

1 Pursuing Daphne

Purple notes

At the center of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* lie violated bodies. Sometimes male, at other times female, a few of these ruined forms elude the grasp of gender and its reductive nominations. Fractured and fragmented bodies from Ovid's poem cast long, broken shadows over European literary history. Sometimes, these shadows fall back on the poem that gave them shape. As Quintilian put it when deliberating the frequently heard charge that Ovid's manner is too ingenious, there is "some excuse" for his invention, since so much of it is required if this poem's author is to "assemble" such extremely diverse things into "the appearance of a unified body" ("res diversissimas in speciem unius corporis colligentem").¹ That a poem fascinated with the fracturing of bodies should have been passed down through the middle ages and into the Renaissance, thanks to Lactantius, predominantly in fragments, a reordered collection of pieces torn away from their original arrangement, is one of the ironies of literary history that continues to echo and ramify.² For it is not merely that the body's violation is one of the poem's prominent thematic concerns. As Philomela's severed "lingua" mutely testifies – her "murmuring tongue" designating both the bodily organ and "language" as such – dismemberment informs Ovid's reflections not only on corporeal form, but linguistic and poetic as well.³ An elaborately self-reflexive poem, the *Metamorphoses* traces, in minute and sometimes implacable detail, the violent clashes between the poem's language and the many bodies of which it speaks. In this book, I contend that the violated and fractured body is the place where, for Ovid, aesthetics and violence converge, where the usually separated realms of the rhetorical and the sexual most insistently meet.

I take my cue in the following chapters from Philomela's severed *lingua*, "murmuring on the dark earth." In them, I analyze the complex, often violent, connections between body and voice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and several Renaissance texts indebted to it. In addition to

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Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, I read lyric, narrative, and dramatic works: Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* (1359–74), John Marston's *The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image* (1598), Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) and *The Winter's Tale* (1610–11). My general purpose is twofold: to interrogate the deeply influential connections between rhetoric and sexuality in Ovid's text; and to demonstrate the foundational, yet often disruptive, force that his tropes for the voice exert on early modern poetry, particularly on early modern representations of the self, the body, and erotic life. After demonstrating the complex connections between Ovid's rhetorical strategies in the *Metamorphoses* and his distinctive way of portraying the human voice, I turn to works by Petrarch, Marston, and Shakespeare in which tropes for the voice allow each author to restage, in his own way, many of the dilemmas central to Ovid's representation of subjectivity, sexuality, and gender. I do not try to offer an exhaustive account of Ovid's presence in early modern poetry. Others have already attempted that greater task.⁴ Rather, I have selected a few prominent texts to consider in detail, texts in which Renaissance writers are as captivated in their turn, as was Ovid, by the idea of the voice. At the same time, I have chosen texts in which desecrated and dismembered bodies are imagined to find a way to signify, to call us to account for the labile, often violent, relationship between rhetoric and sexuality as it was codified, transmitted, and rewritten in an Ovidian mode. In the chapters on Petrarch, Marston, and Shakespeare, I argue that Ovid's rhetoric of the body – in particular his fascination with scenes of alienation from one's own tongue – profoundly troubles Renaissance representations of authorship as well as otherwise functional conceptions about what counts as the difference between male and female experience.

To recall something of the extraordinary cultural reach of Ovidian narrative, and therefore something of my reasons for returning to analyze this legacy, I should observe here that Ovid's stories fascinate contemporary feminists writing about female subversion and resistance much as they once did medieval and early modern writers preoccupied with stories about love and male poetic achievement.⁵ As the story of Philomela's tongue should make clear, an important hallmark of Ovidian narrative – by which I mean not only Ovid's poem but also the many European texts that borrow from it – is its unerring ability to bring to light the often occluded relationships between sexuality, language, and violence. The poems arising from that reflection have been at once deeply influential (in poetic practice) and sorely neglected (in critical practice). Such neglect of the foundational yet unsettling consequences of Ovidian rhetoric has come about, in part, because when viewed from the

