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College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, Massachusetts

The Thesis of Kendall Swanson

entitled Transforming Trees, Transcending Binaries: Gender in Augustan Poetry

is submitted to the office of Scholar Programs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with College Honors at the College of the Holy Cross, and has been read and approved by the following:

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Transforming Trees, Transcending Binaries: Gender in Augustan Poetry

Kendall Swanson

College Honors Program

Abstract

Humans have been inextricably linked to nature since before the rule of Emperor Augustus in Ancient Rome. Nature feeds humans, it gives people the tools to build a society. Because of this relationship, it is no surprise that authors, both ancient and modern, incorporate various themes of the natural world into their works. Additionally, nature appears linked to human conceptions of gender, as seen in literature and real-world experience. According to the United Nations, one goal to accomplish in order to achieve sustainable development is gender equality in all countries. Gender and nature work together: when inequality exists, environmental degradation ensues. The period of Augustan poets provides an important backdrop for this discourse, as these authors communicated to one another via intertexts in their poetry, and their thoughts might inform opinions on this topic today. By closely reading passages in the original Latin and comparing the ways in which these authors use themes of nature to form claims on gender, this thesis concludes that poets in Ancient Rome thought that gender was a social construct.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments **4**

Introduction **6**

Chapter 1: Gendered Transformation in Death: An Analysis of Virgil's use of Funerary Rites in the Aeneid **14**

Chapter 2: Seeking Sanity in the Binary: An Investigation of Traditional Gender Roles in Propertius' Elegies **31**

Chapter 3: Peeling Back the Bark: Instances of Transformation into Trees from Ovid's Metamorphoses **46**

Conclusion **65**

Works Cited **71**

Acknowledgments

I was not alone in watching this thesis develop from a half-baked idea on the intersection of gender and nature in antiquity because I had a group of people who supported me through the whole process. I would not have reached this point—a complete thesis—without this team of people in my corner.

I would first like to thank my advisor, Professor Aaron Seider. He has guided me through the majority of my undergraduate career, helping me transition from a student in Introductory Greek to the person writing a Senior Honors Thesis. I am eternally grateful for his support and encouragement throughout my years at Holy Cross. Without the ability to explore my fascination with Dido, Queen of Carthage in his *Aeneid* course, I would not have nearly enough content to write about for an entire year.

I would also like to thank my reader, Professor Daniel Libatique. My time spent with him in Intermediate Greek II was a shining light in a difficult semester overshadowed by a global pandemic. His perspective on relationships and gender in the *Iliad,* a work that I initially considered a violent, male-dominated story of war, showed me that the theme of gender in antiquity was just as relevant then as it is now.

To my friends:

Rebecca Bower, for putting up with my nonsense—which only got worse with this thesis—for four consecutive years and for pushing me to stay curious. Madison Nodurft, for being my support when my self-doubt reached an all-time high. Anna Giulianini, for giving me a space to work my ideas out loud until they made sense—and it sure took a long time. Rose Kaczmarek, for always rooting for me, even when she was halfway across the world. Stephen Dierkes, for staying up with me in Dinand until the

librarians had to kick us out, and for blowing his dining dollars on late-night tea with me. Sean Sova, for being the best practice audience and cameraman for my presentation and for encouraging me to let myself have some fun in between study sessions. Helena Connell, for reminding me that I was never alone in my academic journey and always letting me bother her at her table in Cool Beans. Colby Bowers, for celebrating with me and saving a Campion Cookie for me every Friday morning.

I would lastly like to thank my parents for their investment in my education—both fiscally and emotionally. They always had faith in my journey as a student, even when I felt like I was an imposter at a prestigious institution. Their work ethic and gratitude for everything they earned have certainly leeched into my mindset on life. I continuously work to make them proud.

To everyone else who has borne witness to my various moods and mental states during the production of this thesis: it is finally over! The T-Word is DONE!

Introduction

A landscape defined by civil unrest, debates on gender, and attention to nature might seemingly only exist in the 21st century, with the rise of climate justice and feminist movements, but this image also paints the picture of a different time: Ancient Rome under the reign of Emperor Augustus. In both cases, cultural artifacts of the time act as their own historical record. In the 2020s, social media platforms unofficially catalog life and engage with these themes, and back in Augustan Rome, poetry had that same effect. Having created a platform to pass judgments on the human condition, poets who published in this time collectively crafted the claim that gender in antiquity, as it is today, was socially constructed.

In 31 BCE, Octavian saw a decisive victory against Marc Antony in the Battle of Actium, the naval battle that essentially ended the civil war that had been gripping Ancient Rome. Actium marked many changes: Octavian changed his name to Augustus and assumed the role of princeps, and the Roman Empire officially took over the Roman Republic. With the civil war and the installation of a new form of government, Rome saw a great period of uncertainty in this era. Many writers since then, such as Tacitus, showed a preference for the beloved Republic, so Augustus needed to demonstrate that this transition to absolute rule was the right thing to do.

Augustus's solution to quell the confusion and prevent any unrest was to publicize several ideals that Noreña refers to as the "Augustan Ideology," which had foundations in peace due to Augustus's military prowess (Noreña 152-53). Augustus pushed a traditional social agenda regarding slavery, military, marriage, and gender roles. Augustus took this time to project his concept of a perfect society—both in terms of cultural values, and moral values as well. Hence, this cocktail of confusion and an attempt to shift

paradigms set the perfect landscape for select poets of the time to share their own opinions on the way life ought to be.

As another push to settle the uncertainty, Augustus commissioned Virgil to write a poem to bolster his image and reinvigorate faith in the greatness of Rome. Thus, the Aeneid was born. The Aeneid is the quintessential work of Augustan poetry, so it is wrought with political commentary, and, more importantly, social commentary. Virgil makes use of an epic narrative with several characters as a means to convey his opinions. Whether his final work praised or condemned Augustus remains a question to this day, especially since Virgil died before its completion and requested that the manuscript be burned. What should have been erased from history became the ideal vehicle for commentary on the state of affairs in Augustan Rome.

This period also saw a strong presence of elegists, such as Propertius. His Elegies were written over a rather long period of time in the Augustan era, while maintaining some of the important themes that are found in the Aeneid. Propertius draws inspiration from Virgil and other epic poets in many points of his elegies, but the main narrative follows the tumultuous love between the narrator and his girl, Cynthia. Despite the limited plot and cast of characters, Propertius continues to join the discourse that Virgil began, contributing his voice as an elegist.

Rounding out the era is the poet, Ovid. His magnum opus, the Metamorphoses, appears to encapsulate elements from both epic and elegiac poetry. Like the Elegies, the Metamorphoses contains many intertexts, a hallmark of Augustan poetry. Ovid takes a more fantastical approach to his social commentary, incorporating magical elements and scenes of transformation in his lines. Instead of following one consistent plot, Ovid wrote

a series of stories where the climax is a transformation. It is one of the other well-known works from this time.

These three authors share many common traits: they establish their authority to the point that, even in antiquity, their crafting with words was lauded. Their main tactic for establishing authority was through their use of grammar. Specifically, they would intentionally break commonly accepted rules of grammar to demonstrate their understanding of such rules. A notable example is found in Virgil's previous work, where he has notably switched the gender of a certain word within the same poem. Virgil's use of the word *cortex* ("tree bark") in such a transgressive manner builds his authority as a poet because he can flaunt his mastery of Latin grammar while also defining his unique style as a poet (Corbeill "Sexing the World" 46).

Additionally, their works included several intertexts: references to other authors in antiquity. Intertexts helped strengthen a poet's authority by making them appear well-read and therefore made their assertions more credible. Not only were these poets driven to reference notable works that were published before them, such as Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, but they also felt inclined to reference one another. For example, Ovid was known to be an avid reader of Virgil's work (McCallum 28). Thus, the Augustan poets included hints to their knowledge of previous work, as well as showed their attention to current publications. This fusion of genre and time allowed Virgil, Propertius, Ovid, and others to make themselves credible as authors. Given their elevated status, as well as the political climate, these poets were able to thrive in making their opinions noteworthy.

This subset of authors also invites several important perspectives to the discourse: the mix of epic and elegy turns a seemingly homogeneous group of authors into a diverse

sample. Their work also shows the challenges with categorizing poetry into “epic” vs “elegy,” as both subgenres see some overlap. Sarah McCallum introduces a notable example of this phenomenon when she discusses the elegiac components of Dido’s final speech in the fourth book of the Aeneid, especially the erotic language (McCallum 24). Keeping in mind the differences between the subgenres of these authors, it becomes even more crucial to pay attention to areas where they agree. Their opinions on gender share many differences, but their similarities will drive the majority of this thesis.

Why trees

Trees are just one type of nature that these poets use for analyzing gender, but their implications carry significant force. Engagement with the theme of gender benefits from the lens of tree transformations because trees are unique in both their connection to humans and their grammatical patterns. Trees influence several aspects of human life: houses, ships, and tools all originate from trees. Additionally, it has been proven that time spent in the forest has a positive impact on humans, both in terms of physical health, but also mental well-being (Oh 2). In a broader sense, humans are connected to trees in our vernacular: the concept of a family tree shows a definitive example of the use of tree imagery in daily speech and thought patterns.

Ancient Romans valued trees in many ways, especially with the implementation of sacred groves to specific deities (Hughes 90). In addition, the Romans were dependent on the gifts of trees like we are today. They were aware of this dependence: they consumed massive amounts of wood for fuel and shipbuilding. In fact, deforestation itself is not a modern phenomenon, the Romans experienced the loss of trees just like we do today. Josephus even wrote of a deforestation campaign in his account of the Jewish War

where the Romans razed an entire forest to disorient the people of Jerusalem: they exploited the importance of trees as a means to devastate their enemies. Hence, humans and this type of nature are inextricably linked, even though this link is not immediately obvious.

Furthermore, trees are living things like animals; however, unlike animals, trees lack gender. Aside from the biological indicators of sex on a tree that determine its role in reproducing, there is no concept of gender placed on a tree as the one humans have placed on ourselves. Even more fascinating is the attempt made by Ancient Romans to gender trees, as the Latin word arbor is a feminine noun. In fact, “most tree names are second declension feminine nouns, and indeed the vast majority of the small number of second declension nouns which are grammatically feminine are trees” (Sharrock 17). As a result, humans have created a complex relationship between trees and gender, one that did not necessarily need to exist: after all, the Romans could have made arbor a neuter noun. The importance of trees as well as their complex relationship with gender make them an excellent mode of analysis of the concept of gender in the Augustan period. Trees have existed then, and they exist now. Trees can help explain the past and shed light on the present.

