

PASSION AND PROGRESS IN OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*

S. Georgia Nugent

This essay explores relations between the passions and progress in Ovid's epic poem, the *Metamorphoses*, by focusing on six tales of disastrous passion. In each instance, physical impasse – an inability to progress – provides a means of representing moral impasse of the type Aristotle characterized as *akrasia*. Each of the female protagonists in these tales attempts to master her passion (and thus to progress) through the manipulation of language, but (with one exception – arguably the only tale in the *Metamorphoses* with a positive outcome) none is successful. The physical impasse experienced by these heroines is often followed, after a moment of crisis, by dramatic movement; but that movement is impetuous or even mad – it does not represent moral progress. In fact, in each of the tales – again, with the exception of the anomalous “happy ending” in the case of Iphis – disordered passion not only impedes moral progress, it introduces the element of murder in the family, thus threatening perhaps the most basic form of progress, the chronological succession of generations.

Introduction

This essay explores relations between the passions and progress in Ovid's epic poem, the *Metamorphoses*. Passions abound in the *Metamorphoses*; indeed, a once popular paperback translation proclaimed on its cover that the poem is “an epic of love.” Few readers today would endorse that description, since much of what passes for love in this work would more accurately be called rape, or at least lust.¹ Still, Ovid's epic makes of the passions its subject matter more explicitly and consistently than does any of its classical counterparts. Indeed, it is most often passion – not necessarily love, but often anger, fear, greed, or shame – that appears to cause the transformations that give

the poem its title. And metamorphosis itself may represent a kind of progress insofar as it is change, movement from one state to another. But metamorphosis may also halt or even negate progress, resulting in fixation in an eternal present or even "regress" on an evolutionary chain – for example, from human to nonhuman, or animate to inanimate. In this sense, metamorphosis often appears in Ovid's narrative as a kind of *deus ex machina*. It terminates, but offers no real progress beyond, the impasse to which Ovidian characters often are led by disordered passion.

In relating passion to progress, our central concern is, of course, in moral progress, the development of the human soul and the ways in which the passions may influence, impede, or enhance that development. In Ovid's work, however, which avowedly attempts nothing less than a history of the world from the cosmogony to the poet's own day, the senses of progress that we encounter will be more directly chronological and kinetic: progress understood as the passage of time and the ability to move forward. Yet this is not to say that the moral dimension is missing; rather, I would argue that Ovid approaches moral progress obliquely, his characters' movement in space and time rich with signification for our understanding of their moral strides – or their standstill. In the concluding books of the *Metamorphoses*, the poet is drawn again and again to explore the situation in which a protagonist (always female), torn between her illicit desires and her own sense of rationality and shame (or perhaps only cultural protocol), stands at an impasse. As metamorphosis in Ovid often presents a physical analogue to a moral condition,² so the moral impasse between desire and decorum is literally embodied by Ovid's heroines as an inability to progress physically, to take the next step.

As one critic has dryly remarked, "What most interested Ovid and provided him with a limitless field for exploration... was human behaviour under stress" (Kenney 1982: 436). Several of the best-known and most frequently studied passages of the poem are stories in which an intense but illicit love is held in equipoise by a countervailing emotion, and the individual experiencing these emotions debates her course of action in an internal monologue. In a number of cases, the passion of love is restrained or offset by *pudor*: shame or a sense of propriety.³ This particular scenario of agitated internal debate occurs with a series of women, including Medea, Scylla, Althea, Byblis, Iphis, and Myrrha. These six Ovidian episodes are interrelated in many ways.⁴ In each case, the heroine's moral dilemma results in her being "stuck" for a time as conflicting passions render her unable to progress. Yet these six heroines display a kind of paradoxical relation between passion and progress. On the one hand, they are fixed fast by the moral choice that confronts them, while on the other hand, their passion ultimately drives them to actions that propel them across the boundaries of sanctioned human behavior. Paralysis of the will had merely suspended them on the threshold of transgression. In each case but one (that of Iphis, who, as we will

see, presents a singularly positive denouement), these characters, when they break out of moral and physical impasse, plunge forward both impetuously and tragically.

Trapped by choice

What is the philosophical context for Ovid's consideration of these issues? For an author whose reputation is colored still by Quintilian's characterization of him as *nimum amator ingenii sui*, "too much in love with his own cleverness" (*Inst.* 10.1.88), this may seem a strange question to ask. Did this witty and irreverent poet, who clearly relished and fostered his own image as a cosmopolitan bon vivant, a "bad boy" in the regime of a moralizing Augustus, have an interest in the systematic philosophies of his time? Ovid's description of the origins of the universe clearly bears traces of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, but it also includes Platonic and Stoic elements. Although few would consider Ovid to be consistently Epicurean, Stoic, or Pythagorean (despite the extended "speech" of Pythagoras with which the epic culminates), the poet seems to have been not indifferent to the philosophical currents of his time, but rather, as we might expect, eclectic in his relationship to philosophical schools.

The specific narrative *topos* that concerns us here – instances in which passion wars with rationality, causing the individual to be trapped between these two opposite impulses, often literally rendered immobile, incapable of progress – may be illumined by yet another philosopher. Ovid's repeated anatomy of this problem seems to present a narrative and indeed an explicitly kinetic correlative to the philosophical state that Aristotle diagnosed as *akrasia* (*Eth. nic.* 7.1–10), a kind of paralysis of the will in which a moral agent correctly perceives the "better" course but fails to act upon it.

