Ovid’s Apollo, His Better Half, and His Lesser Siblings

One of the first myths that Ovid tells in his Metamorphoses is that of Apollo and Daphne. In this myth, Ovid presents Apollo as a failed *vir*. Despite being a *puer*, a youth of an age when he would normally be the passive partner in a homoerotic relationship, Apollo attempts to be an active male lover in the myth of Daphne with the result that he loses the nymph permanently. He is at the wrong stage in his life to be the active member in an erotic relationship and as a result he cannot properly approach Daphne in such a way that would allow him to physically dominate her. Ovid further emphasizes Apollo’s failure by contrasting it with Zeus’s success with Io in the very next episode.

The Apollo of the Daphne myth provides the first example of a character type Ovid will feature several times in the Metamorphoses: the young man who has his first experience with erotic desire before he is mature enough to handle the experience properly. These youths fail to consummate their loves with disastrous effects. Apollo is a god and therefore his attempt to transgress the natural boundary of his age and time of life has no consequence, but the other Apollo-like youths do not have divinity to protect them. When Apollo is referenced later in the poem, the young men whom Ovid associates with him, Narcissus and Hermaphroditus, will play a particular role within their own narratives that will hearken back to the Apollo of the Apollo/Daphne episode to create a sense of expectation, even foreboding, in the reader. When Narcissus and Hermaphroditus try to step over the *puer/vir* boundary, that act of hubris destroys them. Ovid’s characterization of these boys as Apollo-like makes the audience instantly sensitive to the boys’ peril and surrounds their stories with apprehension that colors their every moment.

Ovid uses Apollo’s name as a tag to indicate to his audience that the character to which it is attached is in danger. It is a way for Ovid to make clear that that character is a *puer* who is trying to step outside the bounds of his current life stage to be a *vir*, but who will ultimately fail, starting with Apollo himself and his pursuit of Daphne in book 1 and continuing through the tragedies of the ill-fated youths of the next books.

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