

Materna tempora: Compression and Delay in Ovidian Gestation Narratives

Ovid's experiments in mythography from the final decades of his career are acutely preoccupied with time as a guiding principle of narrative structure, from the broad temporal scope promised in the proem of the *Metamorphoses* (*primaque ab origine mundi / ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen*, *Met.* 1.3-4) to the sequential calendric books of the *Fasti*. Where this keen Ovidian interest in chronology overlaps with tales of reproduction, genealogy serves as a useful transitional device, since compression of narrative time between generations makes possible the efficient staging of an entire family's history within a single book (e.g., from Pygmalion to Adonis in Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*). Though recent scholarly work has drawn attention to the complex thematics of motherhood, natal lineage, and the fertile female body in Roman poetry (Keith 2000, Fantham 2004-5, Lateiner 2006, Augoustakis 2010, Keith 2010, McAuley 2014), the poet's treatment of the particular timespan between conception and birth remains understudied. In this paper, I examine narrative treatments of the gestational period in the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti*, and work to reconcile an apparent tension between formulaic temporal compressions of pregnancy and close associations between pregnancy and delay.

Despite occasional indications that proper fetal development depends upon the completion of gestational *tempora* (as in the case of Bacchus, who completes his *maternaque tempora* within Jupiter's thigh, *Met.* 3.312; and cf. *Met.* 11.311), the necessary months between conception and birth are, more often than not, absent from narratives of generation. Indeed, in Ovidian poetry, the consummation of male lust with a female partner (willing or not) so frequently triggers an immediate "cut-scene" to the birth of a child that the act of conception becomes a dependable predictor of compressed narrative time. The

rapid appearance of the next generation in these contexts renders pregnancy a mere plot device, where standard temporal markers condense the entire period of gestation into a single line, or, sometimes, a single word. After the extended narrative of Io's captivity in Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses*, for example, the birth of her son Epaphus occurs after a mere *tandem* (1.748). For Orithyia, the acts of becoming wife and mother are syntactically simultaneous: *illic et gelidi coniunx Actaea tyranni / et genetrix facta est* (*Met.* 6.711-712). In similar fashion, the narrator of the *Fasti* relates in a single breath how Tacita becomes pregnant and bears the Lares: *fitque gravis geminosque parit* (*Fasti* 2.615). Longer expressions of gestational time tend to draw upon the language of the lunar cycle: this is true in the case of Callisto (*orbe resurgebant lunaria cornua nono*, *Met.* 2.453; and cf. *Fast.* 2.175), Pygmalion's ivory maiden (*cornibus in plenum noviens lunaribus orbem*, *Met.* 10.296), and the successful fertility rituals of the Lupercalia (*luna resumebat decimo nova cornua motu*, *Fast.* 2.447).

Ovidian mythography thus consistently compresses the necessary period of time between conception and birth. This narrative pattern is especially noteworthy, I argue, in light of the programmatic characterization of gestation, in *Metamorphoses* 1, as a process accomplished through delay: *fecundaque semina rerum / vivaci nutrita solo ceu matris in alvo / creverunt faciemque aliquam cepere morando* (419-421). As the *Metamorphoses* continues, the lexicon of delay and deferral appears in close proximity to several narratives of suppressed gestation (e.g. *Met.* 2.461, 6.215, 11.307). In the *Fasti*, moreover, Juno's parthenogenesis is accomplished with the help of a supernatural blossom (acquired from Flora) whose particular power is to achieve motherhood for its recipient without delay (*nec mora*, *Fast.* 5.254). The notion, as originally presented in *Met.* 1, that gestation is itself an

act of delay may therefore seem incompatible with Ovid's consistent refusal to be delayed by its narration; and yet, given that the word *mora* is often invoked in Roman poetry in reference to unwanted or unnecessary narrative digression (see e.g. Reed 2016), the association between *mora* and compressed narratives of generation may in fact be a characteristically self-aware Ovidian nod toward the poet's apparent impatience with staging gestational time.

Bibliography

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