Human constructions of gender vary greatly from grammatical gender because grammatical gender is markedly more neutral in its application than human gender constructs. As the distinction between humanity and nature becomes blurred, so too does the distinction between masculinity and femininity. Alison Sharrock pointed out the tenuous distinction between male and female characteristics in the Augustan period. It appears that masculinity had set traits: self-governance, strength, and an active role in

sex; however, the definition of femininity simply appears to have been an absence of the previously listed traits: "It is very difficult to come to a sense of Roman constructions of femininity that do not tell us more about masculine attitudes to the Other (female, slave, foreigner) than they do about real Roman women" (Sharrock "Gender and Sexuality" 96). This thesis plays on this idea, introducing the dynamic of the "Man" and "not-Man," which defines the distinction between those who exhibit the traits of masculinity and those who do not.

The claim that gender is socially constructed is quite provocative to make in Ancient Rome—a society so deeply entrenched in the gender binary that it even affects the grammar of the Latin language. Every Latin noun is assigned a grammatical gender, masculine, feminine, or neuter, that dictates its overall inflection. Whether the Romans willed it or not, a noun's grammatical gender automatically assigns a set of traits to the person, place, thing, or idea it describes. A notable example of this is with the names of trees: nearly all tree names have a feminine grammatical gender, despite their typically masculine inflection as second-declension nouns.

Although the intersection of gender and nature no longer carries overt grammatical details, especially in English, this intersection remains relevant to this day. The United Nations has declared that gender equality is an essential step that all nations must take in order to develop sustainably, so there exists a clear indication that gender discourse can include natural themes and vice versa. Mies et al. write that "liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation, but only as a part of a larger struggle for the preservation of life on this planet" (Mies 16). As the earth begins to degrade, and forests continue to deplete, women are the ones who must shoulder the brunt of adapting to

climate disasters. When children become ill from contamination at the hands of large oil companies, mothers must add “caretaker” and “activist” to their already extensive lists of titles. Thus, environmental degradation is also degradation to women. This thesis highlights this relationship and hopes to shed light on the harm of allowing the patriarchy to reign unbridled.

Chapter 1

Gendered Transformation in Death: An Analysis of Virgil's use of Funerary Rites in the *Aeneid*

Humans and nature become intermingled in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Virgil employs many different means to blur the line between humans and the natural world, such as vivid metaphor, but his most literal transformations of humans into nature come in the form of death rites. In several instances, a character dies and Virgil dedicates a substantial amount of the narrative to describe the aftermath—what happens to the body. In two notable circumstances, Dido and Pallas, the bodies are cremated on pyres of oak, indicative of their incorporation into the tree as they become ash. In these cases, burning facilitates the transformation of a human into a tree.

Another death ritual that occurs in the *Aeneid* is the transformation of Mezentius's dead body into a tree, so he may become a trophy for Mars. After killing Mezentius, Aeneas pauses the narrative to assemble his armor and limbs onto a tree trunk. Virgil attempts to make sense of the gender binary in the context of Ancient Rome. He does this by assigning certain characteristics to male and female characters, but his organization becomes faulty when his male characters assume feminine traits and vice versa. In his characterization, he works to contribute to the definition of masculinity and femininity as a dichotomy between the "Man" and the "not-Man," those with masculine traits and those who lack them. As a result, Virgil instead bolsters the overall assertion that gender was a social construct in Ancient Rome, as it is today, and that this distinction exists to create an unnecessary power dynamic.

The use of transformation into trees blurs the physical distinctions of gender, leaving behind only the innate characteristics of these characters. This process forms the overall commentary—when a woman adopts masculine traits of agency and suicide, she becomes remembered as a manic pervert, but when a boy becomes effeminate, he is

likened to a precious flower. Virgil attempts to maintain a clear contrast between masculinity and femininity through the impact these characters ultimately have on Aeneas's piety and pursuit of Rome. With Dido acting as a hindrance, and the men acting as aids in their unique ways, Virgil begins to entertain the idea that women ought to be mere tools for men, rather than develop their own agency.

Aeneas is the embodiment of *pietas*, or piety. This loaded word can apply to both loyalty to the gods, as well as dedication to one's family. The scene where Aeneas carries his elderly father and young son out of a burning Troy exhibits his familial dedication, while his overall journey to begin the development of Rome demonstrates his loyalty to the wishes of the gods. Since *pietas* runs through his actions, one might suspect that all actions taken by Aeneas are pious acts. However, his temptation by Dido, queen of Carthage, shows that he too lies subject to fault at times. Regardless of his imperfections, Aeneas is given an almost godlike level of fame in Roman canon, especially since he was the son of a goddess. Additionally, Caesar wished to show that he shared a bloodline with Aeneas as a means to validate his legitimacy as Emperor (O'Hara 16).

The mighty oak tree exists prominently in the characterization of Aeneas, to the extent that the oak becomes a symbol of both him and Italy as a whole (Parker 1293). Oak has several traits that make this type of tree unique and a hallmark of Roman masculinity. The oak tree is tall, strong, and unmovable; it towers above other types of trees. According to Virgil in his *Georgics*, the oak tree's roots plunge into the depths of Tartarus, and its crown touches the heavens so that it "remains untouched, and, enduring, it outlasts many generations and centuries of men as they roll by" (2.290-293). It represents all that Rome is and wants to be: not only is the oak the strongest tree of all,

but it has the power to outlast generations. A strong legacy was a clear goal of the Augustan regime, as evidenced by his commissioning of the *Aeneid* in the first place. Virgil's work was set to establish Rome and the Julio-Claudians as the oak trees of all Roman leaders.

The Italian oak tree becomes a major fact of Aeneas's identity once Virgil describes him as one in the face of frenzy. In Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, Virgil contrasts hysterical Anna to the silent, powerful Aenas by likening him to an oak tree. Virgil compares Anna's mood to the "North Wind's blasts" that "assault," while Aeneas is the "solid, tough, and venerable oak" that cannot be shaken by the tempest (Aeneid 4.441-442). This pause in the narrative creates a vivid connection between Aeneas and the oak, cementing the relationship between Aeneas and oak trees. Aeneas is not *like* the oak—Aeneas *is* the oak, the oak *is* Aeneas. In a similar vein to the olive tree signifying the presence of Minerva, so too does the oak tree mark the presence of Aeneas.

As an extension of Aeneas, oak becomes an agent in the transformations of Dido, Mezentius, and Pallas. Thus, it is worthwhile to note the presence of the oak tree in all of these transformations. Holt Parker notes the interesting detail of the presence of oak in Dido's pyre, remarking that "an Italian tree is used to destroy a Carthaginian queen" (Parker 1292). The oak tree as an instrument demonstrates that it is Aeneas who leads to the demise of the life of Dido, Queen of Carthage, so it is worth exploring her seemingly peculiar amount of agency in her death at the end of Book 4.

Dido begins her arc within the narrative of the *Aeneid* as a *dux femina*, a female leader ruling over subjects who work with the efficiency of honeybees. Along with her incredible accomplishments, Dido also represented many Roman ideals. For example, her

dedication to remaining celibate after the passing of her husband, Sychaeus, reflects the honorable practice of Roman women contemporary to Virgil. She was also crafty, as seen in the cunning actions she took to establish Carthage. Not only had she courageously fled her brother's kingdom on her own, but she made a deal with the natives of the land to which she fled. The deal was that she could take as much land as she could encircle with a bull's hide, which she sliced into strips and strategically placed so she would own a large span of land on the water. Her bravery and genius led to the thriving city of Carthage. Once her path crosses with that of Aeneas, her characterization begins to change. Her devotion and craftiness turn dark, as she begins to appear manic for her love of Aeneas, and she used unsavory means to trick her sister into building a funeral pyre.

Aeneas swept into Carthage with weary men and a dramatic story of how his home was overtaken by the Greeks. He allowed Dido to feed and care for his crew, and he made himself quite comfortable in Carthage, even going so far as to don Phoenecian clothing and assume a role as an architect (Reed 86). Aeneas made it appear as if he and his men could live comfortably in Carthage for the rest of their lives. Dido could not help herself, and after careful consideration, she allowed herself to love a man other than Sychaeus. After a marriage ritual in a cave and many other exchanges that hinted at Aeneas's love for her, Aeneas suddenly chose to depart in pursuit of his destiny. Naturally, Dido did not receive this news well. As Aeneas began his arrangements to leave, Dido also made her own arrangements. She commissioned a pyre to be built, indicating that it would be to burn an effigy of Aeneas:

haec effata silet, pallor simul occupat ora.

non tamen Anna novis praetexere funera sacris

germanam credit, nec tantos mente furores

concipit aut graviora timet quam morte Sychaei.

ergo iussa parat.

At regina, pyra penetrali in sede sub auras

erecta ingenti taedis atque ilice secta,

intenditque locum sertis et fronde coronat

funerea; super exuvias ensemque relictum

effigiemque toro locat haud ignara futuri.

She falls silent with this utterance, at once a pale color occupies her face

Not even Anna believed that her sister was crafting

Strange funeral rites, nor does she receive such great frenzy

In the mind, or does she fear something heavier than the death of Sychaeus.

Therefore, she prepares the orders.

But the queen, with the pyre penetrating in her throne, under high

Winds, towering high with logs of pine and oak,

Both hung that place with garlands and crowned the funeral with

Leaves; she placed clothes and a sword left behind,

And an effigy on the cushion, not aware of what was yet to be.

(Aeneid 4.499-508)

However, Dido revealed her ruse right as she was about to deliver her own killing blow. For a few lines, the reader knows more than Anna as she carries out the funeral rites for her sister. This fact makes the reader empathize with Anna because she has become a victim of Dido's trickery—it was impressive when Dido tricked the Carthaginians into giving up their land, but there is a sense of familial treachery with the actions of Dido now. Not only has she foregone her celibacy, she now does not back down from making a victim of her own family.

Additionally, Virgil takes this time to describe Anna as "not having frenzy of the mind" (*nec antos mente furores*), in direct contrast to her sister, Dido. By using that particular phrasing, it appears as if Dido has enough *furor* for both of the sisters. The word *furor* also shows its prominence at the end of its line, punctuating the thought. It had been previously employed when Dido first realized how in love she was with Aeneas. She ran through the forest in an animalistic fury, which is now being repeated in this scene. This frequent association of Dido with *furor* marks her change from a leader who was defined by her accomplishments to a crazed creature.

