THE FACES OF LOVE IN OVID’S METAMORPHOSES

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If, after reading the *Metamorphoses* from cover to cover, one were set the unprofitable exercise of conveying in one sentence the nature of the loves depicted in that work, a tempting generalisation might be that they are conceived at first sight, strongly physical in character, and closely allied with violence should immediate gratification be denied. Indeed, Neptune’s reaction on first glimpsing Coronis

\[
uidit et incaluit pelagi deus; utque precando
tempora cum blandis absumpsit inania uerbis,
uim parat et sequitur
\]

(2. 574-6)

embodies and succinctly states the theme of a number of tales in the *Metamorphoses*. This paper will examine the variety in Ovid’s depiction of love both within and outside the pattern suggested above, but the validity of that pattern must first be established with a few of the many illustrations available.

The instantaneous flaring up of love is a regular event, be the lover a god or mortal, male or female. Thus, Jupiter’s feelings on seeing Callisto are simply an elaboration of *uidit et incaluit*:

\[
in uirgine Nonacrina
haust, et accepti caluere sub ossibus ignes (2; 409-10).\]

And the sight of Andromeda has a similar effect on his son Perseus, with the humorous touch added that emotion almost caused him to forget to fly:

\[
trahit inscius ignes
et stupet et uisae correptus imagine formae
paene suas quatre est oblitus in aere pennas (4. 675-7).\]

Even two gods may conceive a passion simultaneously at first sight:

\[
uidere hanc pariter, pariter traxere calorem (11. 305),\]

the only difference between the two being that, while Mercury raped Chione immediately, Apollo restrained himself until nightfall. Ovid’s description of Pluto’s abduction of Proserpina specifically highlights the speed of events:

\[
paene simul uisa est dilectaque raptaque Diti:
usque adeo est properatus amor (5. 395-6).\]

When the humble Iphis sees Anaxarete, or the more exalted Tereus Philomela, their reactions are similar:

\[
cf. uiderat et totis perceperat ossibus aestum (14. 700)\]

and

\[
exarsit conspecta uirgine Tereus (6. 455).\]

And love at first sight is felt alike by the gentle Echo and by the nymphomaniac Salmacis, but Ovid’s choice of words underlines the possessive, dominating
nature of the latter’s desire:
cf.  
uidit et incaluit (3. 371) 

and  
puerum uidit uisumque optuit habere (4. 316).

The standard equation of love with fire is elaborated by a number of similes, which contain just enough variety to avoid tedium. Indeed, the resemblance is seldom as marked as in 1. 492-5 and 6. 455-7, describing the first onset of love in Apollo and Tereus respectively:
cf.  
uterque leues stipulae demptis adolentur aristis,  
ut facibus saepes ardent, quas forte uiator  
uel nimis admouit uel iam sub luce reliquit,  
sic deus in flammas abit...  

and  
non secus exarsit conspecta urigine Tereus,  
quam si quis canis ignem supponat aristis  
aut frondem positasque cremet faenilibus herbas.

The application of a rural simile, including the unusual technical term faenilia, to Tereus is most startling. But it is, unfortunately, impossible to be sure whether Ovid was unconsciously more or less repeating himself or whether he was, through deliberate association, seeking to point the contrast between his playful Apollo and Daphne narrative and the sombre, grotesque tale of Tereus and Philomela. The effect of sudden love on the air-borne Mercury is amplified in a striking and original way by

non secus exarsit, quam cum Balearica plumbum  
funda iacit: uolat illud et incandescit eundo  
et, quos non habuit, sub nubibus inuenit ignes (2. 727-9),  
an obviously felicitous comparison, which recurs in a very different context at 14. 825-6. Ovid was apparently fascinated by the notion, common in antiquity, of lead missiles glowing and melting through their own speed. It is the impact of Narcissus’ nearness on Echo that receives stress through  
quoque magis sequitur, flamma propriore calescit,  
non aliter quam cum summis circumlita taedis  
admotas rapiunt uiuacia sulphura flammas (3. 372-4).  
Just as this simile underlines Echo’s susceptibility, her role as the victim of a one-sided love, so the reader is helped to visualise Salmacis’ lustful, peering eyes by the comparison marking the intensification of her desire which resulted from her first view of Hermaphroditus’ nakedness:

flagrant quoque lumina nymphae,  
non aliter quam cum puro nitidissimus orbe
opposita speculi referitur imagine Phoebus (4. 347-9).

