Matermorphoses:
Motherhood and the Ovidian Epic Subject

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> nec perit in toto quicquam, mihi credite, mundo,
> sed variat faciemque novat, nascique vocatur
> incipere esse aliud, quam quod fuit ante.
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> Ovid *Met.* 15. 254-256[1]

Rather than treating women as somehow exceptional, I start from the question of what would have to change were we to take seriously the notion that a 'person' could normally, at least always potentially, become two. What would happen if we thought identity in terms that did not make it always spatially and temporally oppositional to other entities? Could we retain a notion of self-identity if we did not privilege that which is self-contained and self-directed?

> Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*[2]

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2 — Battersby (1998) 2. Elsewhere Battersby argues: 'We need to think individuality differently, allowing for the potentiality for otherness to exist within it as well as alongside it. We need to theorise agency in terms of potentiality and flow. Our body-boundaries do not contain the self;

> Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; my mother gave it me.
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> Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* 4.1.42

In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, the association of women with the Latin language and with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is figured explicitly through Lavinia, daughter of Titus, who is raped and then mutilated by attackers who have read Ovid's story of Philomela. Tongueless and handless, Lavinia is turned into a corporeal text, a version of Ovid's narrative written across her maimed body, to be read and interpreted by her outraged male relatives[3]. Yet the play's correlation between woman and classical text works both ways, with women constructed both as aesthetic objects and characters in Ovid's poem and also as active readers and writers. The mute Lavinia communicates her violent story by directing onlookers to the 'tragic tale of Philomel' (4.1.47-48) in a printed copy of the *Metamorphoses* on the stage; and, in case the reference wasn't clear enough, she then traces the Latin word *stuprum* and the names of her rapists in the sand (4.1.77) (recalling Ovid's other silent, writing heroine, Io, 1.640-650.)[4]. Moreover, her nephew first identifies the book she seeks out as 'Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: my mother gave it me', a reference to the role of mothers in the Renaissance dissemination of classical learning. A few lines earlier, Marcus had contrasted Lavinia's frustrated attempts to express herself with the famously articulate Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi (*Titus* 4.1.12-14) and thus recalls Cicero's quip that Cornelia nurtured her sons 'not so much in her lap as with her speech' (*apparet filios non tam in gremio educatos quam in sermone matris*, *Brutus* 211)[5].

Shakespeare's *Titus* is 'dedicated to enacting the literal and figural pressure of the *Metamorphoses*'[6], and by affiliating Ovidian poetry not only with the violated and silenced virgin but also with the knowledge and speech of mothers, his tragedy registers something about Ovid's poem that classicists have yet fully to acknowledge. Latin scholars have increasingly and productively read the *Metamorphoses* as a poem characterized by intense self-consciousness and allusive wit, which flirts playfully

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they are the embodied self' (1998: 57-58). Maternity is fundamental to her idea of what marks the female subject position; for a critical discussion of the implications of this, see Baraitser (2009) 10-11.

3 — On Lavinia as textual object, further 'violated' by Marcus' speech interpreting her body in Ovidian terms, see Enterline (2000) 8; Fox (2009) 109-112.

4 — The Io allusion is remarked on by Oakley-Brown (2006) 28; she also compares Ovid's only use of the word *stuprum*, in the story of Callisto, another avatar for the silenced Lavinia (2006: 34). On the marking of writing as feminine in the *Metamorphoses*, see Wheeler (1999) 50-58; also Sharrock (2002) 100 n. 21: 'Writing becomes a way out of silence for women'.

5 — 'Cornelia never with more care/Read to her sons than she hath read to thee/Sweet poetry and Tully's *Orator*'. See Oakley-Brown (2006) 27ff. on the sexual politics of the Renaissance transmission and translation of classical myth, dramatized in *Titus*; Fox (2009) 108-124 discusses the feminization of agency in *Titus* through various characters' imitations of Philomela, Procne and Hecuba.

6 — Enterline (2000) 8.

with generic hybridity and gender ambiguity[7]. An epic that challenges epic conventions, it is also hailed as granting unparalleled space to the female experience and voice[8]. Although female characters repeatedly fall victim to male lust and violence, set alongside the numerous rapes are women's own narratives of desire and the poem frequently privileges women's intimate passions and psychology over masculine heroic narrative[9]. Yet critical interest in the poem's victimized femininities has tended to focus on virgins like Daphne, Byblis, Scylla, Arachne or Philomela, ignoring older or maternal figures such as Hecuba, Niobe or Althaea, despite their prominent and vocal roles in key episodes[10].

In the preeminent model of Roman and Augustan epic, Virgil's *Aeneid*, mothers are a problematic counter-thread to the epic's overt fixation on fathers and sons. From Creusa to Andromache to the Trojan mothers in Book 5 and, of course, Amata, the poem seems to need to suppress or leave behind a series of *matres*, in order for epic narrative and hero to continue on their journey to found the Roman race[11]. Although Virgil's depictions of figures like Andromache and Euryalus' mother display a famed sensitivity to individual mothers' suffering as a

7 — See the essays in Hardie, Barchiesi and Hinds (1999) and Hardie (2002) for excellent readings of Ovid as a 'poet of courtship, rape and the ambiguities of gender and generic identity' (Wheeler 2002: 345). Wheeler (2002) 344-345 outlines how later Latin poets such as Seneca and Lucan were more influenced by the *Metamorphoses*' darker aspects, such as its depiction of a world 'in extremis', in which natural, social and familial boundaries are dissolved, and the poem's 'cosmological framework (chaos, flood, Phaethon, and the speech of Pythagoras), its battle scenes, and its spectacles of grotesque wounds and bodily suffering'. Martindale (2005) 201 also critiques the current obsession with Ovidian intertextuality at the expense of other aspects, contrasting medieval and Renaissance readings of the *Metamorphoses* as a 'master-poem of love, change, and nature, a mythographic work of importance and authority, a vehicle for wisdom within the spheres of morality, ontology, and metaphysics'.

8 — On the female voice in Ovid, see, e.g. Enterline (2000); McKinley (2001); Sharrock (2002); Newlands (2005) 483ff.; Salzman-Mitchell (2005) 150-206 on female narrators.

9 — Newlands (2005) 483ff.; Keith (1992); Segal (1998); Keith (1999) describes how the *Metamorphoses* stages the encroachment of the female on the masculine hero; see also Sharrock (2002).

10 — Exceptions to this include Lateiner (2005), an all-too-brief survey of mothers in the *Metamorphoses*; Fantham (2004-2005) examines Ovid's examples of the mourning mother, while Segal (1998) 27ff. includes a vital few pages on Ovid's interest in the female experience of birth and pregnancy. There are a number of articles on individual episodes involving mothers, although many focus on aspects other than maternal representation: e.g. on the Tereus, Procne and Philomela episode, see Joplin (1991), Pavlock (1991), Segal (1994), Enterline (2000) and Gildenhard and Zissos (2004). Oliensis (2009) 77-91 is an important exploration of the symbolic role of the maternal in this episode but, like most of the others listed, focuses mostly on the representation of Philomela rather than Procne. Feldherr (2010) 295-312 examines the political (and Augustan) ramifications of Niobe's story; Salzman-Mitchell (2005) 193ff. is a rare reading of the Alcmene and Dryope birth narratives, arguing that they embody a 'female-oriented perspective' (200).

11 — This is by now a critical commonplace among feminist readings of the *Aeneid*, important articulations of which can be found in Perkell (1981); Oliensis (1997); Fantham (1999); Nugent (1992) and (1999); Keith (2000). For more recent interventions in the debate, see Oliensis (2009) 61-77 and Sharrock (2011).

consequence of conquest and empire, he also associates these mothers' emotions with a dangerous, anti-heroic and regressive madness, presenting their voices and bodies in such a way that emphasizes the need for their control and marginalization as a group. One salient example of this is Euryalus' mother's lament in *Aeneid* 9: however articulate and reasoned the mother's speech against the war, however justified her expression of grief, it is introduced by the epic narrator as 'womanly wailing', (*femineo ululatu*, 9.477) a phrase which, Alison Sharrock has shown, brings with it the wider negative connotations of these gendered signifiers (femininity and inarticulate wailing) within Roman patriarchal culture. These associations are seemingly ratified by the internal audience's response to her speech: the 'weakening' of the warriors' manly spirits and their violent shutting up of the mother back inside the domestic sphere of the house – out of the poem (9.498-500)[12]. If Virgil's poem of 'firsts, founders and fathers'[13] repeatedly demonstrates its own ambivalence towards the poetic and emotional energy it derives from maternal figures by evoking them only to silence them in this way, it is an interesting and important aspect of the *Aeneid*'s contemporary reception, then, that in his *Metamorphoses* Ovid pushes mother after mother centre stage, as subjects and protagonists of their own extended narratives, privileging rather than displacing, silencing or repressing their voices[14].

This article surveys some of the interpretive and thematic possibilities of placing the maternal at the heart of a reading of Ovid's epic. A central concern of Ovid's poem is the exploration of sexual difference and many episodes reflect, and reflect on, epic's generic obsession with the achievement and securing of heroic masculinity at the expense of feminine otherness. Alison Keith has shown how Ovid's 'Perseid', for example, dramatizes what Teresa de Lauretis has identified as epic narrative's opposition between the hero as 'active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences' and female as 'what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of

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12 — Sharrock (2011) 68-69 notes the unusual reaction in terms of the epic tradition of female mourning: whereas in the *Iliad*, Andromache and Hecuba's laments do not derail the war effort, providing rather a circumscribed and ritualized space for extreme grief, ultimately, one assumes, to be channeled into military revenge, Euryalus' mother's outburst actually undermines the men's will to fight. In this way, her speech 'serves as an effective catalyst for the reassertion and reaffirmation of authoritative power' (Nugent 1992: 232). In a later essay (1999), Nugent argues that female figures in Virgil are persistently evoked only to be suppressed and silenced in the service of a patriarchal epic agenda, but their voices linger beneath the surface, displaced, invisible and denied.

13 — Bakhtin (1981) 13 on classical epic in general, cited by Keith (1999) 219.

14 — This is in keeping with Ovid's general predilection for the digressive, marginalized, erotic and pathetic over the martial and heroic: see Newlands (2005) 480. Augoustakis (2010) is an important examination of the reception of the *Aeneid*'s ambivalence towards women and mothers in Flavian epic.

plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix or matter'[15]. This opposition may take the form of a feminized body, nature or landscape that is conquered by the hero's masterful gaze; in Perseus' case, he conquers literally by controlling the petrifying gaze of the monstrous Medusa[16]. Elsewhere in the poem, Ovid reverses the power dynamic, depicting a feminine landscape paralyzing or engulfing the hero, as, for example, Hermaphroditus is absorbed by Salmacis' spring in a form of emasculating rape[17]. In both cases, however, the opposition between active, transformative male hero and passive, immobile, female 'matter' remains key, even if Ovid's representations of Medusa and Salmacis also have potential for recuperative or resistant readings along feminist lines[18].

Yet the *Metamorphoses* challenges dominant generic conventions in more radical ways too, not simply by playing games within the traditional terms of epic's assertion of sexual difference, but also by positing the female body, and its potential to metamorphose into two, as a paradigm for thinking differently about the relationship between matter and form, substance and essence. In so many of Ovid's stories, what is transformed is the female body; indeed its very porousness and permeability, and its capacity for mutation and multiplication, make it stand for the very principle of transformation itself. The ramifications of this are explored far beyond exuberant Ovidian tropes of penetration, birth and bodily materiality, however. Ovid's placing of maternal voices and psychic experiences at the heart of so many of his transformative episodes has implications for our understanding of selfhood and agency too, making us wonder whether De Lauretis' otherwise incisive description of narrative epic's passive, female 'matrix', as 'what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death', is really adequate at all to describe the shifting shapes, perspectives and roles of mothers in Ovid's text. Taking as the inspiration and point of departure for my reading feminist philosopher Christine Battersby's provocation in my epigraph – namely, what happens to our notions of identity if we take as the norm and paradigm, not the male, but female embodied experience, with its potential to become two – I argue

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15 — De Lauretis (1984) 119.

16 — Keith (2010) and (2000) passim.

17 — Keith (1999) is a nuanced discussion of how epic masculinity in the *Metamorphoses* is 'particularly threatened by contact with the female' and she sees the stories of transsexuals in the poem as offering ways out of the impasse established by feminist criticism (either Ovid subverts gender hierarchies or reaffirms them).

18 — Liveley (1999) is an excellent discussion of the different kinds of gendered readings that Ovid encodes in his text and addresses the Salmacis episode in particular. Enterline (2000) 39ff. considers the lingering image of Medusa's speechless *os* and Philomela's tongue as icons of the importance of the female voice in Ovid's 'reflection on the conditions, effects and limitations of poetry' (17). Rimell (2006) is a fascinating reading of Medusa and Narcissus as foundational figures for the oscillation and interaction of same/other, male/female, in Ovidian poetics.

that Ovid exploits the metamorphic potential of maternity, its conflation of the boundaries of the body, inside and outside, self and other, and its association with paradoxical roles and extreme passions, to explore and redefine poetic, personal and political relations in the Augustan era. As I hope to show, the intense psychic struggles and emotional monologues of Ovid's mothers, which are linked to motherhood as physical and bodily process, become key elements in this poem's unprecedented exploration of the contradictory and multiple nature of subjectivity itself.

