

## Water, Women & Bodies in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

The ancient philosophers and scientists, in discussing gender differences, link women to wetness (τὸ ὑγρόν); Aristotle (*Prob.* 809b12), Rufus (ap. Orib., *Coll. Med. lib. inc.* 20.1-2), Aretaeus (*SA* 2.12.4), Hippocrates (*Mul.* 1.1 viii 12.6-21) and Galen (*Comp. Med. Gen.* 2.1 xiii 467-8K) describe women as being naturally softer and wetter than men. While readers of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have noticed a connection between women and places of water (Salzman-Mitchell, 2005; Nugent, 1990; Parry, 1964), I suggest that the ancient scientific and philosophical works about women and their bodies cast light on the transformative property of water in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I propose to consider how men and women deploy water in the *Metamorphoses* as a weapon against the opposite sex. In this context, water functions to emasculate men and to render women "more feminine".

In discussing the ancient physiological views, Anne Carson shows that women (like water) are soft and mollifying, porous and penetrable, formless and boundless. The most important and dangerous property that water and women share, however, is their pollutability; once they are polluted, they become polluting (Carson, 1990). Furthermore, women have a proclivity for overstepping and wreaking havoc on boundaries. This proclivity becomes even more dangerous when women are seen as watery and polluting bodies that contaminate and destroy gender boundaries. The Salmacis and Hermaphroditus story in the *Metamorphoses* (4.285-388) is one of the many episodes that clearly encapsulate the polluting and emasculating nature of a woman and her water (3.138-252; 5.439-461; 5.533-550; 6.317-381). When Hermaphroditus has entered Salmacis' bathing waters, Salmacis pours herself around and invades him. Once Salmacis has violated the boundaries of his body, Hermaphroditus steps out of the river with his masculinity washed away. The mollifying property of the polluted water (and of Salmacis) has made his limbs soft (*mollita... membra*), and his voice *non virilis* (4.381-2).

Even more interesting are the episodes in which men use water against women. In book five (5.572-641), for example, the huntress Arethusa narrates to Ceres how she once rejected the traditional female roles: as a beautiful yet *fortis* nymph, she roamed the groves and set nets, remaining steadfast in her virginity (5.78-584). One day, hearing the river god Alpheus speak from the stream in which she was swimming, Arethusa fled and called upon Diana for help. But Arethusa's innate wetness betrayed her; hidden by the goddess in a thick mist, *frigus sudor* and *caeruleae guttae* began to fall from the nymph's limbs, a *lacus* formed beneath her feet, and *ros* fell from her hair (5.632-5). Suddenly, she was transformed into water. Alpheus, then, taking advantage of her now penetrable and malleable nature, raped her. Now addressed by the strange title *Alpheias* (5.487), Arethusa is no longer able to roam the woods and hunt, but is instead transformed into a pool of water, fixed within the confines of her own riverbanks, and identified as "belonging to Alpheus."

The ancient scientific views allow us a way to understand why a woman's water transforms men, and why water renders women vulnerable in the *Metamorphoses*. Anxieties about women's and water's pollutable and boundless properties render both a threat to order that can, and must, be controlled only with the imposition of boundaries.

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