But in the case of Medea it is the re-kindling of a waning love that is illustrated by

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{utque solet uentis alimenta adsumere, quaeque} \\
&\text{parua sub inducta latuit scintilla fauilla,} \\
&\text{crescere et in ueteres agitata resurgere uires,} \\
&\text{sic iam lentus amor}. \ldots (7. 79-82),
\end{align*}
\]

the quick rhythm of line 81 suggesting obliquely the speed with which Medea’s feelings return as soon as Jason reappears.

The recurrent fire motif, with its occasional elaboration by means of similes, is a clear indication that the characters of the Metamorphoses feel their passions strongly, and it is hardly surprising that those passions are frequently translated into violent physical acts. Yet Ovid seems almost studiously to avoid detailed descriptions of the many rapes enacted in his narrative. The reader’s attention is shifted in a number of different directions. However, one of the most remarkable and specific rape scenes is the one involving Salmacis and Hermaphroditus. The case is doubly unusual also in that woman is the aggressor and that the rape merges with the transformation. Salmacis’ desperate attempt at physical union

\[
\begin{align*}
pugnamentemque tenet luctantiaque oscula carpit. \\
subiectatque manus inuitaque pectora tangit et nunc hac iuueni, nunc circumfunditur illac; \\
denique nitentem contra elabique uolentem implicat (4. 358-62)
\end{align*}
\]

gives rise to a series of three similes:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{ut serpens quam regia sustinet ales} \\
&\text{sublimemque rapit; pendens caput illa pedesque alligat et cauda spatiantes implicat alas;} \\
&\text{utue solent hederae longos intexere truncos,} \\
&\text{utue sub aequoribus deprensum polypus hostem continet, ex omni dimissis parte flagellis (4. 362-7).}
\end{align*}
\]

In the first simile Ovid has eliminated some of the colourful detail from his apparent model Aen. 11. 751-6, and he concentrates on the entwining of bodies in a violent struggle. A gentler note is introduced with the brief central simile, which seems to look ahead to 4. 375-6. Here the coalescence of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus is related to the process of grafting. While the polyp simile is more like that of the eagle above, it emphasises the firmness of Salmacis’ hold, with no longer any suggestion of a violent struggle. And the re-introduction of a watery setting within the simile makes the transition back to the main narrative a particularly smooth one.

Analysis of Ovid’s other rape scenes suggests far less concentration on the
physical violence involved in the actual deed. Thus Ovid contents himself with a mere statement of the initial rape of Philomela by Tereus (6. 524-5) and of the further rapes after the cutting out of her tongue (6. 561-2), the emphasis being rather on Tereus' eager anticipation (6. 513-8). Philomela's mounting anxiety before the act (6. 522-3) and her helplessness, shame and revulsion afterwards (6. 527-48 and 605-9). What grotesque physical description there is in this episode centres round the excision of Philomela's tongue (6. 556-60) and the balancing sketch of the mutilation of Itys' body (6. 643-6). The real interest is of a psychological nature, with the reader able to trace the process by which Philomela and Procne were reduced to Tereus' own level of bestiality.