perspective of the history of classical scholarship, it is only in recent years that literary critics have reinvigorated a serious study of rhetoric by analyzing the ways that various practices and forms of writing raise difficult epistemological, ethical, and political questions. Much of this theoretical work has just begun to reach criticism of the *Metamorphoses*.⁶ The habit of treating Ovid's stories piecemeal, rather than in light of the poem's larger narrative strategies and self-reflexive fantasies, may have furthered such neglect. Selective reading informs not only literary appropriations of Ovidian material but critical reception of it, too. As one critic observes, because we inherit the *Metamorphoses* as a kind of collection or anthology, "the temptation to read Ovid's tales and not Ovid's epic is very strong."⁷

The opening chapter therefore situates several stories central to feminist criticism – among them, Philomela, Medusa, Echo, Arachne, the Bacchae – in the context of Ovid's larger narrative and rhetorical strategies. It argues that Ovid's penchant for ventriloquizing female voices occupies a crucial, if mysterious, place in the *Metamorphoses* as a whole. But I open this study with the example of Philomela's amputated, "murmuring" tongue because it so succinctly captures the characteristic way that Ovid uses stories about bodily violation to dramatize language's vicissitudes. Other bodies will be put to similar use as the Renaissance authors examined here revisit Ovid's poem. Fantasies of fragmentation permeate Ovidian narrative, and they do more than convey a message about the body's vulnerability or, more importantly, the violence that subtends the discursive production of what counts as the difference in sexual difference. Scenes of dismemberment and rape, of course, do convey both of these culturally laden meanings and I endeavor to keep them in mind. But as Philomela's tongue suggests, violated bodies also provide Ovid with the occasion to reflect on the power and limitations of language as such. Before being cut out, for instance, Philomela's tongue speaks about rape as a mark of the difference between what can and cannot be spoken: she says "I will move even rocks to share knowledge" of an act that is, literally, *ne-fas*, or "unspeakable" ("et conscia saxa mouebo" 6.547; and "nefandos" line 540, derived from the verb *fari*, "to speak or talk"). Of Ovid's representation of the rape itself – "and speaking the unspeakable, he overwhelmed her by force, a virgin and all alone" ("fassusque nefas et uirginem et unam / ui superat" lines 524–25) – Elissa Marder points out that Ovid's text tellingly "insists on the convergence between speaking the crime and doing the deed. One cannot speak 'rape,' or speak about rape, merely in terms of a physical body. The sexual violation of the woman's body is itself embedded in discursive and symbolic structures."⁸ When Tereus "speaks the unspeakable,"

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language becomes a productive, violent act that is compared to rape even as the act of rape resists representation.

This book attends to the many places in Ovidian narrative where the idea of a speaking body – often literalized as the figure of a moving tongue – becomes a single, memorable image that brings together the usually separate realms of aesthetics and violence, representation and the body, language and matter. Further brief elaboration of the way Ovid tells the story of Philomela’s tongue will therefore be a useful way to introduce the problems guiding the analyses that follow. In the middle of his story, the narrator begins to stutter over the word “unspeakable.” Ovid’s iterated *nefas* signals a kind of narrative impasse, a fixation on the poem’s troubled failure to speak about an event that defies speech. *Nefas* stresses that all we get, from Philomela or the narrator, are mere words and signs about an event that escapes words and signs. Resistance to narration, however, only induces further narrative. Thus when Tereus literalizes his “unspeakable” act by cutting out her tongue, giving her an “os mutum” line 574 – literally, “speechless mouth” – Philomela finds recourse in art, weaving a tapestry to represent the crime. “Great pain” begets in her the very “talent” to which Ovid elsewhere often lays claim as a poet (“ingenium,” line 575). She sits at a “barbaric loom” (“barbarica tela” line 576) that is, etymologically speaking, a loom of incomprehensible utterance (derived from the onomatopoeic Greek word, βάρβαρος, for the meaningless sounds on other people’s tongues). On such an instrument, Philomela manages to weave threads that are “skillful,” “expert,” or “practiced” (“stamina ... callida,” line 576), turning her body’s bloody mutilation into “purple marks” on a white background (“purpureasque notas,” line 577). Like her narrator, Philomela struggles at the limits of representation: where the narrator stutters at the effort to turn an unspeakable act into verse, Philomela is imagined to coax an expert weaving out of an unintelligible, hence “barbarous,” instrument.

