# *"Suasit amor facinus"*: What was she thinking? Notes on scandals in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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Like Zoe Heller's acclaimed novel, What Was She Thinking: Notes on a Scandal, Ovid's Metamorphoses offers its audience penetrating insights into the psychology of women confronted by moral dilemmas. Originating in a desperate need for emotional fulfillment within the context of a patriarchal society, the transgression of socially dictated boundaries can be both liberating and debilitating for women (cf. Newlands, 1997). Ovid's narrative discourse in the stories of Medea, Scylla, and Althaea focuses on what may be considered a distinctive feminine psychology reminiscent of Carol Gilligan's landmark study, In a Different Voice (1982).

From the imagined perspective of a first reading of the epic, the poem unfolds its meaning and communicates it to the audience by an accretion of information (cf. Wheeler, 1999). What the audience learns from Medea informs the reading of Scylla, and the stories of Medea and Scylla are necessary conditions for a more nuanced reading of Althaea. In each story, a woman is faced with the necessity of choosing between compelling commitments and equally demanding emotional concerns, as Ovid uses a dramatic soliloquy to pose the problem and to elucidate the psychological process engendering the final decision and subsequent action. The clear intratextual links within the stories of Medea, Scylla, and Althaea underscore certain parallels between each woman's plight and circumstance, as well as highlighting the important differences, and they compel the audience to consider the stories in relationship to one another.

Medea, Scylla, and Althaea, are all conventional figures of reproach for what Greco-Roman society would deem as their immorality. Although Jason marries Medea in fulfillment of his vow for her help, her dream of wedded bliss (nihil illum amplexa verebor) disintegrates from the reality of Jason's continuous self-centered demands and becomes a nightmare of sorcery, murder, vengeance, and perpetual flight. Scylla's anticipated reward from Minos (praemia nulla peto nisi te) is not love, but curses and rejection by the outraged king of Crete; her metamorphosis into the Ciris, as she clings to the departing ship of Minos and is attacked by her father (himself transformed into an osprey), is her only release from a ruined life. When Althaea grants her brothers' shades the consolation of Meleager's life and so throws the "funereum torrem" into the flames, her final words to them, "vosque/ipsa sequar," signal her inevitable suicide. The fate of these women argues against the moral propriety of their respective choices. Their fates would also seem to support the "paradox" Gilligan proposes, that "the very traits that traditionally have defined the 'goodness' of women, their care and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development."

By counterposing the psychology and destiny of these women, Ovid illuminates the tragic aspect of a woman's life in a man's world. Ovid transforms traditional examples of feminine treachery into sympathetic portrayals of women in crisis, and so demonstrates an unusual sensitivity to the distinctive nature of feminine morality in the Metamorphoses.