

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Voices and Vacancies in Verse: *Metamorphoses* and Gendering the Ovidian Soliloquy

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Abstract

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a poem saturated with stories and heavy with the most colourful narrative elements. One such is the soliloquy, which Ovid bequeathed to poets and dramatists like Chaucer, Faustus and the Bard. *Metamorphoses* houses five soliloquies, all, interestingly, in the mouth of female characters. This essay attempts to understand the 'gendering' of the soliloquy through its aetiology and implications on the characters, narrative, themes and audiences. Medea, Scylla, Byblis, Myrrha and Atlanta are the only Ovidian soliloquists of *Metamorphoses*. This puts them in a difficult position, for they are a granted agency and comprehensive selfhoods and characterhoods through the expression of complex psychological interiorities. But at the same time, their identities are suffocated with erroneous rationales, moral didacticisms and tragic endings. The soliloquies operate within the liminality of gender and gendered literary traditions. The essay culminates in an open question: how authentic is the female voice narrated by a male author?

Keywords: monologue, gendering, aetiology, characterhood, narrative, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

1. Introduction

Picture a space at the heart of the world, between the earth,
the sea and the sky, on the frontiers of all three parts of the universe.
Here there are eyes for whatever goes on, no matter how distant;
and here there are ears whose hollows no voice can fail to penetrate. (Ovid, 2014, p. 466)

It will not be irrational to call *Metamorphoses* (Ovid, 2014) [refer to this edition for all textual evidence] a narrative feat. Scholars and academicians don't shy away from using the word 'scandalous' when discussing Ovid's magnum opus. And rightly so, for it is a compendium of material from a "numberless entrances...and a thousand additional holes" (Ovid, 2014, p. 466). I am not bringing in to question the credibility of Ovid's sources, but the multiplicity of voices, consequential to them. Labelling Ovid, the omniscient narrator of *Metamorphoses*, will be, if not entirely erroneous, definitely a reductive understanding. The narrative is layered with stories within stories, narrators narrating narratives through other narrators. And it is quite easy to lose track (pun intended). The most interesting discursive layering

can be found in book 5; Ovid-a Muse-Calliope-Arethusa. For a poem that plots history right from the creation of the world to Caesar's apotheosis, narrative elements gain crucial importance, despite a non-linear temporality and a motley of digressions. This makes the insertion of not one but five anti-narrative soliloquies (Bennet & Royle, 2014), an object of interest. Given the epic poem's saturation with stories and tales, these soliloquies are not merely distracting but intrusive. Most importantly, all five of these have been allocated to female characters. In this paper, I will be *gendering* this 'intrusion', and trying to analyse the implications and aetiology - narrative and thematic – of the five 'feminine' soliloquies.

Arethusa's episode is a good starting point. It has a total of five voices interwoven into each other; Alpheus is heard through Arethusa's voice, Arethusa through Calliope's, Calliope through the unnamed Muse's and the Muse through Ovid's. "When we observe that the story of Arethusa is controlled by three female narrators, a Muse, Calliope and the nymph herself, we can begin to sense what is shared in their respective 'narrating instances'; and it is even more interesting to notice that the two male voices involved in the story telling are top and bottom of the sequence, which proceeds from the invisible Ovid via three virgin goddesses to another, much less articulate, male speaker" (Barchiesi, 2006). Two other long instances wherein the female voice dominates the narrative can be found in Book 4 (The Daughters of Minyas) and Book 6 (Athena and Arachne), both of which are engaged in acts of mass storytelling.

2. The Soliloquy and Female Characterhood

In such a fast-paced text, where stories are replacing each other in mere moments, sometimes even mid-sentence, it is difficult to find pockets of air. But Ovid's genius is such, that the reader seldom needs them. Yet, he places five soliloquies right in the middle of *Metamorphoses*, Books 7, 8, 9 and 10 and in the mouth of women. There is no paucity of monologues in this epic poem, but soliloquies are rare, and even rarer are episodes charged with a female voice. Each of the soliloquies is an internal debate, a conflict of choice, ending in some sort of a resolution.

