

Victa Libidine: Ovid's Naturalistic Portrayal of Forbidden Love in the Metamorphoses

This paper argues that in contrast to the typical epic description of love as imposed by an external divine force, Ovid employs a naturalistic view of human passion drawn from love elegy for the related stories of Byblis and Medea in his *Metamorphoses*. The story of Byblis in *Metamorphoses* IX should be considered alongside the story of Medea in Book VII because the two are closely linked by a number of thematic and verbal parallels, and because both are part of a series of women with forbidden passions in the second half of the *Metamorphoses*. Byblis and Medea both blame gods for their forbidden passions, which raises the question of whether they are correct to do so (*Met.* 7.11-12, 9.624-625). This question is particularly pertinent because two of Ovid's primary epic models—Apollonius's *Argonautica* and Vergil's *Aeneid*—both prominently feature Cupid causing women to fall in love. In particular, these stories are predecessors of Ovid's Medea—the *Argonautica* because it gives the story of Medea on which Ovid's account is based, and the *Aeneid*, because Dido's story as well was based on Medea's story in the *Argonautica*. The story of Byblis, meanwhile, is related to the story of Phaedra via textual parallels with Ovid's *Heroides* (Westerhold, 2018; Raval, 2001). In these sources, the gods explicitly cause the forbidden love. Ovid clearly parallels Apollonius's version of the Medea story, using both simile of fire leaping up and describing Medea as paling and reddening when she falls in love (*Argonautica* 3.280-298; *Met.* 7.77-81). In Ovid however, rather than following Cupid's shot, these effects occur when she lays eyes on Jason again after previously conquering her love (*Met.* 7.77-81, 7.83-85). This naturalistic explanation fits with Ovid's understanding of love given in *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedia Amoris*, which depict love as a powerful but natural emotion that can be encouraged or reduced through good management.

Love in these works does not spring up fully-formed, as it does in the *Argonautica* or the *Aeneid*, but rather begins small and increases with time and indulgence (*Remedia Amoris* 79-80, 91-92). This is also how love is described in the *Metamorphoses* accounts of Medea and Byblis; it grows over repeated encounters, nourished by the fertile imaginations of the two girls. These stories can also be illuminated by a passage of the *Ars Amatoria* in which the *praeceptor amoris* argues that women are more subject to sexual desire than are men (*Ars Amatoria* 1.81-82). Byblis and Medea are both mentioned as examples of wicked lust to prove this point (*Ars Amatoria* 1.283-284; 1.335-336). After Medea overcomes her love for Jason, the *Metamorphoses* says that *victa dabat iam terga Cupido*: clearly personifying desire as the god Cupid being defeated (*Metamorphoses* 7.73). The story here cannot be the same as the *Argonautica* or the *Aeneid*, for there, Cupid is irresistible. In epic, Cupid cannot be beaten. In the world of the Ovid's didactic elegiac, however, he can. The *Remedia Amoris* uses Cupid as a symbolic personification of natural love who can be fought with the weapons of the *praeceptor amoris*. This is the sense in which the Medea passage uses Cupid—not as the overwhelming divine force of love, but as the symbol of a love that can be defeated by human effort. Byblis thinks that she is in the world of epic or tragedy, in which the god of love afflicts mortals like Dido, Medea, or Phaedra with overpowering love. However, Byblis is not in that world. She is in a human world, where love grows over time and her imagination inflames her passion. Her love is indeed only corrupt lust, and if she had realized this in time, she perhaps could have saved herself, just as the *praeceptor amoris* says that he could have done for Dido or Scylla or Phaedra (*Remedia Amoris* 56-60, 64, 67-68). Likewise, one fundamental transformation that Ovid performs on Apollonius's Medea is to move her into the naturalistic framework of his didactic elegy, where Cupid can be chased away at his first approach, but where chance and proximity will strengthen love's hold over time.

Ovid brings to the *Metamorphoses* his keen interest in the way that human love really works, and thus, in the midst of supernatural happenings everywhere, he tells the love narratives of Byblis, Medea, and others as profoundly human stories.

Bibliography

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