Violence in the Apollo and Daphne story is more or less confined to the simile of the hound and the hare (1. 533-8), which foreshadows Daphne's avoidance of rape rather than an actual rape. The rest of the scene is, if anything, gentle and humorous in tone, with Apollo's fond imaginings (1. 497-502), his solicitude lest Daphne hurt herself (1. 508-11), and alluring sketches of her (1. 477; 527-30). And the story ends happily with Apollo's resigned acceptance of her non-sexual function (1. 557-65). By way of contrast rapes are successfully perpetrated by Jupiter. There is a succinct statement of this in the case of Io:

\textit{tenuitque fugam rapuitque pudorem} (1. 600),

the main point of the story being the aftermath, namely Io's life as a heifer. Even with Callisto there is a limit to the violence necessary because of Jupiter's comparatively subtle beginning. Disguised as Diana, he started with quasi-innocent physical endearments, and it was only after he had betrayed himself with excess of zeal that the inevitable struggle ensued (2. 434-6). Here Ovid gives no details and having stated simply that Jupiter triumphant returned to heaven (2. 437), he devotes the rest of the story to Callisto's feelings of revulsion, her guilt and her sufferings even as a bear. Jupiter's abduction of Europa serves mainly to bring book 2 to a memorable close. Although her fear is mentioned (2. 873), the reader is apt to concentrate on purely visual impressions - Europa offering the bull flowers (2. 861), its frolicsome response (2. 862-5), her garments fluttering in the breeze (2. 875). In Ovid's treatment of Pluto's abduction of Proserpina there are particularly delicate touches. We are deflected utterly from her fear and distress (5. 396) by thoughts of her girlish innocence, which is manifest first in the delightful vignette of her gathering flowers (5. 391-4), and then in her sorrow at losing them through Pluto's precipitancy (5. 398-401). (I consider it unlikely that Ovid intended to invest the flowers with any symbolic meaning.) And even where violence is stressed and elaborated, as with Boreas (6. 685-701), it is presented as a general characteristic rather than being gruesomely enacted. For all Orithyia's fear and trembling (6. 706) she re-appears in a family setting, apparently none the worse for her experience (6. 711-12). With obvious relish Ovid traces the various changes of shape by which Thetis long managed to thwart Peleus' attempts to rape her, yet the final act of
coition is portrayed as a more or less voluntary one after Thetis has realised that Peleus is favoured by some deity (11. 238-65). And although the fate of Leucothoe, virtuously spinning, is technically rape (*uim passa... est*), Ovid does mitigate the situation by representing her as being swept off her feet by the Sun’s radiance and dropping her protests in good time (4. 233). Finally, it is ironic that one of the most sustained and elaborate ‘rape’ narratives, the chase of Arethusa by Alpheus (5. 597-641), which is ostensibly so replete with strong emotion and vigorous exertion, culminates in Arethusa’s remaining intact.

So far, then, there appears to be consistency in Ovid’s depiction of passions conceived instantaneously and having a strong physical basis. Although a measure of force is usually necessary for those passions to be gratified, there is a general absence of gruesome rape scenes. Even within these limits Ovid seeks to avoid monotony by varied emphases and methods of presentation. What remains to be shown is that this variety extends, also, to the nature of the loves portrayed and that Ovid has painstakingly given each its own memorable stamp.

Very different indeed from the mature and cynical philanderers are Pyramus and Thisbe, whose young love is sufficiently aware to need full consummation (4. 74) but, through circumstances, unfulfilled even to the extent of kissing. With supreme delicacy Ovid has composed a tale of wistful frustration — from the lovers’ kissing each side of the dividing wall (4. 79-80) to Pyramus’ kissing Thisbe’s cloak when he thinks her dead (4. 117), and her kissing him at the moment of his death (4. 141). Tragedy befell these lovers, who had been artificially separated, because neither could face life without the other. The only union they were destined to have was a symbolic one, for their blood was mingled together on the sword with which they ended their lives (4. 163) and their ashes found rest in a single urn (4. 166). A more profound tale is that of Cephalus and Procris, whose conjugal love was so overwhelming as to make each pathologically suspicious of the other, whose love, paradoxically, led to a series of unloving acts and, in the end, to the death of Procris. With Cephalus we are able to feel the simple joys of love which must be communicated (7. 708-10; 797-803), diffidence about a partner’s fidelity which springs from one’s own sense of guilt (7. 715-721), the spell of a loved one’s beauty (7. 730-3). For the reader who follows the maze of misunderstandings and forgiveness flowing from deep love there may be comfort in Procris’ apparent realisation as she expires in her husband’s arms that he did, after all, prefer her to all other women (7. 859-62), but Cephalus, living on with his burden of guilt and sorrow, remains one of a handful of Ovidian characters who command real sympathy.