Ovid's mothers are too numerous and varied to discuss each in detail so, for the sake of interpretability, my discussion will be loosely framed around three key reiterated maternal tropes in the *Metamorphoses* – birth, vengeance and mourning. These are not proposed as coherent or definitive categories of analysis: indeed, a key aspect of Ovid's text is that all such taxonomies tend to vie, overlap and break down in the poem's infinitely fluid metamorphic economy (and as we shall see, on closer inspection most of Ovid's mother stories start to look like a distinctive amalgamation of all three). Instead, these tropes will function in each section as springboards for considering some of the wider implications of maternity for Ovid's metamorphic poetics and for his representation of subjectivity and agency in the poem.

Births

Questions of birth, generation and reproduction (physical/artistic, literal/figural, human/bestial/divine) are marked as structurally and thematically central in the *Metamorphoses* from its opening lines. The proem's ambitious temporal sweep hails Ovid's song as not simply original (*in nova*, 1.1), but also about origin, indeed, a 'perpetual' chain of interconnected origins, encompassing his own creative 'beginnings' (*coeptis ... meis ... ad mea tempora*) and the birth of the world (*primaque ab origine mundi ... perpetuum ... carmen*)[19]. The very first body to 'change into new bodies' (1.1-2) in the poem is of course the cosmos: the birth of order – sky, earth, water – from undifferentiated chaos or 'nature'. This cosmogony 'establishes the rules of the game'[20] and is mirrored at the end of the poem by the speech of Pythagoras expounding the cyclical nature of all life processes, setting up for Ovid's epic a grand macrocosmic frame,

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19 — Wheeler (1999) 8ff. is a detailed exposition of the proem's programmatics: Ovid suggests that his poem will be a work of both natural philosophy to rival Lucretius' and a universal epic history that outdoes Ennius' *Annales* and the *Aeneid* (*primaque ab origine ... ad mea tempora*), and this plays against its ambiguous invocation of Callimachean poetics. On the phrase *primaque ab origine mundi* see his interesting comments at 20ff.

20 — Feeney (1991) 194. On the cosmogony and its Homeric and Hellenistic models, see Wheeler (1995); Helze (1993) and Myers (1994).

whose emphasis on a universal dynamic of creation and destruction contextualizes all the other forms of metamorphoses in between, however minor, bizarre or incidental[21]. Ovid's pseudo-philosophical account of the world's creation from 'raw' matter into distinct forms evokes Aristotle's theory of human and animal reproduction, in which the male seed contributes the form or animating spirit and the female only the raw material, an essentially passive matter (e.g. *GA* 2.4.738b20-23, 2.716a5-7). Thus, around primordial Chaos there hovers a kind of feminized, even pregnant imagery: it starts off as a heap of crude, undifferentiated matter (*rudis indigestaque moles*, 7); *indigesta* here, 'disordered', also has a corporeal meaning, of 'undigested' and is further described as a heavy 'weight' (*pondus iners*, 8) containing within itself 'discordant seeds of elements not well joined' (*non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum*, 9). Everything is unstable (*instabilis*, 16), unformed and in flux (*nulli sua forma manebat*, 17) and multiple parts or layers war with each other inside this 'single body' (*corpore in uno*, 1.18-20)[22]. Chaos is finally transformed into an ordered cosmos by the separating, fixing hand of a god ('or a better nature', 1.21), elsewhere defined as an explicitly masculine 'artist' or 'craftsman' (*mundi fabricator*, 57; *ille opifex rerum*, 79; cf. also *ille*, 32).

The creation of man, soon after, is also an explicitly masculine and artistic act, with 'seed' as the animating agent of passive matter (76ff.). Either the paternal demiurge created man from divine *semen*, Ovid hypothesizes, or Prometheus mixed earth and the seeds of the sky with water, to give man a shape like the gods (*finxit in effigiem*, 83); either way, 'earth, which had been rough and without form, was changed and wore the unknown shapes of men' (*sic modo quae fuerat rudis et sine imagine tellus/induit ignotas hominum conversa figuras*, 88-89). Yet even here, where Ovid attributes the ultimate formative potency to masculine forces, the essential instability or flux of 'raw matter' lingers, with the suggestion that 'new forms of life result from this flexibility' through the earth's own autochthonous, feminine fertility[23]: thus the golden age soil, for example, produces fruit of its own accord without intervention from plough or hoe (101-102). Such spontaneous acts of generation reflect the primordial chaos of his opening lines and suggest the fragile nature of the order imposed upon it; the world, and his poem, is inherently unstable and mutable, in a continuous state of dynamic flux. Ovid further undermines this optimistic vision of masculine creativity soon after however,

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21 — On the speech of Pythagoras, see e.g. Hardie (1995) and Galinsky (1998).

22 — Barkan (1986) 28 describes Ovid's Chaos as the 'precondition for a metamorphic universe'. His discussion of Ovid's cosmogony and its significance for our understanding of metamorphosis in the poem is most useful (1986: 27-32).

23 — Barkan (1986) 30. On the binary relation of flux and fixity as essential to Ovidian metamorphosis, see also Barkan (1986) 66.

in his brief account of the Giantomachy. The Giants are also the earth's children and when Jupiter crushes them for challenging his authority, the earth responds with her own competing act of human generation, which is also an act of maternal grief: 'drenched with much blood from her sons [the Giants], she breathed life into the warm blood, and in case no memorials of her offspring should remain, turned it into the likeness of men' (157-160)[24]. Ovid puns on or allegorizes the 'bloody' origin of these human beings, who are greedy for slaughter, with the *sententia*, 'you would know they were sons of blood' (*scires e sanguine natos*, 162). This time it is maternal matter rather than paternal or divine spirit that infuses and determines the nature of humanity.

Ovid's multiple and noticeably inconsistent accounts of man's creation in his first book exploit a double myth of human origins, in which paternal and maternal are rival rather than co-operative principles: either we were created by the design of a benevolent father-god, then declined from our early state of innocence and purity, or we were generated by an angry, feminized earth to be naturally corrupt and murderous. Ovid's revisions and rewritings of the primal scene of human generation leaves conflicting questions about where humans came from and about the roles of matter/form and male/female in reproduction, whose ramifications are felt in many of his later metamorphic narratives. Rival versions of creation as either divine design or chaotic mutation also associate reproduction with forms of political or social power: 'after years of conflict culminating in the chaos and bloody fratricide of civil war, Augustus had only relatively recently restored Rome and its warring citizens to order and harmony, establishing peace and a new Augustan 'cosmos''[25]. If the idea of a universe created by an orderly (and masculine) controlling spirit corresponds to an Augustan world-view, what are the potential ramifications of this imposed order replaced sequentially by a feminized self-generating disorder[26]? Moreover, the primal link suggested in the story of the Giants between maternal grief and human violence has implications for reading mother figures in the rest of the poem too, not only figures such as Hecuba and Procne, but also powerful divine mothers like Venus, Ceres or Latona.

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24 — See also Feeney (1991) 194 and Bomer (1969-1986) vol 1. 70 on Ovid's incongruous versions of human creation.

25 — Lively (2011) 17.

26 — Wheeler (1999) 30 observes that the optimistic philosophical account of creation as the product of a divine intelligence had gained 'normative status' in Augustan Rome, and further that the imposition of divine control over discordant elements (1.9) echoes the use of natural philosophy in the *Aeneid* to convey political ideology (e.g. *Aen.* 1.25). But Ovid's second version of creation undermines this idea of order and progress: 'if there was teleology in the cosmogony, there is little sign of it after the flood' (1999: 32). For a discussion of the several interpretive options here, see O'Hara (2007) 110-114. Neither, however, broaches the gendered implications of Ovid's account.

The fragility of the newly imposed cosmic system is revealed when it easily tips back into terrifyingly undifferentiated chaos, in the story of the great flood (*iamque mare et tellus nullum discrimen habebant;/omnia pontus erat*, 1.291-292). Again, however, its very instability and material flow lead to yet another earth-generated creation in the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the two remaining people on earth. Deucalion laments that he lacks the artistic inspiration of his father Prometheus to repopulate the desolate earth as before – 'If only I could restore the nations with my father's arts and pour souls into moulded earth' (*o utinam possim populos reparare paternis/artibus atque animas formatae infundere terrae*, 363-365), leading us to laugh at his sexual innocence – all he need do to recreate humanity is to become a father himself! But in the end no paternal spirit is required, since earth again regenerates herself from her own matter. Commanded by the oracle to 'throw behind you the bones of your great mother' (*ossa post tergum magnae iactate parentis*, 383), the couple first take the words literally and are distressed at the idea of dishonoring their dead kin (a form of 'moral chaos' to mirror the physical chaos of the flood)[27]. But Deucalion finally realizes he must read the oracle metaphorically, replacing 'mother' with matter or earth and 'bones' with stones. Leonard Barkan explains well this moment's thematic significance to Ovidian metamorphosis as a whole, in that it posits a continuum between physical nature and human existence (note especially the 'genetic' resemblance between the 'hard toil-enduring race' of men and the stones that were their source, 1.414-415):

> A whole series of parallels is implicit in Deucalion's interpretation: literal mothers and mother earth, bones and stones, stones and the recreated human race. These parallels are the very basis of which Ovid's poem is made, for when we accept – so early in Book 1 – the metaphoric flow among separate categories of existence, we are prepared to understand how metamorphosis defines the multiple nature of things. In this case it defines the nature of the human species: '*inde genus durum sumus experiensque laborum/et documenta damus qua simus origine nati*' (1.414-415: "Hence come the hardness of our race and our endurance of toil; and we give proof from what origin we are sprung"), and the transformation itself tells us that we are what we are because of the flow from gods to giants to men to bones to stones.

In a brief metaliterary reading however, Vered Lev Kenaan has suggested that the fact that Deucalion rather than Pyrrha makes the conceptual leap from literal to symbolic understanding of the oracle dramatizes the ancient allegorical tradition of interpreting texts, which

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27 — Barkan (1986) 31.

associates the feminine with superficial, sensual surface detail and the masculine with deeper meaning: 'For allegorists, the feminine is intrinsically tied to those material and concrete dimensions of the text that must be transcended in order to arrive at the abstract truth constitutive of the text's genuine core of meaning'[28]. We might adduce, in support of Lev Kenaan's argument, the analogous movement from literal to allegorical 'mother' in the Romans' famous story of Lucius Junius Brutus, nephew of one of Rome's kings, Tarquin and future founder of the Republic (Livy 1.56.9-13). The king sent his sons, along with his nephew, to consult the oracle at Delphi. The king's sons decided to ask the oracle which of them would become king of Rome. The oracle responded: 'The highest power at Rome shall be his, young men, who is the first among you to kiss his mother' (*imperium summum Romae habebit, qui vestrum primus, o iuvenes, osculum matri tulerit*, Livy 1.56.9). While the Tarquinii take it to mean their own mother, the queen, and make their way home, Brutus kisses the earth, 'since it was common mother to all mortals' (*quod ea communis mater omnium mortalium esset*, 1.56.13). The end result is that Brutus, in defending the honour of his raped kinswoman Lucretia, overthrows the monarchy and establishes a republic, fulfilling the maternal oracle in the process. Here the allegorical interpretation signals Brutus' transcending of the material and concrete 'mother', the body of the woman, to fulfil his true, political destiny as future founder of the Roman Republic.

Yet besides the fact that both stories celebrate the 'penetrating' insights of a male interpreter (Brutus and Deucalion), the gender binary in Ovid's story is not so clear-cut. Deucalion's reading of the word 'mother' as allegory or metaphor for earth does *not* in fact take him to a higher abstract or political plane, as it does Brutus. Rather it leads Deucalion *back to matter*, to the literal, material and physical generation of life from earth, from stones into bones. Placed so early on in the poem, this scene of 'reading' metaphor seems to showcase how the flux of matter and form, sameness and difference (which, as Barkan suggests, characterizes all Ovid's transformations) is also replicated at the level of the poem's language, in a persistent *fluidity* between the poles of literal and figural meaning (rather than a replacement of one with the other). In this poem at least, material and linguistic realms, male and female roles in the production of matter and meaning, are not separate but rather infuse, transform and reproduce each other[29].

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28 — Lev Kenaan (2008) 188.

29 — See also the vivid personification in Ovid's account of the earth's generation of animals, *sua sponte* (417): *fecunda semina rerum,/uiuaci nutrita solo ceu matris in aluo/creuerunt* (419-421). The Earth's parthenogenetic ability also leads to the birth of the monstrous Python, however (433-440).

The poem's first metamorphosis, then, and its 'first' metaphor, both pertain to gestation, birth and motherhood, and this inaugurates a pattern whereby Ovid explores and elaborates on the literal and figural permutations of maternal motifs throughout the rest of his work. One might expect the rich allegorical potential of birth/earth, as explored in the cosmogony and echoed in the numerous metamorphic episodes involving feminized landscapes, to subsume and displace almost entirely in the poem the bodies and voices of 'real' mothers, in typical epic fashion. Yet the *Metamorphoses* is crowded with individual mother figures who play both major and minor roles, many of whom speak and narrate their maternal experiences and emotions. The most prominent of the poem's birth narratives is that of Alcmene, mortal mother of Hercules, whose father was Jupiter (9.273ff). Ovid's brief account in Book 9 of the death and apotheosis of Hercules, after his numerous heroic labours, is succeeded by the far-longer and more detailed narrative of the hero's birth, told by Alcmene herself to her daughter in law, Iole. Since Hercules was Jupiter's illegitimate child, Juno, Jupiter's jealous wife, did her utmost to obstruct the birth. Alcmene tells how she laboured in agony for days with the prodigious contents of her womb, while Ilythyia, or Lucina, goddess of childbirth, at Juno's command sat outside the chamber with her legs and fingers crossed – thus preventing the birth through sympathetic magic. Alcmene's maid Galanthis finally realizes what is happening and outwits Lucina by lying to her that the child has already been born – Lucina jumps up in anger, uncrossing her legs, and lo and behold, Hercules enters the world. Galanthis is punished for her tricky talking, however, by being changed into a weasel, animals which were thought to give birth to their young through their mouth.