The work that Philomela produces, moreover, amplifies the problems raised by her “moving” tongue: her tapestry takes up where her tongue left off, telling us that in this story, presumed distinctions between language and action, the speakable and the unspeakable, aesthetics and violence verge on collapse. On her tapestry, Philomela weaves a set of purple “notae,” a noun that, as Marder observes, suggests several divergent yet crucial meanings. *Nota* may signify a written character – a mark of writing used to represent “a sound, letter, or word.” It may signify the “vestige” or “trace” of something, like a footprint. It may also designate a mark of stigma or disgrace, particularly an identifying brand on the body. And in the plural form used in Ovid’s narrative,

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“notae,” can, by extension, also suggest “a person’s features.”⁹ Artist of her own trauma, Philomela sits down to translate something – an event, a body – that cannot be translated: rape is an “unspeakable” sound; the medium of its communication, a “barbaric” loom; the “notes” that represent it, neither letter, mark, nor physical imprint. Philomela’s “purple notes” on a white background hover somewhere between being a self-portrait, a physical remnant of the crime (like a bruise), and a stigmatizing “brand or tattoo” that re-marks the violated body it was supposed merely to represent.¹⁰ This weaving, in its turn, proves every bit as persuasive as the tongue Philomela once hoped would “move the very rocks to consciousness” (6.547). It moves her sister, Procne, to terrifying action. The tapestry then extends the confusion between the “speakable and the unspeakable” to another person (again, “fasque nefasque,” 6.585) because the crime conveyed in these marks resists the “indignant words” Procne seeks with her “questing tongue” (“uerbaque quaerenti satis indignantia linguae / defuerunt,” 6.584–5).

All the aspects of language enacted in this story of Philomela’s rape and mutilation are not necessarily compatible, though each fleetingly shades into the other. Through her murmuring tongue and bruised marks Ovid invites us to reflect on the power and limitations of language in its several overlapping functions: instrumental, poetic, and rhetorical. As an instrument of communication or expression, language is necessary but inadequate to its task. As a sign hovering between literal and figural meanings, Philomela’s “lingua” or “tongue” functions as a productive yet potentially violent distortion of the world (and body) it claims to represent. On Philomela’s loom, signs become objects of aesthetic appreciation. And as a rhetorical tool, language wields enormous power, although its force may, without warning, exceed the control of the one who uses it. The figure of Philomela’s severed “lingua” and her bruised “purple notes,” moreover, refuse any final distinction between language and the body, or between ideas and matter. Ovid’s narrator knowingly poises his text on a divide between what can and cannot be represented, aesthetic form and violence, poetic “ingenium” and barbarism, language and the body. And he mercilessly draws our attention, all the while, to the fading of that divide. Disquieting erasures such as these characterize the *Metamorphoses*: in Ovid’s rhetoric of the body, poetic and rhetorical self-reflexivity can become “grotesquely violent and yet intensely moving.”¹¹

When I refer to Ovid’s “rhetoric of the body,” I mean not merely to designate a language that describes the body, but to draw attention to several other, more elusive issues. First, I mean to suggest that in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid refuses commonplace distinctions between the

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body's ability to speak and its ability to act: the narrator continually draws attention to such mysterious and complex images as that of Philomela's "moving" tongue. Capturing in one figure a Roman commonplace for the aims of rhetorical speech (*mouere*, to "move" one's audience), Ovid tells us that her tongue has motion and that it "moves" those who listen. Rhetoric, in the story of Philomela's tongue and tapestry, means taking the idea of symbolic action very seriously. It means acknowledging that the body is both a bearer of meaning as well as a linguistic agent, a place where representation, materiality, and action collide.