The soliloquy, more than anything is an act of self-awareness, which is imperative for the creation of a self (Damasio & Meyer, 2009). It signifies a divided conscious, or two arguing voices. This presence of heteroglossia points to an internal complexity in the soliloquist. "Voices express "worlds," not entirely as fictional worlds are expressed by texts, but rather as character worlds. What split awareness makes possible is the representation of juxtaposed and conflicting voices, divided in values and conceptual emphasis, within the same mind" (Milowicki & Wilson, 1995). The emphases on *mind*, *selfhood* and *self-awareness* are crucial here. Milowicki and Wilson identify four R's in Ovidian soliloquies. "Ovid relativized the values, subjecting them to rhetorical deformation and structuring the debate to conclude with a rationalization. These are the three Ovidian Rs. A fourth "R," reduction, usually deployed as irony, prompts the effects of deflation and minimalization" (Milowicki & Wilson, 1995). Parallel to these Rs is a fragmented character with a narrative voice equipped to include a counter-voice and through this, Ovid is making a radical departure from the monologic epic.

This fragmentation is only allocated to female characters. They become vehicles of not just experimenting with the epic form (elaborated in the latter half of this section) but also the elegy. Byblis

transgresses gendered-literary lines with her soliloquy and the letter addressed to her brother and the traditional passive object of desire becomes the subject who ‘writes.’ Hence, these ‘feminine’ soliloquies mark a formal break from and questioning of literary tradition. Moreover, they grant a certain complexity and depth to their speakers. Their utterance corroborates the presence of a mind, selfhood and self-awareness. The psychomachia prevents the five female characters from becoming “like any other heap, simply the collocation of [their] traits” (Milowicki & Wilson, 1995). It is safe to say, that the speakers have been crowned a comprehensive characterhood as per the Bakhtinian concept of “character-world.” The coronation is unique to these female speakers and puts them on a higher level in the hierarchy of the *Metamorphoses* characters.

Medea, Scylla, Byblis and Myrrha are all active agents, and even Atlanta, despite having developed an affection for Hippomenes, chooses to run the race, “Yet better is not to be idly prayed for but done!” “So be done with delay, and to action” (Ovid, 2014, pp. 249, 250).

Medea’s agency comes from the confidence she has in her abilities as Hecate’s sorceress. And more than her *amor* for Jason, it is glory that seems to drive her. Jason will owe his life to her and she will be “the woman who saved him” (Ovid, 2014, p. 250) (it is worth noting that Ovid gives no voice to Jason in this episode). She will be praised by mothers all over Greece for being the saviour of their sons. She is ambitious to leave the periphery of her land Colchis, in pursuit of glory, knowledge *and* love.

“The greatest of gods is alive inside me! I’ll not forsake greatness / but pursue it: the glory of saving the sons of Greece, / the knowledge of better lands and of cities ...” (Ovid, 2014, p. 250). Much like Jason, Minos will owe his victory to Scylla, she postulates. She fantasizes her actions bringing the war to an end. She is ready to “go through fire and sword” (Ovid, 2014, p. 297) for her courage is abundant. In her thoughts, *she* would make herself known to Minos and ask for dowry. She is taking on the role of her father as the agent of exchange. She understands the futility of mere wishing and is all but ready to take charge. “If wishes were horses, though, beggars would ride . . . Yet God helps those who help themselves, remember, and fortune favours the brave” (Ovid, 2014, p. 297).

Byblis shows an awareness of her own value, when she says that her brother, Caunus would be worthy to have her (Ovid, 2014, p. 363). She also wants to control her identity, her name, both given to her by the patriarchal familial structure, and struggles to do so. Most of all, her agency is explicit in the act of writing.

Death seemed best to her. She rose from her bed, determined to strangle
herself in a halter and tied her girdle around a crossbeam.

Then crying, “Farewell, dear Cinyras, now you understand
why your daughter dies!” she attached the noose to her pale white neck. (Ovid, 2014, p. 400)

The only resolution Myrrha finds is death. And even then, in an attempt to commit suicide, she takes her life in her own hands. The words ‘she’ and ‘her’ and variations of it, as I have highlighted, appear seven times in the aforementioned extracted. “Go while you may, fair stranger. My bed is polluted by bloodshed (Ovid, 2014, p. 413).

