How Are Victims of Unwanted Intimacy Treated in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*?

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Introduction

Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BCE–17CE) was a Roman author and poet whose work focuses on themes of love and seduction. Throughout his work, women who do not desire intimacy are often forced into it. Again and again, the perpetrators of these sexual acts remain unaffected by their actions. Therefore, the victims of this oppressive lust often blame themselves and are blamed by other outside forces. In Ovid’s epic *Metamorphoses*, although Io represents an exception, victims, such as Daphne, Philomela, and Callisto, find themselves guilty of crimes they did not commit.
Part I: Apollo and Daphne

Source 1

'da mihi perpetua, genitor carissime,' dixit
'virginitate fru! dedit hoc pater ante Dianae.'
ille quidem obsequitur, sed te decor iste quod optas
esse vetat, votoque tuo tua forma repugnat.'¹

- Ovid, Metamorphoses I.486-489

In Book I of the Metamorphoses, Ovid tells a story of unrequited love between Apollo and Daphne. Daphne has chosen to remain a virgin forever as Diana did, revealing that she never had any intentions for a sexual relationship. However, the phrases “decor iste quod optas esse vetat” and “votoque tuo tua forma repugnant” reveal that, rather than Apollo being blamed for his overbearing lust, Daphne’s beauty was seen as the cause of her virginity being threatened. Even though Daphne actively worked to stay chaste, she is still seen as the cause of any sort of affection that is thrust upon her, and therefore assigned guilt.

Source 2

Hanc quoque Phoebus amat positaque in stipite dextra
sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus
complexusque suis ramos ut membra lacertis
oscula dat ligno; refugit tamen oscula lignum.
cui deus ‘at, quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,
arbor eris certe’ dixit ‘mea!’²

- Ovid, Metamorphoses I. 553-558

Even after Daphne makes her transformation, attempting an escape, Apollo still remains in pursuit. The phrase “‘arbor eris certe’ dixit ‘mea!’” proves that instead of being blamed for Daphne’s transformation, Apollo still receives what he wants. Furthermore, “refugit tamen oscula lignum” shows that even in her changed form, Daphne still attempts to remain chaste. Despite Daphne’s attempts to shy away from this sexual contact, Apollo is still not seen as a perpetrator, but rather a man who was forced to fall in love by Daphne’s intoxicating beauty. This source clearly proves that guilt is not placed upon perpetrator Apollo, but rather on the victim.

¹ ‘Dearest father, let me be a virgin for ever! Diana’s father granted it to her.’ He yields to that plea, but your beauty itself, Daphne, prevents your wish, and your loveliness opposes your prayer.
² Even like this Phoebus loved her and, placing his hand against the trunk, he felt her heart still quivering under the new bark. He clasped the branches as if they were parts of human arms, and kissed the wood. But even the wood shrank from his kisses, and the god said ‘Since you cannot be my bride, you must be my tree!'
Part II: Callisto and Jupiter

Source 3

atonitae manibusque uterum celare volenti
'i procul hinc' dixit 'nec sacros pollue fontis!'
Cynthia deque suo iussit secedere coetu.³

- Ovid, Metamorphoses II. 463-465

In Book II, Ovid details the story of Callisto and Jupiter. Callisto is a nymph who follows the virgin goddess Diana, proving that she desires no future sexual interactions. Still, when Jupiter forces himself upon her, Callisto is found at fault. Diana seemingly accuses Callisto of attempting to pollute a sacred fountain, showing that Diana sees Callisto’s pregnancy as a deliberate betrayal, even though Callisto actually wanted to remain a virgin. Furthermore, the phrase “deque suo iussit secedere coetu”, reveals that Callisto was not only blamed for the rape, but also punished in that she is forced to leave the only home she knew.

Source 4

adsiduoque suos gemitu testata dolores
qualescumque manus ad caelum et sidera tollit
ingratumque Iovem, nequeat cum dicere, sentit.⁴

- Ovid, Metamorphoses II. 486-488

After Callisto is blamed even further by Juno for her husband’s crime and transformed into bear, her pleas for this misery to be over are still not heard. The phrase “ingratum Iovem” reveals that once he got what he desired, Jupiter did not care about Callisto, despite her continual pain. By acting indifferent, Jupiter is enabling his wife to further blame Callisto for his rape and his child that she was forced to carry. This source once again shows the true perpetrator of a crime remaining guilt free, while the victim undergoes endless blame.