While the Hellenistic philosophers are extremely concerned with the correct ordering of the will, with what M. Nussbaum (1994b) has appropriately called "the therapy of desire," it is Aristotle who perhaps provides the most complete diagnosis of the condition that afflicts the heroines of Ovid. In the seventh book of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle addresses his analytical powers to the puzzle of the akratic individual, someone who correctly perceives that the action that he (or, exclusively in the case of Ovid, she) is about to undertake is wrong and yet chooses that action nevertheless. Plato's Socrates had argued that this was impossible, that every moral agent acts in accordance with his (or her) best understanding of "the good." But Plato's contemporary Euripides clearly disputed this view in a number of his theatrical works, including *Medea*. And Plato's student Aristotle, drawing on empirical observations as was his wont, grapples with the reality that we perceive in our own time as well: individuals do in fact (even with alarming regularity) perceive the better course and choose the worse (*Eth. nic.* 7.2.1–10). What train of thought, what rationalizations lead moral agents to behave in this way?

The philosopher sets himself the question: Does the akratic individual, who apparently knows what he or she should do but acts in contradiction to that knowledge, actually *have* knowledge, and if so, in what sense? Aristotle pursues an intriguing analysis of this problem that seems particularly illuminating in the case of Ovid's heroines. First, he frames the problem as one of faulty logic by assuming that a moral agent's choice essentially takes the form of a practical syllogism (*Eth. nic.* 7.3.6). For example,

Daughters should not betray their fathers. (major premise)

I am a daughter. (minor premise)

Therefore, I should not betray my father. (conclusion)

The akratic individual, Aristotle argues, correctly recognizes the major premise, the general rule, but fails in the formulation of the appropriate minor premise, the application of the universal to the particular. We surely see Ovid's deliberators behaving in just this fashion, performing elaborate mental gymnastics to enable themselves to slip the noose of the syllogism. Often, this takes the form of attempting to rename, recategorize, or otherwise redeploy language so as to detour from the inexorable path of the logic.

In the instance above, for example, the skewed logic might take this form:

Daughters should not betray their fathers.

I am a lover (more than a daughter).

Therefore, I may betray my father.

In other instances, it seems that two quite distinct syllogisms are inappropriately commingled. For example,

Incest is forbidden for humans.

I am a human.

Therefore, incest is forbidden for me.

The gods' behavior is appropriate.

The gods commit incest.

Therefore, incest is appropriate.

In the ruminations of a Byblis or Myrrha, these two are melded into a misshapen syllogism, something like this:

Incest is forbidden for humans.

But the gods commit incest.

Therefore, I can commit incest.

How does this faulty logic come about? Aristotle argues that even if, in some way, the akratic individual “knows” what is right – that is, knows how to construct the practical syllogism correctly – under the influence of passion such knowledge is not really present to the individual. The knowledge is not operative, any more than it might be to one who is asleep or drunken or mad (*Eth. nic.* 7.3.7). Furthermore, Aristotle draws the analogy that under those circumstances a person apparently speaking the language of knowledge is simply mouthing the words, like an actor speaking a part (*Eth. nic.* 7.3.8). This phenomenon, too, one can observe in Ovid's akratic heroines, who in several instances clearly recall dramatic heroines⁵ and at other times seem to conceive themselves almost as actors in a play. I do not claim direct Aristotelian influence on the *Metamorphoses*, but the philosopher's analysis of the akratic individual can shed light on Ovid's representation of characters who are driven by their passions to act in a way that they “know” is wrong.

Medea

The poster child for akratic conflict clearly is Medea, in a narrative tradition that dates back to Euripides's *Medea*:

I know indeed what evil I intend to do,
But stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury,
Fury that brings upon mortals the greatest evils.

(*Medea* 1078–80 [trans. R. Warner,
in Lattimore 1955])

In this famous formulation, “I see the better, but I do the worse,” Euripides had thrown down the gauntlet to a Platonic philosophical understanding that individuals act in accordance with their knowledge of the good. Ovid's Medea voices essentially the same sentiment as she launches into a troubled soliloquy that explores both her emotional state and possible actions and outcomes:

si possem, sanior essem;
sed trahit invitam nova vis, aliudque cupido,
mens aliud suadet: video meliora proboque,
deteriora sequor!

(*Metam.* 7.18–21)

I'd act more sanely, if only I could,
but this new power overwhelms my will;
reason advises this, and passion, that;
I see the better way, and I approve it,
while I pursue the worse.⁶

At the conclusion of her deliberations she reiterates even more forcefully that she understands the enormity of her choice and acts, not ignorant of the right but overcome by passion:

quid faciam, video, nec me ignorantia veri
decipiet, sed amor!

(*Metam.* 7.92–3)

I clearly see what I'm about to do:
not ignorance beguiles me now, but love.

The very explicit terms in which Ovid's Medea voices her decision (self-perceived as immoral) make it clear that the poet is self-consciously participating in the philosophical controversy, with origins at least four centuries before him, about whether an individual, conscious of the right, can choose the wrong. Ovid explores the individual's moral conflict in such a case through the development of both rhetorical and physical analogues for the conflict. Medea and her counterparts in the *Metamorphoses* engage in elaborate rhetorical formulations of their dilemmas, often employing paradox and irony as means of reconfiguring the reality that they face. G. Tissol has offered an excellent analysis of the way in which, through these rhetorical ploys, "we observe language stretched and exploited, made to promote the worse argument over the better." "Semantic slippage," Tissol notes, "allows desire to . . . prepar[e] fertile ground for both the generation and the reception of specious arguments" (Tissol 1997: 51).

In addition to negotiating their inner conflicts through rhetorical ploys, however, Ovid's heroines also project their moral dilemmas into a spatial dimension. As she wrestles with the conflicting emotions caused by her infatuation with Jason, who has come to her father's kingdom as an enemy (*frustra . . . repugnas* [*Metam.* 7.11]), Medea represents her inner indecision to some extent in terms of external physical forces or paths of action. Although she exhorts herself to thrust aside (*excute* [7.17]) her passion, she is unable to do so. She is dragged along (*trahit* [7.19]) by some alien force; she also speaks of a god standing in opposition to her (*nescio quis deus obstat* [7.12]). We realize that as she debates inwardly, enjoining herself to dispense with delay (*omnem pelle moram* [7.47–8]), she is paralyzed by these conflicting forces, incapable of action.