Atlanta is “the girl who outstripped the fastest of men in running” (Ovid, 2014, p. 410). She lives up to her ‘swift-footedness’, unlike Achilles. She is beguilingly juxtaposed with Homer’s hero and exemplifies a gendered shift from the male oriented Iliad (Ziogas, 2011). She is as much in love as her already mentioned counterparts. Yet she does not give in; she holds back when she could have gone forward but she does not forfeit. Her act is one of strength, determination and self-preservation.

Each soliloquy represents its speaker as a subject, as the women take charge of their lives. The soliloquies are not empty rhetorical intrusions but vehicles for expression of feminine psychology, agency and activity. They provide a view of the tumultuous interiority of these women and a glimpse into their desires and goals. Female ambition is not limited and reduced to the convention; glory, knowledge, peace, identity and writing are transgressive. The soliloquies also tell the reader that the soliloquists believe in their potential and capabilities and hence the possibility of actualising these ambitions. Placing them in the traditionally constructed category of one gender is difficult and we are impelled to let them persevere in a liminal space.

Ovid bequeathed the soliloquy to many a successive writer. Chaucer follows in his footsteps in the ‘Prologue to the Wife of Bath,’ and it is no doubt that this is what makes Alice one of the most intriguing figures in literature. After the Middle Ages, Renaissance dramatists used the soliloquy as a humanist element and dissonant characters became the hallmark of Modernism.

3. Problems with the Gendered Ovidian Soliloquy

The crucial question to ask here though is why Ovid makes five *female* characters the mouthpiece of this anti-narrative strategy, which bestows on them a distinct characterhood, multidimensionality and even agency. Gender in Ovidian poetry has always been an area of heated argument between scholars and academicians. Those who wish to highlight his brutally patriarchal philosophies accoutre themselves with the *Fasti* whereas *Heroides* is often used as a shield against authorial misogyny. Feminist critics writing on *Metamorphoses*, have driven attention to the heretofore overlooked abundance and treatment of raped women. We have already discussed the narratorial and social elevation that the soliloquies give to their female speakers. Now we shall investigate if this is evidence enough to certify Ovid’s sympathetic attitude towards the ‘other’ sex, “Desire and reason / are pulling in different directions. I see the right way and approve it, / but follow the wrong” (Ovid, 2014, p. 249).

The feminine psychological realm that the soliloquy makes us privy to, is proven to be faulty. Despite the internal debate, all five women reach erroneous resolutions and end up “follow[ing] the wrong.” The second ‘R’ in Milowicki and Wilson’s (1995) propositions is rhetorical deformation which leads to the third, rationalisation. I argue that there is no need for a deformation as the soliloquies already open with a decision. Medea begins by saying that it is useless to fight (Ovid, 2014, p. 248). Scylla’s “This heart-breaking war!” (Ovid, 2014, p. 296) is a classic example of Ovidian wordplay. Byblis’ questioning of her dreams is immediately followed by “He’s beautiful!” (Ovid, 2014, p. 363). Myrrha’s “foul thoughts” have already started “leading” (Ovid, 2014, p. 398) her. Even her prayer to the

gods ends with “if this is indeed a crime” (Ovid, 2014, p. 398). In her soliloquy, Atlanta curses the god who “hates all beauty and wants to destroy this man” (Ovid, 2014, p. 412) and believes that she “cannot be worth such a price” (Ovid, 2014, p. 415). Such opening lines make the psychomachia almost meaningless, repealing the women of their cognitive ability to rationalise.