Alcmene's story is almost unique as one of the only relatively detailed accounts of childbirth in the Latin literary tradition and it crystallizes a number of Ovidian metamorphic motifs, both poetic and corporeal. Most obviously, Alcmene herself narrates her own birth story and Iole, future mother of her grandchildren, is its audience. Framed in such a way, the episode restages the scene of epic narrative and its reception as an intimate exchange of experience and knowledge between women,

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After Phaethon's scorching flight, Earth is further personified as mother when she rebukes Jupiter for the destruction: *hunc fertilitatis honorem/officiique refers?* (2.285-286). The growth of men from the soil after Jason sows the serpent's teeth is also explicitly compared to the development of a foetus in the womb (7.121ff.). Ovid similarly complicates the traditional contrast between active male form/passive female matter or earth in the Perseus narrative when the blood dripping from Medusa's head brandished by Perseus fertilizes the earth below, which then brings forth snakes (4.614-619); here, it is female blood that plays the generative male role. On flux as a dominant force in the *Metamorphoses*, see also Altieri (1972), who connects it with Eros. Enterline (2000) 65 argues that metamorphosis is a 'continual movement between literal and figural meanings'.

specifically mothers: 'But long troubled by cares, Alcmene had in Iole someone in whom an old woman could confide her worries, to whom she could talk about her son's labours witnessed by all the world and her own misfortunes' (9.275-278). Moreover, the physical pain of childbirth is repeatedly equated with speech, its power to recreate subjective experience and evoke emotions and passions: 'even now', Alcmene says, 'as I tell it, cold horror holds my limbs, and to remember is part of the pain' (*quin nunc quoque frigidus artus,/dum loquor, horror habet, parsque est meminisse doloris*, 9.291-292); 'I longed to die and my words of pleading would have moved the unfeeling rocks' (*cupioque mori, moturaque duros/ verba queror silices*, 9.303-304). In similar but inverse fashion, Galanthis' fictive speech is itself associated with childbirth, since her lie releases the spell and allows the birth to happen. But the equation of speech and birth has dangerous consequences, as shown by Galanthis' punishment of transformation into a weasel: 'Because through her lying mouth she had helped Alcmene give birth, through her mouth *she* must give birth' (*quae quia mendaci parientem iuverat ore,/ore parit*, 322-323).

The episode as a whole plays with the idea of epic heroism and with what constitutes appropriately epic content, replacing the *labores* of Hercules with Alcmene's heroic endurance of labour. Hercules' metamorphosis into a god is described in terms of rebirth under the sign of his divine father, in which the 'mother's part', his mortal *matter*, is removed entirely, and only the immortal part remains (9.262-265; 268-270):

> interea quodcumque fuit populabile flammae,
> Mulciber abstulerat, nec cognoscenda remansit
> Herculis effigies, nec quicquam ab imagine ductum
> matris habet, tantumque Iovis vestigia servat...
> sic ubi mortales Tirynthius exuit artus,
> parte sui meliore viget, maiorque videri
> coepit et augusta fieri gravitate verendus.

> Meanwhile, whatever the flames could destroy, Mulciber consumed; no recognizable shape of Hercules remained nor was there anything left of his mother's likeness; he kept only the traces of his father Jupiter... So when the Tirynthian cast off his mortal frame, he became strong in his better part and seemed to grow bigger in august dignity.

Yet this patrilineal fantasy of a purifying, fleshless, mother-free birth is wittily overturned and trumped by the far longer story of Hercules' original birth – told from the mother's perspective, rather than that of the father or son. The inversion of epic norms is emphasized by the story's setting in the birth chamber, a domestic space replete with symbolism of the reproductive female body that it encloses. Thus the cross-legged Lucina

sits *ante fores*, guarding the 'birth passage', while the earlier description of the divine Hercules' *augusta gravitate* is ironized by the description of his mortal mother's literal *gravitas* (273), her heroically pregnant body. Alcmene's account of her long-suffering struggle with the unjust gods punningly feminizes epic heroism: Hercules' Labours are upstaged by his mother's labour and her comically huge pregnant body enacts a carnivalesque disruption of traditional epic hierarchies[30]. Moreover, her embodied viewpoint as speaking and birthing subject – she is her own epic poet here – counters the Aristotelian notion of the mother as merely the passive vessel, mere matter, to the animating masculine seed, posited at the beginning of the poem. Alcmene's triumphant poetics of parturition thus, narratively speaking, restore the part the mother gave, correcting her problematic excision from the body of the immortalized Hercules directly before.

It is tempting to give Ovid's imagining of an Alcmenean voice a proto-feminist reading, to see it as calling attention, in an ironic, humorous way, to the universal debt of origin and life that we all, as humans, owe to the mother. Luce Irigaray has argued that the experiences of birth and mothering are obscured or erased in patriarchal value systems, whose myths of genesis privilege paternity and deny the mother's story and subjectivity, in a form of primal matricide: 'Our entire male economy is founded on the murder of the mother'; '[T]he entire male economy demonstrates a forgetting of life, a lack of recognition of debt to the mother, of maternal ancestry and of the women who do the work of producing and maintaining life'[31]. In Ovid's Hercules-Alcmene narrative, the subject's transition from life to death to immortality (via his father) is granted less 'weight' narratively *and* literally than the transition from non-life to life via the maternal body, from womb to world. Alcmene's dramatic account of Hercules' organic birth not only outshines the story of his divine paternal rebirth, it seems to undermine it as a sort of fiction or fantasy: unlike his magical apotheosis, the mother's birth story is rooted in the body, in material and experiential human knowledge. Resonating with the Roman legal adage, *pater semper incertus est, mater certa*, Ovid's choice of emphasis reminds the reader that Hercules' heroism may have been because his paternity was double, ambiguously human and divine, but his maternal origin is *known*, tangible, certain: one body produced another body. Ovid explicitly evokes the ultimate uncertainty of paternity when he has

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30 — On the pregnant Alcmena in Plautus' *Amphitruo* as embodying a Bakhtinian grotesque realism, see Christenson (2001) 244.

31 — Irigaray (1993), where she counters Freud in claiming that civilization was founded on an originary matricide (not patricide) – this original crime goes unpunished and causes the erasure of the experience of birth and mothering in patriarchal culture. Also Irigaray (1994) 7.

Alcmene say: 'My womb was so extended with its weight and what I bore was so great that you could tell that the father of its concealed burden was Jupiter' (*tendebat gravitas uterum mihi, quodque ferebam,/tantum erat, ut posses auctorem dicere tecti/ponderis esse Iovem*, 9.287-289). It is only the mother's visible, bodily *gravitas* that is 'proof' of Hercules' divine fatherhood.

And indeed, this emphatic embodiedness is perhaps what is really remarkable about Ovid's imagining of Alcmene's tale, and even shocking in generic terms at least: it presents us with a personalized, first person account of the pain and physical processes of childbirth, unparalleled in surviving Latin poetry. The supernatural framework of the story – the goddess' cruelty in preventing the child being born – seems to be, in part, an allegory of the *normal* embodied human experience of labour, its elongated agonies which are seemingly beyond the limits of human endurance and its very real threat to the life of mother and child. If Hercules' birth was a triumph of female mental wit and physical resilience, so, one might argue, given the high rates of maternal and infant mortality, was any successful labour in antiquity – a near-miraculous outwitting of death itself[32].

In a sense birth – a transition from one body into another body, and from one body to two – might be viewed as the archetypal form of metamorphosis in the poem, as Pythagoras seems to suggest in his speech towards the end (15. 254-256):

> nec perit in toto quicquam, mihi credite, mundo,
> sed variat faciemque novat, nascique vocatur
> incipere esse aliud, quam quod fuit ante...

> Nothing dies in the whole world, believe me, but rather it changes and renews its form, and what we call birth is to begin to be something other than what one was before...

A new beginning, but also, as Denis Feeney notes, a return: '[s]ince the appearance of mankind is a metamorphosis of earth (1.87-88), a human's transformation into a rock or tree is a reversion to origins'[33].

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32 — The proximity of death and birth, and speech and silence, in Alcmene's account are also brought out in the story of Myrrha, who gives birth to her son Adonis after being transformed into a tree, following incest with her father (10. 495-514). Space restrictions prevent me from discussing this fascinating birth story in depth here; it is worth noting that Lucina performs the opposite function in Myrrha's labour to her role in Alcmene's, since is with the goddess' aid that the seemingly impossible birth is allowed to happen, and the child emerges out from beneath the bark. But whereas Alcmene survives to narrate her own story of labour, Myrrha, already denied speech when she became a tree (506-507), disappears entirely from the narrative (although see 10.524, where Venus' infatuation with Adonis is described as the boy 'avenging his mother's fires').

33 — Feeney (1991) 194.

This suggests one reason why maternity is such a powerful trope and originary fantasy for the flux and continuity of Ovidian metamorphosis: it offers a visible, naturally occurring and ubiquitous example of radical corporeal (and social) transformation in humans, the primary example of the porousness and instability of the parameters of the human body. Birth, as Pythagoras intimates, is a form of metamorphosis that is supposedly comprehensible and benign ('natural') – and yet at the same time its processes and contours remain mysterious, liminal, resisting definition. Questions that dogged ancient theories of reproduction – is a pregnant woman one body or two bodies? Is the female merely a receptacle or container, subject to physical processes beyond her control, or does she have her own procreative power? A woman might be carrying a male child inside her – does that make her (and him) gender ambiguous? – find vivid analogy in Ovidian metamorphosis. The very 'naturalness' and everydayness of maternal metamorphosis and childbirth makes it a 'real-life' counterpoint to the poem's many supernatural or bizarre transformations, such as from human to rock, fountain, tree or beast, a metaphoric connection made clear in the sequence of birth narratives in Book 9 and 10: from Alcmene's (relatively) 'normal', i.e. human, birth, we move straight into the story of Dryope, a breastfeeding mother who morphs into a tree, which in turn is echoed by the arborealisation of Myrrha in the next book, who nevertheless manages to give birth to a human child, Adonis. At the same time, however, the pregnant, birthing or nursing maternal body, resisting fantasies of completeness, boundary integrity or closure, is also a morphological paradigm for the terror and monstrosity of the poem's multiple mutations, a reference point (along with sex and death) for the violations and dissolutions of bodily unity that characterize Ovidian metamorphosis[34]: doublings, splittings, incorporations, enclosures, boundary-crossings, hatchings, liquefactions, gender transformations, bestializations and, as in the case of Hercules, apotheosis.

One school of thought in Ovidian studies has argued that metamorphosis in Ovid is primarily a metaphor for psychic change[35], but thinking about metamorphosis *through* the maternal challenges any implicit dualism or hierarchy between body and mind. Rather, the unstable ontological and phenomenological status of pregnancy, its conflation of the boundaries of the body, of self and other, and its suggestion of new

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34 — This is evident in the especially horrific description of Scylla's transformation in Book 14, in which a jealous Circe turns the beautiful virgin into a monster with rabid dogs protruding from her lower parts (*statque canum rabie subiectaque terga ferarum/inguinibus truncis uteroque exstante coercet*, 14.66-67). As Segal (1998) 31 notes, her metamorphosis 'confuses bestiality and humanity on the one hand and associates female sexuality and maternity with monstrosity on the other'.

35 — For a discussion of this mode of reading, which originates in the Elizabethan period, see Enterline (2000) 23.

and multiple forms of subjecthood, allows us to appreciate how bodily and psychic metamorphosis in Ovid are 'interrelated, mutually constituted, dependent upon each other'[36]. Moreover, as I will explore in more detail over the next sections, Ovid's exploration of maternity as a hybrid, unfixable entity, the paradigm of the subject in process[37], translates into other, cultural and political insecurities surrounding patriarchal maternal identity and social roles, which he interrogates through figures like Procne, Hecuba, Ceres and even Venus, anxieties such as: does a mother have obligations to her children above all other forms of kin. How does mother-love mutate into destructive rage or grief? How *natural* is motherhood anyway – is it interior essence or social performance? Is it the most basic bodily process we share with animals, an emblem of our mortality, or does its creative energy approach the divine?

Besides stories with birth and/or mothers at their heart, such as Alcmene's, Niobe's or Hecuba's, motherhood and birth often function as crucial narratological tools in the poem, either providing a transitional link from one tale of transformation to another (as genealogical prelude or aftermath) or the narrative motivation for metamorphoses itself. Charles Segal has noted that 'for all the poem's emphasis on the erotic, it is not flirtation and seduction *per se*, but the very unelegiac experiences of impregnation and birth that carry the plot forward'[38]. But the epic alignment Ovid sets up between lineage and narrative teleology is never unproblematized, and always contains a suggestion, however suppressed, of a maternal perspective. A typical example is when Ovid segues smoothly from the stories of the rape of Io to Phaethon via Epaphus, Io's (Isis') son by Jupiter, who taunts his coeval cousin for believing *his* mother's stories that the Sun is his father (1.748ff.) This uncertainty over whether his mother is telling the truth spurs Phaethon to ask for proof of paternity from the Sun in the form of a gift, ultimately leading to his death. The mother's role here evokes similar anxieties to Alcmene's story: first, that only matrilineage is certain, while paternity is always a 'supposition' – potentially even a fiction; and second, that mothers hold exclusive knowledge, and therefore power, of a man's true identity. Self-knowledge is also at stake in the story of Narcissus, whose mother also provides a linking narrative function: Tiresias' sex change and blinding leads onto the tale of the doomed boy by means of a brief digression on Liriope, who

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36 — Fox (2009) 9.

