Make panic look fetching: the eroticization of rape by ovid

Jordan Reid BerkowFinal PaperRome of AugustusApril 17, 2003″Make Panic Look Fetching”: The Eroticization of Rape by OvidIn both the Ars Armatoria and Metamorphoses, Ovid presents highly detailed, compelling scenes of rape, crafting these moments with an almost exquisite attention to detail that reveals their value to him as a writer. Two of the most notable rape scenes in Ovid’s repertoire are that of the rape of the Sabine women, in the Ars Armatoria, and the story of the Arcadian Girl (also known as the Callisto myth) in Metamorphoses. While one may imagine that the ancient Roman conception of rape may have been fairly simplistic and accommodating to the male perspective, Ovid’s portrayals are, to the contrary, quite complex and cast the women not as mere faceless victims, but rather as individuals with highly distinctive personalities and characteristics. Additionally, Ovid pays a great deal of attention to the negative effects that the rapes have on the victims, describing their sorrow, their tears, and their cries, as in the Ars Armatoria, for their mother (124). This remarkably sympathetic portrayal of women, however, while perhaps intended to elicit sympathy from the reader, is overwhelmed by Ovid’s attraction to the fantasy of male dominance and by the extreme eroticization of the act that reveals Ovid’s true perception of rape. Indeed, the compassionate, tear-stained depiction of the women is the very mechanism through which Ovid eroticizes the brutal scenes. His compassionate portrayal of the women is thus invalidated by his determination to cast these women as clear objects of desire and arousal, reveling in the beauty that is found in their misery. The Rape of the Sabine Women is a tale so integral to Roman history and mythology that it has found its ways into the oeuvres of a number of prominent authors. Livy tells the story of the young Roman men who, finding it more difficult than they

had expected to secure a wife, attack the Sabine women during a festival at the bequest of their ruler, Romulus (SB 53). The Rape of the Sabine Women is not generally cast as a moment of shame in Roman history, but rather as the crucial moment in the development of the race. It was, as Mary Beard writes in " The Erotics of Rape: Livy, Ovid and the Sabine Women", an " originary moment for the Romans" (1). Beard goes on to note that Livy's telling of the story of the Sabine women " emphasizes the honourable motives for the rape…[and] admits no questioning at all of what is, at first sight, a most questionable founding act" (4). In many renditions of the story, then, the rape is viewed as a political act, not one in which the emotions or identities of the victimized women are given a great deal of consideration, and certainly not one involving any significant component of sympathy. The Callisto myth is another story that has been taken up by a number of classical authors, from Hesiod and Apollodorus to Pausanias and Ovid (Wall 10). Ovid's rendition is a fascinating and highly complex portrayal of the nymph dedicated to Diana who catches the eye of Jove. Jove approaches Callisto (referred to in Ovid as simply the " Arcadian girl" or " Lycaon's daughter", but who will here be referred to as Callisto for the sake of simplicity) in the guise of Diana, and then rapes and impregnates her. When Callisto's pregnancy is discovered by Diana, she is banished. Upon the birth of her son, Arcas, she is transformed into a bear by the jealous Juno, wife of Jove. This rape scene, as well, is often viewed as a moment of political change more than a brutal, invasive act, for as Kathleen Wall writes in The Callisto Myth From Ovid to Atwood, the rape takes place in a " wasteland" that is later renewed by the birth of the illegitimate son, Arcas, the savior of the country (16). While many versions of both stories focus on the political

impact, as opposed to the emotional or psychological trauma of the act of rape, Ovid's accounts again contain a great deal of complexity and a surprising degree of attention to the female characters. In the story of the Sabine women, Ovid does not, as Livy does, attempt to deny the individuality of the women involved (Beard 9). Ovid takes care to describe the unique ways in which each woman responded to the trauma: The same nightmare for all, though terror's features varied: Some tore their hair, some just froze Where they sat; some, dismayed, kept silence, others vainly Yelled for Mamma; some wailed; some gaped; Some fled, some just stood there. (121-125) The women are not grouped into a singular body of " rape victims", but are treated as individuals, with distinct personalities and responses to assault. Ovid's description of the rape of the Sabine women further appears to relate to the feminine perspective through its insistence on conveying the horror of the situation. In the above quote, the dismay with which the women greet their rapists is made abundantly clear, in contrast to Livy, where little attention is paid to the responses of the women, with the strongest reference to their attitude towards their rapists coming in the line " the stolen maidens were no more hopeful about their own situation [than the parents], nor less indignant" – hardly a compelling description of the emotional consequences of rape. Ovid, however, pays a great deal of attention to the fact that the girls are left " panic-stricken, / Not one had the same colour in her cheeks as before" (119-120), and portrays the relationship between the victims and the rapists as " timorous doves flee[ing] eagles" (117) and baby lambs running when they lay eyes upon " the hated wolf" (117-118). Furthermore, by referring to the scene as a " nightmare" (121) Ovid clearly instructs the audience's response to the scene: as a spectacle of horror. In

Metamorphoses, the scene of Callisto’s rape is similar to the account of the rape of the Sabines in the Ars Armatoria in that Callisto is endowed with a significant degree of individuality, and the reader is clearly intended to look upon the scene with a sense of horror and a deep sympathy for the violated woman. Callisto’s most striking characteristic is her fierce independence and, as a huntress, disinterest in typically feminine pursuits: “ She had no need / To spin the wool to softness, nor to vary / The way she wore her hair” (410-412). Perhaps the most startling evidence of her strong personality comes when Jove appears to her in the guise of Diana, and Callisto cries, “ All hail, great goddess! / Greater, I think, than Jove, and he might hear me / For all I care” (428-430). She is unafraid of the wrath of even the most powerful of all gods, the ultimate strong, masculine figure. Callisto is no nameless, faceless woman, but a notably original character with a personality that rivals even Jove’s in its distinctiveness and strength. Like the rape of the Sabine women, Callisto’s rape in Metamorphoses is portrayed with an eye towards eliciting the sympathy of the reader. Ovid writes that Callisto “ really struggled against” Jove, noting that the struggle was so fierce that even Juno might have been moved to sympathy for the girl, and describes the aftermath of the rape by writing that “ she loathed the forest, / The knowing woods, and fled, almost forgetting / To take her bow, her quiver, and her arrows” (438-440). Callisto is so traumatized that she, like many rape victims, cannot stand to even be in the physical area where the violation took place. She is so emotionally wounded that she nearly forgets her greatest passion, hunting, in her desire to flee the scene of the crime. The audience’s sympathy for Callisto is further evoked during the scene of Diana’s discovery of the girl’s pregnancy. When Diana orders her to jump into a pool of water,

Callisto refuses out of fear that her condition will be discovered. In response, Diana’s other attendants literally strip Callisto naked, leaving her exposed and vulnerable: “ So the others / Stripped her, and saw the truth. She stood in terror / Trying to move her hands to hide her belly” (461-463). After this second violation, Callisto is not received into the warm arms of her companions, but is banished as a “ pollutant” (465). To add to this punishment for an act that was forced upon her, Juno takes vengeance on Callisto by transforming her into a bear. Ovid describes the transformation in horrible detail, as Juno “ flung her down to the ground, and the girl, reaching / Her arms towards her in pleading, saw them blacken / Grow rough with shaggy hair” (480-482). The heart-rending way in which Callisto is treated, in conjunction with Ovid’s clear characterization of her as an independent, strong character combine to infuse this episode with a surprising degree of complexity and humanity. While both stories may appear, then, to pay a surprising amount of attention to the feminine perspective in their determination to convey the individuality of the victims and the fact that the reader is intended to sympathize with them, Ovid cannot be construed as a feminist because his true conception of the act as an erotic show of male dominance is made clear in both myths. Examining, first, the story of the rape of the Sabines, we can see that Ovid’s true perspective on the story is revealed through its very placement in the Ars Armatoria. No matter how much sensitivity is invested into the story, the fact that the story is but one scene in a text on love advice cannot be ignored (Beard 7). Ovid’s account of the rape thus takes on aspects of a hilarious joke, as when he declares that “ Project Rape was on” (114). The rape scene is therefore not a serious description of a highly significant moment of

political change, nor is it a sensitive portrayal of the emotional aftermath for the victims of rape. It is, rather, but one more moment of flippancy in a humorous treatise on how to get a woman. Rape, it is implied, is just one of the many means by which to secure yourself an heir. The tentatively feminist tone that we have noted in the Callisto myth is invalidated when, upon closer examination, the story is revealed as an emphatic declaration of male dominance. Callisto can be viewed as the very prototype of the independent, self-sufficient huntress who has no need for male companionship, and her violation is thus a resolutely misogynistic assertion of the inevitability of male dominance over even the strongest woman: " She really struggled against him (even Juno / Had she been there to see, might have forgiven) / But girls are frail, and anyway, who could conquer the might of Jove?" (434-437). Ovid's determination to portray Callisto as a strong female character can therefore be seen as underscoring the theme of male dominance – no matter how strong or independent the woman, in the face of male power she must ultimately fall victim to his wishes. Kathleen Wall writes that the strange rejection of Callisto by Diana can be seen as further evidence of Ovid's misogyny. Diana's condemnation of her companion is odd, considering the fact that most modern studies insist that the goddess " was not originally characterized by physical virginity" (Wall 12) and thus would not have reacted with such reproach to Callisto's rape and pregnancy. " The goddess's moral or social condemnation of the nymph's behavior is, like the meaning of the word ' virgin', a patriarchal imposition, for the matriarchal goddess of fecundity, maternity, and childbirth would not have treated her votary in this way" (Wall 13). Ovid, through Diana's rejection of Callisto, elicits further sympathy for the young girl, but also demonstrates an

inaccurate rendition of how a mother goddess figure would have responded to the violation of her protégé, thereby revealing his true attitude towards the matter. Ovid's real perspective on these brutal scenes of rape is revealed most strikingly through his determination to eroticize the act even while describing the horror and fear experienced by the victims. Mary Beard describes how, during the scene of the rape of the Sabine women, Ovid lavishes great attention on the beauty and desirability of the Sabines, conveying that their sadness renders them even more attractive. " What, after all," writes Beard, " could be more erotic than tears and fears? Hit her and have her; she looks so gorgeous when she's all upset" (9). Ovid writes that even in their terror, " many contrived / To make panic look fetching" (126-127). Rape, then, is not so much a brutal act as a sexual farce, a contrivance by the women to appear unwilling and reluctant so that they may be taken through no fault of their own. The male attackers take on a paternalistic tone, almost being cast as rescuers of the Sabine women: Any girl who resisted her pursuerToo vigorously would find herself picked upAnd borne off regardless. ' Why spoil those pretty eyes withweeping?'She'll hear, ' I'll be all to youThat your Dad ever was to your Mum.'(127-131)The fact that the rape takes on a humorous light thus reveals Ovid's true perception of the act, invalidating the claim that some may imagine he has on presenting a feminist account. The rape of Callisto is similarly eroticized, both through the attention lavished on Callisto's physical beauty and desirability and through the very scene of the " seduction". Callisto is a purely natural beauty, and her transformation into a bear symbolizes the fact that her character brings to mind " the untamed side of our personalities" (Wall 14), a savage, wild, free – and highly sexualized – object of desire. Additionally, when Jove

seduces Callisto, he does so in the guise of a woman, Diana, kissing her “ The way a maiden does not kiss, or should not” (430). Through these elements, Ovid creates a male fantasy: the strong, independent, desirable ice woman who is overcome through intervention by another, equally sexually aloof woman, yet who eventually must fall, submissive, to the inescapable power of a man. Though Ovid, in both the “ Rape of the Sabine Women” in the Ars Armatoria and the Callisto myth in Metamorphoses appears to infuse brutal scenes of rape with surprising sensitivity and attention to the feminine perspective, the feminist slant is entirely invalidated as a result of his inability or unwillingness to divorce himself from fantasies of male dominance and the erotic aspects of the rape scenes. Rather than truly portray the emotional trauma that results from rape, he instead creates sexual farces that only serve to underscore the apparent inevitability of male dominance that is pervasive throughout his works.