The content of their soliloquies is also worth investigating. Medea is mostly asking twisted rhetorical questions and her rationalisation is dependent on glory, specifically personal glory. Scylla not only celebrates war, as it became a means for her to meet Minos but also justifies Jupiter’s abduction and rape of Europa. She also decides that Megara will face defeat when the “the fortunes of war still hung in the scales, as the bird of victory soared and wavered between the kings but never descended” (Ovid, 2014, p. 294). Her resolution is weak; from forgoing “the bed of her dreams than achieve desire by treason” (Ovid, 2014, p. 296) to deeming her plan “excellent” (Ovid, 2014, p. 297) and fully resolving to surrendering herself and her country, in a matter of mere eleven lines. Byblis feels it is alright to have desires for her brother as long as they are in dreams. She cites examples of Saturn-Ops, Ocean-Tethys, Juno-Jove and Aelous’ children. Even the idea of her death makes her think of how Caunus will finally kiss her lips. She finishes her ‘argument’ with “In that case, Byblis, if your never reject his advances, woo him yourself!” (Ovid, 2014, p. 365). Myrrha draws a parallel with nature – horses, cows and birds - wherein parents can freely copulate with their young ones. She also mentions unnamed countries where the same is allowed between humans and “natural love is intensified by the double attachment” (Ovid, 2014, p. 398). But when she scolds herself for her evil passion and says that she must not “defile Nature’s unbreakable bonds with incestuous union” (Ovid, 2014, p. 399), her fickle use of ‘nature’ becomes explicit. Atlanta feels unworthy of being the cause of Hippomenes death and even suggests the possibility of his victory despite the oracle’s warning.

It seems that Ovid’s female soliloquists are incapable of objective cognitive discourse. “Their awareness of opposed sets of values does not extend to the recognition that the single-minded power of their desires corrupts reason and revokes the possibility of rational debate. In their interior monologues, they draw boundaries between antithetical values, attempt to reason, and then find themselves, as desire inevitably asserts itself, swept to their respective dooms” (Milowicki & Wilson, 1995). From Medea to Atlanta, the rationale sinks, so much so that Medea’s desire for glory is now Atlanta almost considering her own defeat. The women base their choices on exaggerated and often irrelevant examples. Technical and definitional problems are also there. It is most disturbing to see the justification of Europa’s rape by Jupiter. After a critical analysis of the soliloquies, women’s own irrationality, defective discernment and ignorance surface; they are mentally unfit for application of logic and sense. It should thus come as no surprise that the soliloquists are shown to be mad. "I should be more sane, if I could!" (Ovid, 2014, p. 248). "I'll confess that I love him to madness" (Ovid, 2014, p. 365). But Cinyras’ daughter was lying awake, tormented by passion / She couldn’t control and the frantic longings that constantly haunted her" (Ovid, 2014, p. 400).

Byblis’ madness becomes obsessive and she goes on to follow her brother despite his rejection. Scylla has the urge to enter enemy lines and even jump from the top of her tower. Atlanta, who has never lost a race, is foolishly dazed by three golden apples. Myrrha’s is the extreme case as she is driven

to kill herself. And for Medea, it is the start of a descent into mental instability, which reaches its height when she murders her own children. The maniacal behaviour, depression and rage are synonymous with lovesickness. “The dominant reaction to frustrated love in ancient literature was manic and frequently violent. Second, lovesickness, in its literary depictions, mirrors the distinctions which the ancient medical writers posited for melancholia itself” (Toohey, 1992). The cure for this condition is sexual union with the beloved.

The central aspect of all Ovidian soliloquies is sexual congress. This essay does not intend on giving a moral commentary but objectively understanding the gendered definitions of its contentious ideas. Ovid was definitely not the first one to use the soliloquy. But he gave new themes to the clashing antithetical values, feminine themes. “This clash, particularly in the form of the "heroic choice," was an ancient *topos* that focused the hero in a moment of choice, often debated in a monologue, between the imperative to fight and the need to flee—the epic dilemma of fight or flight” (Milowicki & Wilson, 1995). For Medea, Scylla, Byblis and Myrrha, the struggle is between *amor* and *pudor* (Atlanta’s case is slightly different in this context and will be discussed in the following section). The former two have fallen for their foes and the latter two are on the path to committing incest. Ovid’s contemporary audience would most definitely have been familiar with each of these stories. Then why does he go on to spend so much time (and narrative economy) on their psyche?