37 — Fox (2009) 10 describes Ovidian subjectivity as 'in process', but she does not connect this to his representation of maternity. For a recent account of the pregnant woman as paradigm of the subject in process, see for example Kristeva's famous essay 'Woman's Time' (1986). Kristeva's gendering of conceptions of time in this essay also has much to offer those concerned with the relation of order to disorder and linearity to repetition in the *Metamorphoses*.

38 — Segal (1998) 39.

first consults the seer about her child (3.340-348) and is told, famously, that he should not 'know himself'. Similarly, it is the fleeting account of Cyane's rape that introduces Ovid's more fulsome story of her children, Byblis and Caunus (9.450ff), intimating that the origin of the siblings in an act of maternal violation had a causal link to Byblis' violation of familial and sexual norms through her incestuous desire. Moreover, mothers, in their position at the heart of the family, can themselves provide the opportunity for metamorphic and erotic transgressions: the Sun infiltrates the bedchamber of Leucothoë by assuming the form of her mother (4.219-224), while the absence of Cenchreis, Myrrha's mother, from her husband's bed to partake in a festival of Ceres that required sexual abstinence, supplies the occasion for her daughter's incest (10.434ff.)[39]. Iphis' mother, Telethusa, actually brings about her daughter's metamorphosis herself: in 'pious deceit' of her husband, she refuses to kill her girl child at birth and brings her secretly up as a boy; then on the eve of the 'boy's' marriage, Telethusa's desperate prayers arouse the pity of the maternal goddess Isis, motivating Iphis' transformation into a real boy (9.666ff.). Here too it is the mother's secret 'knowledge' (versus the father's ignorance) that provides the narrative motivation for the metamorphosis.

While in Iphis' story the mother helps to engender a rare happy ending for all, in many of Ovid's narratives, however, maternity brings not joy but retribution. Books 2 to 4 set up an intimate and iterative association between mothers and punishment that is developed further in the more complex maternal revenge narratives later in the poem, which I discuss in more detail below. Maternal punishment in these early books is often a problematic adjunct to stories of divine rape, since pregnancy offers disconcertingly public 'proof' of illicit acts of lust. Juno in particular is the agent of such punishment, enraged by the persistent fertility of Jupiter's conquests. Callisto's swelling womb offers 'proof' of her *crimen* (2.462) and Diana expels her from her virginal entourage, but Juno is incensed: 'of course, this was all that remained, adulteress, that you should be fertile and make it my injury known by giving birth and testify to the dishonor of my Jupiter' (*'scilicet hoc unum restabat, adultera', dixit,/'ut fecunda fores fieretque iniuria partu/nota Iouisque mei testatum dedecus esset'*, 2.471-473)[40]. Ovid's Juno reprises her characteristic *ira* and *saevitia* (e.g. 1.724ff.; 2.470; 4.550) from the *Aeneid*, but directs it not against the heroic founder of a future civilization but explicitly against *paelices* (2.469, 508; 4.447)*,* the female targets of her husband's roving eye, who

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39 — Lowrie (1993) 51: 'Incest, always *scelus*, becomes doubly so when the mother is observing abstinence'.

40 — Later Jupiter's catasterism of the bear Callisto and her hunter son Arcas averts the threat of his unwitting matricide: 2.505-507.

(usually) bear his offspring and thereby undermine her position as royal wife (notably, she does not direct her anger towards Jupiter himself). Ovid's Juno thus casts in a different light a key aspect of the Virgilian goddess: her association with mothers, as their mobilizer and manipulator, deploying figures such as Amata and the Trojan *matres* as instruments of her enmity towards the would-be Romans. On the one hand, in keeping with the antiheroic impulses of his poem, Ovid humorously deflates the mighty conflict between Juno and Jupiter that drives Virgil's narrative of Roman foundation, reducing it to the level of a domestic tiff redolent of new comedy, about a hen-pecking wife and her husband's inability to 'keep his pants on'. But by reorienting Virgil's divine motivation from the grandly political and 'fated' plane to the explicitly relational and marital, Ovid also exposes the problems of maternity and reproduction suppressed in the *Aeneid's* depiction of Roman *imperium* as smoothly-transmitted patrilineal right. Instead Ovid elevates the anger of a jealous wife, the vulnerability of her social position and her inability to conceive enough offspring, into the subject matter of epic itself. Juno's bitter complaint about Semele, pregnant with Jupiter's *semen* (Ovid can't resist the pun, 3.259), is thus both comic (especially the Virgilian echo of 266) and deadly serious in its account of her threatened *auctoritas* as a problem of *maternity* (3.263-266, 268-270):

> ...ipsam, si maxima Iuno
> rite vocor, perdam, si me gemmantia dextra
> sceptra tenere decet, si sum regina Iouisque
> et soror et coniunx, certe soror...
> concipit (id deerat) manifestaque crimina pleno
> fert utero et mater, quod uix mihi contigit, uno
> de Ioue uult fieri; tanta est fiducia formae'.

> 'The woman herself, if I am rightly called great Juno, I will destroy, if I am fit to hold the jeweled scepter in my right hand, if I am queen and both sister and wife of Jove – well, sister certainly... She has conceived (that's all that was lacking) and she carries her crime publicly in her full womb and wants to become a mother by Jupiter alone, which has scarcely happened to me; she has such great pride in her own beauty'.

Semele's imperious 'pride in her looks' (*forma* here seems also to suggest her pregnant shape) directly echoes Ovid's earlier description of a god's confidence in his ability to seduce a mortal woman (Mercury: *tanta est fiducia formae*, 2.731), a comparison that suggests Juno is indeed right to feel her divine position threatened by the ambitions of this mortal

mother-to-be[41]. Juno reads Semele's female body very differently to the rapacious male gaze of gods like Jupiter and Apollo in these first few books, which reduce women to visual objects, vessels for their seed: by contrast, the goddess interprets Semele's *forma* in terms of an active courting of motherhood, a pride in her own fertility, and a threat to divine genealogy.

In the next book, Ino also arouses the anger of Juno, for her pride in her marriage, maternity and her foster-child Bacchus (4.420ff.) and, later on in the poem, Juno causes a plague to stalk the land of Aegina because it is named after the mother of Aeacus, the mistress of Jupiter (7.523ff.). Sometimes of course mothers do not need to be seduced by gods to court divine displeasure with their will to power: Andromeda is bound to the rock because her mother had boasted too much of her beauty (4.670-671). But Juno's complaints about Semele's *fiducia* point to the very 'real' threat that the power and persistence of human fertility poses to the Olympian order. This threat is most explicitly articulated – and quashed – in the story of the super-fertile, boastful mother Niobe and her punishment by the goddess Latona, which I will discuss in more detail below, suffice to note here that, in typical Ovidian fashion, the Niobe episode's restoration of divine-human hierarchy is reversed a couple of books later in Alcmena's account, when a mother's fecundity and ingenuity triumph over Juno's divine wrath and, despite the goddess's best efforts to prevent it, the child Hercules is born. As Juno seems to be painfully aware, reading motherhood and female fertility in the *Metamorphoses* more often than not problematizes the point of view of masculine characters (and critics' tendency to elide this with the point of view of the poet) who read the female body in the poem as simply passive matter, to be appropriated by the 'male libidinal imagination'[42].

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41 — The language is elegiac – cf. Prop. 3.24.1, adduced by Barchiesi (1999) 112 n. 1 – but there is also noticeable echo of Neptune's rebuke to the winds aroused by Juno in *Aen*. 1. 132: *tantane vos generis tenuit fiducia vestri?* While the Junonian link is ironic, at issue in both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Aeneid* passages is the theme of figures lower in the cosmic hierarchy (a human woman, the winds) challenging divine authority.

42 — The phrase is from Segal (1998) 23, who sees Ovid's sympathetic representations of childbirth as an exception to this, however, and discusses interestingly the female-oriented perspectives of Alcmene, Dryope and Myrrha's birth narratives (27-30). I differ from Segal, however, in that, rather than viewing these stories as *exceptions* to the poem's exploration of male and female bodies along impenetrable/penetrable, active/passive lines, I am more interested in how the maternal, birthing, body might function as a fundamental point of departure and paradigm for thinking about the metamorphic subject.

Revenge

The wondrous power of mothers to generate life can quickly mutate, in Ovidian epic, into to the capacity to dole out death. This brings us to a central paradox that faces the feminist reader of Ovidian maternal representation: while on the one hand the poet seems to counter the epic tendency to depict mothers negatively, by emphasizing mother's own knowledge, voices and active experiences of birth, on the other hand he exploits as a recurring theme the plot motif of terrifying maternal vengeance. This is the subject of some of the lengthiest and most dramatic narratives in the poem, from Ceres' destruction of the earth in revenge for her daughter's rape and Latona's reprisal on Niobe for presuming to be a 'better' mother, to Hecuba's savage, dehumanising rage at the murder of her children. Most disturbingly, in the stories of Procne, Medea and Althaea, clustered together in the middle of the poem, three mothers become active perpetrators of violent retributive metamorphosis upon their own children. These narratives linger on the gruesomeness and supposed 'unnaturalness' of this act and exploit in intensive, melodramatic fashion a pervasive patriarchal ambivalence towards mothers in Western culture, which identifies them not only with birth and nurture but also with mortality. According to Sheila Murnaghan's analysis of the trope associating women and death in Homeric poetry, if to be born of woman also entails one day to die, it is 'as if women, by giving birth to men were also responsible for their dying'[43]. Like Medea, whose story in Book 7 they flank and echo, Procne and Althaea are destroyers of a man's paternity, not on the battlefield, but from their position inside the family (and it is always male children they kill). Yet even though his depictions of these women, consumed by uncontrollable *dolor* and *furor*, seem to be in many regards Roman patriarchy's worst nightmare, a melodramatic intensification of the association of women and death, Ovid does not straightforwardly pathologise these women as mad and bad. His representations also unsettle the very trope of maternal vengeance, setting it in context of feminine resistance to masculine violence and utilizing mothers' association with extreme emotions to explore fundamental psychic and social dilemmas.

Prefiguring the nightmarish narratives of Procne, Medea and Althaea in the poem's middle books is Ovid's rewriting of Euripides' *Bacchae* in the story of Pentheus in Book 3, in which the son is punished for disrespecting the god by dismemberment at the hands of his mother and maternal aunts (3.711ff.). While Ovid constructs a gruesome parody out of the tragic scene in which the hallucinating Agave is oblivious to her

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43 — Murnaghan (1992) 243.

son's cry of '*mater*' (3.725), his famously inconsistent account of the mad-
ness of Ino especially exemplifies the ambiguous and reflexive relationship
of mothers with madness and punishment, as both its instruments and
victims. Juno first declares her intention to drive Ino mad using Bacchus'
maddening of Agave as her literary model (4.424, 428-431), but as the
story progresses it is Ino's husband Athamas who is possessed by homi-
cidal mania, dashing his son's brains against a rock (4.512-519)[44]. Ovid
then queries whether Ino's own madness was the product of divine forces
at all: did Tisiphone's poison cause it or was it in fact Ino's maternal *dolor*
at Athamas' murder of her child (520)? The result of this uncertainty
is that when Ino leaps into the sea, it is at least possible to read it as an
attempt to *protect* her remaining son, Melicertes, rather than to kill him,
as Agave does (521-530). Ovid's account also seems to evoke and also
defy another variant of the myth, in which Ino is a vengeful stepmother or
usurped wife (like Ovid's Juno), punished for trying to sacrifice Athamas'
children, Phrixus and Helle, by Nephele (Ovid describes the attempted
infanticide in *Fasti* 3.853-876)[45]. While O'Hara is right to assert that the
flaunted incongruities in Ovid's story speak to the epic's larger question
of whether humans are controlled by external (e.g. divine) or internal
forces[46], its layering of multiple possible Inos (victim of divine madness,
loving protectress and murderous stepmother) also encapsulates the way
in which destructive and caring maternities do not stand independently
of one another in this poem, but build on, mirror and distort each other
as the poem progresses.

   The case of Ino also exemplifies that when mothers do metamorphose
into alternative forms of life or natural phenomena, it is not usually
a direct punishment from the gods (Callisto and Semele are obvious
exceptions, with the possible addition of Dryope and Coronis), nor the
clarification of some flaw or essence (as Lycaon, for example)[47]. More

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44 — On the inconsistency of Ovid's Ino narrative, see Feeney (1991) 239-240, O'Hara
(2007) 115. On the Virgilian intertexts of the Ino episode, see Otis (1966) 372, Feeney (1991) 239.
The slaughter of Pentheus, especially Euripides' version in the *Bacchae*, is also evoked in the *Aeneid*
as a paradigm for maternal madness, when Ascanius confronts the frenzied Trojan *matres*: Oliensis
(2009) 69-70. Virgil, like Ovid here, sets up certain expectations by invoking the tragic model, but
overturns them (Ascanius is not, in this case, torn apart by the women). The repressed tragic intertext
re-surfaces in the episode of Amata, however, whose maenadic *furor* makes her a 'non-violent Agaue'
(Hershkowitz 1998: 50 n. 11; Oliensis 2009: 71).

45 — Cf. also Apoll. 1.9.1-2. Nonn. *Dion.* 10.96ff. and Schol. Hom. *Iliad* 7.86 explicitly link
this story with Ino's suicide. On Ino as murderous stepmother, with a discussion of these and other
sources, see Watson (1995) 222-225. Ovid's account of Ino's madness in the *Metamorphoses* adheres
roughly to the contours of his more expansive version in the *Fasti* (6.475-564), which associates her
with the goddess Mater Matuta; there however he explicitly describes her as having tried to kill her
son in her madness, a deed which she is ashamed to admit to Hercules (6.525-526).

