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Maintaining the Upper Hand

Antonia Lluberes

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, humans undergo metamorphosis as a form of punishment, disguise, or out of desperation. In many of the stories the transformations occur willingly or unwillingly and may or may not involve various gods and goddesses. When there is some sort of divine intervention, however, the goddesses or gods involved are the only beings who know the identity of the person and they do what they can to ensure the change promotes human suffering. Although metamorphosis initiated by any divine being is often problematic for the human subject, the transformations that take place out of a goddess' wrath are especially degrading. In the transformations of Arachne and Actaeon in particular, embarrassment, potential loss of control of the situation, and excessive anger are the main justifications for the goddesses to make the transformations. In Actaeon's story, he is turned into a stag after accidentally seeing Diana, the virgin huntress, bathing. Arachne is turned into a spider after she beats Pallas, the virgin warrior, in a weaving competition. Ovid illustrates his belief that virgin, unmarried goddesses who did not embrace their maternal instincts and whose lives were not dominated or controlled by male figures took extreme measures to punish humans who disrespected or threatened their control. Transformations performed by female goddesses are merciless expressions of revenge all of which are a result of embarrassment. The goddesses only change the external appearance of the person and include an unfortunate and often ironic end to their human existence in an attempt to regain dominance.

In the story of Diana and Actaeon, the goddess punishes the mortal hunter by turning him into a stag. Actaeon is transformed after he finds Diana bathing in a cave in a "valley clothed in hanging woods" while he is "idly wandering / Through unknown clearings of the forest . . ." (55-6). Diana, the goddess who typically lived in high places to maintain the upper hand, decided to bathe on a level ground with humans which made her more vulnerable. Although her position made it easier for someone to discover her, she never expected to be seen and "like the crimson dawn, / So deeply blushed Diana. . ." (56) when she was not only discovered by a man, but also while she was naked. Had she been in full control and had "Her arrows ready," (56) she may have killed Actaeon right on the spot due to her embarrassment, but Diana does not have the upper hand of the situation and her only defense is to throw water on his head. Diana is so threatened and surprised by Actaeon's presence the only reaction she has is to speak "words that warned of doom. . ." and curse him because she is unable to see — like a mother would — that it was just a mistake, and Actaeon was not trying to take control of her (56). Diana did not live with humans and have to deal with their imperfections, and this isolation made her more impatient than she may have been otherwise. Diana's impatience leaves Actaeon no time to apologize or explain himself, because she does not even consider that he did not seek her out to defile her, but rather accidentally discovered her.

In another of Ovid's stories, the goddess Pallas ends Arachne's human existence by turning her into a spider after Pallas is embarrassed and defeated. Arachne is a girl known for her weaving abilities, but she is proud and denies that her ability was a gift from Pallas. The warrior goddess is accustomed to people looking up to her, not only as a goddess but also as a woman, and is hurt by the young girl's excessive arrogance and ungrateful attitude. Additionally she, like Diana, is a virgin who never married and thus had full control of her life without any outside

dominance or challengers. Pallas is also seen as a benefactor to humans, and for this reason she goes to earth to give Arachne a second chance and challenges her to a weaving competition saying, “Let her contend with me” (121) with the assumption that she would dominate the human and win. Arachne accepts the challenge and weaves a tapestry depicting scenes of various gods taking advantage of or abusing human subjects which further challenges Pallas’s inherent role as a benefactor. After both tapestries are complete, Pallas “could find, / Envy could find, no fault” (125) in Arachne’s tapestry and for the first time, Pallas is not only not in control of the situation, but also underneath a human. Pallas is so infuriated she “[tears] up the tapestry [. . .] / And with the boxwood shuttle in her hand / three times, four times, [strikes] / Arachne on her forehead” (125) to prove her dominance through physical abuse. Arachne cannot take the brutality of the beating and when she goes to hang herself Pallas condemns her saying, “live but hang, you wicked girl . . .” (125) and turns her into a spider. Although Arachne is not thankful for the gift she has been given, and foolishly does not acknowledge Pallas’s role as a benefactor, she is predominately punished because she wins the weaving competition that Pallas initiates and the goddess does not know how to handle defeat and loss of control.

One of the worst consequences of Actaeon and Arachne’s metamorphosis is that they maintain some human essence internally and are not fully transformed into the creature they are condemned to become. Actaeon’s outward transformation into a stag means that he simply cannot express his thoughts and feelings, because he has no means of communicating them. Soon after he is changed he tries “to say ‘Alas!’ — but no words” (57) come when he looks at his reflection in the water and sees his antlers. The huntress Diana not only regains control of the situation by changing him into a stag, but also sets “terror in his heart” (57) to punish him and make him panic in his new body. This brave and well-known hunter has nowhere to turn and, like Diana was in his presence, is vulnerable to external influences and desperate for an answer as “the tears rolled down / On cheeks [that were] not his” (57). When Actaeon discovers Diana, the goddess’s status is equal to a human and she reacts immediately to regain her dominant status as a goddess. When Actaeon is transformed into a stag his prominence also drops, but unlike Diana he is unable to fight back or regain his prior human status. Actaeon was changed into a stag for something he did not do on purpose and no matter where he goes he cannot get out of this new body and cannot tell anyone who he really is. Similarly, some of Arachne’s human essence stays with her as a spider, in her ability to weave. Though Arachne is reduced to the size of an insect, she still spends her days “weaving her web, [pursuing] her former skill” (125) to show Pallas she will never be able to win. Pallas may not have knowingly given her the ability to weave, but even if it was an accident, Arachne still has some of her flamboyant human arrogance by weaving even after losing her human form. Both goddesses attempt to show their dominance by turning humans that threaten their superiority into animals and putting them below human status, but then go further in their punishments by allowing them to remain human internally.

The most horrific part of both goddesses’ vengeful transformations is how the human’s existence in his or her new form is continuously punished. As if Diana’s punishment for Actaeon by turning him into a deer is not enough, soon after his transformation he is attacked and killed by his own hunting party. As Actaeon the hunter becomes the hunted “He [flees] where often he’d followed in pursuit, / [Fleeing] his own folk. . .” (57) in a desperate attempt to outrun the pack he once led. Although he is a strong and agile stag, he still has been reduced to an animal and, unlike Diana, does not have any water, arrows, or divine powers to save himself and rise above his pursuers before “the whole pack, united, sank their teeth / Into his flesh” (57-58). Actaeon’s unfortunate death is worsened because “his friends / With their glad usual shouts

cheered on the pack” (58) and were unable to see they were killing a superior and a friend. Although she does not die, the punishment Arachne receives is also cruel and incredibly ironic. As a spider, Arachne is more nimble than she was as a human which makes her better at weaving. Additionally, just as Pallas thought Arachne was a pest and destroyed her tapestry, spiders are seen as pests to humans and their webs are often swatted away because they are a nuisance. Arachne’s punishment to live as a spider makes her suffer more because in her human form Pallas was the only one who would destroy her work to display her dominance, but now anyone can easily ruin her work. Although Pallas was not as extreme as Diana and her human subject did not die, she did punish Arachne to maintain control of the situation and prove her dominance.

In the stories of Actaeon and Arachne, human lives come to a sudden end after, even if briefly by chance or by skill, humans are equal to or above powerful goddesses. Diana and Pallas change these humans into animals to regain their dominance after they are threatened or disrespected and the control they have over the situation is jeopardized. Both goddesses have always had full control of their lives in choosing to remain unmarried and not have a male dominate them. Additionally, their decision to remain virgins meant they never experienced motherhood which, in Ovid’s view, suppressed their natural maternal instincts as well as the patience required to raise children. Although their roles in ancient mythology were different, both were goddesses of power, dominance, and independence and both were fighters, whether in warfare or in the hunt. Diana and Pallas did not want Actaeon or Arachne to see them as vulnerable equals, or simply naked and defeated, and when they did, the goddesses were embarrassed and sought to ruin the humans’ lives. Diana is found by Actaeon accidentally and she sees it as a threat to her virginity, whereas Pallas, who is often viewed as a benefactor to humans, takes offense at the images on Arachne’s tapestry and her pride and punishes her accordingly. Although Arachne and Actaeon are never reunited with their families or turned back into their full human forms, they receive punishments the goddesses see fit to maintain their sovereignty over humans. The contrast between how Arachne and Actaeon confront the goddesses and their punishments that follow reveal Ovid’s belief that his relegation and exile from Rome was too harsh and, like Actaeon, he was not guilty of anything because “what guilt [could] it be to lose one’s way?” (55). Arachne and Actaeon’s punishments and Ovid’s exile are examples of extreme and somewhat unnecessary punishments, but they do warrant a level of respect. Although the punishments Pallas and Diana administer destroy or end human life, and do not invoke or inspire change in the human, they are done to maintain the goddesses’ dominance and control over humans and their positions as divine and powerful women.

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