4. Aetiology of the Ovidian Soliloquy

The soliloquists decisions, though ‘wrong,’ are nonetheless given time to be dwelled over. In the end, desire prevails, but the women are not impulsive in following their passions. They debate and study their choices; however faulty the entire cognitive process may be. Ovid is thus, not making a conscious choice here but following the social ideologies of his time. Women are devoid of sexual freedom. Even Diana’s “exaggerated restrictiveness is not so much a positive assertion of a woman's right to control her body as a denial of the right to exercise her sexuality” (Curran, 1978). To put it in a crude manner, women have a *need*, a necessity to study, deliberate and rationalise their sexual desires whereas men simply have the freedom and ‘right’ to act on theirs, “it is lust at first sight followed by immediate gratification” (Curran, 1978). The psychomachia is between the self and society.

It might be argued that Ovid’s soliloquists choose to pursue their *amor*, putting self over society. This transgression of theirs is not celebrated but damned. “Women are ‘meant’ to be silent. The suppression of women’s voices, bodies, and sexuality is an all-too-common story in (ancient) culture and in the Ovidian corpus, where it is one of the meanings of metamorphosis” (Sharrock, 2006). Medea is not physically transformed, but her humanity is dissolved in her sorcery (Rosner-Siegel, 1982). She is not an object of affection but a prize. She is driven to insanity and murders her children in an “evil revenge” (Ovid, 2014, p. 268). In the three tales that follow the Golden Fleece episode, she is only a tool in the hands of men who only value her for her magical powers. She is last mentioned slipping poison into her step-son’s drink. Her narrative ends abruptly and the voices of two men, Aegeus and Theseus, take over. For Scylla, Byblis and Myrrha, the punishment is twofold, a metempsychosis (Barchiesi, 2006) and metamorphosis. Scylla and Byblis develop an unhealthy obsession, following their ‘beloved’,

clinging to a warship and “raving and screaming” (Ovid, 2014, p. 371), respectively. Scylla becomes a bird, Ciris and Byblis, a stream. (Scylla’s namesake, Scylla the monster is alluded to when Minos rebukes her by calling her “so evil a monster.” Quite similar to Scylla is Clytaemnestra, who appears as a “hateful dog.” Both the women, in lieu of their actions, are collapsed into a monstrosity, one by the direct relation of a shared name, and other by the subtle mention of dogs (Tsitsiou-Chelidoni, 2003). Myrrha’s father threatens to kill her and she escapes, wandering all over. Overcome with guilt, she prays for her own ostracization from the realms of the living and dead and is transformed into a tree.

Atlanta, not an absolute anomaly in the technicalities of her choice, has to decide between self-preservation and marriage; hers is also a conundrum between the self, self-preservation and the social, marriage. Despite choosing the former, she is defeated by divine intervention. After the race, she is bereft of her identity; her name is not uttered once and she is submerged in “they” and “wife”, before completely losing herself by being turned into a lion. She pays for her husband’s fault.

At this juncture, I would like to make a slight digression to focus on only one of these stories, and on a singular aspect of it. It is only to further the argument that the soliloquists’ rebellious endeavours are barely successful. As mentioned before (section 2), Byblis, in her lovesickness and the act of writing a letter establishes herself as the ‘writer’ instead of the conventionally ‘written.’ In becoming the lover from the beloved, she also occupies the role of the elegiac poet. But her persuasion is not a success, and the appropriation of the elegiac mode isn’t either. Her failure to woo Caunus as an elegiac poet is inextricably tied to her being a female, ‘over stepping’ into the territory of the male poet. “Byblis is thus relegated to the role conventionally played by women in the elegy, the embodiment of the text, as she is physically transformed from the ‘writer’ into *bublos*, the ‘written’” (Raval, 2001). Her failure is testimony to the rigidity of gendered literary conventions.

Byblis’ fate is a warning against prohibited love. (Ovid, 2014, p. 362)

It’s a shocking story. Daughters and fathers, I strongly advise you
to shut your ears! Or, if you cannot resist my poems,
at least you mustn’t believe this story or take it for fact.