From the poignancy of love cut short by death one may pass to a couple of ridiculous wooings, related in contrasting fashions and with a detachment happily shelved in the two stories outlined immediately above. The episode of Polyphemus’ pursuit of Galatea’s favours is an Ovidian *tour de force*, which may be appreciated fully only alongside Theocritus’ Polyphemus idylls (11 and 6).
The pathetic, comic and moderately grotesque features of the Theocritean Cyclops are exaggerated to absurdity by Ovid. What we are offered in the *Metamorphoses* is, for once, broad farce. We find that Polyphemus' self-beautification for Galatea consists of combing his hair with a rake and trimming his beard with a scythe (13. 765-6). The comparisons of *Id.* 11. 20-1 are extended ludicrously to nineteen lines (13. 789-807), in which the speaker's flagging inspiration is cruelly shown up by the poet's gift for varied arrangement. In Ovid, Polyphemus' claims of wealth and generosity in giving presents studiously go one better than they do in Theocritus (cf. *Id.* 11. 34-7; 40-1 and *Met.* 13. 810-37), and he even makes a virtue of his own deformity (cf. *Id.* 6. 34-8 and *Met.* 13. 840-53). His threats to dismember Acis, and especially the suggestion that Galatea mate with the scattered limbs (13. 865-6), are hardly likely to endear him to her. Where the parody extends also to the serious and sombre second eclogue of that revered Augustan, Vergil, one may sense an iconoclastic Ovidian chuckle (cf. *Ecl.* 2. 52-3; 40-2; 25-6 and *Met.* 13. 817-20; 831-7; 840-1 resp.). To gain a further notion of Ovid's virtuosity and variety of treatment one should compare the self-wooing of Narcissus, which is, also, futile, ridiculous and lacking in true pathos. But here Ovid introduces not farce or literary parody, but a series of clever verbal conceits to explore the implications and frustrations, e.g.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{et placet et uideo; sed quod uideoque placetque,} \\
&\text{non tamen inuenio (3. 446-7),}
\end{align*}
\]

or

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{inopem me copia fecit (3. 466),}
\end{align*}
\]

or

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{nunc duo concordes anima moriemur in una (4. 473).}
\end{align*}
\]

Polyphemus and Narcissus lacked the consummation which was granted, against great odds, to Pygmalion with his statue, and to Iphis with Ianthe. The reader is able to share intimately the thoughts and feelings of Pygmalion, the artist whose view of womanhood became warped through his disgust at the immorality of the Propoetides and who, with an idealist's inability to accept imperfection, created the woman of his dreams in ivory. Far from treating the episode in an obscene way, like his sources, Ovid traces Pygmalion's immersion deeper and deeper into a world of fantasy—his refusal to accept that it is a mere statue that he loves (10. 254-5), his imagining that his kisses are returned (10. 256), his fears lest bruises be caused by his caresses (10. 258). And his thoughtful gifts and attentions, recalling those of an elegiac lover, are described by Ovid with extreme delicacy and a wealth of colourful detail which admirably conveys Pygmalion's tender solicitude (10. 259-69). Real sympathy is felt a little later when he falters in asking Venus for marriage with the woman of his creation:
The rest of the story shows the translation of Pygmalion's fantasy into reality—how, when he repeats his caresses, he does actually feel the softness previously only imagined (10. 281-4), how his earlier confident self-deception turns to temporary disbelief and diffidence (10. 287-8). The portrayal of the statue coming to life deepens in significance because one views it through Pygmalion's eyes and with a share of his feelings, and the wax simile (10. 284-6) is particularly apt in that, as well as illustrating the process of coming to life, it recalls the original moulding of the statue. The unique fairy tale quality of the girl's awakening to life and to her lover at the same time will not be lost on any reader:

oral et tandem

_oraque tandem_

_ore suo non falsa premit, dataque oscula uirgo_

_sensit et erubuit timidumque ad lumina lumen_

_attollens pariter cum caelo uidit amantem_ (10. 291-4).