46 — O'Hara (2007) 115.

47 — Feldherr (2002).

often maternal metamorphosis purports to be a release from extreme suffering or emotion (as in the stories of Hecuba, Myrrha, and Ino)[48] and/or a literalization or reification of that emotion (the petrification of Niobe, for example, or the eternal mourning of Procne and Philomela). In some of the poem's most prominent mother-narratives, Ovid does away altogether with the trappings of a 'standard' supernatural metamorphosis (displacing it onto lesser characters) and concentrates solely on radical emotional, psychological and social transformations, linking these to maternity as natural process and social identity. Medea's infanticide, although submerged among Ovid's account of her other crimes, nevertheless marks her psychic passage from a love-torn helpmeet into poisonous witch-stepmother; Ceres too, goddess of fertility and natural abundance, becomes, through her maternal grief, purveyor of universal hunger and barrenness; and Althaea, as we shall see, transforms herself from loving, mother into violent, vengeful sister.

There is little doubt that the most transgressive figures, in this poem full of transgressive figures, are mothers who reject motherhood: Procne who kills her child Itys as vengeance on her husband for the rape of her sister, and Althaea, who causes the death of her son Meleager for the murder of her brothers. The story of Procne's revenge on Tereus has been well-covered in recent criticism (though she has usually taken second billing to Philomela, often viewed as a surrogate artist-figure), the story of Althaea, less so[49]. It's worth thinking about their two stories, however, as interanimating versions of the same tragic trope, not just maternal infanticide, but also a maternalised *rhetoric* of internal self-division, which leads to radical and transformative action[50]. These mothers (who would not be mothers) articulate their dilemmas in the same rhetorical mode as incestuous girls such as Myrrha and Byblis, who lust after their father and brother respectively, and Ovid thus sets up an analogy between incest and infanticide as profoundly feminine crimes, crimes that result from the interior conflict in a woman between familial duties and her deepest passions. Such conflict is concisely articulated in zero-sum terms by Procne, when she argues herself into killing her son. The idea comes first when

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48 — Although whether these metamorphoses actually inure the subject from pain is ambiguous. For example, when Myrrha is changed into a tree Ovid tells us that she has lost her senses implying that the tree's continued weeping is simply physical not emotional (10.499-500). Yet later, with the birth of Adonis from Myrrha's tree, Ovid says 'nor did her pain have words' (*neque habent sua verba dolores*, 10.506; also *dat gemitus arbor lacrimisque cadentibus umet*, 10.509). See Theodorakopolous 1999: 150.

49 — For the Tereus, Philomela and Procne episode, see, e.g., Joplin (1991), Pavlock (1991), Segal (1994), Enterline (2000) and Gildenhard and Zissos (2004), Oliensis (2009) 77-91. For Althaea, see Segal (1999).

50 — In taking Procne and Althaea together, I am following Newlands (1997), who shows how they are displaced explorations of different aspects of Medea.

she observes Itys' resemblance to his father (*quam/es similis patri*, 6.621-622), implicitly evoking the reproductive theory in which the mother is merely vessel or container for the masculine seed and contributes nothing to the child's form. She then experiences a brief resurgence of maternal love for him as a child in his own right, when Itys embraces her with childish affection ('the mother is moved and her anger was broken and stood still, and her eyes unwillingly grew wet with tears forced from her', 626-628). Feeling herself waver with 'too much piety' (*ex nimia mentem pietate labare/sensit*, 629-630), she firms her resolve by comparing the boy to her dumb, mutilated sister (6.631-635):

> inque vicem spectans ambos 'cur admovet' inquit
> 'alter blanditias, rapta silet altera lingua?
> quam vocat hic matrem, cur non vocat illa sororem?
> cui sis nupta vide, Pandione nata, marito:
> degeneras: scelus est pietas in coniuge Terei'.

> She looked at both in turn and said: 'Why is this one able to make soft pretty speeches, while her stolen tongue is silent? Since he calls me mother, why can she not call me sister? See the kind of man you have married, daughter of Pandion! You are unworthy of your father; faithfulness to a husband such as Tereus is a crime'.

Here, just as the raped Philomela calls herself substitute for Procne, *paelex* to her own sister (6.537), Procne's words make the son stand in for the absent father whom he resembles (*cui sis nupta vide*), and so in killing him she turns the rhetoric and logic of patrilineal society against itself (*scelus est pietas*). While her rhetoric obviously derives much of its ironic force from its pitting of natal and conjugal identities against each other (*matrem ... sororem*), key here to her extremist logic is also the matter of sexual difference (*alter ... altera*, *hic ... illa*), which was asserted by Tereus so violently in the rape, and is, in Procne's telling of it, reasserted in turn in the speech of Itys and the silence of Philomela[51]. Procne turns a problem of language into a one of kinship – she cannot now be both called both *mater* and *soror*, nor can one name stand for the other. Here, the failure of speech (*cur non vocat illa sororem*) marks the fissuring of her present identity and the hatching of a new, terrifying Procne out of this irreducibly-divided self. Lynn Enterline has remarked that 'for Ovid, the

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51 — Excellent summary of the themes of gender, speech and silence in this episode in Rosati 2009, who covers the existing scholarship. See Loraux (1998) 71-72 for the perceived relationship in antiquity between legitimate filiation and justice ('under the government of a good king, the just rulings of justice go together with women giving birth to sons who resemble their fathers', citing Hesiod *Works and Days* 225-226 and 235). Procne's articulation of her revenge in terms of sexual difference, as a form of female 'justice', reverses this connection.

self comes most memorably into being when the instrumental function of language breaks down'[52], and indeed, directly after this speech, Procne is transformed: 'without delay, she dragged Itys off, as a Ganges tigress would the suckling offspring of a deer through the dark woods' (*nec mora, traxit Ityn, veluti Gangetica cervae/lactantem fetum per silvas tigris opacas*, 636-637). If Procne is now the bestial predator[53], the role of 'mother' and 'container' is transferred to Tereus, whose unwitting cannibalism is described with the language of inverted penetration and parturition ('he stuffed his own flesh into his belly', *inque suam sua viscera congerit aluum*, 651). The truth of his hideous meal is both concealed and revealed by Procne's riddling response to Tereus' call for Itys to be brought to him: 'You have within you the one you want' (*intus habes, quem poscis*', 655). Her pun on *intus*/Itys, collapsing the son into a father who is now also 'mother', encapsulates how language, the name of 'mother,' in this episode both falls short and, horrifyingly, means too much[54].

While Procne's transformative rhetorical moment is brief, in Althaea's speech Ovid elaborates on the dynamics of internal self-division for nearly fifty lines (to a degree that many critics have deemed 'excessive')[55]. In making his Althaea post- and propter-Procnean, Ovid develops the same rhetoric of maternal revenge and the conflictual passions and identities associated with it, to think further about the relationship of interior to exterior, internal passion to social role, and concealment to unconcealment, that structure the Tereus episode. When Althaea debates whether to throw the branch on the fire, like Procne, 'mother and sister fought and two names tugged her breast in different direction' (*pugnant mater sororque/et diversa trahunt unum duo nomina pectus*, 8.464-466). Ovid describes her psychic turmoil first as a series of physical fluctuations, as the mother veers from pallor to redness, dry eyes to tears. He then

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52 — Enterline (2000) 27, though she only focuses on how language breaks down in the face of *erotic* violence (such as when Io can only utter animal noises, or Philomela's tongue twitches on the ground), rather than on the way Ovid also utilizes rhetoric and the trope of its failure to convey violent crises of kinship (and vice versa).

53 — Compare Tereus as Philomela's animal attacker at *Met.* 6.520-522, 524-530. Pavlock (1991) and others have noted how the story's characters and roles mirror and collapse into each other: victim/aggressor, male/female, Greek/barbarian.

54 — Enterline (2000) 27 on Philomela's tongue in this regard.

55 — Most recently Papaoiannou (2008) 268 has argued that Althaea's rhetoric is so hyperbolic and clichéd it should be read as an ironic mockery of the female epic lament, thus completing the larger deconstruction of epic masculinity in the Calydonian hunt episode as a whole. While it is clear that here, as elsewhere, Ovid reorients his epic's focus from heroic male activity to female subjective emotion, and thus undercuts the genre's obsession with masculine achievement, to see the sole function of Althaea's elaborately expressed passion as simply 'ironic' and 'deconstructive' ignores the rich subjective and emotional content of the speech itself, not to mention its complex intratextual relationship with the narratives of Procne and Medea and other conflicted heroines, such as Scylla and Byblis. Segal (1999) discusses the undercutting of high epic mode with Alexandrian and erotic registers in the hunt episode, but argues that Althaea's is the tragic phase of Meleager's story (318ff.).

appropriates the classic epic simile of a hero's heart tossed on a sea of troubles, transmuting it into a domestic, feminine setting (8, 470-477)[56]:

> utque carina
> quam ventus ventoque rapit contrarius aestus
> vim geminam sentit paretque incerta duobus,
> Thestias haud aliter dubiis adfectibus errat
> inque vices ponit positamque resuscitat iram.
> incipit esse tamen melior germana parente
> et, consanguineas ut sanguine leniat umbras,
> impietate pia est.

> As a ship, driven by the wind and against the wind by the tide, feels the double force and yields uncertainly to both, so Thestius' daughter wavered between shifting passions and she in turn set aside her anger, and, once set aside, she roused it up again. But she began to be a better sister than a mother and in order to appease the shades of her blood with blood, she was impiously pious.

The Calydonian hunt, in which legendary heroes like Nestor and Theseus hide up trees or refuse to get their *arma* dirty, showcases epic masculinity in farcical malfunction; in Ovid's story the real epic battle is Althaea's titanic struggle with herself[57]. Althea's language performs this doubling, self-reflexive function (8.483-485):

> ulciscor facioque nefas: mors morte pianda est,
> in scelus addendum scelus est, in funera funus'.

> I both avenge and perform a wicked deed: death must be atoned for by death, crime must be added to crime, slaughter to slaughter.

The dualism that Philip Hardie has shown to power the plots of Virgilian and post-Virgilian martial epic, primarily articulated through abstractions of *pietas* and *furor*, is here concentrated claustrophobically into a single individual's torment, her *dubii affectus*[58]. With its accumulation of puns, repetitions and figurae etymologicae (to mirror the 'heaped sorrows of the impious house' 486), the mother's rhetoric folds in on itself in a self-cancelling vacuum, staying an internalized version of the ultimate Roman (anti) epic *nefas* – a psycho-civic war.

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56 — For epic variants of this psychological simile involving, to varying degrees, waves, indecision, *ira* and *aestus*, e.g. *Iliad* 9.1-8; Virg. *Aen*. 4.532, 564; 8.19-20; 9.798; 10.680, 813-814, 870-871; 12.486-487; 526-527, 666-667, 831.

57 — Segal (1999) 320 compares this scaling up of the feminine perspective to earlier versions of the story by Bacchylides and Homer.

58 — Hardie (1993) 58. See also 8.506-509.

As with the Procne narrative, doubling and implosion are also evoked in the episode's repeated symbolism of interiority, pregnancy and birth. When, contemplating murder, Althaea takes the brand out of its hiding place in the deep recess of the house (*penetralibus abditus imis*, 8.458), the gesture repeats and reverses the double birth Meleager has already experienced: 'the life twice given, first at birth, then when I snatched the stick, give it back' (*bisque datam, primum partu, mox stipite rapto/redde animam*, 504-505). Sheila Murnaghan has noted that Althaea's opposing but fundamentally similar actions intensify the traditional patriarchal link between a mother's act of giving birth and its inevitable sequel, the child's death, here making her *ira* directly responsible for that death[59]. Again, as with the Procne-Tereus episode, the mother's internal conflict is mirrored by the way Ovid draws us into the hidden enclosures of a feminine or feminized body, whose internal organs, *viscera*, are lingered on, penetrated and even externalized, both literally and metaphorically. 'Let this pyre burn my vitals' (*'rogus iste cremet mea viscera', dixit*, 478), are Althea's first words in the poem, as she holds the brand-child over the funeral flames; after she finally tosses it in, Meleager feels his *viscera* in turn, in the exact same position in the line, 'scorched by unseen flames' (*caecis torreri viscera sentit*, 516)[60]; and finally, completing the circularity of womb-as-tomb with a suitably claustrophobic ring composition, the guilt-tormented mother kills herself with a sword, again in the same place in the line/body: *acto per viscera ferro* (533).

It's hard to get away from the conclusion that Ovid's stories of mothers who engage in son-slaughter are elaborate fulfillments of the patriarchal fantasy which asserts women's causal contribution to man's death as well as his birth. Their inner psychic turmoil, leading to a renunciation of a maternal 'love' in the service of paternal power (see, e.g. 8.497-498), is yoked symbolically by Ovid to the unconcealing of all that was supposed to remain *inside*, repressed, hidden from view: Tereus' rape and the imprisoned Philomela; Itys' head; in Althaea's case, the brand. In both stories, in different ways, it is as if the body's inner uterine spaces, the *viscera*, are turned outwards to engulf and re-consume the men who emerged from them. The monstrous wombs of Ovid's murderous mothers seem to epitomize (by representing in reverse) the abjection of the maternal body as irredeemably 'other', a process which is, as Julia Kristeva has argued, necessary for the formation of human subjectivity in Western culture, while their ultimate erasure from the scene through metamor-

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59 — Murnaghan (1992) 248.

