

Homosexuality, Romanness and dismemberment in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Although Ovid has been defined “the most heterosexual of Augustan poets” (Makowski 1996), the theme of homoerotic love is widely present in his poetry. From his pronouncements about non-heterosexual behaviors scattered throughout his *corpus* (*Am.* 1.19–20; *Ars am.* 1.505–510, 2.682–684, 3.433–438; *Her.* 15.15–20; *Tr.* 2.365), it emerges that Ovid generally displays a derogatory attitude towards homosexual practices, which reflects the dominant Roman ideology of looking at homoerotic relationships with a certain homophobic eye (Richlin 1993). This study focuses on the *Metamorphoses* and aims to demonstrate that Ovid shows a similar unsympathetic inclination towards homoerotic passion. I propose that Ovid dooms those who repudiate their masculinity to a violent death, which happens in the form of dismemberment. I analyze three characters that I consider suitable examples of loss of virility in the *Metamorphoses*: Hippolytus, Pentheus and Orpheus. I argue that Ovid characterizes these mythological figures as Roman in identity and cultural background. Their assumptions and utterances about sexuality are deeply rooted in Roman culture and express concerns related to the opposition between masculinity and femininity in Roman society.

In book 15, Ovid purposely reworks the literary material of the myth in order to “Romanize” the character of Hippolytus. The poet draws from the asexual Euripidean Hippolytus and re-shapes him into the newly transformed Virbius (Prest 2005). This transition sanctions the passage from the Greek, genderless character of the tragic tradition to a masculine, fully restored Roman (Virbius = *vir* + *bis*). Hippolytus’ transformation therefore assumes the traits of a distinctively Roman metamorphosis.

Pentheus' figure in book 3 appears similarly filled with moral concerns towards sexual conduct typical of Roman thought, and his words to the Thebans resemble Postumius' speech against the *Bacchanalia* in book 39 of Livy. While the Roman senate succeeds in suppressing the perverted practices of the *Bacchanalia*, Pentheus yields to the effeminacy of the Bacchic cult and dies by *σπαραγμός*.

Lastly, in books 10 and 11, Orpheus' shift to homosexuality and misogynist hatred after the death of Eurydice (Bremmer 1991) becomes the reason for his death by dismemberment at the hands of the Maenads. By rejecting heterosexual loves and turning into a demasculinized male, the effete rhapsode becomes the prey of the followers of Bacchus, who slaughter him like a deer in the middle of the theatre (*Met.* 11.25–27). While the Maenads gain dominant and predatory traits characteristic of the Roman male, Orpheus gradually loses his masculinity and acquires a passive stance, which will ultimately lead to his gruesome death.

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