

## Rape, Prayer, and Recompense in the Caenis Episode of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In this paper I explore the connection between prayer and compensation for rape in the episode of Caenis (*Met.* 12.189–209) and situate this narrative within a broader network of power negotiations between female victims of rape and their divine rapists in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Throughout the epic poem, Ovid manipulates the common amatory trope of plying one's erotic interest with prayers, and establishes a contrast between asking for lovers' affections and taking them by force (cf. Gauly 2009: 71). This *topos* first appears in the paradigmatic Apollo and Daphne episode when Apollo decides to stop wasting blandishments on the nymph and begins to chase her (*sed enim non sustinet ultra/ perdere blanditias iuvenis deus* 1.530–31). As the poem progresses, the contrast specifically between *preces* and *vis* emerges (e.g. 2.574–76, 6.684, 11.239–40). While seducing a woman with *preces* is a common euphemism in elegy, Ovid exploits the word's dual senses of erotic pleading and formal prayers to a divinity in the numerous narratives of rape and attempted rape throughout the poem (On rape, see especially Curran 1978; Richlin 1992; James 2016). Most frequently, this takes the form of a narrative pattern in which a woman rebuffs a god's advances (On rebuffed prayers, cf. Tissol 1992: 265–66, n. 9), runs from him (1.502, 1.701, 2.576, 5.601), and then as she is on the verge of being captured, prays for divine assistance (1.545–6; 1.701; 2.576; 5.618–20). Whenever a woman appeals for divine help during pursuit, she escapes rape, though only after a disfiguring transformation (On change as an escape from rape, see Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 181). Prayer, then, is the only way women can defend themselves against aggressive male pursuit and prevent rape.

In addition to prayer being deployed as a defense against rape in the poem, prayer can act as recompense for rape after the fact. In Book 12, Nestor recounts the young woman Caenis'

transformation into a man after being raped by Neptune to Achilles and the Greeks (189–209). In Caenis' 20-line episode *votum* occurs five times (12.192, 199, 200, 201, 205), signaling its thematic importance. At the beginning, *vota* refers to erotic pleading, similar to uses of *preces* elsewhere: *multorum frustra votis optata procorum* (she was hoped for in vain with pleas from many suitors 12.192). Following the great sea god's violence against the girl (*vim passa dei est* 12.197), he offers her *vota* in exchange, and assures they will not be rejected (*'sint tua vota licet' dixit 'secura repulsae:/ elige, quid voveas!'* 12.199–200), perhaps alluding to her refusal of other men's *vota* (*frustra votis optata* 12.192). Caenis asks not to be a woman anymore, so that she cannot be raped again (*tale pati iam posse nihil; da, femina ne sim* 12.202). Neptune responds by transforming her into a man and additionally grants that she not be susceptible to sword wounds (12.203–7).

While Neptune's response may at first seem natural enough, previous divine responses to prayers in the poem have exploited imprecise language to enact transformations of ambiguous benefit. Because Caenis asks merely not to be female, she leaves open a number of options besides becoming a man that would technically fulfill her entreaty (e.g. transformation into a plant, bird, or fountain, like Daphne (1.452–567), Cornix (2.569–95), or Arethusa (5.572–641). Neptune does not exploit this ambiguity, however, but seems to interpret the intended meaning of her words. Neptune also appears to respond more sympathetically by advancing her up the cosmological hierarchy. Whereas many other victims of rape or attempted rape are silenced, Caeneus keeps a voice, but it must be transformed. The narrator emphasizes that it becomes a new, male voice (12.203–5). Still, the relatively positive transformation that Caenis receives chiefly depends on having already endured sexual violence. In the rape narratives of the *Metamorphoses*, divine erotic petitions give way to appeals offered to prevent rape, which give

way to prayers granted because of rape. Prayers become a locus for complex power negotiations with results that reinforce the precarious position of women. Ultimately, the traumatic experience of attempted rape or completed rape is transformative—whether metamorphoses occur up or down the cosmological hierarchy.

#### Bibliography

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