It appears briefly that Medea may succeed in following her better judgment and banishing her passion (*et victa dabat iam terga cupido* [*Metam.* 7.73]; *et iam fortis erat, pulsusque resederat ardor* [7.76]). However, as soon as she lays eyes on Jason again, her infatuation overcomes her. Alluding again to the clarity with which she perceives her own course to be wrong (*quid faciam, video: nec me ignorantia veri decipiet* [7.92–3]), she nevertheless proceeds. If the epitome of *akrasia* is the paralysis of the will, with the moral agent poised

on the razor's edge, unable to make the right choice, unable to refrain from the wrong, this interminable moment is narratively represented in Medea's case by her fixed gaze on Jason. She is unable to turn her eyes from him, frozen in time (*lumina fixa tenet* [7.87]; *nec se declinat ab illo* [7.88]).

The rhetorical couplings in which Medea presents her possible alternatives represent them almost as physical destinations to be approached or fled:

non magna relinquam,

magna sequar:

(*Metam.* 7.55–6)

... quin adspice, quantum

adgrediare nefas, et dum licet, effuge crimen!

(7.70–1)

I do not leave

greatness, but elope with him to seek it!

... Just look ahead:

how great a sin it is you're thinking of!

Turn from this crime and flee while you are able.

Of course, in Medea's case there is a particular rationale for framing her moral choice in terms of a physical itinerary, for she will either remain in her father's household or, an exile from her land, set sail with Jason. In the event, having fled from her native land with Jason, Medea embarks on a seemingly endless circling of the globe. Her extraordinary journeys, undertaken via magical chariot, are more extensive than any other travels described by Ovid. They are occasioned either by Medea's search for baneful herbs for her potions or by the need to escape the scenes of the crimes that she has effected through those potions. To map Medea's moral choices onto geographical coordinates, then, is particularly appropriate. Yet this tendency to formulate moral dilemma in terms of physical impasse, which is established paradigmatically in Medea's case, then extends beyond her to a series of subsequent narratives that do not necessarily entail actual physical relocation. Each of these presents a woman who engages in an anguished interior monologue in which she debates whether to undertake an action that she initially believes to be amoral, but to which she is driven by passion.

Scylla

The brief tale of Scylla opens book 8, much as Medea's narrative opened book 7, and her situation bears the closest similarity to that of Medea. As Jason came seeking the Golden Fleece, a source of power for Medea's father, likewise King Minos is a handsome and daring hero who has come to besiege

the kingdom of Nisus, Scylla's father. And Scylla, like Medea, finds herself intensely drawn by the sight of the enemy leader. As the power of Medea's father, Aeetes, depended on his possession of the Golden Fleece, similarly Nisus's kingship depends upon a magical lock of purple hair. Scylla resolves to cut this lock of her father's hair and present it to Minos, thereby betraying her father and handing over her city to the attacker.

Scylla's passion stirs her to contemplate a headlong rush to Minos's side (*impetus* [*Metam.* 8.39]). In her mind, she imagines leaping down into his camp from the tower whence she has watched him for six months or flying to him on wings:

O ego ter felix, si pennis lapsa per auras
Gnosiaci possem castris insistere regis.
(*Metam.* 8.51–2)

Thrice happy would I be if I had wings
to fly into the camp of the Cretan king.

But in fact she simply sits (*sedebat*) and gazes at him (8.38–42).

In Scylla's case the impasse to which her passion has brought her means not only that she is unable to rouse herself to action, but also that she is unable even to determine whether she is happy or sad: " 'laeter,' ait 'doleamne geri lacrimabile bellum, in dubio est' " "What should I feel about this dreadful war? Should I rejoice or grieve? I cannot say" (*Metam.* 8.44–5). In the brief internal debate that follows, however, Scylla develops several rationalizations for action, imagining why it will actually be a good thing to betray her city, including the justice of Minos's cause and the idea that by curtailing the war, she will be preventing bloodshed. As Tissol has noted, these specious arguments make a space for desire to inhabit, and Scylla determines to move boldly forward. Noting that what stands in the way of love (*obstaret* [8.75]) should simply be destroyed, she resolves to forge ahead, though fire and sword should bar her path (*ire per ignes et gladios ausim* [8.76–7]).

In fact, however, as Scylla notes, fire and sword do not block her path; it is only her father who stands in her way. This is the sole obstruction to desire that, she opines, any similarly determined girl would delight in destroying (*perdere gauderet* [*Metam.* 8.75]). She expresses the wish that she had no father (*di facerent, sine patre forem!* [8.72]), and it is clear that the cutting of her father's talismanic lock of hair is actually a symbolic murder of the father. Once she has decided to snip this lock, essentially the deed is done: her father and her city are betrayed. Minos, however, rejects her gift and herself, while nevertheless taking the proffered city.

Whereas the lovelorn Scylla merely passively contemplated Minos, the spurned Scylla actively casts herself after him, madly plunging into the sea and clinging to his departing ship. At this juncture antagonism between father

and daughter is revisited as Scylla's father, who now has been transformed into a bird, swoops down and attacks her, tearing at her with his hooked beak.⁷ In the metamorphic denouement of the tale, however, she too is transformed into a bird, thereby both escaping the attacks of her father and realizing her earlier wish to take flight.

Althea

Later on in the same book another tortured heroine debates her course of action at considerably greater length. This is Althea, mother of Meleager. Althea is driven not by erotic love, but by two conflicting loves and loyalties, one owed to her male child and another to her male siblings. This account follows upon the story of the Calydonian boar, in which Meleager is triumphant over the boar, but in a fray that subsequently breaks out he also kills his two uncles, Althea's brothers. When she learns of her brothers' deaths, and of her son's responsibility for their demise, she resolves to take vengeance on her son (Ovid characterizes her impulse as *poenae amor*, a passion for vengeance [*Metam.* 8.450]). Again, a magical element is involved in this tale. It happens that at his birth, the Fates decreed that the length of Meleager's life would be equal to the life of a particular wooden log. Althea snatched this log from the fire and has kept it safe in her possession. To avenge her brothers, she determines to burn it.