In so delicate a narrative Ovid refrains from a description of sexual intercourse. Rather, just when the statue is coming to life, he uses for Pygmalion the anticipatory periphrasis _Paphius...heros_ (10. 290), the offspring of the union being Paphos.

In treating another seemingly impossible love which was granted consummation by a goddess, namely the love of Iphis and Ianthe, Ovid is his more usual detached and ironic self, introducing many rhetorical conceits. The story centres round Iphis' 'Lesbian' feelings for Ianthe, to whom she has been betrothed by her father, and one must suspend one's disbelief that he should so conveniently have given her a name common to boys and girls, and that he should have remained unaware of her true sex for thirteen years. There is a contrast between Ianthe's hopeful feelings and Iphis' despair as the day of the marriage approaches and she seems likely to be revealed as a girl. Her plight is exposed mainly through her long soliloquy, which Ovid uses as a vehicle for his own wit rather than to create genuine pathos. This is especially apparent in her naive assumption that 'Lesbian' passions must be unheard of (9. 727-30). The rhetorical sequence comparing the mating habits of animals with her own desire culminates in the wild paradox that even Pasiphaë was more normal:

_ taurum dilexit filia Solis,

_femina nempe marem_ (9. 736-7).

In her attempts to cure herself of her love Iphis lapses deep into self-deception. Her statement _spes est, quae capiat, spes est, quae pascat amorem_ (9. 749) is a direct contradiction of Ovid's 'editorial' comment _Iphis amat, qua posse frui desperat, et auget/hoc ipsum flammas_ (9. 724-5). And can one not detect Ovid the elegiac poet humorously and incongruously intruding in Iphis' list of the obstacles that do not face her (9. 750-2)? Rhetorical conceits are multiplied in
An element of irony underlies Iphis' belief that human ingenuity cannot bring about a change of sex (9. 741-4), since we know that her sex was changed, but by divine agency. And it is part of Ovidian wit as well as delicacy to suppress all mention of the chief manifestation of that change but scrupulously to list the peripheral ones, such as longer strides, a darker complexion, increased strength, sharper features and shorter hair (9. 787-90). Ovid's more erudite readers would have remembered the concentration of his source, Nicander, on the brand new genitals.

Finally, Ovid's handling of two incestuous passions will be considered. The slightly censorious tone with which he introduces the story of Byblis (9. 454-6) soon gives way to a sympathetic presentation of the various stages of her self-deception about her real feelings towards her brother Caunus. Her initial behaviour involves only common physical endearments, but gradually she dresses up especially to attract him and envies more beautiful girls. Still she does not realise the illicit nature of her feelings, even though she refers to him as 'dominus' and would prefer him to call her 'Byblis' rather than 'sister' (9. 457-67). Her real erotic fantasies are enacted in her sleep (9. 469-71), and her inner struggle is conveyed by means of a long soliloquy. She begins with highly proper sentiments and resistance to the inclination she now recognises, and since she does not at this stage contemplate acting on it, she hastily comforts herself with sweet recollections of her nocturnal imaginings (9. 474-86). Even when she reverts to real life, her idyllic sketch of marriage with Caunus is based on the premise that there be no consanguinity. Her thought that he is in fact her brother causes her to turn from fantasy to lament (9. 487-94). After wondering whether dreams have any weight, Byblis lists gods who have committed incest, only to dismiss the idea that human conduct could be based on that of the gods. But even the reflection that death would be preferable to the shame that obsesses her, causes her to imagine the kisses that Caunus would give her dead body, and instinctively she starts imagining again the enjoyment such kisses would give her in life (9. 495-506). Although she reacts to the recollection that Aeolus' children committed incest, by a further struggle to curb her inclination, Byblis decides to write to Caunus confessing her love. She makes the decision on the basis of the interesting rationalisation that she is justified since she might have reacted favourably had Caunus taken the initiative (9. 507-16). What began as a sympathetic portrayal not lacking in psychological verisimilitude is to a certain extent debased by such conceits in the text of Byblis' letter as