If you do believe it, then also believe that the crime was punished. (Ovid, 2014, p. 397)

Medea, Scylla, Byblis, Myrrha and Atlanta; their tragic stories are moral didactics, teaching other women how *not* to behave. Byblis is straight up presented as a warning. Myrrha is seen both as a victim and a perpetrator (Resinski, 2014) but nevertheless, hers is also a cautionary tale. Her tears are “honourable” only because of the overwhelming guilt and self-inflected punishment. Though Ovid is not explicitly imposing his position on the subject, in Byblis and Myrrha’s case, he is covertly guiding the audience into choosing theirs. The intrusive soliloquies are handy tools here. As much as we appreciated their opening up the soliloquists’ psyche, on the flip side, they lay bare their speaker, naked for the discernment of the audience. Soliloquists “bear a special burden to repay the audience, which has gained...the right ‘to pass judgment’” (Freeman, 2010). “For the Audience, ratifying the speaker’s request for unique floor access counts as a favour done and entitles the Audience, first, to expect the

speaker will repay them via the special quality of what he says during his special floor time and, second, to pass judgment on his success when his turn is over” (Freeman, 2010). All of Ovid’s audience including us, the 21st century readers of Ovid, is given the legitimate right to assess and judge his soliloquists. This further problematizes Ovid’s choice of using the soliloquy.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have tried to transpose gender identities over the narrative technicality of the soliloquy. In this gendered sense, the soliloquy encompasses an alternate sequence of voice and vacancy. The choice of using it is careful and calculated and it exists in a symbiotic relationship with its female character. Where it psychologically empowers and grants an encyclopaedic characterhood to its female speaker, it simultaneously also makes her cognition irrational and presents her for the moral judgement of the audience. It expands women’s ambitions to glory and selfhood but also draws attention to their sexual restrictions. All of their rebellions are poignantly tragic. Ovid challenges literary tradition while kneeling down to it. And thus, Ovidian soliloquies are double edged swords. They are not simply misogynistic and definitely not wholly empathetic. They exist in a liminality of gender (and literary tradition). It is impossible to gender the Ovidian soliloquy. And hence, it is even more important to keep exploring the formal and thematic constituents of this element. In the attempting of gendering the Ovidian soliloquy, one must also look at the bigger picture. This essay would be incomplete without referring to one of the most harrowing and controversial *Metamorphoses* stories of all, Tereus, Procne and Philomela, Book 6. Tereus’ incestuous sexual desires are gratified no matter the degree of violation and violence that they necessitate. He need not rationalise his lust but only act on it. Yet he is not able to wane Philomela’s agency and the woven tapestry becomes her pseudo-voice. Procne’s own voice, though fleeting, is not completely distant from heteroglossia. She is contemplating her duty as a mother, and a sister and daughter. Interestingly, Procne’s resolution is *against* her husband and *for* her father and sister. All three characters are transformed into birds; Ovid does not take a clear moral stance and leaves judgement to his audience. In the narrative chronology, this story is placed quite close to Medea’s and before the five soliloquies.

The anti-narrative (or perhaps narrative) element demands a detailed and objective analysis in a “narrative economy [that] is constantly threatened by an impulse towards expenditure, conscious consumption, and dispersion” (Barchiesi, 2006). The soliloquy, what it does, how it does and how it represents the soliloquist, needs to be carefully examined to better understand gender in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The soliloquy grants women a space to voice their selfhoods and interiority and in doing so, limits and suffocates their very potentials. How much it voices and how much it (deliberately) leaves vacant cannot be monolithically concluded. A further scope of academic investigation and inquiry in this space, would be juxtaposing and comparing ‘masculine’ monologues, such as that of Narcissus with these ‘feminine’ soliloquies. In the end, I would like to ask a question, posed a little differently from the way Allison Sharrock does with reference to *Heroides*, “What kind of gendered voice is produced by a male author speaking through a female mask?” (Sharrock, 2006). How opaque is the female mask?

The hall is filled by a crowd which is constantly coming and going...
 They chatter in empty ears or pass on stories to others;
 the fiction grows and detail is added by each new teller.
 This is the haunt of credulity, irresponsible error,
 groundless joy, unreasoning panic, impulsive sedition
 and whispering gossip. (Ovid, 2014, p. 466)

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