In Althea's case, the paralysis of will resulting from her conflicting passions is elaborated in great detail.⁸ She builds a fire, but she cannot bring herself to place the log upon it, stopping and starting, not just three times, but four:

tum conata quater flammis inponere ramum
coepta quater tenuit:

(*Metam.* 8.462–3)

And then she tried – four times – to thrust the branch
into the fire, and drew back each time.

Several times, Althea's dilemma is formulated as one of conflicting roles and names:

pugnat materque sororque,
et diversa trahunt unum duo nomina pectus.

(*Metam.* 8.463–4)

Mother and sister strove with one another
and those two names were tugging at one heart.

incipit esse tamen melior germana parente.

(*Metam.* 8.475)

The sister, nonetheless, began to win.

nunc animum pietas maternaque nomina frangunt.

(*Metam.* 8.508)

And now the mother in me melts my heart.

In Althea's case, we may easily perceive a kind of flawed syllogism underlying her dilemma:

A mother should not kill her son.

I am not a mother (but a grieving sister).

Therefore, I must kill my son.

This conclusion might have resulted from the melding of two distinct syllogisms, both of which Althea perceives as applicable to her:

A mother should not kill her son.

I am a mother.

Therefore, I should not kill my son.

A sister must avenge her brothers.

I am a sister.

Therefore, I must avenge my brothers.

Aristotle notes that in such cases where two arguments are (or appear to be) in contradiction, passion (*pathos*) may lead one to act as if under the influence of madness (*mania*).⁹

Althea's inability to act is explicitly compared to the plight of a ship caught in conflicting currents. In a brilliant rhetorical formulation, Ovid says that she repeatedly takes up and puts down her wrath (*ira* [*Metam.* 8.474]), yet surely one feels that *ira* is a synecdoche for the log that is synonymous with her son's life:

utque carina,

quam ventus ventoque rapit contrarius aestus,

vim geminam sentit paretque incerta duobus,

Thestias haud aliter dubiis affectibus errat

inque vices ponit positamque resuscitat iram.

(*Metam.* 8.470–4)

as when a ship,

driven in one direction by the wind

and in the other by an opposing tide,

feels those two equal forces struggling,

and yields herself uncertainly to both;

that was Althea, wandering between
wavering passions; now her burning rage
is stifled, now it's started up again.

One aspect of Althea's dilemma concerns not only her own conflicting kinship roles as mother and sister, but also the importance of the father/son relationship. She finds it unbearable that her husband, Oeneus, may still enjoy a son, while her own father, Thestius, has been deprived of both of his sons:

an felix Oeneus nato victore fruetur,
Thestius orbus erit? melius lugebitis ambo!
(*Metam.* 8.486–7)

Shall fortunate
Oeneus rejoice in his son's victory?
Shall Thestius mourn? Better you both grieve.

Ultimately, she will determine that Meleager must die, thereby destroying his father's hopes:

pereat sceleratus et ille
spemque patris regnumque trahat patriaeque ruinam!
(*Metam.* 8.497–8)

Let him die,
the criminal, and with him take the hopes
his father had for him and for his kingdom.

At last, she determines to go through with the act, and she invokes her brothers' *manes* (spirits). Yet, once again, she hesitates and refrains, unable to bring her hand to the deed:

quo rapior? fratres ignoscite matri!
Deficiunt ad coepta manus!
(*Metam.* 8.491–2)

What am I rushing into here?
Brothers, forgive a mother's wavering,
my hands rebel from what they have begun!

Her equivocation rises to a crescendo – *et cupio et nequeo*, “but I cannot accomplish what I wish for” (*Metam.* 8.506) – and it seems that she may never be able to escape the vortex of indecision and the inability to complete the movement that will both avenge her brothers and murder her son. Finally, in a posture of *contraposto* that provides a perfect physical analogue to the tergiversations of her soul, averting her eyes but extending her hand, she completes the act:

Dixit dextraque aversa trementi
 funereum torrem medios coniecit in ignes.
 (*Metam.* 8.511–12)

She turned away and with a trembling hand
 flung the funeral torch into the fire.

Having taken the step of throwing the log on the fire and thereby ending the life of her son, Althea proceeds at once to end her own life as well, driving a sword through her heart (*exegit poenas acto per viscera ferro* [8.532]).

Whereas Medea had debated two courses of action that literally entailed different destinations, and Scylla formulated sophistries that appeared to transform betrayal into benefit, in Althea's story Ovid has taken both the physical and the rhetorical analogues of passionate dilemma to a new plane. Althea's decision to take or not take a physical action (tossing the log on the fire) will have a remote consequence (causing her son to die) rather like what we are accustomed to in the virtual world. Ovid has abstracted the heroine's dilemma from a directly physical analogue (Medea will stay or sail away) to a mediated action (Althea's disposition of the log will have consequences for her son) that assumes a significance far beyond itself. Similarly, Althea's tale moves the conflict that she feels between her obligations as a mother and those as a sibling to a level of abstraction where it is not only loyalties or emotions, but also abstract designations, *nomina*, that vie with one another. The heroine's rumination on how disordered passion either causes or is reflected by a disorder in language itself will be reiterated and taken further by subsequent figures, particularly Byblis and Myrrha.

Byblis

The tragic tale of Byblis is introduced specifically as an exemplum to be avoided: *Byblis in exemplo est, ut ament concessa puellae*, "Byblis serves to illustrate a moral: that girls should not desire what's forbidden" (*Metam.* 9.454). Thus the narrator introduces an awareness of this narrative as a narrative, a tale intended for an audience and, more specifically, to effect a particular moral outcome in that audience. This self-consciousness about the transaction between the writer and the reader is particularly apt for the Byblis episode, for it mirrors the action of the narrative, in which Byblis herself becomes an extremely self-conscious writer.

