

Prayer, Power, and Gender in Ovid's Galatea Episode

Galatea's narration of her encounter with Polyphemus in Book 13 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has been recognized as a site of significant gender destabilization (Salzman-Mitchel 2005: 184-93). Throughout the work many women are silent or silenced (cf. Forbis 1997, de Luce 1993; Joplin 1984), but Galatea is one of a select set of women (e.g. Cornix, Arethusa) who are permitted to tell their own story. With this voice the nymph attempts to appropriate a more powerful position, and in the process she disrupts typical gender roles. In particular, she feminizes her lover, Acis, by unwittingly making him resemble female victims of attempted rape in the poem, especially in his prayer for help.

Scenes of rape and attempted rape permeate the fabric of the *Metamorphoses* in such abundance it is perhaps unsurprising that they contain a significant proportion of the work's prayers. The distribution of prayers among these scenes is neither random nor equal, however, but concentrated in episodes of attempted, rather than completed, rape. The stories of Daphne (1.452-567), Syrinx (1.689-712), Cornix (2.569-95), and Arethusa (5.572-641) constitute the core of a narrative pattern in which a woman is desired, flees, is pursued, prays for help, and then undergoes a transformation to avoid capture and rape.

This pattern is gendered, as women flee the threat of male violence. Throughout the first half of the epic, slightly different permutations of this basic dynamic play out repeatedly, and prayer resulting in corporeal transformation is revealed to be the sole effective means of defense against male violence for powerless women in flight. Galatea's tale, however, upends the expected pattern of pursuit and prayer by transferring the role of powerless fleeing victim to a man, Acis.

The frame narrative that provokes Galatea's tale creates the expectation that Galatea will recount a story of erotic pursuit that follows the former pattern. When Scylla brags about her ability to evade her many suitors, Galatea remarks that she was not able to escape (*effugere*) the affection (*amorem*) of the Cyclops without distress (13.740-45). The reference to flight and love in particular recall the established pattern of love and pursuit (cf. 5.572-76, esp. *fugae, amores*).

The initial portion of Galatea's story intensifies this expectation in its similarity to scenes of attempted rape, especially the poem's exemplary story of Apollo and Daphne. Polyphemus loves a disinterested Galatea, just as Apollo had fallen for an averse Daphne. Similarly, Polyphemus sings his own praises in an attempt to woo his beloved (13.808-856), just like Apollo had done (1.504-24). This correspondence, as well as the Cyclops' assertion that Galatea has fled previously (*fugisse* 13.808), primes the audience to expect Polyphemus to desire and chase the nymph when he glimpses her (On the role of the male gaze in scenes of rape see Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 23-42). Instead, the Cyclops sees Galatea lying with her lover and becomes inflamed with rage.

As he threatens to destroy the couple, Galatea disappears by diving into the sea and Acis flees. This casts him into a role generally played by women throughout the *Metamorphoses*. He continues this gender reversal by shouting a prayer that mimics those of maidens in flight, especially in its repetition of the phrase "*fer opem*," a plea rare in extant literature outside Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (cf. Subias-Kanofal 2016) (13.880-81; Daphne 1.545; Arethusa 5.618). This repetition clinches his parallelism with female victims. The scene culminates in Acis' transformation into water by Galatea. This corporeal metamorphosis is the typical outcome for women, and Acis is the only male in the poem whose prayer for help results in such physical change.

This defiance of established gender paradigms and departure from the expected pattern of pursuit results largely because of the gender of the narrator. Still, Galatea is not able to achieve the security and power equivalent to a male. Although she avoids both physical transformation and harm from the Cyclops, she does not escape unscathed. She loses her lover and admits the ordeal caused her great distress (13.745). Throughout the epic, women who resist male advances never escape without ultimate physical or psychological suffering.

Bibliography

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