

Ovid's Vertumnus and the Elegiac Fantasy

During the past two decades, there has been considerable controversy over the resolution for the story of Pomona and Vertumnus, the final set of lovers in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the last lines, Vertumnus, having assumed his wholly divine form, is described as *vimque parat*, "prepares [to use] force" (14.770); however, this never comes to fruition, as Pomona falls in love with him and *mutua vulnera sensit*, "she felt mutual wounds [of love]" (14.771). The use of *vulnera* strikes a balance to *vim* in the previous line, raising the specter of violence at the culmination of the first uniquely Italian "love" story in the *Metamorphoses*. This martial imagery amidst a seemingly happy ending complicates the reading: does the substitution of love for violence signal a programmatic, pro-Augustan ending for the *Metamorphoses*, or does the threat of rape make it no different from the many "Greek" tales of lust and rape which came before it?

Scholars have been split on the issue. W. R. Johnson (1997) sees it as akin to a modern movie romance; some subordinate the importance of the violence to larger themes (Myer 1994); others, following H. Parry (1964), look at the ending quite cynically as yet another example of a rape victim in the *Metamorphoses* (Curran 1984). Both sides bring up admirable points worthy of consideration that need be implemented into any complete synthesis of the myth.

I believe a solution lies in Ovid's "previous life" as an elegiac poet. After all of Vertumnus' other disguises fail to arouse Pomona, he enters her garden as an old woman, who gives sexual advice to the younger girl in favor of Vertumnus. This would seem to emulate the elegiac trope of the conversation between *lena* and *puella*, the girl-object of the elegiac persona's lust. Vertumnus, as an elegiac *amator* in disguise, subverts the normal message of the *lena*—to spread out the *puella*'s loves to several men in order to rake in as much as possible while she is still young—in favor of single pairing with her *amator*. Vertumnus afterwards goes onto to deliver an inset poem about Iphis and Anaxarete, a mythological *exemplum* that seems to function as an oral deliverance of an elegiac *amator*'s poem. These parallels suggest that Ovid is tapping into his elegiac history in the framing of his Roman romance.

This narrative frame delves into the fantasy world of the elegiac *amator*: he attempts to win the heart of his *puella*, first by means of his words and poems, but, if necessary, through violence. However, Pomona's acquiescence to her *amator*'s true form permits Vertumnus the fairy tale ending which *amatores* of elegy can only dream and never achieve. This fantasy ending permits a two-fold interpretation. First, Ovid creates his ultimate Roman "love" story based on the model of elegiac *amator*, setting it apart from the "Greek" rapes earlier in the *Metamorphoses*. However, this also permits an interpretation under which the episode can still exhibit the violent undertones that trouble elegiac poetry (James 2003): although the *amator* laments the cruelty of the *puella* and his *servitium amoris*, this only masks the harsh and sometimes violent reality of a male-dominated power hierarchy, which thinks little of plight of *puellae*—so too Ovid, in the mythical union of Pomona and Vertumnus.

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