Second, by Ovid's "rhetoric of the body," I am referring to the sense conveyed throughout the *Metamorphoses* that our understanding and experience of the body itself is shaped by discursive and rhetorical structures. Ever alert to language's shaping force on what we know about our own body and the bodies of others, Ovid's poem frequently dramatizes in minute detail the action and effects of this productive, at times even performative, process. In it, the mark of an image, sign or figure repeatedly falls between the body and a character's perception of it. Between Narcissus and self-understanding falls an *imago*; between Pygmalion and womankind, a *simulacrum*; between Perseus and the body of the Gorgon, a protective, mirroring shield; between Actaeon's experience and understanding of his swiftly changing shape, a strange sound that "neither human nor any deer could make." Representation, in fact, becomes foundational to how we perceive the human race: the narrator imagines new beings arising from the stones of Deucalion and Pyrrha, but between our eyes and the bodies of these new humans arise forms "such as statues just begun out of marble, not sharply defined and very like roughly blocked out images" ("uti de marmore coepta / non exacta satis rudibusque simillima signis" 1.405–06). I call this introduction "Pursuing Daphne" in order to suggest the way that the form of the body – Daphne's sense for *figura* – both inspires and eludes the capture of language – Apollo's sense for *figura*. Like Daphne, the bodies in Ovidian narrative take shape under the formative pressure of figural language. And yet something about those bodies remains, like Daphne, forever fugitive.

To understand why Ovidian poetry insists on drawing such close connections between language, sexuality, and violence, this book directs attention back to the often overlooked scene of writing in the *Metamorphoses*. By "scene of writing" I am referring to two, related, matters: the poem's systematic self-reference, its complex engagement with its own figural language and with the fact of having been a written rather than a spoken epic; and its equally complex engagement with the materiality of reading and writing practices in the Roman world. Symbolically and

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historically resonant, this scene of writing, I contend, left indelible traces not only on Ovid's representation of the body but also on many of the later European works derived from his epic. The Ovidian narrator habitually emphasizes the poetic, rhetorical, and corporeal resonance to the various "forms" (*formae*) and "figures" (*figurae*) about which the poem speaks, deriving many of the *Metamorphoses'* erotic and violent scenes out of the entanglement of poetic and bodily "form." For example, Ovid's interest in the double nature of Daphne's beautiful "figure," for example, turns a story of rape into one of the first book's successive stories about the birth of certain poetic forms (in this case, epideictic). Similarly, the vacillation between the literal and figural meanings of "lingua" allows Philomela's mutilated tongue to tell another, related story about the uneasy relationship between a body and what is usually taken to be its "own" language. The specific metalinguistic resonance of one memorable scene in the *Metamorphoses* has grown somewhat dim, perhaps, because of material changes in practices of writing. But in Book 10, Pygmalion's statue undergoes a change from marble to flesh by passing through a stage like wax growing soft under pressure from the thumb:

subsidit digitis ceditque, ut Hymettia sole
cera remollescit tractataque pollice multas
flectitur in facies ipsoque fit utilis usu. (10.284–86)

The ivory yields in his fingers, just as Hymettian wax grows soft in the sun and molded by the thumb is changed into many forms and becomes usable through use itself.

In a poem that habitually renders its interest in the "forms" and "figures" of its own language as erotic stories, it is no accident that this simile for the ivory maiden's animation refers to an actual tool for writing in the Roman world. As the narrator of the *Ars Amatoria* suggests in another erotic context when advising lovers to be cautious when counterfeiting, wax was the malleable surface used to coat writing tablets: "nor is it safe to write an answer unless the wax is quite smoothed over, lest one tablet hold two hands" (3.495–96). Ovid conveys Pygmalion's rapt attention to the body taking shape like wax under his fingers with a metaphor as weighted, in his day, as was the one Shakespeare uses for *Much Ado's* Hero, stained with slander: "O, she is fall'n / Into a pit of ink" (4.1.139–40).

