

## 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*, "prepared [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 nice counterpoint to *vim* in the previous line—replacing the idea of violence with that of love—but nevertheless the mere specter of violence at the culmination of the first uniquely Italian love story in the *Metamorphoses* complicates the reading: does the substitution of violence for love 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. Some, such as W. R. Johnson (1997), see it as akin to a modern movie romance, or minimize the importance of the threat 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, it seems to me, 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 his 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*, or procuress, and *puella*, the girl-object of the elegiac persona's lust. Vertumnus, as an elegiac *amator*, or lover, in disguise subverts the normal message of the *lena*—to spread out the *puella*'s loves as much as possible, in order to rake in as much as possible while still young—in favor of single pairing with her *amator* Vertumnus. He then goes on to deliver an inset poem about Iphis and Anaxarete, a mythological exemplum that seems to function as an oral deliverance of the elegiac *amator*'s poem. These parallels suggest that Ovid is tapping into his elegiac history in the framing of his Roman romance.<sup>1</sup>

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 gives the episode the same problem of violent undertones that trouble elegiac poetry (James 2003): although the *amator* laments the cruelty of the *puella* and his *servitium amoris*, servitude to love, 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.

### Selected Bibliography

- Curran, L. C. (1984). "Rape and rape victims in the *Metamorphoses*," in J. Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan (eds.), *Women in the Ancient World*, Albany: 263-86.
- James, S. L. (2003). *Learned Girls and Male Persuasion: Gender and Reading in Roman Love Elegy*, Berkley.
- Johnson, W. R. (1997). "Vertumnus in love," *CP* 92: 367-75.
- Myers, K. S. (1994). "*Ultimus ardor*: Pomona and Vertumnus in Ovid's *Met.* 14.623-77," *CJ* 89: 225-50.
- Parry, H. (1964). "Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Violence in a pastoral landscape," *TAPhA* 95: 268-82.

---

1 This is not to suggest a *Kreuzung der Gattungen*, but only a framework around which Ovid fashions his story.