. Once the animals were ensnared, the 'hunters' stabbed them and then claimed to have made a kill." She goes on to observe in a footnote that "many Romans apparently enjoyed the kill, and watching the kill, more than the pursuit." See Jo-Ann Sheldon, *As the Romans Did* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 321.
24. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* II, 401-10, trans. Raeburn.
25. "When we come to examine the content of this old system of education, we find, in the first place, a moral ideal; the essential thing was the development of the child's or the young man's conscience, the inculcation of a rigid system of moral values, reliable reflexes, a particular way of life." Marrou, *History of Education*, 319.
26. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* II, 39-46, trans. Raeburn.
27. Apollo's gesture recalls that of Hector removing his helmet (in *The Iliad*) in order not to frighten his baby son as he bids goodbye before going forth to battle Achilles.
28. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 329-32, 381-85, trans. Raeburn.
29. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I, 569-75, trans. Raeburn.
30. Harlow and Laurence, *Growing Up*, 61-63. They cite Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
31. A definition based on classical sources by William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, (London: John Murray, 1875) can be found at [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/I/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA\\*/Ius.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/I/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Ius.html). Catullus wrote a description of spinning the wool in his poem about the marriage of Peleus and Thetis: "Now when the gods, relaxed, took ease upon the ivory-footed / couches and ate a feast from banquet tables, / then came the fates uttering prophecies, bodies shaken with / age yet

- swung in perfect rhythm / of what they sang. All, all in white but for a scarlet hem / that flowed round thin and yellow with age ankles, / all with red bands (blood against snow) bound round the hair. / Never at rest the distaff, gathering wool spins in the left / hand the right selecting / strands on five raised fingers, thumb plunging downward, in / measure to the speed / threats cut by quick teeth and ends of thread and lint dry on the lips." Catullus, "At the Wedding of Peleus and Thetis (Catullus 64)," in *The Poems of Catullus*, trans. Horace Gregory (New York: Covici-Friede, 1931), 211.
32. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV, 32–44, trans. Raeburn.
  33. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV, 32, 54, trans. Raeburn.
  34. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV, 279, trans. D. E. Hill (Warminster, UK: Aris & Philips, 1985).
  35. *Ibid.*, lines 271–73.
  36. The temple was built under the reign of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, the last king of Rome prior to the establishment of the Roman Republic. Georges Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion With an Appendix on the Religion of the Etruscans*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 280–310.
  37. Ovid, *Tristia* 1.3.27–30.
  38. Ovid, *Tristia* 3.14, lines 13ff, trans. Wheeler.
  39. Ovid, *Fasti* III, 809–34, in *Ovid's Fasti: Roman Holidays*, trans. Betty Nagle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
  40. Martha Maas and Jane McIntosh Snyder, *Stringed Instruments of Ancient Greece* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 34.
  41. Frederick Ahl, *Metaformations. Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 226. *Editor's note: Middlebrook had planned to acknowledge "Chen" for calling attention to this source. We regret that we do not have fuller information.*
  42. *Ibid.*
  43. Ovid, *Tristia* 1.10.1–14, trans. Green.
  44. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* V, 256–72, trans. Raeburn.
  45. *Ibid.*, lines 332–35.
  46. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI, 1–6, trans. Hill.
  47. For other contemporary meditations on the myth of Arachne, see A. S. Byatt, "Arachne," in *Ovid Metamorphosed*, ed. Philip Terry (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 131–57; and Italo Calvino, "Ovid and Universal Contiguity," in *The Literature Machine*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Pan-Picador/Secker & Warburg, 1989), 146–61.
  48. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI, 14–23, trans. Raeburn.
  49. *Ibid.*, lines 26–40.

50. *Ibid.*, lines 43–44.

51. *Ibid.*, lines 59–60.

52. *Ibid.*, lines 103–22.

53. *Ibid.*, line 133.

54. *Ibid.*, lines 128–29.

55. D.E. Hill, note to line 582 in his translation of *Metamorphoses* VI, vol. 2, p. 189.