This lover's deliberations with herself are the most extensive in the work. Furthermore, in a way that itself reflects her divided mind, her deliberations take place in two separate monologues. Having wavered over what course of action to take, and then taken it, Byblis then revisits that original decision and determines that she will proceed in a different way. Whereas the first episode is marked by a great deal of hesitation and questioning, stopping and starting, the

second appears straightforward: Byblis makes a decision and acts on it. To some extent, this becomes yet another stage in the initial quandary, another opportunity to change one's mind and backtrack. More significantly, however, once Byblis has decided to act, she is propelled madly forward, her crossing of the bounds of propriety ultimately leading her to traverse physical boundaries as well.

When Byblis recognizes, initially through the experience of very vivid erotic dreams, that she loves her brother in more than a sisterly way, she, like the other heroines we have seen, formulates novel rationalizations for her impulses, laments what stands in her way (*quod obest* [*Metam.* 9.494]), and utters the telltale exclamation, *Quo feror?*, "Where is this leading me?" (9.509), a signal in Ovid's text that the speaker, like an individual swept away in a flash flood, has lost the sense of agency and feels borne along disastrously by forces that she (or he) cannot control.¹⁰

For Byblis, even more so than for Althea, a great deal revolves around the power of names:

iam dominum appellat, iam nomina sanguinis odit:
Byblida iam mavult, quam se vocet ille sororem.

(*Metam.* 9.466–7)

She calls him "Master" now, and now detests
the thought that they are siblings, and prefers
that he should call her "Byblis" and not "Sister."

O ego, si liceat mutato nomine iungi,
(*Metam.* 9.487)

If I could be allowed to change my name
and marry you . . .

Althea wrestled with the mutually exclusive actions apparently mandated by her multiple designations as sister and as mother. Byblis, however, not content to be so constrained by her designation as sister, perceives that she must change the names themselves, must take control of the power of naming.

After a particularly specious argument, Byblis decides that she will indeed confess to her brother her incestuous love (*Metam.* 9.514). Love compels her (*coget amor* [9.515]), but shame restrains her (*pudor . . . tenebit* [9.515]) from speaking out. Trapped between speaking and not speaking, she chooses an alternative path: she will write a letter.

"ipsa petam. poterisne loqui? poterisne fateri?
coget amor, potero; vel, si pudor ora tenebit,
littera celatos arcana fatebitur ignes!"
Hoc placet, haec dubiam vicit sententia mentem.
(*Metam.* 9.514–17)

"I will go after him! Can you admit this?
 Will you be able to confess it?
 Compelled by love, I will be able to!
 If Shame should press her finger to my lips,
 a silent letter will confess my hidden feelings."
 This purpose pleases her and overcomes
 her mind's uncertainties.

The writing of Byblis's letter is a quite extraordinary event, and one that Ovid chooses to describe at length in vivid physical detail. The extended agony that we have just seen in Althea's case, as she steels herself for the dreadful act of infanticide, yet cannot bring herself to it, yet cannot abandon her plan – all this is condensed, in Ovid's portrayal of Byblis, into a kind of **paroxysm of indecision**:

incipit et dubitat; scribit damnatque tabellas;
 et notat et delet; mutat culpatque probatque
 inque vicem sumptas ponit positasque resumit.
 (Metam. 9.523–5)

She starts and stops. Sets down – and then condemns.
 Adds and deletes. Doubts; finds fault with; approves.
 She throws the tablet down, then picks it up!

The standoff between *audacia* and *pudor* (9.527) seems to render the poor girl almost palsied, but she does indeed proceed with her letter-writing:

in latus erigitur cubitoque innixa sinistro . . .
 et meditata manu componit verba trementi.
 (Metam. 9.518, 521)

Still in her bed,
 she lifts herself up and leans on her left elbow: . . .
 Her shaking hands set down the practiced words.

Expressing the effect of her passion to some extent with metaphors of motion, she notes that she fought at length (*pugnauitque diu* [Metam. 9.543]) against Cupid's weapons but was unable to flee (*effugere* [9.544]). Finally, she has been driven by overwhelming passion (*cogor* [9.546]; *cogeret ultimus ardor* [9.562]). The dire outcome destined for Byblis's letter is itself presaged by a kinetic sign: as the sister entrusts her missive to a servant for its delivery to her brother, it falls to the ground.

cum daret, elapsae manibus cecidere tabellae;
 omine turbata est, misit tamen.
 (Metam. 9.571–2)

She dropped the tablets she was giving him,
but sent them anyway – despite that omen.

When this ill-fated letter reaches its recipient, very much like Minos in the case of Scylla, Byblis's brother Caunus is horrified and repulsed by her overture. Informed of his reaction by the servant who delivered her letter, Byblis initially is frozen with terror:

palles audita, Bybli, repulsa,
et pavet obsessum glaciali frigore corpus.
(*Metam.* 9.581–2)

When she heard the news
of his rejection, Byblis lost all color
and shivered uncontrollably from chills.

Recovering quickly, however, she launches into a second monologue to plot a new strategy. From this point on, her earlier indecisiveness of action, as she starts and stops, inscribes and erases, takes up and puts down her writing tablet, is essentially reversed. **No longer trapped in indecision, she now propels herself forward, tragically, into immediate and indeed ceaseless action:**

vincetur! repetendus erit, nec taedia coepti
ulla mei capiam, dum spiritus iste manebit.
(*Metam.* 9.616–17)

He will be overcome! I will pursue him
once more, and not give up while I have breath!

iamque palam est demens, inconcessamque fatetur
spem veneris, siquidem patriam invisosque penates
deserit, et profugi sequitur vestigia fratris.
(*Metam.* 9.638–40)

Her madness unconcealed now, she confesses
the hope of her forbidden love, and flees
her homeland and its now-detested hearth,
and sets out after her self-exiled brother.

She relentlessly importunes her brother, who finally flees from his homeland in despair. Yet Byblis continues to pursue, her passion leading to a mad and frenzied flight across the earth, until she finally drops in exhaustion and is transformed into a fountain, still endlessly flowing.

Iphis

Following directly on the tale of Byblis's impossible love in Ovid's text is the story of yet another impossible love, that of Iphis. Byblis's erotic object choice was inappropriate because it was her brother; Ovid represents Iphis's choice as equally hopeless, because she is a woman in love with another woman. Iphis finds herself in this predicament because she has been disguised as a male all her life. Her mother (on the advice of the goddess Isis) raised her this way because had her true gender been known, she would have been put to death at birth as an unwanted female child. Iphis's father, Ligdus, had mandated exposure if his wife should give birth to a female child. The father is successfully deceived, however, and he, believing his child to be a son, betroths him to a young woman, Ianthe – a particularly poignant situation because Iphis has in fact become enamored of this young woman.

Iphis reflects upon her dilemma in ways very similar to the other akratic heroines. **She perceives herself to be trapped in an impossible situation and draws a series of analogies**, as do Byblis and Myrrha. However, whereas Byblis and Myrrha seek to sanction their illicit passions by reference to the behavior of the gods or animals, Iphis finds no such anodyne. Even among the animals, she laments, a passion like hers is unknown.

The inability to proceed is very concretely represented in the narrative by the repeated attempts of Iphis's mother to stall and delay the wedding that the father has arranged. Despite the ostensibly hopeless situation, however, this is one of the rare narratives in the poem, indeed perhaps the only one, in which metamorphosis appears to provide an unequivocally positive outcome. Through the miraculous intervention of the goddess Isis, Iphis is metamorphosed into the male whom her father Ligdus and betrothed Ianthe believed her to be, and she is united with her beloved. This extraordinarily positive outcome is quite literally represented in the form of progress: the initial sign of Iphis's transformation is the fact that as she approaches the wedding ceremony, which can no longer be put off, she begins to march forward with the longer stride of the male gait (*sequitur comes Iphis euntem, quam solita est, maiore gradu* [Metam. 9.786–7]).

Myrrha

Even more so than in the case of Byblis, Ovid's narrator prefaces the story of Myrrha with warnings about its dreadful nature. So horrible is the story, the poet avers, that he even urges his own work be left unread or receive no credence:

dira canam: procul hinc natae, procul este parentes,
aut, mea si vestras mulcebunt carmina mentes,

desit in hac mihi parte fides, nec credite factum;
vel, si credetis, facti quoque credite poenam!

(*Metam.* 10.300–3)

I sing of dire events: depart from me, daughters,
depart from me, fathers; or, if you find my poems charming,
believe that I lie, believe these events never happened;
or, if you believe that they did, then believe they were punished.

As several of the Ovidian heroines have wished away the existence of their progenitors, in this case the narrator's voice proclaims that it would have been better if Cinyras's daughter had never been born:

si sine prole fuisset,
inter felices Cinyras potuisset haberi.

(*Metam.* 10.298–9)

if he had only been childless,
Cinyras would be regarded as one of the blessed.

At a later point in the narrative Myrrha will also express the wish that she were not the daughter of Cinyras (*non essem Cinyrae, Cinyrae concumbere possem* [*Metam.* 10.338]). In another paradoxical formulation the narrator asserts that while it is a crime to hate one's parent, love like this is an even greater crime:

scelus est odisse parentem;
hic amor est odio maius scelus!

(*Metam.* 10.314–15)

Hating a parent is wicked, but even more wicked
than hatred is this kind of love.

Unlike Byblis, Myrrha is not deceived about her own incestuous passion; she knows it for what it is. Indeed, her first-quoted words in the text are symptomatic: *Quo mente feror?* "What have I begun?" (*Metam.* 10.320). The troubled interior monologue that follows is, in her case, a series of rhetorical riffs on the paradoxical aspects of her situation, variants of what both Byblis and Iphis have articulated. Myrrha dwells at particular length on the confusion of names that incest threatens, as mother and daughter become rivals, and the incestuous mother is sister of her son, and so on.¹¹

It is not directly in this interior monologue that Myrrha fully displays the syndrome of conflicted passion that we have been examining, but rather in the narrator's description (in the third person) of the sleepless night that follows for her. As is true for the other lovers, shame and desire war within

Myrrha (*pudetque et cupit* [Metam. 10.371–2]), and she does not know how to proceed (*quid agat, non invenit* [10.372]). Similar to the metaphorical description of Althea as a ship caught in conflicting eddies, Myrrha is compared to a great tree, struck by an axe, balanced precariously before crashing down in one direction or another:

utque securi
 saucia trabs ingens, ubi plaga novissima restat,
 quo cadat, in dubio est omnique a parte timetur,
 sic animus vario labefactus vulnere nutat
 huc levis atque illuc momentaque sumit utroque,
 nec modus et requies, nisi mors, reperitur amoris.
 (Metam. 10.372–7)

She wavers,
 just like a tree that the axe blade has girdled completely,
 when only the last blow remains to be struck, and the woodsman
 cannot predict the direction it's going to fall in,
 she, after so many blows to her spirit, now totters,
 now leaning in one, and now in the other, direction,
 nor is she able to find any rest from her passion
 save but in death.