Renaissance authors, particularly those educated according to a humanist model of imitating classical precursors, were extremely sensitive to Ovid's rhetorically self-conscious verse. An important phase in the history of rhetoric is embedded in the subtle details of Renaissance

returns to Ovidian narrative. Each chapter therefore focuses on the particular problems raised by a later writer's equally self-conscious revision of Ovidian rhetoric. Because of Ovid's frequent metapoetic, metalinguistic, and metarhetorical turns, however, he has often been condemned as an author marred by rhetorical excess, insincerity, and misplaced ingenuity.¹² It is therefore a revealing index of a shift in both taste and critical practice that *Titus Andronicus* – the Renaissance play that most consciously endeavors to bring the violated Ovidian body to the stage while rivalling his self-reflexive word play and rhetorical inventiveness – was once an embarrassment in the Shakespearean canon and yet has become, in recent years, the object of critical fascination.¹³ One notable speech in that play, of course, prominently leans on a truly Ovidian juxtaposition of aesthetics and violence. When Marcus sees the tongueless and handless Lavinia before him, raped and mutilated because her attackers have read Ovid's story of Philomela, he speaks about her as if she were an aesthetic object, a marred beauty best understood in terms of the dismembering rhetoric of the *blason*. Pulled apart by the language of lips, tongues, hands, and fingers, hemmed in like Lucrece by Shakespeare's Petrarchan tropes of red and white, Lavinia endures yet one more male reading. She hears her "crimson . . . blood" likened to "a bubbling fountain stirr'd with wind" that flows between "rosed lips;" she can signify very little as her cousin remembers the way her "lily hands" once trembled "like aspen leaves upon a lute" (2.4.22–47). Borrowing from Ovid's text as the two rapists did before him, Marcus reads Lavinia as more than Philomela: with her "body bare / Of her two branches," she exceeds Ovid's Daphne; the "heavenly harmony" of her former singing betters Ovid's Orpheus (2.4.17–18 and 44–51). Even Lavinia's reluctance to be interpreted yet again by the book written across her wounded body – her apparent attempt to flee when Marcus first sees her – is immediately, relentlessly pulled back to the story of Philomela. In a play dedicated to enacting the literal and figural pressure of the *Metamorphoses*, Marcus' demand, "Who is this? my niece, that flies away so fast?" (2.4.11) chillingly recalls Philomela's final flight, as a bird, to escape Tereus' angry beak ("petit . . . siluas . . . prominet inmodicum pro longa cuspidē rostrum" *Metamorphoses* 6.667–73). Given the supremely literary origin for the horrible events written on Lavinia's body, Marcus' speech perpetuates the violence it haltingly tries to comprehend. But it does more than exemplify the play's larger fascination with language's devastations. A point of rupture in the history of literary taste, the speech has also become a kind of touchstone for each critic's sense of the relation between text and the social world, aesthetic form and cultural violence.

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In a similarly well-known, if ostensibly more refined, poem that involves critical in ethical judgment, Ronsard captures in one word the collapse between language, a sense of aesthetics, and sexual violence that characterizes all the texts in this study. Wishing he were like Jove, transformed into the bull that raped Europa, the love poet aspires to write about a beauty that is “ravishing.” In so doing, the poem imports Ovid’s story of rape into its sense of its own attractions:

Je voudroy bien en toreau blandissant
 Me transformer pour finement la prendre,
 Quand elle va par l’herbe la plus tendre
 Seule à l’escart mille fleurs *ravissant*.¹⁴