The *furor* that consumes Dido is conspicuous itself: her frenzy can be seen right on her face. The passage begins with a description of Dido after she completes her speech where she charges Anna with the task of preparing the pyre. After speaking, a *pallor* occupies her face. The use of this particular adjective heavily implies that Dido's typical demeanor has shifted. *Pallor* typically translates to "a pale color," implying that the color has fled Dido's face. However, another interpretation of this word includes a sense of

unsightliness, or even terror (Lewis & Short). Using this interpretation, it becomes more evident that Virgil viewed Dido with disgust, as he characterized her appearance with monstrous traits.

Dido's *furor* bleeds into the very construction of these lines, as they are wrought with enjambment. These lines consist of a few sentences that bleed into multiple lines, almost as if the narrator of the poem cannot even keep pace with Dido's actions. However, there is one striking pause that the reader must take with the line "Therefore, she prepares the orders" (*ergo iussa parat*). This line consists of only two metric "feet," as opposed to a typical 6-foot line that falls within the conventions of dactylic hexameter. Somehow, despite all of the frenzy, Dido maintains her agency over herself and others. Despite the *pallor* that coated Dido's face, indicating her altered mental state, Anna knew that she had to serve her queen. Dido's maintenance of her agency over herself and others remains a tense point in her characterization.

Dido employed agency in her death: she committed suicide by sword. In Virgil's time, suicide by sword was a uniquely masculine act; so, Dido transcended the limits of her femininity and became a more masculine figure in death (Kronenberg). She exemplified the ideal man in her death, and when her body burned she was freed of her gender as she became one with the wood of her pyre. Thus, her interaction and transformation with nature led to a blending of gender characteristics within her person, until she ultimately became genderless. However, since she was a woman in life, her legacy remains tainted with distaste. Even C.G. Trimble wrote that Dido "perverts" the funeral pyre in her practice, as she used her marriage bed and Aeneas's belongings in her own funeral rites (Trimble 1056). Dido was not remembered for her valiant death by her

own hand, but for the trickery with which she orchestrated her own end. Rather than commemorating her accomplishments, she was remembered for her feminine weaknesses. Virgil makes a point to include the fact that oak wood was present in the pyre, which indicates that Aeneas himself had a spiritual presence at this burning. This detail is especially ironic given that most depictions of this scene in its reception make sure to include Aeneas fleeing Carthage as Dido burned. To Aeneas and the reader, Dido was nothing but an obstacle to the greater goal of the foundation of Rome.

While Didobecomes immortalized through her sacrilege of a sacred funeral rite, thus sealing her fate as an enemy to Aeneas's destiny, another character aids Aeneas's pursuit of piety despite Aeneas's unsavory actions. One particularly controversial figure in the *Aeneid* is Mezentius, an exiled Etruscan king who tries to kill Aeneas, but whom Aeneas ends up slaughtering. After a scuffle that lands Aeneas in the perfect position to end his life, Mezentius begs Aeneas for his body to be buried next to that of his recently deceased son. This practice was a common desire, and according to archaeological evidence, it was typically fulfilled (Harrison 283). Instead of following both the request of this man and common practices of the time, Aeneas turns this man into a trophy for the god of war:

> *vota deum primo victor solvebat Eoo.*
> *ingentem quercum decisis undique ramis*
> *constituit tumulo fulgentiaque induit arma,*
> *Mezenti ducis exuvias, tibi magne tropaeum*
> *bellipotens; aptat rorantis sanguine cristas*

telaque trunca viri, et bis sex thoraca petitum

perfossumque locis, clipeumque ex aere sinistrae

subligat atque ensem collo suspendit eburnum.

At dawn, the victor was fulfilling the vows to the gods,

Having cut branches from all sides of a huge oak

He placed it on a mound and dressed it in the glittering armor

Having been removed from Mezentius the chief, as a trophy to you the great god

of might in war; he fixed the crest sprinkled with blood and the

man's broken spear and the attacked breastplate having been pierced in twelve

places and he fastened the shield of bronze to the left side

and hung the ivory-hilted sword from its neck.

(Aeneid 11.4-11)

On the one hand, Aeneas showed his loyalty to the god of war by creating a trophy of a fallen foe. This action showed *pietas* to the gods. As with the practice of burying people with their loved ones, this trophy-making process was also common at the time of writing the *Aeneid* (Gransden 69-70). The assertion that Aeneas shows piety in this act is further justified by the placement of the words *vota deum* at the beginning of this passage: since he committed this act as a deed to the gods, it shows his piety toward them. Additionally, the placement of this phrase sets the tone for the passage as a holy ritual, rather than a

merciless treatment of a dead body, similar to Achilles dragging Hector's body around until the gods ordered him to stop.

At one point in the narrative, the narrator directly addresses the war god himself, noting that the trophy was built *tibi*, "for you," the war god. This brief change in address creates a sense of intimacy with the gods in this scene as if Mars constantly plays a role in Aeneas's arc without actively doing anything. In this phrase, one can imagine a bard in Ancient Rome telling the story of the *Aeneid* to an audience, and pausing to gesture at the sky or a temple to Mars when Virgil directly addresses the deity. It is in this instance that Aeneas shows how he typifies the ideal Roman man: he conducts battle with the war god in mind like a true Roman should. Again, it is clear that he shows devotion to the gods in this act.

In what instance must a hero use mercy against his enemy, and when must he deconstruct a body to send a message? In the case of Achilles, he showed that he avenged the death of his beloved Patroclus, but the case for Aeneas's treatment of Mezentius is not quite as compelling. Mezentius did jeopardize the founding of Rome by attempting to kill Aeneas, but this is not the only time that Aeneas nearly missed out on fulfilling his destiny. It is worth questioning Aeneas's intentions with this process since piety or vengeance alone does not seem to be enough motivation.

When Mezentius died, Aeneas was faced with a choice between two common burial practices. The one he chose demonstrated his loyalty to the gods, but the other choice exemplifies familial piety. Aeneas's treatment of Mezentius is both an act of piety and one of impiety: by choosing to honor the war god instead of Mezentius's family, Aeneas rejected one form of piety in favor of another. Because of this, it is difficult to

justify how this incident may have aided Aeneas in the greater pursuit of his destiny; it appears as if he took an unnecessary break in the narrative to tear a family apart in their deaths. Virgil makes an attempt to justify this action by stripping Mezentius of his humanity. Mezentius becomes objectified as Virgil describes his tree-form as a *tropaeum*, a trophy. This noun is a neuter noun, so Mezentius literally loses his masculine characterization by becoming a neuter *thing*. However, it is worth noting that Mezentius was still a person despite Virgil's alteration of his grammatical gender.

Regardless of how Mezentius ends, he still exists to ultimately aid Aeneas in his pursuit of *pietas* and the foundation of Rome. Dido was marked as a seductress and an obstacle because Aeneas was tempted to remain in Carthage with her, but Mezentius did not receive the same treatment in reception. Even though he attempted to kill Aeneas and sever his bloodline, Mezentius does not receive as much criticism as Dido, as seen in his depiction as a "brave Homeric warrior" (Kronenberg, "Mezentius"). Virgil himself even casts judgment on Dido as she transforms from a *dux femina* to *infelix Dido* whose main defining trait is her *furor.* When compared to Mezentius, it appears as if Dido's act of hindering Aeneas alone was not her most heinous crime, but the fact that she showed agency as a woman is the true reason that the audience and Virgil are compelled to hold her in contempt.

Virgil, in the deaths of Mezentius and Dido, appears to have established a clear dynamic between masculinity and femininity. Either gender has its role and deviation from that role is punished. This construction receives some doubt as the audience witnesses the burial ritual of Pallas, the fallen Arcadian prince and son of Evander. After

Turnus kills Pallas, Virgil once again paused the narrative to detail Aeneas's meticulous fulfillment of the burial rites:

haud segnes alii cratis et molle feretrum
arbuteis texunt virgis et vimine querno
exstructosque toros obtentu frondis inumbrant.
hic iuvenem agresti sublimem stramine ponunt:
qualem virgineo demessum pollice florem
seu mollis violae seu languentis hyacinthi,
cui neque fulgor adhuc nec dum sua forma recessit,
non iam mater alit tellus virisque ministrat.
tum geminas vestis auroque ostroque rigentis
extulit Aeneas, quas illi laeta laborum
ipsa suis quondam manibus Sidonia Dido
fecerat et tenui telas discreverat auro.
harum unam iuveni supremum maestus honorem
induit arsurasque comas obnubit amictu,

Not at all slowly, the others weave a soft bier
Of wicker-work with arbute twigs and oak branches
And they shade the constructed bed with a covering of leaves.
Here they place the exalted youth on the rustic litter;
Just like a blossom having been plucked off by a virgin's fingers

Either a soft violet or a drooping hyacinth,

Whose radiance and beauty have not yet departed,

Now, mother earth does not nourish it and does not pour out strength.

Then Aeneas brought out twin cloaks of stiff gold

And purple, which Sidonian Dido herself

Once made for him, happy in the work

And she interwove the fabric with gold threads.

In mourning, he dressed the youth in one of these as a final honor

And he covered his hair, about to be burned, with the garment,

(Aeneid 11.64-77)

Pallas becomes likened to a blossom having been plucked by a maiden in a rather vivid metaphor. Virgil's characterization of the boy effectively blends masculinity with femininity until one is not distinct from another. The word *florem* translates to "blossom," but its grammatical case is masculine. The blossom is a soft, beautiful piece of nature, so it seems natural that the noun would be feminine, like the name of most trees. However, it is a masculine noun, which shows that things with typically feminine features can be masculine at its very core. By using this word as the main descriptor for Pallas, Virgil shows how he encapsulates femininity while still being a boy.

Virgil's comparison of Pallas to a blossom might be a commentary on how Pallas was not yet a man, and any person who was not a man was able to have a feminine characterization without any criticism. This interpretation further proves the flimsiness of

any distinction between genders: if the only distinguishing trait between masculinity and femininity is a state of being a "Man" and a "not-Man," that shows a lack of a clear definition. Thus, gender roles present as socially constructed attributes with no applicable basis.

Additionally, Virgil's mention of Dido in this instance hints that Aeneas may have had a similar affection for Pallas that he had for Dido. The act of wrapping Pallas's body in a cloak that came from the labors of Dido created the image of a piece of Dido burning with the body of Pallas. These two characters never interacted in the epic, but their love for Aeneas connects them to the extent that Pallas burns wrapped in a Phoenecian shroud. This connection is also clearly seen in the presence of oak in both of their pyres (Parker 1292). Since oak implies the presence of Aeneas, the presence of this tree in the pyres reminds the reader of Aeneas's impact on these characters, and even implicates that Aeneas might be responsible for their deaths. After all, Pallas and Dido might have lived out the rest of their lives had they not met Aeneas. However, Virgil describes Pallas as *sublimem* ("sublime"), while Dido was regarded as *infelix* ("unfaithful").