Although Myrrha settles on a plan to end her life by hanging, she is found and rescued by her nurse, who wheedles out of the demented girl the source of her agony. Again Myrrha is caught, unable to confess or to remain silent (*conataque saepe fateri saepe tenet vocem* [Metam. 10.420–1]). The nurse, as such stories always go, proves to be a resourceful procurer and in fact arranges a means for Myrrha to realize her desire and come to her father's bed under cover of darkness. Reminiscent of the omen of Byblis's fallen tablets, Myrrha thrice stumbles on the threshold of her crime, both literally and metaphorically: *ter pedis offensi signo est revocata*, "thrice Myrrha stumbles and stops each time at the omen" (10.452). Yet she crosses the threshold and goes forward to the crime.

Father and daughter cohabit not once, but many nights. Ultimately, Cinyras wants to know the identity of his mysterious young lover (*Cinyras avidus cognoscere amantem post tot concubitus* [Metam. 10.473]). He calls for light and, with a speed enhanced by grammatical zeugma, "recognizes at once his daughter and his crime" (*inlato lumine vidit et scelus et natam* [10.473–4]). His reaction is equally immediate: he draws his sword to kill her (*pendenti nitidum vagina deripit ensem* [10.475]). Myrrha flees, and she succeeds in escaping the murderous intention of her father (*intercepta neci est* [10.477]).

Myrrha's escape bears comparison to Scylla's in that both daughters are spared attack at their fathers' hands, and her mad flight, ended only by

exhaustion, recalls that of Byblis. Another striking similarity between the tales of Scylla and Myrrha is that the curse that Minos hurled at Scylla, that she might be banished from the world, denied both land and sea (*di te submoveant, o nostri infamia saeculi, orbe suo, tellusque tibi pontusque negetur!* [*Metam.* 8.97–8]), finds an echo in Myrrha's final words. This time, however, the possibility of being removed beyond the known world becomes not a curse, but a prayer, Myrrha's own petition for herself:

ne violem vivosque superstes
mortuaque extinctos, ambobus pellite regnis
mutataeque mihi vitamque necemque negate!
(*Metam.* 10.485–7)

Lest I should outrage the living by my survival,
or the dead by my dying, I do not turn away
from the terrible sentence that my misbehavior deserves;
drive me from both of these kingdoms, transform me
wholly, so that both life and death are denied me.

Passion, progress, and progeny

We have noted that each of these six women encounters an impasse when her passion comes into conflict with her rational assent to social mores. This impasse is real; there is in fact no way for the heroines to reconcile their desires with the cultural protocols that they believe, at some level, to be rational. Hence their akratic predicament. But there are further similarities among these six scenarios.

Each heroine resorts to the power of language as a means of freeing her from the perceived constraints of her circumstances; in some cases, it is language as incantation (Medea), in others as prayer (Iphis), but most frequent is the attempt to regain agency through the power of redescription. The akratic character's desire to escape the constraints of kinship, ethnicity, or gender through the reassignment of names and designations is not unrelated to her construction of faulty syllogisms, in the Aristotelian analysis ("This holds true for X, but I am not X . . ."). The possibility of renaming is also obviously related to metamorphosis itself, which may make of one a different entity entirely. In a sense, the heroines attempt to transform themselves, to effect their own metamorphosis, through the power of language. In one case, that of the prayer for Iphis, this metamorphosis will be successful. In the majority of instances, however, these figures' exercise of language in a transformative effort results in the unmaking both of themselves and of the family.

A number of broad structural relations connect the dilemmas, choices, and outcomes in the tales of these six women. Two of the characters, Medea and Scylla, betray their fathers and their cities for the sake of a handsome

stranger. Another two, Byblis and Myrrha, attempt incest – Byblis (unsuccessfully) with her brother, and Myrrha (successfully) with her father. These two, paired narratives represent extreme end points along an axis of exogamy and endogamy. By pursuing incestuous relationships, Byblis and Myrrha exemplify an unacceptably strong form of endogamy, wishing to marry not just within the cultural group but within the conjugal family.¹² Medea and Scylla appear to have made less disastrous choices, in their desire for exogamous partners, but they too have gone to extremes. In both their cases, the action that serves as a declaration of love is simultaneously the betrayal of the father and his kingdom.

At first glance, the stories of Althea and Iphis do not show the surface similarities that render Medea and Scylla, Byblis and Myrrha, almost doublets of one another. Yet both Althea's and Iphis's tales involve a mother's miraculous saving of a newborn child – an action that is revisited and questioned when the child becomes an adult. Telethusa's decision to raise her daughter Iphis as a male is miraculously affirmed by Iphis's metamorphosis into a male.¹³ In stark contrast, Althea's earlier salvation of her son is reversed, as she determines that she must destroy him in order to avenge her brothers (and, ultimately, her father).

Among the many structural relations that connect these six tales, one of the most surprising is that all (save that of Byblis)¹⁴ involve the notion of intrafamilial murder, either parent killing child or child killing parent. If Medea presents the paradigm of the akratic heroine, she also embodies the epitome of murderous intrafamilial conflict. Medea not only murders her own children but also engineers the murder of Jason's uncle Pelias at the hands of his own daughters, and she is very narrowly prevented from arranging the death of Theseus at his father's hands. In the narrative of Scylla, although daughter attempts to murder father and father returns the favor, both killings are deflected via metamorphosis. Althea, albeit indirectly, kills her son. Iphis's father decreed her death (although he is circumvented). And Myrrha's father, horrified by his complicity in crime with his daughter, attempts to kill her.