*sed quae, cum sit tibi iunctissima, iunctior esse expetit* (9. 549-50).
Be that as it may, her descent into utter shamelessness is manifest. Her change of standards is seen in the fact that whereas previously she had acknowledged a difference in the behaviour permissible to gods and mortals, she now uses divine incest as an argument in her favour (cf. 9. 500-1 and 554-5). Consanguinity is now proposed as an actual screen for incest (9. 558). After Caunus' horrified reaction, Byblis deceives herself into thinking that only her strategy has been at fault and that she should have proceeded with more subtle hints. The sustained nautical metaphor with which this idea is embellished in her soliloquy (9. 589-94) is another disconcerting instance of Ovid's detachment. He seems here determined only to demonstrate his cleverness, however alien the text to Byblis' state of shock. And the same may be said of the pseudo-epic inset with which she tries to raise her hopes (9. 613-5). Still, some sympathy is felt as she seizes upon one false reason after another for the failure of her suit, and as she meditates a series of melodramatic and shameless acts, which are eventually translated into a veritable siege of Caunus. In a rather tortuous way she reasons that if she desisted he would think that she had been fickle, deceptive or simply lustful before (9. 595-629). But repeated setbacks unhinge her mind — she becomes like a bacchante (9. 641-4) — and after her wanderings metamorphosis comes as welcome relief (9. 659-65).

Relief comes similarly to Myrrha (10. 489-502), but after repeated acts of incest with her father, who was unaware of her identity until curiosity got the better of him and he shone a light upon her. By fleeing she briefly preserved a wretched life. Unlike Byblis, she had from the outset recognised her incestuous feelings, which were fully developed. Her soliloquy (10. 320-55) shows some resistance to them, but a greater tendency to find justification for them, e.g. in the behaviour of animals (10. 324-8), or of other peoples (10. 331-3). Slight touches of genuine pathos (10. 342-4) are overshadowed by a striving for cleverness in composition (10.339; 347-9). In the narrative of Myrrha's attempted suicide by hanging and the intervention of the nurse after a confession has been extracted (10. 378-464), the reader is kept constantly aware of Ovid's transference and sometimes startling adaptation of a whole sequence of events in Euripides' Hippolytus. When incest finally takes place, Ovid deflects attention from the physical enjoyment that caused Myrrha to return to her father's bed repeatedly, by concentrating on sinister omens, premonitions, the ironic coincidence that she was addressed as 'filia' because of her age and, above all, the unnaturalness of the act:

accepit obsceno genitor sua uiscera lecto (10. 465)

plena patris thalamis excedit et impia diro

semina fert utero conceptaque crimina portat (10. 469-70)
While the subject matter of the *Metamorphoses* ranges far beyond the erotic, it is clear that one of Ovid’s main preoccupations in this work is to explore a great variety of love relationships and to treat in contrasting ways those that bear a superficial resemblance to one another. Even the many rapes tend to be sharply differentiated. When he chooses to, Ovid can depict love with rare sensitivity, sometimes remaining on the surface, sometimes probing human motivation in surprising depth. His lighter moods vary from farce to mere flippancy. If ever he is disconcerting, it is when that flippancy intrudes, as it occasionally does, into the more serious narratives. In general, though, good taste has helped Ovid steer clear of the many pitfalls inseparable from his amatory subjects, and while the elegiac leopard may not have changed his spots altogether, he does reveal in parts of the *Metamorphoses* a measure of human sympathy scarcely to be expected from the heartless cynic of the *Amores*.

Further reading: