

## The Futile Female Fight

Noori Zubieta

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In a paper for the Humanities Sequence, Noori Zubieta strikes a balance between carefully working through her **evidence, orienting** her reader, and building to a nuanced **thesis** in a **close reading** of a passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.*

### Excerpt

Ovid draws a parallel between the fight of Diana's troop for their virginity to the forest around Callisto. While Diana is associated with the moon, the menstrual cycle, female protection, and maidenship, her brother Apollo is her opposite: associated with the sun, maleness, and sexual tension. In this light, Apollo and the "sun" at their zenith (417) signify a trapping heat and sexual danger<sup>1</sup>, and Diana and the moon consequently at their nadir mean a lack of protection for Callisto. So, just as Diana "overcome by the heat of her brother ... enters the cool of a wood" later on (454-5), Callisto here escapes the danger for "a forest whose trees no axe had deflowered" (417). The implicit analogy likens "deflower[ing]" (417) by an axe, literally the exploitation of natural resources, to figurative rape; both exploitation and rape entail loss of beauty, and Callisto indeed loses her beauty in the transformations following her rape (pp. xxx, *Introduction*). Sex is the female battleground<sup>2</sup>; the violence inflicted upon the trees will have the effect of deflowering, just as the violence inflicted upon Callisto will. In fact, Diana's troop in *Metamorphoses* does not merely hunt but fight for their virginity as "soldier[s]" (414).

The virgin forest is a wild space, not yet subjugated by mortals, and Callisto feels safe here. The word "here" (419) emphasizes that only when in the forest does Callisto feel secure; in the sacrosanct forest, she is comfortable exposing herself. She is vulnerable, having "removed" (419) and "loosened" (419) her weapons, having "laid herself down" (420), and "lying exhausted and unprotected" (422). She thinks she is away from the male gaze, trusting the forest as a refuge and stripping herself of her protections. Jove takes her resting vulnerability as an invitation to prey upon her. However, in giving so much attention to the environment and Callisto's feeling of safety there, Ovid has the reader identify with Callisto, the disempowered victim, rather than with Jove.

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<sup>1</sup>An additional element of danger stems from the "midday" (417), traditionally seen as a perilous time in ancient Greco-Roman culture.

<sup>2</sup> Further evidence for sex as a war occurs during the rape: "fought" (436), "match" (436), and "victory" (437).

Ovid acknowledges Jove's intrusion into her ambit of safety. The verb "spied" (422) connotes invasion and violation of privacy, and even Jove recognizes his actions to come as a "betrayal" (423), attempting to downplay it with the adjective "tiny" (423). However, he only thinks of the sin against Juno and not how it will affect Callisto because, once again, the reader sees immortals' ignorance of their potential to completely overwhelm mortals. All the same, Jove acts "at once" (425) without any moral qualms. Even his certainty that Juno will "never" (423) find out is contradicted by the addition of an "if she does" clause (424); Jove's rhetoric is more self-justificatory than anything. He derives excitement from the deception, bubbling with an exclamation of "oh yes" (424).

In a single move, Jove violates Callisto's refuge in the forest, her relationship with Diana, and her identity all at once. After the rape, Callisto "detest[s] the forests and woodlands which knew her secret" (438-9); her haven has become a symbol of her rape—in which she is trapped after Juno transforms her into a bear. Jove cruelly adopts the persona of Diana, a god of Callisto's same gender whom she respects, in the rape, and after the trauma, it is Diana who will expel Callisto from her troop. Most importantly though, Callisto will have almost fully lost her identity because of Jove. Once he has departed, she "almost forg[e]t[s] to recover her quiver and arrows and even the bow she had hung on a tree" (439-40). Not only does Callisto lose her pledge of virginity and her beauty (pp. xxx, *Introduction*), but she no longer retains her soldierliness either.

*Author Commentary*

Noori Zubieta

This excerpt comes from my third of four close-reading papers for the HUM Sequence. While I really struggled for the first such paper, I found myself getting into a routine by this one. I first looked for a few potential passages to analyze and, as usual, found myself attracted to passages that explored issues of gender. In my first reading of the *Metamorphoses*, the language “a forest whose tree no axe had deflowered” (418) intrigued me, and at my HUM mentor Sydney Bebon’s behest, I decided to trust that instinct.

In the HUM Sequence, I benefited from many professors’ ideas on how to approach close-reading ancient texts with a modern lens; all urged me to be unafraid reading with a more feminist lens even if the times of the text’s writing would not have accepted a feminist perspective. Thus, I examined each word, noticing the careful identity Ovid constructs and then destroys for Callisto. I took out a pen and wrote down all my observations on word choice, metaphors, imagery, and the like; by the end of the exercise, the page was full of blue arrows, circles, and notes. This detailed approach ultimately greatly aided my writing. Once I finally opened the Google doc, the process was rapid, and I found myself loving the work. When I later consulted with professors Baraz and Feeney for feedback on my thesis, I was pleased to hear that, for the first time, my analysis was becoming sufficiently sophisticated.

Throughout the Sequence, I struggled with whether my impulse towards gender-oriented passages was legitimate. I did not necessarily hear the same inclination from other students, and I wondered whether I was just taking the easy way out. However, I think that it was my genuine interest in the theme that allowed me to inspect the text so closely.

*Editor Commentary*

Annabelle Duval

Close reading, a particular sub-category of **analysis**, requires imagination and careful attention to the details of a text — diction, repetition, shifts in tone, imagery, and other literary devices. While close-reading, one must first notice these striking details, then find patterns, contrasts and connections throughout the passage. At the same time, one's reader must understand the context of the passage, and these details may require **orientation** to explain their relevance. Then comes the challenge of showing how these details build to a **thesis**. The writer finds themselves asking why do these patterns and specific features of the text matter, what can they tell us about the larger importance of the text, and how are they different from what we've seen before?

In Noori's essay on a short passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, she deftly focuses on individual word choice while simultaneously connecting this one scene to larger ideas about mythology. First she **orients** the reader by providing necessary background on the associations of the different gods present in the passage. Noori then draws a parallel between the goddess Diana and Callisto, a soldier in Diana's troop. She also introduces the similarity between the female sex and nature, both described as violated and exploited in this scene. At this point, Noori dives into the bulk of her **close reading**. She explains word-by-word how Ovid transforms a place of refuge — the forest — into a reminder of Callisto's rape. Importantly, word choice is not Noori's only area of focus; she looks at syntax, imagery, tone, and symbolism. She further highlights how Ovid's authorial choices may influence which characters the reader identifies with. Throughout her **analysis**, Noori takes time to weave in additional pieces of **orienting** information so that a reader new to Ovid can understand the mechanics of the scene she discusses. These aspects of Noori's **analysis** mean that any reader, regardless of their familiarity with Ovid, can pick up her essay and understand her view of how the details of this text may have larger implications about the relationships between sex, nature, power, and exploitation.

Ultimately, any **close reading** is one person's interpretation of a passage. Another writer analyzing the same scene could draw different conclusions about the author's choices and their effects. But, the best close readings are strongly rooted in textual **evidence**, offer up carefully explained insights, and introduce the audience to arguments they might not have considered upon an initial reading of the passage. In her **analysis**, Noori carefully works through the text to achieve all three of these **close reading** goals.

*Professor Commentary*

Yelena Baraz, Classics Department

For this paper Noori chose a rich and challenging passage from Ovid, the moment when the nymph Callisto, feeling safe, becomes vulnerable to the gaze and then the violence of Jupiter. Here Noori performs an exemplary close reading, carefully tracking how the poet's language in the description of space foreshadows Callisto's rape and transformation. Noori draws out the parallels between the forest as a natural environment vulnerable to human violence and the god's perception of the nymph's sexual availability. She further explores how the reader is invited to identify in the passage, an important question for understanding Ovid's insistence on representing rape: Noori shows that Jupiter's intrusion is unwanted and destructive, destroying his victim's identity. The paper shows how careful attention to language, imagery, and tone can produce a close reading that opens up an important perspective on the big-picture questions the text raises.

**Work Cited**

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. David Raeburn. London: Penguin Group, 2004. Print.

All in-text citations are assumed to be Book 2 unless otherwise specified.

**Bios**

**Noori Zubieta '24** is a first-year from Maplewood, New Jersey. She is thinking about concentrating in Mathematics, Comparative Literature, or Physics. Very interested in race and gender issues, Noori hopes to explore these interests with certificates in Visual Arts and Latin American Studies. Noori is additionally a Copy Editor for the *Nassau Weekly* and a Cultural Advocate for the Asian American Student Association. She wrote this paper as a first-year.

**Annabelle Duval '23** is a sophomore pursuing a concentration in History and is interested in Environmental Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies. In addition to her work for *Tortoise*, Annabelle is an Associate Features Editor for *The Daily Princetonian* and President of the Club Field Hockey Team. She wrote this commentary as a sophomore.