In his study of tragic drama, psychoanalyst and critic Bennett Simon has highlighted the centrality of intergenerational violence in that genre in ways that are relevant to these tragic narratives in Ovid. Simon's analysis alerts the reader to "a sense of terrible warfare within the family" in which "the family is at risk of destroying itself, either by literally destroying its own progeny or by making propagation impossible" (Simon 1988: 2). Although the situations of Ovid's heroines appear to involve erotic passion rather than hatred, they result almost uniformly in a lethal relationship between the generations. And of course metamorphosis itself often represents a radical alternative to propagation, snatching the metamorphosed individual out of the generative cycle and creating a new species, not through reproduction, but by fixating him or her as the instantiation of that species. Simon notes as well that the

narrative impasse that pits the generations of the family against one another is also often reflected on the formal level of language as “an anxiety and concern about generating and propagating stories . . . an uneasiness about storytelling” (Simon 1988: 4). This anxiety around the use of language and storytelling, too, is prevalent in these six Ovidian tales, dramatically enacted in Byblis's fraught letter-writing and culminating in the poet's preface to the story of Myrrha, when he takes the extraordinary step of urging his audience not to read it. “Twisted and interrupted narration, including silences,” Simon argues, “signifies and is consonant with twisted and interrupted generational relationships” (Simon 1988: 8).

In the Ovidian universe, progress is hard-won, and passion, although it may have a creative dimension, more often threatens to destroy. The fundamental cosmogonic progression from chaos to cosmos, for example, is not decisively accomplished but must be reinstituted several times, as the passions – first of Jove's anger, second of Phaethon's pride – cause reversion to a chaotic state. The most basic metric of progress in the *Metamorphoses* is that of chronology, signaled by Ovid's grounding the poem in cosmogony at its opening and in the contemporary reign of Augustus at its close. Although there is by no means a strict chronological progress between these two points, in part because no such fixed timeline for mythology exists, by and large Ovid's tales follow a generational progression (Galinsky 1975: 85). In the six narratives that we have been examining, however, Ovid suggests that the passions with which these heroines contend have the potential not just to impede forward movement, but, more tragically, to dismantle the most basic dimension of human progress: the succession of the generations.

Notes

- 1 L.C. Curran (1978) counts “some fifty or so occurrences of forcible rape, attempted rape, or sexual extortion hardly distinguishable from rape.” Cf. Segal 1969, esp. “Metamorphosis and the Moral Order,” pp. 86–94.
- 2 The paradigmatic case is the first transformation in the epic, that of Lycaon, whose predatory nature as a human being is manifested in his transformation into a wolf (*fit lupus et veteris servat vestigia formae* [*Metam.* 1.237]).
- 3 An early example occurs when Jupiter is confronted by Juno, who suspects the truth about Io, even though Jove has already transformed his paramour into a cow. When Juno asks her husband to hand over this bovine creature, *pudor* persuades one way, *amor* another (*pudor est, qui suadeat illinc, hinc dissuadet amor* [*Metam.* 1.618–19]). On the human plane, *pudor* is the force that, for example, restrains the young Medea's impulse to embrace Jason (*obstitit incepto pudor* [7.146]); in Byblis, *pudor* vies with *audacia* (9.527); in Myrrha with desire (*pudetque et cupit* [10.371–2]).
- 4 Medea and Scylla, for example, seem to be narrative doublets, as each betrays her father for a handsome stranger. The incestuous desires of Byblis and Myrrha have obvious similarities. Myrrha and Iphis utilize almost diametrically opposed

- arguments, as one rationalizes and the other repudiates her desires by reference to the behavior of the animals. Meanwhile, Byblis offers exactly the same rationalizing arguments as those of Myrrha, but looks to the gods rather than the animals as exemplars.
- 5 Cf. Medea's echo of the speech of Euripides' Medea, as noted above, and Myrrha's echo of Phaidra's dramatic action in her attempted suicide and subsequent confession to the nurse.
 - 6 With a few exceptions, all translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are those of C. Martin (2004), occasionally modified. For the Latin text, I have used mainly the edition of W.S. Anderson (1972–97), though I have not followed him in capitalizing the initial letter of each line and have sometimes changed his punctuation.
 - 7 Scylla had already anticipated capital punishment at the hands of her father (*Metam.* 8.126–7).
 - 8 Tissol (1997: 14–15) sensitively examines Ovid's use of paradox in this tale.
 - 9 In a number of instances Ovid alludes to his heroines being driven mad by their passion. Of Medea: *ratione furorem vincere non poterat* (*Metam.* 7.10–11); of Scylla: *vix sua, vix sanae virgo Niseia compos mentis erat* (8.35–6); of Byblis: *dubiaeque ita mente* (9.473); *incertae tanta est discordia mentis* (9.630); *tum vero maestam tota Miletida mente defecisse ferunt, tum vero a pectore vestem deripuit planxitque suos furibunda Iacertos, iamque palam est demens* (9.635–9).
 - 10 Cf. *Metam.* 10.320 (Myrrha) and *Ars* 3.667 (the *praeceptor amoris* expresses dismay that he is letting women in on men's secrets).
 - 11 The locus classicus for such confusion in kinship relations is, of course, the tale of Oedipus, as rendered in Sophocles' tragedies on the theme.
 - 12 Although neither Byblis nor Myrrha marries her kinsman, both express this as their desire (Byblis: *Metam.* 9.487–94; Myrrha: 10.356–64).
 - 13 The intervention of the goddess Isis, on whose promises Telethusa had relied, is certainly at stake here. Behind this uniquely positive denouement in the *Metamorphoses*, however, lies a unique relationship to the father in the tale. Ovid's text makes an extraordinary effort to portray the father, Ligdus, in a positive light. Despite the fact that he would have exposed and killed his daughter at birth, he weeps along with his wife even as he gives her this order (*Metam.* 9.670–82), and he is explicitly characterized as blameless (*inculpata* [*Metam.* 9.673]).
 - 14 Somewhat like Scylla, who wishes that she had no father, Byblis identifies a previous generation as the source of her problem: if she and Caunus did not share the same grandparents, she avers, her amorous suit would be acceptable (*Metam.* 9.491). That grandfather is the river Maeander, which, as Ovid reminds us in introducing the tale, continually turns back upon itself (*totiens redeuntis eodem* [9.451]). This is, of course, just what his granddaughter Byblis has done by directing her passion back upon her own twin brother rather than outward, resulting in the impasse of incestuous passion rather than the progress of generations.

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