60 — Meleager's unheroic, bloodless end makes him envy the wounds of Ancaeus in the hunt, whose *viscera* flow out onto the ground (402).

phosis or suicide further endorses this Oedipal dynamic[61]. And yet I want, perhaps improbably, to resist such a determined conclusion, even though Ovid's text itself clearly flirts with and is seduced by the fantasy of demonic, dismembering mothers. Alongside their viscerality, their bodily interiors, my reading has drawn attention to these women's internal dilemmas, articulated through their rhetorical debates with themselves, debates which are, contrary to the model of maddened maternal speech usually perceived by critics in Roman epic, rational, eloquent, rhetorically coherent in their own way. They may be frenzied, but these women do not – at least at this point – 'wail'[62]. Their debates are also particularly Ovidian reflections on agency and the limits of language: 'I want to act and I cannot', as Althaea says, 'now *pietas* and the name of mother break my resolve' (8.506-508). The primary metamorphosis in the cases of Procne and Althaea is not of shape but of psyche: they experience a radical switch from joy to grief to rage, but they express this painful metamorphic process in terms of a certain loss of self and the struggling emergence of another. Split between words and action, conjugal and natal identities, Ovid's Procne and Althaea engage in projects of self-fashioning or development, exploring a notion of the self in progress or flux. Which should come first, sisterly or motherly love? Passion or reason? Living kin or the dead? Like Medea, Ovid's mothers who kill their kin are radically unsettling because they do not so much reject their motherhood outright like 'unnatural' anti-mothers, as *choose*, according to social and rhetorical context, to generate another identity out of what they perceive as their degraded maternal bond. The causal relationship of maternity and death is presented here not as inevitable, 'natural' (*pace* Murnaghan), but as the anguished offspring of masculinist violence, patriarchy's guilt coming back to haunt it[63].

As I will discuss later with regard to Hecuba, the emotional and rhetorical components of these stories of transformative passion and vengeance are often overlooked or misconstrued as banal or excessive. Yet Ovid's dramatization of his mothers' anguish and torment, ventriloquizing their voices, is a central component of his extraordinary exploration of feminine psychological interiority throughout the *Metamorphoses*, which, as scholars of later literature have argued, provides an important source for

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61 — Kristeva (1987) and (1989).

62 — See Sharrock (2011) on this paradox in the lament of Euryalus' mother.

63 — Well-expressed by Loraux (1998) 51: 'It is not that these heartbroken mothers kill the children to whom they gave birth, but because the father annexed them [the children] to his own power, they thereby destroy the father in the husband ... the tragic thinking of the Greeks places mothers in a dreadful ambivalence, where wrath against spouse prevails over the bodily intimacy with the child'.

the theorization of subjectivity in medieval and Renaissance cultures[64]. Amid the recent interest in feminine subjectivity and speech in Ovid, readers have tended to focus on the transgressiveness of virgins like Byblis, Scylla, Medea or Myrrha, who position themselves outside of gender norms and social expectations and audaciously pursue their own desire (ignoring the significant maternal component in Myrrha's and Medea's stories – admittedly reduced to 4 lines in Medea's case), or on women as victims of (and defined by) rape and male desire[65]. Ovid's wrathful maternal figures operate at a midpoint between these two categories of desiring and victimized female subjects and are therefore important, if usually overlooked, voices in the poem's staged struggle over the meaning of sexual – bodily – difference. Unlike these ultimately silenced or outcast figures, his anguished and articulate mothers, embedded as they usually are within conventional value-systems and structures such as marriage and social reproduction, offer some of his most acute articulations of psycho-social experiences left out of normative political and literary discourses.

Ovid's representation of motherhood in these episodes is full of troubling ambivalences for feminist readers, which I am not seeking to massage away. But this very ambivalence also offers Ovid a certain extreme mode in which to talk about passion and affect and how it conflicts with relationality – the extent to which the subject is defined or not defined by its relation to others. In these characters, Ovidian maternal subjectivity is at its heart a subjectivity in crisis and under threat, internally divided or torn in two. Ovid's Procne and Althaea, so influential on later Roman, medieval and Renaissance literature, emblematize the way in which Ovid consistently associates mothers with interior dilemmas – with ambivalence, (im)morality, and the limits or boundaries of value systems. The consequences of their dilemmas are indeed more far-reaching and destructive than those of his anguished virgins: whereas Byblis, Scylla and Myrrha are cast out of the family and community because of their transgressive passions, Procne and Althaea destroy both themselves those who should be able to rely on them in the most literal of ways. Mothers in Ovid thus tend to exemplify the subject in extremis, especially in their emotional reactions such as grief and anger, and their lamenting or raging speeches, rather than being ineffectual expressions of marginalization or closure, are pregnant with threat and lead to drastic action – their own drastic action, not, as in Virgil's mothers, the catalyst for the actions of

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64 — Enterline (2000); McKinley (2001) xxviii and *passim*. Fox (2009) 12-15 is an excellent overview of how Ovid's poem is for the Renaissance a 'rich source for alternative representations of subjectivity and ... for alternate, marginal or subversive models of emotional and political expression' (12).

65 — Enterline (2000) 33: 'they recognize themselves as subjects in the violent call of someone else's desire'.

men. It is this link that Ovid establishes between maternal grief and maternal agency or power that I wish to explore further in the next section.

Mourning

As stories such as Althaea's show, maternal acts of vengeance in Ovid's narratives often either stem from or lead to maternal grief. Ovid's narratives explicitly yoke these reflexive motifs – the link between mothers' anguish and her agency – to feminine fertility and reproduction, and the problems these can pose to larger power structures. The far-reaching aesthetic, political and social ramifications of maternal grief and agency are explored first in the poem in his story of Niobe, who upsets the cosmic order with her self-assertion as 'super-mother', and is punished with never-ending maternal mourning. Yet few commentators have noted that what is at stake in Niobe's story of pride and punishment is not only a ratification of the traditional epic association of mothers with grief and death (so as to make them responsible for it), but also, like Alcmena's story, the question of what female procreative capacity and fertility *means* within the political and cosmic order. Can it translate into real power?

Before looking at Niobe, it is useful to consider the preceding story of her compatriot and fellow practitioner of *hubris*, Arachne. Arachne's and Minerva's weaving contest is between two virgins rather than mothers (6.45), yet it is also about their rival artistic and procreative powers. One recent reading of Arachne's depiction of the gods' multiple rapes posits it not as an exposure of divine sexual criminality but as a copious celebration of the gods' metamorphic vitality and phallic fecundity, especially that of Jupiter, which Arachne correlates to her own artistic creativity (e.g. 6.103-104)[66]. It is Minerva who interprets the images as *caelestia crimina* (6.131), suggesting that she is enraged not because Arachne offends Olympian dignity, but because the gods' rampant sexuality in Arachne's tapestry remind the goddess of her own barrenness. On this reading, Arachne's litany of divine rapes actually suggests the limits of Athena's virginity as a source of power, however much she might associate herself with the 'male side'. On her own tapestry (6.78-81), Minerva depicts herself in virile armour striking the ground with a spear to bring forth the olive tree, but, as Ellen Oliensis remarks, this single act of (pro)creativity pales in comparison to the 'reiterated phallic accomplishments' of Arachne's gods (especially Minerva's rival in the contest for Athens, Neptune)[67]. On such a reading, Arachne aligns herself not with the female victims of divine

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66 — Oliensis (2004) 290ff., pursuing a passing suggestion by Leach (1974) 117.
67 — Oliensis (2004) 292.

lust, but with the creative potency of the gods themselves. But like Venus'
campaign for sexual empire, Arachne's tapestry is not only an appropria-
tion of male sexual aggression for her own ends; it is also about birth,
motherhood and genealogy, since the projected outcome of the rapes she
depicts (although not mentioned in the episode) will be a series of bas-
tard, semi-divine or heroic progeny (hinted at by *gignis*, 117). Although
the genealogical line that stems from these particular divine rapes is not
explicitly traced in the *Metamorphoses*, the threatening implication of
Arachne's catalogue is that today's raped maidens will be the mothers of
tomorrow's heroes, potential challengers of Olympian authority, just as
Arachne herself challenges Minerva. In the same way that Ovid's narrative
of Proserpina's rape privileges the perspective of female characters, such
as Venus, Ceres and the nymphs, as *both* victims *and* agents of *vis*, so too
Arachne's artistry of divine rape celebrates divine masculine procreation
and yet also gives the female victims 'their own face and the features of
each place' (6.121-122), and thus also parallels her own *labor* with that of
the mortal women who give birth to divine offspring[68].

Like Arachne, Niobe offends by merging human feminine fertility
with the 'will to power'. But whereas Arachne uses her artistic *copia* as
a path to social prestige (a recompense for her humble origins, 6.7-8),
however, Niobe boasts of the *copia* of her womb – her seven sons and
seven daughters – who consolidate her supremacy as Theban queen of
semi-divine lineage and enable her to compete with the goddess Latona.
Ovid amplifies her arrogance from Homer's account (*Iliad* 24.601-617),
by making her not simply compare herself to a goddess, but claim divinity
for herself (6.171-172). In her speech, Ovid aligns her maternal egotism
with political self-aggrandisement: like a female tyrant, she claims that
the Phrygians 'fear me', that Cadmus' palace is *sub domina*, and Thebes
is ruled jointly *a meque viroque* (6.177-179). Niobe's political aspirations
and their contemporary Augustan resonance have been unpacked in great
detail by Andrew Feldherr, who links her poetic representation in Ovid
with 'the visual imagery of empire' on display in Rome, especially the
sculptures of Niobe that decorated the Temple of Apollo in Circo and one
of the doors to the sanctuary of the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine[69].
In associating her fertility with claims to divinity, Niobe's Oriental queen
recalls Cleopatra's similar propagandistic use of maternity and identifi-
cation with the mother goddess Isis, but she also reflects on the public

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68 — On this see Fletcher (2005) 308, who examines in far greater depth than I can here the
complex progression from divine rape to heroic genealogy in the *Metamorphoses*, reading it through
the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*.

69 — Feldherr (2010) 298. On the iconography of Niobe and her children in Augustan monu-
ments, Feldherr (2010) 294 n. 2ff.

representation of Augustus himself, who used imagery of fertility and *copia* to boost his authority and, also like Niobe, loses multiple heirs and adoptive sons to 'Fortune'[70]. Unlike Niobe, however, key to Augustus' self-representation is his conscientious observance of piety towards the gods and his acknowledgement of the supremacy of Fortuna (compare *Res Gestae* 14 with *Met.* 6.195, for example). Moreover, Feldherr argues, his losses do not undermine his power as *princeps*, but rather demonstrate just how supreme his personal authority is.

For Niobe, maternal power is essentially a matter of arithmetic, pure quantity (*copia ... maior ... multa ... plura*) (6.191-200):

> ...illa duorum
> facta parens; uteri pars haec est septima nostri.
> sum felix; quis enim neget hoc? felixque manebo;
> hoc quoque quis dubitet? tutam me copia fecit.
> maior sum quam cui possit Fortuna nocere,
> multaque ut eripiat, multo mihi plura relinquet.
> excessere metum mea iam bona. fingite demi
> huic aliquid populo natorum posse meorum:
> non tamen ad numerum redigar spoliata duorum,
> Latonae turbam, qua quantum distat ab orba?

> 'She became a mother of two; that is only one seventh of my womb. I am fortunate [or 'fertile']; who would deny it? And I shall remain fortunate: who would doubt that either? My abundance has made me safe. I am too great for Fortune to be able to hurt me. Let her snatch away many; she will leave me much more. My goods have now passed beyond fear. Imagine that some part of this population of my children could be taken away: though despoiled I would still not be reduced to a count of two, Latona's crowd, with which how far is she from childlessness?'

Here, fertility in itself becomes a means of radical self-fashioning and self-actualization. Niobe's untrammeled ambition, with its explicit political focus noted above, takes a form that we might label 'maternal imperialism', echoing what Patricia Johnson has called Venus' programme of 'sexual imperialism' in instigating the rape of the virgin Proserpina in Book 5 (cf. Venus to Cupid at 5.371-372: *cur non matrisque tuumque/ imperium profers?*)[71]. Unlike Venus, however, who uses her son's *arma* to make Pluto fall in love with Proserpina, and Latona, who uses Apollo and

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70 — On Niobe's Cleopatran associations, Feldherr (2010) 299; Wyke (1992) 102-103. On Niobe's similarities and differences to Augustus: Feldherr (2010) 300-302 and Rosati (2009) 275, on the wider implications: 'in generale, il tema dell'aspirazione alla divinità da parte del sovrano, e degli incerti confini del suo potere, poteva sollecitare nel lettore qualche associazione con gli sviluppi del tardo principato augusteo'.

71 — Johnson (1996).

Diana in her subsequent revenge on Niobe (6.204-217), Niobe does not *use* her children as instruments for achieving her will; instead, she alleges that the mere fact of having given birth to them makes her *inherently* powerful. Her motherhood, as she conceives it, opens outwards from her royal womb to encompass not just its products, but the political and even divine realms.

The sense that Niobe's rhetoric of super-motherhood can be read obliquely alongside Jupiter's paternal prophecy of Roman *imperium sine fine* (*Aeneid* 1.278ff.) is enhanced not only by her Augustan/Cleopatran associations, as noted above, but also by the insistent emphasis in her speech on limitlessness and transgression, the defining quality of Augustus' triumphant imperial project in Virgil's poem (*his ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono, Aen.* 1.278) and *nascetur pulchra Troianus origine Caesar,/imperium Oceano, famam qui terminet astris*, 1.286-287)[72]. The abundance of her progeny – her 'womb' – becomes aligned with the crazy abandon of her rhetoric, so that Ovid's character both embodies and willingly constructs an image of motherhood as a form of 'excess', as transgression beyond norms and limits. She rejects the warning of Arachne's story to 'use lesser words' (*verbis minoribus uti*, 151); she claims to have grown *maior* through offspring, as if she had given birth to herself; she has exceeded (*excessere*) fear and through her very multiplicity, has gone beyond death itself, attaining a form of immortality on earth (*tutam me copia fecit*). Her speech in celebration of female fecundity has been described as a kind of 'perverted' hymn, echoing Calliope's reworked hymn to Ceres, which opens with a celebration of the goddess' manifold abundance (5.341-345), but Niobe's exorbitant panegyric is dedicated not to the praise of a goddess, but to herself[73]. In making his Niobe's self-representation resonate to varying degrees with the anti-Augustan Cleopatra, and to some degree with the Augustan Venus and Augustus himself, it is difficult not to see her will to earthly and heavenly power as an exploration of anxieties not only about Roman expansion in general, but more specifically about fecundity, matrilineage and female political

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72 — In her conflation of exterior and interior, Niobe seems to prefigure the post-Ovidian Senecan Medea, who turns again and again to her maternity as source of her rhetorical power, which is explicitly aligned with the anxieties of imperialist expansion via the Argo. See Rimell (2012): 'Seneca's tragedy locates the same contradiction [interior/exterior] within the pregnant, reproductive body of Medea: he comes close to writing Medea as a disturbing incarnation, even symptom, of first century anxieties to do with the endless opening up of interior space in the name of *imperium sine fine*'. Niobe's hyperbolic self-description, *maior sum*, is also Medean, recalling first Ovid's Medea at the end of her epistle to Jason (*ingentes parturit ira minas ... nescioquid certe mens mea maius agit* (My anger is giving birth to mighty threats; ... something greater, for sure, is playing in my mind, *Her.* 12.208-209; 212) and Seneca's elaboration on the motif of Medea becoming *maior* through motherhood (e.g. *maiora iam me scelera post partus decent, Med.* 50).

73 — Barchiesi (1999) 124; now Feldherr (2010) 304.

agency in relation to Roman imperial power, recalling, for example, the importance of the mother's line in Augustus' own Julian lineage and of the female line for his succession plan. In the end, however, the story seeks to discharge such anxieties through its prolonged and detailed description of Niobe's punishment by Latona's children, notably the Augustan deity Apollo, for transgressing the bounds of appropriate maternal aspiration.

Niobe's magniloquence – and her rhetoric alone is enough to arouse the goddess' *ira* – also aligns her in complex ways with the ambitious poet of the *Metamorphoses* himself, who also connects his creativity with imperial expansion (15.871ff.) and will get in trouble for a similar lack of restraint in his rhetoric[74], as I will discuss below. But her speech is also remarkable because she articulates a conception of selfhood constructed primarily through the physical products of her motherhood, her *copia*. Niobe's idea of maternity is not far from her fellow Theban Narcissus' self-reflexive idea of love; indeed, the kinship between the two is flagged at very beginning in Ovid's Tiresias-like statement that 'Niobe would have been called the most blessed of mothers, had she not seemed so to herself' (*felicissima matrum/dicta foret Niobe, si non sibi visa fuisset*, 6.156), echoing the seer's gnomic warning that Narcissus would live long, 'if only he does not know himself' (3.348)[75]. Her children are mere external manifestations of her magnificent maternity, mirrors that reflect back on her own self rather than independent beings in the world. Even though, as we see when Apollo and Diana pick them off one by one, they are in fact all young adults, Niobe still claims them as fundamentally *hers* – or parts of her (e.g. *uteri pars haec est … nostri*, 192) – in what seems a perverse fantasy of mother-infant unity. (This discrepancy is ironically highlighted by the careful detail with which Ovid names them and individualizes each of their killings, restoring to them in death a subjectivity that their mother denied them in life). Even after the loss of her seven sons, Niobe still does not conceive of them as separate beings but as calculable possessions, extensions of her self: 'Even in my misery more are left to me than you in your good fortune. After so many deaths, *I* still win!' (*miserae mihi plura supersunt/quam tibi felici; post tot quoque funera uinco*, 284-285).

Niobe's totalizing conflation of maternity and selfhood leads Ovid's narrative to the inexorable conclusion, however, that when she is no longer a mother, she is no longer a person (6.301-305):

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74 — Niobe's *maior sum* (6.195) can also be compared to Ovid's description of his *maius opus* the *Metamorphoses*, at *Fasti* 2.3.4 and *Tristia* 2.63-65. See Feldherr (2010) 304-305; also Williams (2002) 244.

75 — The link is also brought home by the similar admonitory role of Tiresias' daughter, Manto, in Niobe's episode: 6.157ff.

> ...orba resedit
> examines inter natos natasque uirumque
> deriguit malis. nullos mouet aura capillos,
> in uultu color est sine sanguine, lumina maestis
> stant immota genis; nihil est in imagine uiuum.

> Childless, she sank back down among her lifeless sons and daughters
> and husband and grew rigid from sorrows. The breeze moved not a hair,
> the colour in her face was bloodless, her eyes stood fixed in their sad sock-
> ets; there was nothing living in her appearance.

She had thought her *copia* had made her invulnerable (*tutam*),
but now she is truly impenetrable, as barren stone. Whereas once her
children were simply the material manifestations of her inner potency,
her life-giving 'womb', now her very bodily interior hardens and deadens
all the way through: 'her tongue itself froze to her hard palate, and her
veins stopped being able to flow ... even in her very internal organs there
was stone' (*ipsa quoque interius cum duro lingua palato/congelat, et uenae
desistunt posse moueri; ... nec pes ire potest; intra quoque uiscera saxum
est*, 6.306-309). The emphasis on expansion/interiority throughout the
episode renders the final line (*intra quoque uiscera saxum est*) ironically
uterine: Niobe, the mother who once narcissistically confused her the
fecundity of her womb with her whole 'self' (and with worldly power) is
now wholly stone, 'pregnant' with barren rock. Her excess (both of pride
and of fecundity) has turned into its opposite, total lack – of children,
of voice, of life. Such ironies suggest that Niobe's hubris was not only
to 'misread' herself as the most 'blessed' of mothers (6.156), but also to
misread maternity *per se*, taking it to be about quantity rather than quality
(pitching the 'visible', material abundance of her human offspring against
Latona's two 'rumoured' divine ones, cf. *'quis furor auditos' inquit 'prae-
ponere visis/caelestes?* 6.170-171) and to be a static, timeless essence rather
than a fragile and relational identity in time. Now reduced to stone, she is
a literalization of her own materialist attitude, a monument to her mater-
nal imperialism[76]. Indeed, the final irony is that, although Niobe failed
to understand that generating life is a tenuous form of self-monumenta-
lization, an insecure path to the immortality she craved, she achieves that
immortality in the end as a statue, a pure *exemplum*.

Despite this definitive image of Niobe frozen in perpetual weeping
(cf. 6.312), so influential on later literature[77], Ovid does not close down
the potential for meaning of Niobe's maternity entirely. In *Ex Ponto* 1.2,

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76 — For different possible reasons why Niobe turns to stone, see Feldherr (2010) 306-307.
On the reductiveness of her metamorphosis, see Barkan (1986) 67-96.

77 — E.g. *Hamlet* I.ii.149.

he reprises the *exemplum* of her petrification, not as a warning about hubristic excess but as a *release* from excess, this time the excessive pain of subjectivity and emotion: 'Happy Niobe, though she saw so many deaths, for she lost the power of feeling when she was turned to stone by her misfortunes! ... I am he who wishes in vain to be stone' (*felicem Nioben, quamvis tot funera vidit,/quae posuit* <u>sensum</u> *saxea facta mali ... ille ego sum, frustra qui lapis esse velim, Ex. P*. 1.2.29-34). Like his mothers Ceres and Hecuba (and the succeeding narratives of Procne and Althaea), Niobe's story demonstrates the perils of relatedness in Ovid, the cost of human connection and the vulnerability of that supposedly most basic of all bonds, the maternal[78].

Excess

While Niobe's excessive maternity leads to the extreme vengeance of spurned mother Latona, and thus to her maternal mourning, it works the other way round in Ovid's similarly extreme accounts of Hecuba, Procne and Althaea. Hecuba, icon of maternal grief because of the loss of all her numerous children in the Trojan war, is also a paradigm of fecundity and savage vengeance. In her lament for her last daughter Polyxena, sacrificed on the grave of the dead Achilles, she imagines the extravagant fertility of her womb as causally linked to the extravagance of her losses, when she laments: 'I have been fertile for Achilles' (*Aeacidae fecunda fui*, 13.505) and 'I gave birth to funeral offerings for the enemy' (*inferias hosti peperi*, 13.516). Later, Ovid creates a similar emotional and linguistic continuum this time between her extreme sorrow and her extreme violence: her *dolor*, anguish, at the deaths of her last remaining child Polydorus, metamorphoses into *dolor*, anger (538-540):

> ...obmutuit illa dolore,
> et pariter uocem lacrimasque introrsus obortas
> deuorat ipse dolor, duroque simillima saxo
> torpet...

> She was struck dumb by grief, and that very grief consumed her voice together with the tears welling up inside her, and just like a hard rock, she went numb...

Which in turn leads to the loss of her humanity (544-547):

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78 — Ovid contradicts the idea of Niobe as released from suffering in *Tristia* 5.1, where her perpetual tears are claimed to be a sort of consolation for her loss (*cum facerat Nioben orbam Latonia proles,/non tamen et siccas iussit habere genas*, 57-58); here she is an argument against suppressing one's grief internally because it will seethe and multiply within – like a perverted pregnancy (*strangulat inclusus dolor atque exaestuat intus/cogitur et vires multiplicare suas*, 63-64).

> ...seque armat et instruit ira.
> quae simul exarsit, tamquam regina maneret,
> ulcisci statuit poenaeque in imagine tota est,
> utque furit catulo lactente orbata leaena...

> She armed and clothed herself with anger. And as soon as she was
> burning with it, as if she remained a queen, she determined to be avenged
> and became the complete image of punishment. And like a lioness raging
> when bereft of her suckling cub...

Hecuba, Procne and Althaea are extreme exemplars of how mother-hood and murder become such close bedfellows in Ovid – so extreme, in fact, that critics have dismissed the psychological content of their stories as stereotypical, melodramatic and excessive. As scholars such as Gail Holst-Warhaft and Elaine Fantham have established, in works of martial epic, such as Homer or Virgil, maternal mourning and lament is usually suppressed (one thinks here of Euryalus' mother in *Aeneid* 9) or else provides a ritual basis for masculine heroism and its memoriali-zation, as at the end of the *Iliad*[79], but in Ovid's poem mourning itself constitutes the motivation and subject of many metamorphic narratives, whether Niobe's petrification from grief, as discussed above, or Hecuba's dehumanization. Yet little scholarship has taken the *topos* of maternal grief seriously, as Fantham notes, since it lends itself to being read as universal: 'If recent critics have neglected the type of the mourning mother to focus their lenses on the raped maiden, it is probably because they believe the bereaved mother is too stereotypical to offer any scope for psychological subtlety'[80]. This ignores the complex poetic and psychological variations in Ovid's versions of maternal mourning, the varying uses to which the *topos* is put in each story, but it also puts the cart before the horse, as it were: Ovid's mourning mothers, particularly Hecuba, in part seem well-worn 'types' due to their extraordinary influence on later literature as emblems of the power of poetry and rhetoric to generate real emotion and stimulate action. Hamlet marvels at an actor's imitation of Hecuba's maternal grief ('What is he to Hecuba?'), because it reminds him of his *own* – 'real' – grief, thus spurring him to act[81].

This points to a larger reason, perhaps, that the poem's extraordinary investment in maternal figurations has found no real audience among modern Ovidians: they tend not to fit easily into current interpretive

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79 — Holst-Warhaft (1992); Fantham (1999); Murnaghan (1999).

80 — Fantham (2004-2005) 114.

81 — Enterline (2000) 26: 'They [Shakespeare's Lucrece and Hamlet] both use Ovid's suffer-ing Trojan mother as a mirror, that is, in and through which to understand and express what they claim to be their "own" emotions'.

paradigms, even gender-sensitive ones. Instead of the ludic eroticism and dazzling experimentalism for which Ovidian epic is now (justly) celebrated, his maternal representations have tended, for Latinists, to tip towards the excessively banal, sentimentalizing or grotesque (or a combination of all), and to justify the old Ovidian charge of insincerity. Ovid's mothers, it would seem, grieve or rage or go mad according to the (usually) tragic script but with less complex individuality or humanity than Euripides' Medea or Hecuba or Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, and less wit, sex-appeal or pathos than his virginal heroines who, in a more elegiac vein, seduce or are seduced. Instead, mothers in particular seem to embody traditional Ovidian 'defects' of rhetorical self-indulgence, immoderation and lack of decorum[82]. Seneca the Elder (*Contr*. 9.5.17) recounts how the orator Montanus was nicknamed 'the Ovid of orators' because he 'spoiled his epigrams by accumulating them' (*sententias suas repetendo corrupit*); like Ovid, Montanus didn't believe that one could have too much of a good thing. Seneca draws his examples of Ovid's 'Montanisms'[83] from Hecuba's speech in the *Metamorphoses* (13.503ff.).

> ne multa referam quae Montaniana Scaurus vocabat, uno hoc contentus ero: cum Polyxene esset abducta ut ad tumulum Achillis immolaretur, Hecuba dicit: 'cinis ipse sepulti/in genus hoc pugnat. poterat hoc contentus esse; adiecit: 'tumulo quoque sensimus hostem'. Nec hoc contentus est; adiecit: 'Aeacidae fecunda fui'. Aiebat autem Scaurus rem veram: non minus magnam virtutem esse scire dicere quam scire desinere.