Virgil's use of the word *sublime* draws attention because its literal translation of "lofty" indicates a level of physical height. Virgil used words to place Pallas close to heaven, almost giving a deified characterization, similar to how Ovid characterizes Cyparrisus in the *Metamorphoses*. The difference is stark: Dido is a woman gone mad and Pallas is a boy turned god. If Dido and Pallas share a similar role as Aeneas's love interests, then it is worth questioning why Pallas was honored in his death and Dido was reduced to a perverse hindrance. Perhaps to Virgil, despite the fact that Pallas was not yet a man, Pallas's gender saves him from the same fate as Dido.

The manner in which Aeneas conducts this burial ritual also indicates the reverence that the reader should have for Pallas. The beginning of the passage points out that Aeneas worked with haste; the use of litotes with *haud segnes* makes it known to the reader that Aeneas and his men did not hesitate to ensure that Pallas was given optimal treatment. The following lines indicate that he worked with a careful, methodical haste. Aeneas flexed his knowledge of the procedure of burying an honored person in these lines, even having the forethought to ceremoniously burn the body, as evidenced by the use of the future passive participle *arsuras* ("about to be burned"). Finally, the structured use of complete sentences in his writing further conveys his methodical actions. Where Dido acted with frenzied haste, her lines wrought with enjambment, Aeneas and his men ensured precision for their special boy. Thus, Aeneas cared greatly for this boy, as he halted his efforts to ensure a proper burial for Pallas.

As seen with Dido and Mezentius, giving someone a proper burial is not necessary for Aeneas to maintain his pious character. With this fact in mind, he likely stopped to bury Pallas for his own personal reasons: he wanted to ensure a safe passage to the Underworld for his ally and potential lover. This fact shows that Aeneas did not need to choose godly piety in every situation that he was given, because he could have easily abandoned the body of Pallas so he could continue with his destiny. Thus, it is even more outrageous that Dido receives the most scrutiny for her role as a temptation away from his destiny. Clearly, Aeneas was able to make the choice that deviated from the path selected for him by the gods without dire repercussions. While on a much smaller scale, this burial of Pallas can be classified as a delay in Aeneas's destiny, Virgil seems to neglect that fact when he writes about this lofty boy who reminds him of a flower.

If a character who hinders Aeneas does not receive criticism, and a “non-Man” who Aeneas loves receives praise, why does a “non-Man” who hinders him receive so much criticism? Dido was a woman who embodied masculine traits, and, to Virgil, that is problematic behavior. It is clear that Virgil tried to create a dichotomy between genders, but his conflation of Pallas and Dido as “non-Men” broadens the categories to a point where it becomes too difficult to define femininity. If femininity can only be defined in terms of masculinity, as evidenced by Virgil’s writing, is gender a trait worth constructing roles around? Virgil cannot seem to make a compelling claim in favor of gender binaries. Thus, it is worth rethinking modern conceptions of gender and how high of a significance genders are given in modern-day society.

Transformation takes several different forms, as seen in the examples with death in this chapter. A later poet, Propertius takes some inspiration from Virgil as he incorporates some of his own abstract ideas of transformation in his poems. Regardless of the author’s style of tree transformation, Propertius also attempts to stay faithful to traditional Augustan ideas of gender, which further expands the investigation of these themes. Propertius continues Virgil’s vision of a connection between humans and trees through his use of several vivid metaphors.

Chapter 2

Seeking Sanity in the Binary: An Investigation of Traditional Gender Roles in Propertius' *Elegies*

Propertius demonstrates that gender in Ancient Rome is a social construct in his *Elegies*. Out of the Augustan poetry canon, his reinforcement of the gender binary tends to be the most consistent: the presumably male narrator maintains masculine characteristics while applying traditionally feminine characteristics to his love interest and frequent addressee, Cynthia. He goes about this assertion by means of vivid metaphors that liken people to trees, and trees to people. In his use of language, Propertius fabricates his own tree transformations.

Cynthia is both the object of the narrator's desires and the cause for many of his grievances, as illustrated in his elegies. Early on in his work, Propertius utilizes tree transformation to persuade Cynthia to embrace her own natural beauty, comparing her physical form to that of a resilient strawberry tree. Next, he reverses the transformation, instead making the trees into humans by calling them *testes*. Finally, he concludes one of his later poems by declaring that he himself was once a maple tree trunk. These alterations of reality and skewed direction of transformations both illustrate that the narrator's perception of truth is flawed. Hence, the narrator is unreliable. With these facts in mind, Propertius demonstrates the insanity behind assigning certain traits to certain genders, almost arbitrarily.

Propertius begins blurring the line between human and *arbor* rather quickly in his poetry series: in the second poem of the first book, he reminds Cynthia of the arbutus tree as an example of beauty that she should follow. After disparaging Cynthia's use of fancy clothing and exotic makeup to make herself appear presentable, he begins comparing her to nature, remarking that nature finds beauty in its simplicity. In his direct address to her, he pleads:

crede mihi, non ulla tua est medicina figurae:

nudus Amor formam non amat artificem.

aspice quos summittat humus formosa colores,

ut veniant hederae sponte sua melius,

surgat et in solis formosior arbutus antris,

et sciat indocilis currere lympha vias.

litora nativis praegaudent picta lapillis,

et volucres nulla dulcius arte canunt.

Believe me, there is not any cure for your form:

Naked Love does not love a contriver of beauty.

Behold the colors which the beautiful earth produces,

As the ivies come better on their own free will,

And the lovelier strawberry tree rises in lonely caves,

And water knows to run in undiscovered paths.

The painted shores glitter with natural stones,

And birds sing more sweetly without any craft.

(Elegies 1.2.7-14)

Propertius' comparison of Cynthia to each of these nature themes comes rather loaded, as he assigns a trait to each motif that he implies that Cynthia ought to emulate. Most

notably, he wants her to be like the lovely strawberry tree that grows in a lonely cave. Not only does he use the word *formosior* ("lovelier") to describe the tree, but he wishes he can describe Cynthia in this way. This word applies to both physical beauty and an overall demeanor, desirable in a traditional Roman woman.

Furthermore, Propertius introduces the lonely cave to show that the tree thrives when there is no audience to perform for. Camps writes in his commentary on this poem that *solis antris* refers to "wild conditions," which both reinforce the loneliness of the tree, but highlight its beauty in comparison to its surroundings (Camps 47). In his description of Cynthia, her beauty is at the forefront of his focus. This fact shows that he also assigns unassuming humility to the portrait of an ideal woman, and this reflects a traditional distaste for vain women in Rome.

Additionally, a striking majority of the nouns that Propertius used in this extended metaphor are all feminine nouns, showing how Cynthia's gender restricts her subjects of comparison. If she were a man, perhaps the nature motifs Propertius used would have all been different nouns of the masculine grammatical gender. Most notably is Propertius's use of the word *lympha* for water. The more common word for water, *aqua*, is already a feminine noun, but Propertius made the noun even more feminine by using *lympha*, which is directly associated with female water nymphs. With his choice use of this word, Propertius instated a hyperfeminine characterization onto Cynthia. She is not just any woman, she is going to be *the* woman if she follows Propertius' guidance. Thus, Propertius utilized this more specific word for water to push this overall message that Cynthia, in her most ideal state, is the picture of hyper-femininity.

Finally, Propertius incorporates traditional feminine roles into these lines through his use of the word *summittat*, when describing the colors that come from the earth. A feminine noun, *humus*, produces a masculine noun, *colores*. This imagery is reflective of a mother raising a son, which is exactly what a woman ought to do, according to this frenzied Propertian narrator and traditional Augustan thought. Additionally, *summittat* has connotations of child-rearing. According to Lewis & Short, *summittat* can mean “raise” or “rear” in contexts that concern plants and animals (Lewis & Short). His adherence to traditional gender norms runs so deep that it exists in the very grammar of the sentence. This overall comparison even measures Cynthia’s value in terms of what she can produce for the narrator, by relating her beauty to things “produced” (*summitat*) by the earth. Her existence is strictly for the pleasure of the man, and how she can provide a family for future generations.

In a slightly later elegy, Propertius reverses the metaphor, aiming to instead transform the trees into humans. It is in this instance that his mental state is in question—he cannot even adhere to the proper direction of the tree transformation, so his sanity is slipping. Moreover, he demonstrates his insanity through the actions he takes in the name of love. In showing the negative effects of love, he reveals his own declining mental state. Regardless, he sticks to a generally routine characterization of masculinity and femininity, ensuring that the feminine trees continue to serve his needs as the masculine protagonist. In his dialogue to Cynthia, he quickly switches his audience:

> *an quia parva damus mutato signa colore,*
>
> *et non ulla meo clamat in ore fides?*

vos eritis testes, si quos habet arbor amores,

fagus et Arcadio pinus amica deo.

a quotiens teneras resonant mea verba sub umbras,

scribitur et vestris Cynthia corticibus!

an tua quot peperit nobis iniuria curas,

quae solum tacitis cognita sunt foribus!

Or because we give too little signs with different colors,

And not any faith cries in my mouth?

You will all be witnesses, trees that are acquainted with love,

The beech and fir, friend to the Arcadian god.

And how often my words ring under the delicate shadows,

And your name, Cynthia, is carved in their bark!

Or why does your harshness flower from our cares,

Which alone are known by silent doors.

(Elegies 1.18.18-24)

The immediate, abrupt change in audience highlights the Narrator's frantic thinking. In one line he addresses his love, and in the next, he begins to view the trees around him as people, and he addresses them as such. Propertius used the feminine form of *testes* in this passage since it modifies the trees that he names specifically in his poem. Rather than

entering a forest of strong, masculine oaks or maples, Propertius intentionally populates his audience with trees that have a feminine grammatical gender: the fir and the beech.

These particular types are unique in the way that they are both second-declension nouns, which typically take a masculine gender. Hence, the trees appear masculine, but they are feminine at their core. It appears as if Propertius wants to show he enjoys the company of his fellow men, but he secretly wishes for the servitude that women ought to provide. Most importantly, he wishes to fill these feminine trees with the sound of his voice, as pointed out by Hunt: “By the conclusion, the once mute surroundings will be filled with the echoes of his *carmen*” (Hunt 146). He almost impregnates his feminine surroundings with his male voice. Hence, he seeks the company of feminine beings for their services.

Propertius used these specific tree types as tools to help build his own credibility as a poet. He first lists the beech tree, *fagus*, as a member of his audience. His inclusion of this word might be an intertext, according to S.J. Heyworth in his *Cynthia* commentary. He remarks that Propertius’s use of *fagus* is “significant,” noting that it is “a symbol of Vergil’s *eclogues*… one of Vergil’s shepherds uses the *fagus* as writing material,” among other notable examples in the work (Heyworth 82). Naming the *fagus* is significant to Propertius because his subtle inclusion of an intertext to another famous author furthers his poetic authority. With his inclusion of intertexts such as these, Propertius shows his audience that he is well-read and exhibits prowess in writing. Thus, the beech tree loses its agency and becomes a tool for Propertius to show off to readers.

Propertius shows his poetic skills in this passage by several different means. Elegy 1.18 also contains an instance where Propertius plays around with the rules of

grammar, intentionally subverting them to show his advanced grasp of the Latin language. Heyworth also points out that there is a "grammatical oddity" in lines 23-24 because "*curas* is the antecedent of *quae*, which turns out… to be neuter" (Heyworth 82). Rather than sticking to the convention of having a relative pronoun and its antecedent match in gender and number, Propertius shifts the gender between *curas* and its relative pronoun. Propertius may have wanted to further flex his expansive knowledge of previous works, as Heyworth points out historical examples of this same phenomenon, or it could contribute to his overall claim on gender. Perhaps his shifting of grammatical gender reflects his sentiment that gender of all kinds can be manipulated as easily as this, so it is ridiculous to place such an emphasis on gender in Roman society. This fact is also significant because it highlights the reason that he even ran into the woods: his *curae*: his worries and anxieties over his lover's temper.

The fir is also unique in its relationship to *Arcadio deo*: the Arcadian god, or Pan. Propertius calls the fir tree a "friend" (*amica*) to Pan, referencing the story of how the fir tree became sacred to Pan. The fir tree was once a nymph who was beloved by Pan, and after Boreas punished her for choosing Pan over him, she died. Pan then turned her into a tree so her honor could continue for generations (Smith 518). Again, Propertius flexes his poetic authority with this reference. He manages to communicate his advanced knowledge of the lore associated with the fir tree with one simple reference, so simple that it appears to be a throwaway line meant to fill the meter of the poem. But with Propertius, and many other poets, each word is intentional. Propertius reinforces the feminine nature of the trees around him by reminding the reader of the tree's origin: the fir tree came from a woman, so she is the perfect audience for him now.

After establishing his feminine audience, Propertius continues to show that they exist for his benefit only, thus surrendering their agency. Toward the end of this passage, the narrator exclaims that he has carved the name of Cynthia "so often" (*quotiens*) in their bark. Not only does this repeated action show how his mental state is in decline, but it also reinforces his view of the trees and women as tools for him. The rhetorical statement he begins with *quotiens* emphasizes how frequently he completes the action of carving the name of Cynthia into the bark of the trees—one can easily picture a madman in the woods surrounded by trees with sloppy inscriptions on them. With these details in mind, Propertius appears to continue his trend of clutching onto typical gender norms for the sake of maintaining his sanity. While he cannot make sense of why his lover has abandoned him, as evidenced by the frequent questions in this passage, he hopes to maintain control of his bearings by remaining a strong manly man, served by subordinate female beings.

Propertius does not explicitly mention trees again until his fourth book of Elegies, published much later than the *Monobiblos*. Tree imagery is significant enough to Propertius and other poets that it can withstand the test of time. In between years of publishing, trees remain relevant enough to Propertius that he reintroduced them so much later on. In this instance, he returns to the traditional direction of transformation: he used a vivid metaphor to "transform" himself into a tree. After praising his many physical forms, Propertius finishes one of his final poems with these lines:

sex superant versus: te, qui ad vadimonia curris,

non moror: haec spatiis ultima creta meis.

stipes acernus eram, properanti falce dolatus,

ante Numam grata pauper in urbe deus.

at tibi, Mamurri, formae caelator aënae,

tellus artificis ne terat osca manus,

qui me tot docilem potuisti fundere in usus.

unum opus est, operi non datur unus honos.

Six verses remain: I do not delay you, who runs

to bail: this final part is my space.

I was a maple trunk, quickly hewn with a curved blade

Before Numa, I was a humble god in a grateful city.

But to you, Mamurrius, artisan of my bronze form,

May the Oscan earth not wear away your skillful hands,

You, who were able to pour me out, moldable in so many uses.

The work is one, but the honor given to the work is not.

(Elegies 4.2.57-64)

One of the most striking details in this passage is the blatant lie that Propertius tells to his audience: he states that only six verses remain, but he proceeds to write eight verses. While it appears that he is referring to the final 6 lines, which are typically stylized to indicate that they are an inscription, it is still an interesting detail to point out, as Heyworth does in his commentary (Heyworth 444). This line indicates an instance of

intentional uncertainty in Propertius's writing: he had the means to make his statement on the number of lines remaining more clear, but he chose to leave that detail in its current place. Thus, Propertius communicates the insanity of the narrator implicitly by including moments such as this that are meant to confuse the reader. When Propertius confuses the reader, he starts to make them question their own sanity in tandem with that of the narrator, hence further justifying the narrator's desire to remain faithful to traditional gender norms as an anchor to reality—or, at least, his perception of reality.

In addition to the reader becoming confused by Propertius's trickery, the narrator further communicates insanity by constructing his narrative at warped speeds. In these lines, the narrator describes himself as a tree trunk (*stipes*), a god (*deus*), and an object with a bronze form, presumably a statue (*formae aenae*). His physical form rapidly shifts from one to another to the extent that it nearly gives the reader whiplash. The narrator's thoughts and physical form move at lightning speeds, so it is natural to think that the construction of the lines would reflect that. Instead, these lines are free of enjambment, which typically serves to blend lines of poetry as the poet's thoughts blend. This instance would be a perfect case for enjambment to reflect the fluidity of the narrator's body, but Propertius maintains steady pacing of these lines by confining each clause to its own line. In this time of fluid thinking, Propertius adheres to structure in both meter and faithfulness to traditional gender norms.

Elegy 4.2 did not consistently support Augustan gender norms, though, as seen in an earlier line wherein Propertius explicitly states that gender norms are ridiculous in their construction and application. The narrator remarks that one could dress him in Coan cloth and he would become an "easy girl," but nobody would deny his manhood if he

were to don a toga (Heyworth 590). This final shred of reality onto which the narrator was gripping begins to fall out of his reach, and he knows that he might spiral into insanity if he allows this to happen. As a result, the end of the poem finds itself doubling down on supporting traditional gender norms. Rather than conceding to the point that Propertius the Author wants the reader to glean—that gender is socially constructed and therefore a ridiculous basis for a power structure—the narrator fights back and makes even more attempts to maintain his beloved image of an ideal Augustan masculine man.

Propertius remains faithful to Augustan gender norms in the narrator's praise of the artist Marimurrus (Goold 327). The narrator rejoices at the beauty of Mamurrius's work, making a point to highlight how the artist took agency over Propertius's form. Most notably is Propertius's use of the word *fundere* to describe how Mamurrius handled the narrator: he poured him out. In this context, *fundere* most logically translates to a concept referring to pouring, as Mamurrius was an artisan whose primary medium was bronze (Goold 420). However, in other contexts, *fundere* can translate to a more military-focused term meaning "overcome" or "vanquish" (Lewis & Short). Propertius's choice to use a verb with such overwhelmingly masculine connotations reinforces his dedication to traditional gender norms. He wants to illustrate that despite the fact that Mamurrius does not engage in warfare, his accomplishments strengthen his manhood so much that he essentially displays battle prowess in other facets of his life. Thus, the manliest of men formed the narrator into what he is as he finishes this poem.

Propertius also introduces religious imagery in this poem that seems somewhat out of place, given the context of the whole work of *Elegies*. In the midst of his erotic love poetry, Propertius injects spirituality into his lines, which happens right as he praises

Mamurrius. Propertius almost deifies the artist in his words, as he makes vivid allusions to religious figures and even hints at deifying himself. The narrator first claims that he was once a poor god, before the reign of Numa, the second king of Rome (Goold 424). Numa's reign was associated with religious rituals, so Propertius's mention of this specific king relates the actions of Mamurrius to that of a religious ritual.

With this image in mind, Mamurrius becomes like a god who can transform and create subjects. The image of Mamurrius as a god only becomes more vivid with Propertius's claim that he was once a god in a humble city. This claim, juxtaposed with all of the ways in which Mamurrius has changed the narrator, paints a picture of Mamurrius as something above godliness. He is not just any being: he has the power to transform even gods. It appears that all of this praise—elevating Mamurrius to heights that exceed powerful gods—stems from his agency, especially in succeeding in his art, as previously mentioned. His skills both reinforce his manliness and place him on the same level as a god, or perhaps something more.

Propertius depicts men in a hypermasculine manner, and he also makes a point to subtly include some insight into the role of women in Augustan times. This elegy emphasizes the characteristics of "passivity, *mollitia*, and *servitium*" which are heavily associated with women and femininity (Miller 132). The narrator actually assumes the feminine role in relation to Mamurrius, but it only serves to emphasize the masculinity of the artisan. The narrator surrenders his agency in order to become the subject on which Mamurrius works, thus exhibiting passivity and *mollitia* in a literal sense: his form is soft to the point of becoming moldable. Not only does Propertius show what makes a man,

but the narrator's assumption of more feminine traits as a means to highlight this also shows the role of women as supports for men in Augustan Rome.

Propertius displays the principle of *servitium* in his final line: *unum opus est, operi non datur unus honos* ("the work is one, but the honor given to the work is not" 4.2.64). This line is the culminating piece of praise that the narrator gives to Mamurrius, his artisan. The narrator serves Mamurrius through his praise since it emulates the gratitude that humans give to the gods. His passion and dedication to Mamurrius almost act as a payment for his hard work on the narrator's final form. In the narrator's enthusiasm for upholding this exchange, and reinforcing the connection between Mamurrius and the divine, Propertius clarifies the role of women in antiquity, according to Augustan customs. Women were viewed as supports for men as they were expected to surrender agency and serve men.

Propertius uses a combination of *furor* and adherence to gender norms to support the overall argument that gender in Augustan Rome—and in general—is socially constructed. This series of poems requires an intense level of close reading to come to this conclusion because Propertius assumes a persona in his writing. Thus, the narrator must be viewed as a completely different character than Propertius the author, who makes the claim about gender as a social construct. Propertius's character embodies the oddness of gender norms in antiquity by internalizing them and projecting them onto others. Propertius's use of frenzy and *furor* highlights that one must be insane to actually believe that the idea of gender is rooted in anything real.

Propertius joins Virgil in noticing the difficulty in maintaining traditional gender roles in Ancient Rome, but both poets do so in their own unique ways. Virgil decided to

show how easy it is for men to be feminine, or even genderless. Meanwhile, Propertius took an approach with abstract metaphors, but even he broke the flow of his poetry to explicitly state the truth: that gender is simply a function of how one ultimately presents themselves. As time continued, another poet took to writing an epic poem with elegiac components. Ovid continued this discourse, opting to conduct literal transformations of his anthropomorphic characters into their tree selves. This shift from an abstract set of metaphors to literal transformations by magic encapsulates the entire spectrum of tree transformations, allowing readers to notice points of continuity in their arguments.

Chapter 3

Peeling Back the Bark: Instances of Transformation into Trees from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In order for Ovid to convey his idea of gender in Ancient Rome, he needed to strip people of their human-constructed genders and replace their corporeal forms with trees in his *Metamorphoses*. The only gender that remained for these characters was their grammatical gender, and even that became standardized, as most tree names are feminine nouns. By removing the physical aspects of a person that gives them their gender, Ovid exploited the personal traits that dictated one's gender in Ancient Rome. It is through this process that the reader is able to see the futility of maintaining gender roles in Ancient Rome, which becomes Ovid's main point. When boys become akin to women, and women exhibit masculine traits, defining gender becomes increasingly difficult. Perhaps it is more accurate to acknowledge gender as a social construct and to cease reducing people to their gender.

Ovid makes use of a variety of narrators and perspectives to tell stories for him. Mimesis is a technique used by authors where the author assumes the persona of a character who then narrates the story, which creates a hierarchy of narrators: a "primary narrator" and then subsequent other narrators (Barchiesi 288). Employing mimesis, Ovid tried to imagine what his narrators might make of a story as a means to make the narrator more compelling, even if the story's accuracy might suffer. Thus, Ovid demonstrated an understanding of his characters and narrators as he gave them a voice. A significant case exists in his use of Orpheus as a narrator. After grieving the loss of his beloved Eurydice, Orpheus turned to loving boys instead of women. Orpheus literally vocalizes this switch in Book 10: he turns his love to "tender young males" (Anderson 482). As a result, his narration of Book 10 reflects his turn to pederasty.

Despite all of the different voices, some elements of each story remain continuous throughout the narrative, no matter who controls the story. Thus, because of these consistencies, it can be concluded that Ovid's perception of gender was rather mixed, as he frequently awarded masculine traits to women and feminine traits to men. This analysis of his *Metamorphoses* will be mainly guided through the transformation of people into trees, which is the most thorough and intimate way in which humans can interact with trees. When people become trees, they quite literally forego their human-constructed gender.

Humans interact with all different types of nature in many different ways in the *Metamorphoses*. From the sea to the sky, plants and animals play a major role in these stories of transformation. As a result, nature becomes a rather broad lens with which one can examine the dynamics of gender in Ovid. David Hughes points out that trees were sacred to Ancient Greeks and Romans, writing of the *hiera temene*, sacred groves, that were kept intact for the sake of protecting trees that were thought to be blessed by a certain god (Hughes 90). Their sacredness made ancient peoples hold them to high importance, and so writers like Ovid could use them as vehicles to make statements on the human condition.

The most thorough way that humans interact with trees in the *Metamorphoses* is their transformation into trees. Among many stories of humans becoming "dendrified," as coined by Allison Sharrock, the stories of Daphne, Cyparissus, and Myrrha make the most striking points ("New Bodies" 5). Daphne, a nymph, exhibits not only human traits but masculine traits: specifically, self-government. She, as well as Myrrha, are given

direct speech in their stories, thus implementing a sense of self-government in their narratives. In both cases, the women control their stories by making their demands.

The story of Daphne concerns her abduction by the god Apollo. After being struck with Cupid's lead-tipped arrow, she desperately fought to avoid the advances of a lust-struck Apollo. She had told her father that she did not want to marry, instead, her wish was to live as a virgin. Once Apollo cornered her, she called out to her father, Peneus, and he turned her into a tree:

> *"fer, pater,' inquit 'opem! si flumina numen habetis,*
>
> *qua nimium placui, mutando perde figuram!'*
>
> *vix prece finita torpor gravis occupat artus,*
>
> *mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro,*
>
> *in frondem crines, in ramos bracchia crescunt,*
>
> *pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret,*
>
> *ora cacumen habet: remanet nitor unus in illa"*

> "Bring help father," she said, "if you river gods have divine light,
>
> destroy the figure which must be changed, with which I have pleased too much!"
>
> with the prayer finished, heavy sluggishness occupied her limbs
>
> her soft chest was surrounded by drawn-out weight
>
> her hair sprung up into branches, her arms into boughs
>
> then by measure slow roots hang from her swift feet,
>
> her face as a peak: radiance alone remained in that girl"

(Metamorphoses 1.545-552)

Daphne made a wish and it was granted, as the narrator concluded in these lines. Upon an initial reading, it seems as if Daphne was victorious in this scenario, but her characterization ultimately takes a downward turn. In her transformation, Ovid employed the word *torpor* ("sluggish") to describe her limbs upon becoming a tree. This word carries a connotation of heaviness and lack of agency to it: someone who was once in active control over her own limbs lost the physical ability to move them. In a literal sense, a human became an object. With respect to Daphne's wish, it appears that her desire to become undesirable is accomplished through her characterization becoming sluggish. If it takes Daphne's humanity being removed, then it must happen.

Perhaps this is what Daphne wanted: she wanted her desirable, feminine form to vanish and she would have embraced the new brutish frame. However, her wish was not truly granted. The final clause, *remanet nitor unus in illa* ("only radiance remained in her"), reminds the reader that Daphne still attracts her pursuer. Because of this, her wish was denied by the narrator. Her request for her body to change comes true, but given the context of her outcry, she truly sought safety from her captor. Instead, she was left with the one thing that endangered her: her *nitor*. Again, Daphne is left with a lack of agency despite her best wishes, because her post-dendrification self can no longer speak. As a result, she lost the chance to right her wrongs and make an attempt to save herself. She remained left in danger with no way out.

Her entire character becomes defined by slowness and weightiness as she takes on the form of a laurel. Ovid's narrator uses words such as *gravis* and *pigris* as well as *torpor* to describe her final form. Apollo's perspective may play a role in this context as he views his prey suddenly rendering herself incapable of movement. What appears to be a win for Apollo ends up being a potential victory for Daphne, as her desirable body becomes destroyed and replaced with a new one characterized by sluggishness and weight. This new body is immune to abduction because even the god Apollo cannot overcome the strength of her roots and bark.

Furthermore, the use of the word *illa* to describe Daphne may have just been a trick to maintain the meter, but it could also hold some stronger implications. *Illa* literally translated to "that one," which conveys a derogatory tone toward the pronoun's antecedent. Again, Daphne once enjoyed the benefits of a human characterization and ends her tale lacking all human traits and remains trapped in her fate. The use of *illa* might be a result of Ovid incorporating Apollo's perspective into the narrative. Since there is not an explicitly stated narrator in Book 1, the perspective of the one witnessing the metamorphosis plays a much larger role. Apollo was the only character present in Daphne's change into a tree, so her final description may be skewed to reflect Apollo's anger with his object of desire actively avoiding his advances. Perhaps this use of the word *illa* is the product of a scorned lover.

Ovid's narrator gave Daphne agency and quickly ripped it away from her. At the beginning of her transformation, she cried out directly to her father: *'fer, pater,' inquit 'opem!'* ("'bring help, father!' she said"). The presence of Daphne's direct discourse gives her something that ultimately gets taken away. The narrator's choice to include a

quotation from Daphne shows that she once had agency–the ability to ask for help. In this case, her voice and direct speech represent an element of autarchy, a uniquely masculine trait as pointed out by Sharrock. With her transformation into a tree, her voice disappears and her agency gets lost. By giving Daphne a uniquely human quality, speech, the narrator uses it to symbolize her humanity being stripped and replaced with tree bark.

The story of Cyparissus plays a stark contrast in this dynamic. Cyparissus is another character in the *Metamorphoses* who undergoes dendrification, but the narrator's tone toward him seems to shift. In his characterization of Cyparissus, the reader receives the impression that he transformed into a divine figure after his dendrification. After killing the sacred stag of Apollo, Cyparissus asked for a reprieve from his grief. He was gifted a reprieve when he became a tree:

iamque per inmensos egesto sanguine fletus
in viridem verti coeperunt membra colorem,
et, modo qui nivea pendebant fronte capilli,
horrida caesaries fieri sumptoque rigore
sidereum gracili spectare cacumine caelum.
ingemuit tristisque deus 'lugebere nobis
lugebisque alios aderisque dolentibus' inquit.

And now with blood having been discharged through immense tears
His limbs began to turn into the color green,
And which hairs were just now hanging on the snow-white forehead

They become bristly with taken up stiffness

His slender peak sees the stars and the heavens.

The god groaned with sadness and said “you will be mourned by us

You will be present and you will mourn with the others in suffering”

(Metamorphoses 10.136-142)

Rather than becoming the victim of Apollo’s ravaging lust, Cyparissus was honored by both the god and the pederastic narrator, Orpheus. The use of the word *nivea* to describe Cyparissus’s hair conveys a sense of purity about the boy since the sight of white snow implies its untouched nature. Like a divinity, Cyparissus is pure despite his crime of killing a stag. Hughes points out that animals were so sacred to the gods that hunters deeply considered the usefulness of killing an animal before committing the deed, lest the animal's life be taken in vain (Hughes 89-90). Thus, the wasteful killing of the stag by Cyparissus should have warranted a much harsher treatment. Instead, his purity receives the most attention, which is manifested in his very appearance.

In addition to his pure characterization, the now-dendrified Cyparissus developed a more divine characterization himself. Orpheus pointed out Cyparissus’s “crown / That gazes on the heavens and the stars” (10.140). This introduction of the heavens (*caelum*) and stars (*sidereum*) applies a more divine quality to Cyparissus since these two motifs have heavy associations with the gods. The gods who sit at Mount Olympus reside among the heavens. Those who are honored by the gods turn into constellations, they live among the stars. Apollo’s speech after his transformation further cements this detail: by

declaring he will exist among the mourning, he grants Cyparissus a sense of omnipresence, which is again characteristic of the gods. Thus, the tree form of Cyparissus replaces his humanity with divinity.

Finally, the reader is essentially told to feel empathy for Cyparissus as Orpheus records Apollo's reaction. Apollo "groaned in sadness" (*ingemuit tristique*) at the sight of his special boy turning into a tree. As the reader sees a god moved to *tristis*, the reader follows suit. The presence of this adjective at the beginning of his direct discourse governs the tone of his words. As Apollo speaks, the reader knows to read his speech with sadness. This placement thus dictates to the reader that the reader must also mourn for poor Cyparissus, and so there seems to be greater demand for empathy in this context. As a result, Cyparissus receives a much more tender treatment from his narrator than Daphne does from hers.

Despite the more empathetic characterization of Cyparissus as a tree, there remains one alarming detail: he lacks any direct speech. The only quotation from a character in the story of Cyparissus is Apollo. His lack of direct speech indicates a lack of agency to begin with, so did Cyparissus ever have agency to lose, like Daphne? Sharrock outlined in her argument that masculinity was defined by autarchy and that the feminine was a lack of autarchy. Since he had no voice, Cyparissus did not have self-government. Thus, this male character exhibited a feminine trait and Ovid continues to blur the lines that distinguish the genders from one another.

It appears that the punishments for either character did not fit the crime. Daphne's only crime was being attractive to a god, while Cyparissus ended the life of an animal without a need to do so. So, why did Daphne get her humanity ripped away, and

Cyparissus moved a god to mourn? Sharrock argues that "it is significant that almost all transformed trees in the poem are originally female beings (humans or nymphs), while the only male characters to be transformed into trees are all sufficiently exceptional as not to destabilise the specific connection between females and trees" ("New Bodies" 5). Perhaps there is a status quo that Orpheus sought to maintain, by keeping women adhered to the category of mundane trees while Cyparissus develops a divine characterization. He might have wanted to make an attempt to make sense of the murky categories of male and female by attaching the feminine to something tangible: a tree.

On the other hand, Ovid may have been performing an act of mimesis in his near-deification of Cyparissus. After all, Orpheus summarized his own turn to pederasty in his narrative after losing Eurydice. Perhaps Orpheus's characterization of Cyparissus was a result of his realization: by highlighting feminine traits in the boy, Orpheus can justify his own attraction to the boy. In this way, he can engage in pederasty and maintain typical Roman traits of a heterosexual relationship. Sharrock even notes that "it is widely accepted that the representation of a beloved boy has considerable overlap with that of a woman or girl since both are situated on the other side of the opposition between the adult male citizen and everyone else" ("New Bodies" 6). Perhaps it is a combination of newfound affection and a wish to make sense of the confusion. With this justification, it is clear that Orpheus wanted to maintain that distinction between adult men and the "Other," but his doing so actually blurs the lines between masculinity and femininity more. If Cyparissus can join the ranks of the "Other," how does one distinguish between a boy and a girl?

Orpheus's perspective may have impacted his attitude toward the character of Cyparissus. Because of his affinity for boys, and potentially his desire to justify these feelings, he may have applied a bit more sympathy to Cyparissus's narrative than he, or Ovid, did to women in a similar situation. It is difficult to compare the story of Daphne to Cyparissus without acknowledging the difference in narrator because the narrator, not the character's gender, may be the reason the stories differ. This disparity can be overcome through an analysis of the story of Myrrha, a woman who also becomes dendrified in Book 10, narrated by a heartbroken Orpheus.

In her tale, Myrrha is a woman who unknowingly falls into a frantic love with her father, Cinyras. Her love becomes so powerful that she frequently experiences passionate bursts of emotion that are only remedied by her maid. After several of these spells, the maid suggests that Myrrha perform a bedtrick on her father, and pretend to be a young woman that he does not know so she can sleep with him and stop the hysteria. The maid tells a rumor to Cinyras that a young woman, about Myrrha's age, wishes to sleep with him. An enthusiastic Cinyras later joins this woman in his chambers; the woman is Myrrha under the cover of darkness. After sleeping together many times, Cinyras wishes to see his lover, and he brings a lamp to bed one night. Both he and Myrrha react with horror to find that father and daughter had been engaging in an incestuous relationship. To make matters worse, Myrrha is pregnant with Cinyras's child. Myrrha becomes flooded with shame as she prays, begging to neither continue living nor die. In response, she becomes dendrified:

... nam crura loquentis

terra supervenit, ruptosque obliqua per ungues

porrigitur radix, longi firmamina trunci,

ossaque robur agunt, mediaque manente medulla

sanguis it in sucos, in magnos bracchia ramos,

in parvos digiti, duratur cortice pellis.

iamque gravem crescens uterum perstrinxerat arbor

pectoraque obruerat collumque operire parabat:

non tulit illa moram venientique obvia ligno

subsedit mersitque suos in cortice vultus.

… For the earth came up to legs of the one speaking,

The slanting root spread out through

the burst nails, support of a long trunk

And hard-wood drives her bones, with her marrow remaining in the middle,

Her blood goes to sap, her arms into great branches,

Her fingers into little ones, her skin is hardened into bark,

And now growing, the tree had bound her heavy womb

And had covered her chest, and was preparing to cover her neck:

That one did not bring delay and she came, she sat to meet the wood

And she immersed her face in the bark.

(Metamorphoses 10.489-498)

Orpheus employed some choice words in this scenario when establishing the events that occurred in Myrrha's story. This transformation, more so than the two others previously discussed, included much more language relating to animals, such as *ungues* ("nails") and *pellis* ("skin"). This use of animal language begins to dehumanize Myrrha, but Orpheus does not appear to be motivated solely by Myrrha's gender. Instead, he likely assigns her animal qualities because of his distaste for her actions: namely, her lust for her own father.

Earlier in book 10, Ovid, whether through the voice of Orpheus or against it, includes a comment from Orpheus, who "'puritanically' criticizes Nature for permitting incest and then assumes a self-righteous air as a Thracian free of such corruption" (Anderson 503). Thus, to Orpheus, Myrrha has actually committed a crime, unlike Cyparissus. Despite the fact that Cyparissus committed a deed that might have been viewed as a crime by any Roman, Orpheus was not a Roman, so he was not as concerned with sacred animals. In the use of animal characteristics to dehumanize a criminal, Ovid engages in yet another successful act of mimesis.

Orpheus further seasons his words with distaste as he calls Myrrha *illa* in the final lines of her transformation. Like in the case of Daphne, she becomes an object of scorn from the narrator. Instead of Apollo feeling anger over losing his woman, Orpheus further separates himself from the story of Myrrha by using a derogatory term to address her. By doing this, he further shows the reader how greatly he disapproves of incest.

As for plant terms, Ovid-as-Orpheus continues to use carefully selected terms. The most interesting, and repeated, word in this dendrification is the word *cortex* ("tree bark") that consumes Myrrha as she transforms into a tree. Anthony Corbeill points out

the fascinating use of this word by Virgil in both his *Eclogues* and the *Georgics:* he switched the gender of this word for no apparent reason ("Sexing the World" 9). In the former work, *cortex* was a feminine noun, but in the latter, it appears as a masculine noun.

Writing several decades later, Ovid did not miss this detail and used this ambiguous noun with intent. It is evident that he wanted his intended audience to be familiar with the *Georgics*, as noted by Anderson (Anderson 475). Thracian Orpheus would not be as keen on this detail, as he exists in a plane where Vergil and other poets do not exist. Ovid's use of a noun whose gender is fluid reflects his view on gender overall: gender is fluid, and genders are distinguished in terms that do not remain static. His knowledge of its use further shows how he attempts to commit mimesis in his use of different narrators, but he cannot stop his own opinions from bleeding into the narrative.

His repetition of this word in Myrrha's narrative shows its significance to the overall narrative. As someone becomes a tree, their gender becomes such an insignificant part of their identity that it is nearly unidentifiable. In her *cortex*, is Myrrha a woman or a man? Additionally, the *cortex* continues to assert its importance as it acts as a player in this story. In line 494, the *cortex* appears in the ablative case, showing its role in the clause as an agent. Literally, Orpheus gives the *cortex* agency by making it a grammatical agent. With this detail, the story no longer stars Myrrha alone; she and the *cortex* are co-stars in this narrative. Combined with its ambiguity in terms of gender, the importance of this word shows that there exists an undeniable uncertainty in the construction of gender in Ancient Rome. Ovid, as Orpheus, exploits this ambiguity to build onto the fluid nature of gender, especially when it comes to humans becoming nature.

Again, a woman adopts masculine traits while retaining some of her most strong feminine characteristics. She shows agency, unlike Cyparissus when she bends her head down to complete her transformation: she dictates her own story. Thus, Myrrha shows that she has autarchy, similar to Daphne. Additionally, Orpheus includes some of Myrrha's direct speech in the story, only further showing her agency in this narrative. Her decision to dive into the wood as it consumed her showed a willing surrender of her voice, whereas Daphne lost her ability to flee when her voice was taken from her.

Myrrha further demonstrates masculinity in her transformation as evidenced by the use of the word *robur*. According to Lewis & Short, *robur* typically translates to "hard-wood," or "something made from "hard-wood" (Lewis & Short). However, they further explain in their definition that *robur* can simply mean "strength" (Lewis & Short). As Myrrha's skin becomes replaced with bark, she begins to physically embody the masculine trait of strength. Her once soft feminine form becomes replaced by a more masculine rigidity, which further blurs the description of Myrrha's character: her transformation makes it increasingly difficult for the reader to determine if she is a masculine or feminine character.

In this instance, Myrrha and Cyparissus seem to align in their respective arcs because they both begged for their suffering to end. However, Cyparissus acted in a much more feminine manner, as his cry was the result of self-inflicted violence from grief. Corbeill claims that one of the major differences between men and women in Ancient Rome manifests itself in the way humans grieve. Men were expected to maintain composure—remain strong in the face of uncertainty—while women were more often acting out in emotional outbursts, taking on "violent, self-mutilating gestures as a way of

appeasing the dead and preventing the recently deceased from somehow adversely affecting the surviving society" (Corbeill, "Nature Embodied" 84). Given the opportunity to grieve, Cyparissus chose to grieve in the accepted feminine manner. Meanwhile, Myrrha actually receives this sentence with joy, according to Anderson. Anderson notes how Myrrha's "eagerness to escape, her gratitude for divine mercy" demonstrates her view of becoming a tree: this is her escape fantasy. Compared to Cyparissus, this difference further shows the difference in reaction between characters. A young boy acted the way a woman ought to have in Ancient Rome, while a pregnant woman took on more masculine traits.