I wish I were transformed into a whitening bull in order to take her subtly as she wanders across the softest grass, alone and isolated, ravishing thousands of flowers.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Europa is raped as the result of her aesthetic sense. The bull is so white, its bodily “form” so beautiful (“tam formosus”), its horns so “various” that “you would maintain that they were by someone’s hand.” Europa “admires” this bull (“miratur”) and is, therefore, raped (2.855–58). Ronsard, too, imagines his beloved to be both subject and object of aesthetic appreciation; his brief phrase for her pastime, “ravishing flowers,” joins her capacity for aesthetic pleasure to violence in true Ovidian fashion.¹⁵ A chiasmatic exchange takes place between speaker and his second Europa – a suspicious slippage of agency that, as we shall see again in the chapter on Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*, characterizes Ovidian narratives of rape. Here, the poet derives his aesthetic sensibility from “elle” while his own desire to “ravish” – expressed in his opening wish to be like the golden shower that fell into the lap of Danaë – suddenly becomes hers.¹⁶ Through Ronsard’s pun on *ravir*, moreover, Ovid’s already metapoetic story becomes yet another meditation on the conjunction between rape and the “flowers” of rhetoric – in this instance, as in much Renaissance Ovidian poetry, Petrarchan rhetoric. Similarly, Perdita’s desire, in *The Winter’s Tale*, for the flowers that Europa, “frighted,” let fall “From Dis’s waggon” (4.4.116–18), borrows Ovid’s favorite technique of turning metaphors – particularly metaphors about poetic language – into literal objects in the landscape. Invoked in the context of a debate about the relationship between nature and art, Ovid’s text surfaces in the form of Proserpina’s lost “flowers” and forces us to reflect yet again on the disquieting conjunction between poetic form and sexual violence.

This book is devoted to reading figures such as Philomela’s “purple notes,” Marcus’ “lily hands,” Ronsard’s “ravissant,” or Perdita’s

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flowers. In such figures, poetic language and the ruined body insist on being read together. By taking us on sometimes intricate pathways through the erotic landscape of Ovidian and Petrarchan rhetoric, these figures keep asking us to ask: what, precisely, is the relationship between literary form, cultural fantasy, and sexual violence? And what, moreover, do these jarring conjunctions mean for the subjects of Ovidian narrative? It perhaps does not go without saying that I find the conjunction between aesthetic form and culturally inflected sexual violence disquieting, and hence illuminating, because I do not believe they are the same thing.¹⁷ Ovid's deliberately troubling juxtapositions compel me to extend an already well-developed feminist critical tradition in which the question of how to read rape has become central to the question of how to read the *Metamorphoses*. But in order to expand the feminist critique of the thematics of sexual violence in Ovid's text, this book considers how representations of the body, subjectivity, and sexual difference are bound up with, and troubled by, the poem's intense rhetorical and aesthetic self-reflection.¹⁸ If I direct attention to Ovid's characteristically ironic move from admiring the beauty of a *figura*, *imago*, or *simulacrum* to a distinctly rapacious "love of having" ("amor . . . habendi" 1.131), it is because I believe the narrative's incessant turn of attention to the beauty of a mediating screen of poetic form allows one a certain (though certainly not inviolable) space for reflection, distance, and critique. To address the frequent juxtaposition of poetic language and violence in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and to understand the place of the embodied subject in it, therefore, I have taken a lesson from Philomela's purple notes and moving tongue, analyzing the scene of writing out of which such urgent figures emerge. I do so because I believe it important to understand the *conjunction* of aesthetics and violence, rhetoric and sexuality, in this influential tradition. I understand this to be a critical and productive interference between two different orders, not an utterly saturated translation of one into the other.

These readings suggest, moreover, that the problems raised by Ovidian rhetorical practice alter the sense of certain terms crucial to discussions of the relationship between representation, sexuality, and violence. That is, his rhetorical practice continually calls into question what we mean when we make such distinctions as those between male and female, subject and object, author and reader, agent and victim. At the same time, it also tells us that the relationship between a speaker's discourse and his or her mind, feelings, or experience is far from transparent. Ovidian narrative therefore troubles the link that, as John Guillory argues, is often made in debates over the canon between "representation" understood as a literary term and representation understood as a political