> Not to give too many examples of what Scaurus called Ovid's Montanisms, I will content myself with just one: when Polyxena had been led away to be sacrificed at the the tomb of Achilles, Hecuba says: "Even the ashes of the buried man fight our family". That might have been enough for him, but he adds: "We felt our enemy, even in his grave". He wasn't satisfied even with this, and adds: "I was fertile – for Achilles". Scaurus was quite right to say that to know how to stop is just as important as to know how to speak[84].

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82 — For Ovid's self-indulgence and violations of literary decorum in ancient criticism, see Sen. *Contr*. 2.2.12 ('he used language by no means freely except in his poetry, in which far from being unaware of his faults he embraced them'); cf. also *Contr*. 10.5.25; and Seneca *NQ* 3.7. Quintilian's assessments are notorious: *lascivus quidem in herois quoque Ovidius et nimium amator ingenii sui, laudandus tamen in partibus* (*IO*. 10.1.88-89); *Ouidi Medea videtur mihi ostendere, quantam ille vir praestare potuerit, si ingenio suo imperare quam indulgere maluisset*, (*IO*. 10.1.130); cf. also *IO*. 4.1.76-77. Elliott (1985) is a useful analysis of the critical tradition. On Ovid's 'puerile' poetics as an anti-establishment provocation, see the excellent article by Morgan (2003).

83 — It is interesting how the terms of comparison between Montanus and Ovid are swapped around in Seneca's passage: the orator who was called 'an Ovid' now gives his name to some of Ovid's own poetic excesses ('Montanisms').

84 — For students of oratory in the Renaissance, however, Ovid's Hecuba became an *exemplum* of how to deploy rhetorical *copia* to generate powerful emotion: Enterline (2000) 25-26.

The notion of Ovidian stylistic 'corruption' or self-indulgence is not confined to ancient critics[85]. One modern commentator has objected to the excessive rhetorical artifice of Althaea's monologue on whether or not to kill her son Meleager, arguing that her 'smooth antitheses ... destroy all illusion of a woman in agony of soul'[86]. Decorum of style and content is at stake in a different way in Alcmene's tale of her struggle to give birth, described by another recent critic as 'pedestrian' because it jars with Ovid's preceding account of Hercules' apotheosis, lowering the heroic tone[87]. At the point when his treatment should be at its most horrifying, serious or tragic, mothers seem to bring out the shock artist in Ovid, as with his image of mother Agave and her sister Autonoe in a tug of war over the unfortunate Pentheus (3.721f.), a 'cartoon-like' parody of violence[88]. The one episode involving a mother that has received intensive critical attention, the gruesome revenge-tale of Procne, Philomela and Tereus, is often seen as the most disturbing, problematic and critically unassimilable of the whole poem, due to an even more extreme disjunction between grisly subject (the poem's most savage rape, followed by filicide and cannibalism) and stylistic mode (occasionally titillating, comic or punning)[89].

Whether they push at the limits of rhetorical and literary decorum, 'realism' or generic convention, emotional and social propriety, or the poem's supposedly dominant tone of humour and playfulness, to read mothers in the *Metamorphoses*, it would seem, is to grapple with Ovidian poetry at its most excessive and critically 'indigestible' – at the edge of 'chaos', as it were. Ovid's mothers in particular draw attention to the tension and interaction of surface display and inner substance in the poem, to the relationship between words and action, rhetoric and interior passion, body and self – and as we saw earlier, between linguistic and material realms. A more fruitful approach, then, might take their excess

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85 — The later critical tradition on rhetoric in Ovid is surveyed by Enterline (2000) 229 n. 12.

86 — Hollis (1983) 89. Anderson (1972) *ad loc* however celebrates it as one of Ovid's masterpieces. Good discussion in Fantham (2004-2005) 118-119. Critical unease at Ovid's insufficiently 'epic' Calydonian hunt episode is nicely unpacked by Horsfall (1979).

87 — Anderson (1972) 437, though he views the aesthetic disjunction positively, as an ironic commentary on the preceding divinization. Galinsky (1972) 104 also claims that the birth undercuts 'any remaining epic and serious aspirations' of the apotheosis.

88 — Segal (1998) 35-36 discusses the clash of tones and registers in Ovid's description of Pentheus' fate. Segal's preceding comments (1998: 34) on Marsyas apply to this too: 'Ovid's little scene upsets the traditional categories. He makes us ask whether he is just aiming at shock effects, or experimenting with a range of stylistic registers, or enjoying a display of a «baroque» or «anticlassical sensibility» that jumps abruptly from one mood or one genre to another. None of these is to be excluded; but Ovid uses these vivid details of the body to raise the question of what constitutes ugliness and beauty'.

89 — Richlin (1992) 158; Segal (1994); responses discussed by Gildenhard and Zissos (2007) 3-4, who also note that despite, or because of this, it is one of Ovid's episodes which has most inspired later authors.

to be part of the point; in other words, to see the aesthetic offensiveness or 'jarring effect' of these episodes as signifiers of deeper moral, social and psychological conflicts and tensions[90]. At the heart of the tale of the daughters of Pandion, for example, lies the question of whether the killing and cooking of Itys is a morally justified or at least structurally equivalent response to Tereus' crime, or whether the women's savagery is 'too much'. A similar moral uncertainty lingers around the figure of Hecuba, paradigm of extreme injustice, who exceeds the limits of human suffering and transforms into a howling dog. Her fate even disturbs the gods, who concur afterwards that it was undeserved, excessive and out of all proportion (13.572-575); for while her bestialization offers a certain grim freedom from her misfortunes, it also makes permanent the disintegrating, dehumanizing effects of her grief.

So it is, I would argue, the very extremeness of Ovid's mothers *and* the readerly discomfort they induce, whether in the poem's gods, in its ancient critics or in us, that makes them interesting and paradigmatic in certain ways for thinking about Ovidian poetics[91]. A good example of the critical potential of thinking about Ovid's poetics through maternal excess can be found by returning to the Procne and Philomela episode, mentioned above. Ovid structures this episode through a progression of powerful and interlinked images: his titillating description of Philomela's beauty is complemented by the excessively repellent image of her twitching tongue, which in turn is echoed in the climactic revelation of Itys' disembodied head. In linking these images, Ovid suggests that our horror at Philomela's tongue is merely the flipside of our voyeuristic enjoyment of her ravishable beauty, and thus seems to rub in the reader's face the potential consequences of his or her sensory and literary pleasures and their attendant hypocrisies. Ovid's supposedly 'pathological' playfulness, indulgence and excess suddenly look like they have a surprisingly serious agenda, a distinctly moral inflection. Following the image chain (Philomela's beauty-her maimed tongue-Itys' disembodied head), we are lead to see that the consequence of Philomela's physical objectification and rape is not motherhood, as for most other rape victims in the poem,

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90 — Gildenhard and Zissos (2007) 3 note that this episode is used by Christoph Ransmayr's novel about Ovid in Tomi, *The Lost World*, as the metaliterary key to Ovid's work: 'Of all the Ovidian myths that might have triggered Cotta's insight into his destiny, Ransmayr opted for a tale of singularly grotesque savagery. This choice suggests that, in Ransmayr's view, the most profound understanding of Ovid and his work derives from a close encounter with the most offensive of his literary fantasies'.

91 — Gildenhard and Zissos (2007) 4: 'Whether Seneca and Quintilian, Ovid's earliest noteworthy critics, felt genuine moral outrage at his gruesome wit or his poetry merely offended against their notions of aesthetic propriety remains a subject for debate. Yet frissons of content and form are an abiding hallmark of Ovidian poetics, and negotiating those two levels remains central to the reception of his text'.

but a mother's mutilation and murder of her child: that is, the violent rejection of the maternal and conjugal relation in favour of the sisterly.

The constraints that a patrilineal system places on maternal identity and selfhood is exemplified in a different way by his Niobe and Hecuba. In the wider tradition, Niobe and Hecuba are universal emblems of insuperable mourning for both antiquity and later eras, becoming transcendent symbols of the shared burden of human grief, rather than just examples of excessively grieving mothers (cf. *Iliad* 24.602ff.; and Hamlet's previously quoted line, 'What is Hecuba to him?'). Yet although Ovid's versions clearly influenced Niobe and Hecuba's post-classical significance, his actual representations of them in the *Metamorphoses* are both more extreme and more focused on their maternity than earlier or later accounts, and in fact seem to refute this easy cultural sublimation of mourning mother into transcendent universal symbol. Rather, the Ovidian Niobe's and Hecuba's disconcertingly hyperbolic expressions of maternal pride and grief strain at the limits of the patrilineal system in which they became mothers, a system that holds nothing of more value than the paternal kinship line – hence Niobe's maternal absolutism – and can therefore 'imagine nothing more tragic than genealogical extinction'[92]. Transmuted from supermothers to non-mothers, then ultimately to non-humans and non-subjects, Ovid's depiction of Hecuba and Niobe seems to ask what legitimate space is left for their totalizing grief, which cannot generate anything more of social value in this system. What room for any kind of self at all (209-209)?

If the Procne, Hecuba and Niobe episodes force us, as readers, to consider the relationship in Ovid between the ethical, political and the aesthetic, critically pursuing the readerly discomfort evoked in other maternal episodes can also lead us to unexpected generic and poetic questions. In the Alcmene episode, for example, we might ask *why* Alcmene's birth narrative should automatically be categorized as 'deflating' and 'pedestrian' compared to Ovid's (generically problematic and ambiguous) narrative of Hercules' apotheosis. As I have suggested, one could argue that the mother's *labor* against Juno's magic is accorded an 'epicness' greater than the Herculean *labores* it so clearly reworks. Alcmene's birth tale privileges the natal over the (im)mortal: the reorientation of the idea of 'heroism' away from Hercules and towards the laboring mother pregnant from Jupiter's seed implies that the hero's apotheosis may in fact be, as Richard Fletcher has suggested, a 'direct extension of his birth through divine rape and not a result of the *labores* listed by the dying hero'[93].

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92 — Grazia (2000) 367, on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*'s Hecuba.
93 — Fletcher (2005) 317-318.

Returning to Niobe, Ovid's characteristically self-reflexive statement that 'she would have been the most blessed of mothers, had she not seemed so to herself' (6.156) not only makes her into the Narcissus of mothers (recalling 3.148), but also has an oblique resonance of the poet himself, in Quintilian's famous apodosis about Ovid's *ingenium*: 'Ovid's *Medea* seems to me to show how outstanding that man could have been, had he preferred to constrain his genius rather than indulge it (*Ouidi Medea videtur mihi ostendere, quantam ille vir praestare potuerit, si ingenio suo imperare quam indulgere maluisset, IO*. 10.1.130). Set alongside Seneca the Elder's remarks about the self-indulgent sensationalism of the Hecuba speech, it's worth noting that both these critiques of Ovid's poetics pertain to his depiction of mother figures. In them Ovid's mothers are used to define the limits of (what have been perceived to be) the 'Ovidian': his 'Medea' shows his literary *ingenium*, his 'Hecuba' his rhetorical excess[94]. (Ovid's *Medea* tragedy is sadly lost, but his earlier Medea, in *Heroides* 12[95], suggests that Quintilian's praise of the play's 'restraint' and 'moderation' might actually be a misreading: *ingentes parturit ira minas ... nescioquid certe mens mea maius agit* (My anger is giving birth to mighty threats; ... something greater, for sure, is playing in my mind, *Her*. 12.208-209; 212)).

In the *Metamorphoses*, the extreme restrictions of feminine social roles, combined with the extravagant passions traditionally associated with women and the corporeal permutations inherent in pregnancy and birth, offer Ovid a tantalizing basis for a kind of maternal poetics of excess, a poetics that flirts obsessively psychic, social and aesthetic limits and the incipient threat of their explosion. Colin Burrows has asserted that the *Metamorphoses* sets itself up as a linear story of universal origin and generation down to the Roman people and the period of Augustus, yet what it seems to offer is at most a sequence of irregular or destructive sexual encounters and bizarre fertilizations: 'The poem is an extraordinarily tense mixture of the generative and the perverse. And Ovid is not interested in reconciling them'[96]. Ovid uses mothers' cultural associations with *both* generativity *and* perversity to trope forms of social and discursive instability: mothers, in their indigestible, unintegrated 'excess', come to symbolize the limits of expression and human endurance, when passions and suffering can no longer be controlled or absorbed by bodies, social

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94 — On the stereotype of Ovid's lack of self-discipline and excessive rhetorical ingenuity and recent revaluations of these aspects, see Hardie (2002) 36.

95 — A letter excluded by some from Ovid's corpus because of its absence from the list in *Am*. 2.18 and because of stylistic issues: e.g. Knox (1986). Hinds (1993) and Heinze (1991) reasserted the letter as authentically Ovidian.

96 — Cited in Barchiesi (1999) 121, who calls the *Metamorphoses* a 'fragmented and sterile universe'.

identities or structures and explode outwards into action. Yet while Ovid's
mothers may exemplify the subject in extremis, in the terrifying process
of dissolution, as such they can on occasion provide the grounds for its
creative reconstitution or rebirth. The emphasis that maternity in Ovid
places on 'becoming' rather than 'being', to suggest, to reprise philoso-
pher's Christine Battersby's terms in my epigraph, a notion of self-iden-
tity that is not 'spatially and temporally oppositional to other entities',
that does not 'privilege that which is self-contained and self-directed'. In
recuperating the mother from her position as the 'repressed' or uncanny
subtext of the *Aeneid's* Roman masculine self and making her traumas,
dilemmas and desires the 'matter' of much of his epic, Ovid provides a
fertile paradigm for the exploration of early imperial subjectivity itself.

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