³ Terrified she tried to conceal her swollen belly. Diana cried ‘Go, far away from here: do not pollute the sacred fountain!’ and the Moon-goddess commanded her to leave her band of followers.
⁴ She showed her misery in continual groaning, raising such hands as she had left to the starry sky, feeling, though she could not speak it, Jupiter’s indifference.
Part III: Proene and Philomela

Source 5

nacta locum Proene sacrorum pignora demit
oraque develat miserae pudibunda sororis
amplexumque petit; sed non attollere contra
sustinet haec oculos paelex sibi visa sororis

- Ovid, Metamorphoses IV. 603-606

In Book IV, Ovid details the story of Philomela, who was raped by her sister Proene’s husband Tereus. After being isolated for a year, Philomela is discovered by Proene. The word “miserae” shows that Philomela is unhappy with her situation. Then, the phrase “oculos paelex sibi visa sororis” reveals that this unhappiness is not simply because Philomela was raped, but rather that she finds herself at fault. She blames herself for Tereus’s crime, thinking that she betrayed her sister. Therefore, this source proves that beyond society cultivating blame, victims also find guilt within themselves.

Source 6

quarum petit altera silvas,
altera tecta subit, neque adhuc de pectore caedis
excessere notae, signataque sanguine pluma est.
illo dolore suo poenaeque cupidine velox
vertitur in volucrem, cui stant in vertice cristae.
prominet inmodicum pro longa cuspid rostrum;
nomen epops volucri, facies armata videtur.

- Ovid, Metamorphoses IV. 668-674

Philomela’s eventual fate further proves that she was blamed more than Tereus. When she begins to flee Tereus, she is transformed into a bird. Tereus, although sharing the similar fate of transformation, is made to be more powerful. The phrase “facies armata videtur” reveals that Tereus is put into a position of dominance, as he appears armed. This shows that even though Philomela remained an innocent victim in this crime, she was still treated as weak. Her transformation into a less strong bird seems to be a punishment for a crime she could not prevent.

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5 Proene, once there, took off the religious trappings; uncovered the downcast face of her unhappy sister, and clutched her in her arms. But Philomela could not bear to lift her eyes, seeing herself as her sister’s betrayer.
6 One of them, a nightingale, Proene, makes for the woods. The other, a swallow, Philomela, flies to the eaves of the palace, and even now her throat has not lost the stain of that murder, and the soft down bears witness to the blood. Tereus swift in his grief and desire for revenge, is himself changed to a bird, with a feathered crest on its head. An immoderate, elongated, beak juts out, like a long spear. The name of the bird is the hoopoe, and it looks as though it is armed.
Part IV: Io and Jupiter

Source 7

coniugis ille suae conplexus colla lacertis,
finiat ut poenas tandem, rogat 'in' que 'futurum
pone metus' inquit: 'numquam tibi causa doloris
haec erit,' et Stygias iubet hoc audire paludes.7

- Ovid, Metamorphoses I. 734-737

In Book I, Ovid offers the story of Io’s rape by Jupiter, which contrasts slightly with his other
tellings of forced sexual acts. The phrase “coniugis ille suae conplexus colla lacertis, finiat ut poenas
tandem” reveals that Jupiter is willing to beg for his wife’s forgiveness and ask her to stop blaming
another. Furthermore, Jupiter calls upon the Stygian waters, which shows he is willing to go to great
lengths, even calling upon the underworld, to prove his point. In this grand display of pleading, Jupiter is
revealing that he blames himself slightly for Io’s punishment. This is different from the other sources, as it
relieves Io of some of the responsibility of guilt.

Source 8

Paelice donata non protinus exuit omnem
diva metum timuitque Iovem et fuit anxia furti,
donec Arestoridae servandam tradidit Argo.8

- Ovid, Metamorphoses I. 622-624

Despite Jupiter showing some sympathy for the fate of Io, Io was still blamed for what he had
done. The phrase “timuitque Iovem et fuit anxia furti”, shows that Juno knew that Jupiter was deceitful
and was aware that he had tricked her with clouds shrouding the earth before. However, the phrase “donec
Arestoridae servandam tradidit Argo” reveals that rather than punishing Jupiter for his crime, Juno chose
to force Io to be under a constant watch. Juno placed a punishment on Io, rather than Jupiter, proving that,
in the end, Juno blamed her.

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7 Jupiter threw his arms round his wife’s neck and pleaded for an end to vengeance, saying ‘Do not fear, in future she
will never be a source of pain’ and he called the Stygian waters to witness his words.
8 Though her rival was given up the goddess did not abandon her fears at once, cautious of Jupiter and afraid of his
trickery, until she had given Io into Argus’s keeping, that son of Arestor.
Conclusion

The stories in Publius Ovidius Naso’s *Metamorphoses* find blame with the victims of unwanted lust. Whether the characters find blame within themselves or society blames them, their lives are often ruined by the sexual intimacy they did not want. The fates and thoughts of these characters are revealing of Roman society and how women were treated. Women were often found to be powerless to be able to defend themselves because of the same stigmas that the victims in the *Metamorphoses* face. Because of its evincing nature, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* will continue to be an important reference on how victims were treated in ancient Rome.
Works Cited
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*