Myrrha's pregnancy adds another layer of intrigue to the overall claim because the pregnancy was such a uniquely feminine trait that meant her body was changing in multiple ways. Myrrha's pregnancy means that she actually underwent two metamorphoses in her story. Not only was she turned into a tree, but she was forming a life. Combined with her dialogue showing her control of her own story, the fact that she was orchestrating a metamorphosis further emphasizes the masculine nature that she exhibits in the narrative. Her ability to control two transformations at once gives her a uniquely masculine characterization, and it becomes further highlighted by the feminine behavior of Cyparissus. It is through Myrrha that Ovid continues to communicate that gender has always been an uncertainly defined topic.

Furthermore, her pregnancy continues into the next story as her tree self actually gives birth to her son, Adonis. Sharrock describes this phenomenon as one of the "ongoing sufferings" described in the *Metamorphoses* ("New Bodies" 24). Despite the fact that she eagerly sought the transformation and, with it, an end to her suffering, she

had to continue suffering. This episode still conveys a positive outcome to Myrrha, though. Despite being characterized as an animal and then turned into a tree, she still gave birth to a human baby. Thus, she was able to maintain a piece of her humanity throughout the whole process. And, since child-rearing was already concluded to be a trait that cannot be assigned to just one gender, it continues this idea of fluidity as Myrrha loses her humanity and her gender.

Both Myrrha and Cyparissus undergo deep, vivid descriptions in their transformations. Orpheus even goes so far as to employ the present and imperfect tenses in her transformation (*porrigitur* and *parabat*), which both convey a repeated action. The reader becomes immersed in the story, almost joining the story as a character. They are also both perpetrators of heinous crimes, which becomes a central point in both of their narratives. Despite this fact, the reception of each character exists in stark contrast to one another.

The fates of these people-turned-trees continue into their respective legacies. After all, these trees do exist in the modern, real world and have their own connotations. Wheeler points out that the laurel tree which Daphne became "is a concrete expression of her desire for eternal chastity" (Wheeler 75). In this interpretation, despite her beauty not leaving, she did accomplish her goal of living eternally chaste. Daphne's transformation into the laurel becomes a positive symbol, reflecting her victory over her attacker because even though he was still lusting after her, he was unable to make love to her. Additionally, Ancient Rome adopted the laurel wreath as a tangible symbol of victory. Daphne will remain eternally connected to victory.

In the case of Cyparissus, he was given a legacy similar to that of a deity. He was awarded godlike traits, as previously mentioned, but his legacy extends further into godlike territory. The cypress tree, like Cyparissus, became synonymous with mourning. Thus, Cyparissus's transformation solidified his role in Roman culture in a similar way to Daphne. Both a male character and a female character, after losing their human genders, remain symbols for future generations.

Myrrha's tale also includes a lasting legacy that transcends space and time. Orpheus even remarks at the end of her transformation that "even tears can gain long fame," and this is true for the myrrh plant. The myrrh plant even becomes a symbol of the East, which becomes another way that Orpheus others Myrrha: he wants to make it clear that her actions are not Roman (Barchiesi 292). Myrrh is the oil that comes from the tree; those famous tears from the tree were given to royalty and used in medicine, so it was a precious material that Orpheus felt compelled to devalue by turning it into something exotic. Again, the suffering and ultimate transformation of a woman in myth created a lasting symbol, and that symbol became tarnished by her crimes. Even though she and Cyparissus were both criminals who became symbols, Myrrha experienced shame in their legacy, and Cyparrisus became nearly deified.

Ovid's use of different narrators highlighted what the author wanted his audience to ultimately understand. The confusion that he causes by assigning different gendered traits, almost on a whim, to his characters shows that gender is nothing more than a series of traits that do not quite follow any rules. Daphne was a woman who exhibited agency, which defied the ideal traits of a woman in Augustan Rome, but she was lauded in her legacy in reception as she became the symbol of victory. Cyparissus also received a

praise-worthy legacy, despite the fact that he committed the crime of needlessly killing a sacred stag. Juxtaposing these two cases with the case of Myrrha, a woman who committed a crime and showed agency, it seemed like an aberration to see that her legacy was tainted by shame.

Ovid intentionally assigned agency and blame to these characters at random to show that one's traits and actions alone are not enough to determine their gender. As a result, Ovid joins Virgil and Propertius in agreeing that gender was a social construct. His use of fantastical elements in direct comparison to his highly gendered narratives creates a relationship between the two. Essentially, maintaining a gender binary is something that humans can only imagine doing.

Conclusion

Virgil, Propertius and Ovid all took a unique approach to answering the same question on gender as a social construct. All of these poets wrote in a similar timeframe, wrestling with similar political and social themes. However, their works all shine on their own. Each poet contributed to the conversation on gender and nature in Augustan Rome with their own signature flair, making sure to establish their credibility as authors by drawing inspiration from one another. This indirect communication between authors in their works created a true discourse within the canon of Augustan poets as each poet was talking to one another.

Virgil used death as a means to demonstrate the lack of tangible basis of gender roles, assigning agency to characters who, until then, should not have exhibited any agency. His characters repeatedly interact with trees by transforming into them when they die. By having Dido and Pallas burn on pyres, he used fire to initiate the transformations via incorporation. Two separate items, the bodies, and the wood became one, homogenous substance at the end. Virgil capitalized on the physical transformations of these characters, as well as Mezentius, to show that a person's essence lies in more than just their physical form, so their gender ought not to be viewed the same way.

Virgil used Mezentius as another, more literal example of tree transformation. This scene also introduced the use of Aeneas's *pietas* as a means to detect the moral standings of a certain character. It seems that a character's morals do not correlate with their gender, as evidenced by Virgil's inconsistent assignment of morals to each character. He supported the idea that gender lies in one's traits, but expands further on this idea to even indicate that it basing gender on something so abstract is foolish. After all, Virgil

showed how easily a woman can perform acts in such a manly way, and exhibit manly traits.

Propertius continued this theme, even going so far as to state that the gender of his narrator is dictated by the clothes he wears, not his physiology. Propertius took a more abstract approach, keeping his transformations in the form of vivid metaphors of both the narrator and other characters. His characterization of the main woman in his poems, as well as the hypermasculinity of a beloved artisan, demonstrated his attempt to make sense of Augustan gender roles. The narrator almost tests the extent to which Augustan ideas on gender are based in fact, and his conclusion follows a similar pattern to Virgil: that the desire to maintain such strict expectations of the different genders is futile.

Propertius injected a sense of doubt into his narrative as he crafted his narrator as a madman who is overcome by love, thus making his adherence to traditional gender norms seem outlandish. His narrator's lament-filled monologue encapsulated this phenomenon as he reversed the order of the transformation, opting instead to turn the trees around him into a human audience. This combination of faulty strictness in gender norms with the questionable persona of the narrator opens yet another avenue for the question of gender and nature to be explored, as Ovid does in his work.

Ovid, ironically, returned the thesis to a sense of reality as he works with the most literal form of tree transformation in his *Metamorphoses*. He drew the clearest connection between humans and nature as he strips his characters of their humanity and replaces it with tree bark. The structure of the *Metamorphoses* provided numerous case studies for this question to see further development. Daphne and Myrrha echoed the example set by Dido in their grasping of agency despite the fact that they were all

women. Cyparissus reflected the tendency of men to award feminine, deified traits to young boys in their narratives, and adds to the assertion that pederasty might be responsible for this phenomenon. This series of physical transformations removes any possibility of an individual's gender being rooted in their physical traits: if even their bodies are capable of changing, then there is truly no tangible basis for gender.

All of these authors worked in their own way to assert a similar conclusion: that gender in antiquity, as it is now, was socially constructed. Augustus brewed a perfect storm for these poets as he created an environment of uncertainty through his conquest of power. He made matters more incendiary by trying to quell the confusion with the imposition of strict gender roles and characteristics. Having been invigorated with material to make commentary, the poets got to work. The result is this series of literature that acts as a real-time conversation between poets over several years in time.

Looking at this rather narrow scope, strictly analyzing the transformation of humans into trees, demonstrates the importance of nature, specifically trees, to humans. As previously mentioned, the presence of trees positively impacts human health and mental wellbeing. Trees have just been inherently essential to human existence, seemingly since the dawn of time. Thus, in a time characterized by uncertainty, the poets were compelled to turn to something they had counted on for their whole lives: nature. Even though the analogy between humans and trees is not immediately noticeable, these poets had an awareness of the intimate relationship between humans and trees, as they incorporated several instances of transformation into trees, in several different ways. Hence, it becomes much more sensible that transformation into trees might become such a recurring theme among poets from this one specific time period.

The reign of Augustus acts as a pastiche of several different themes that continue to dominate social discourse to this day. While trees act as a bridge to link the modern-day with Ancient Rome, so too does the conversation on gender. In a world where people are suffering due to how they express their gender, it is worth questioning the basis of gender, and why it can be used to justify human suffering. The poets agree, as well as many critics of today, that gender is simply another invented thing that humans use to harm one another. Ecofeminists, such as Maria Mies, point out that this harm mirrors the harm that humans have on the Earth. It all comes full circle: harm among humans harms the Earth, and any harm to the Earth further facilitates harm to humans.

When human behavior begins to degrade the Earth, women are the first to assume greater responsibility to their families, work, and each other. When children become ill from being slowly poisoned by corporations in their neighborhood, or families cannot find clean enough drinking water, the mothers add on a new role to their lives: activists. Women around the globe spearhead campaigns to protect and preserve the environment, if not for the sake of this generation but for the sake of generations to come. Thus, the connection between gender and nature continues into the modern-day, as the actions of men simultaneously place strain on women and the Earth. Women are looking out for the Earth, but this relationship deserves some rewriting.

As expressed in these works of Augustan poetry, gender is socially constructed. Thus, the role of women in preserving nature becomes a subject of contention with this fact in mind. How has the patriarchy gotten away with this damage for so long? The power structure created by the patriarchy leads to oppression of those who are not men, but its basis relies on a construct with no tangible roots. The creation and maintenance of

a patriarchal society is abstract, but the consequences are real. Hence, it is worth rethinking the distribution of power among people, hoping to mitigate any imbalance of human suffering. After all, the Earth does not conform to human constructions of gender, so the human race must not let this construct incite the demise of humanity and the Earth.

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