

Death, Dismemberment, and the Female Body in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Despite Ovid's declaration that *formae* and *corpora* are the subject of the *Metamorphoses* (1.1-2), the role of the human body in the poem has received surprisingly little critical interest until lately (Barkan 1986 is an exception). Recent scholarship has taken up the subject (Segal 1998; Farrell 1999, Theodorakopoulos 1999, Gildenhard & Zissos 1999, Lada-Richards 2013), yet aside from Keith (2000), Enterline (2000), and Salzman-Mitchell (2005), little attention has been paid to the importance of the female body in the longest work of a poet known to be deeply interested in the female experience.

This paper addresses this scholarly *lacuna* by showing that Ovid's tales of transformation are designed to highlight the physical and social vulnerability of the female body. I focus on what I have labeled "terminal metamorphoses," in which human beings are transformed into inanimate objects. Narratives of female terminal metamorphosis are not merely more numerous than those of males (women suffer such transformations almost twice as often as men do), but they also tend to be more detailed. Narratives of female terminal metamorphosis usually describe the transformation body part by body part, thus dismembering their victims. The stories of Battus and Aglauros in Book 2 offer a helpful example. Both are turned into stone for defying Mercury, but the male victim's transformation is described in a brief three lines and his *periura pectora* are the only body parts mentioned (2.705-707). The metamorphosis of Aglauros, on the other hand, encompasses twelve lines and catalogues the petrification of numerous body parts, including her limbs, trunk, knees, joints, fingernails, veins, chest, and lungs (2.818-832). This paper shows how, when women are transformed, their bodies are simultaneously dissected, to the point that the female becomes a collection of disarticulated parts.

This tendency is similar to the anatomical blazons of early Renaissance literature, in which individual parts of the female body are enthusiastically praised without reference to the whole. Vickers 1997 discusses the blazon as a tool of male aggression and objectification, arguing that it is a means of figurative rape that transforms the female into a voiceless, powerless object. The conflicting impulses “to embellish/to dismember, to idealize/to disfigure” (Vickers 14) also find expression in the narratives of female terminal metamorphosis since many of these deadly transformations are set in motion by a male aggressor’s desire to possess female beauty. For example, Daphne is dismembered first through an anatomical blazon when Apollo praises her fingers, hands, arms and legs (1.500-502) and then again in the poet’s anatomical account of her metamorphosis into a tree (1.548-552).

Finally, I consider the social consequences of terminal metamorphosis, showing how the poet tends to focus on the female victim’s erasure from the human community. For example, the poet dwells in detail on the Heliades’ last farewell to their horrified mother as they are overcome by bark (*Met.* 2.356-363) and on Dryope’s attempts to kiss her son and husband before she is subsumed by her metamorphosis into a tree (*Met.* 9.385-387). There are no such descriptions of familial farewells in the narratives of male terminal metamorphosis. I argue that Ovid’s portrayal of female metamorphosis indicates that women are more vulnerable than are men to violent, alienating transformation that erases the victim from the human community.

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