

## *Metamorphoses* 5.585–600 The rape of Arethusa

The story of Arethusa (*Met.* 5.572–641) is embedded at the end of Ovid's most complex narrative, the rape of Persephone (*Met.* 5.332–661), which is told by Calliope in a singing contest with their rivals, the Pierides. An unnamed Muse reports to the goddess Minerva Callioipe's winning song; in this extract Arethusa's first-person narrative is also reported by Calliope and, in turn, by the unnamed Muse. The story of Arethusa is thus relayed through three female voices. The story of her pursuit by the river god Alpheus is the second time that Arethusa speaks in this complex narrative; at 5.487–508 she has the important function of telling Ceres that her daughter Persephone has been abducted to the Underworld, a knowledge she gained because in her escape from Alpheus she flowed underground. She promises Ceres that when she finds Persephone again, she, Arethusa, will tell her own personal drama.

The story of Arethusa's attempted rape looks back to the first such story in the *Metamorphoses*, that of Apollo and Daphne (1.452–567); like the latter, Arethusa is a follower of Diana and dedicated to the hunt and virginity. But although she escapes her pursuer by her metamorphosis into a spring, unlike Daphne, who becomes a tree, she keeps her voice and survives, now as a water nymph, to tell her story. Arethusa's story brings to a conclusion in a form of ring composition the first triad of the *Metamorphoses* and its many stories of the gods' violent pursuit of beautiful nymphs; but here instead of tragedy there is, for once, victorious escape.

This extract comes from the start of her story when Arethusa bathes, unknowingly, in Alpheus' waters. Once again, as in the myths of Actaeon and Narcissus, we have the description of a pool that seems peaceful, quiet and pure, yet hides its true character until the unwary are drawn into its trap.

585      **memini** This parenthetical comment draws attention to Arethusa as a storyteller; verbs of “remembering” often point in Ovid to a well-known narrative (that is then given innovative treatment).

**Stymphalide silva** abl. of “place from which.” Stymphalus was notorious in mythology for its man-eating birds, eventually killed by Hercules; Arethusa is not surprisingly “tired” (*lassa*) from hunting there. She thus presents herself as a formidable virginal hunter (see also 577–84), similar to but hardier than the first huntress in the poem to be pursued by a god, Daphne (*Met.* 1.452–567).

586 **aestus erat, magnumque labor geminaverat aestum** ring composition with a playful instance of gemination/repetition; *aestus* has literally been doubled. *aestus* can refer both to temperature and passion; see note on *Met.* 3.412 and 413. Its repetition therefore anticipates the “sexual heat” of the god who will attack her. Cf. *Am.* 1.5.1 *aestus erat*, the sexually charged opening of the “epiphany” of Corinna to Ovid during an afternoon siesta.

587 **invenio** = “I come upon,” a shift to the vivid pres. tense. The description of the river is full of irony; features that seem attractive and safe to Arethusa deceptively expose her to attempted sexual assault. The water is a trap that seduces her.

**sine vertice aquas, sine murmure euntes** The water is described in an elegant tricolon (587–88). Asyndeton emphasizes the unnatural stillness of the water.

588 **perspicuas ad humum** “clear to the very bottom,” the third part of the tricolon, varied in form, as often in Ovid. *perspicuus* is used of water first by Ovid—at *Met.* 4.300, then here. The water’s clarity exposes her to the river god.

**per quas** Antecedent of the rel. clause is *aquas* (587).

**numerabilis** “possible to count,” a rare word, only used in poetry by Horace (*Ars* 206) and then Ovid here

**alte** adverbial = “deep down.” The ability to see to the bottom and count every pebble sums up the clarity of the water.

589 **quas tu vix ire putas** “which you would have thought scarcely moved”; again an emphasis on the deceptive stillness of the water. *tu* is a reminder that Arethusa addresses

Ceres. Looking back on events, Arethusa reflects that the river seemed an ideally safe place to swim—who would have believed an energetic river god lived there?

590   **cana salicta** Greyish-white willows are water-loving plants, as are poplars.

**nutritaque** nom. sing. modifying *populus*; trees in Roman vocabulary are feminine gender.

591   **sponte sua natas . . . umbras** Ovid's beautiful landscapes often display a tension between art and nature. Here the willows and poplar offer shade naturally (*sponte sua*); *natas* has the sense of “created.”

**ripis . . . declivibus** dat. with *dabant* (590), arranged in artful chiasmus with *natas . . . umbras*.

592   **accessi** unlike Narcissus, Arethusa, though tired, does not lie down to drink. Instead this particularly athletic nymph approaches the river in the hope of a swim.

**pedis vestigia** “soles of the feet.” Arethusa carefully tests the waters first. Ovid starts to do a kind of verbal striptease, moving from the foot upwards: *primum* (592), *deinde* (593). The eroticism is coupled with irony—we as readers, accustomed by Book 5 to the dangers of the pools of the *Metamorphoses*, know to expect attack at any moment.

593   **neque eo contenta** “and not content with that”; Arethusa uncovers to the knee

**recingor** emphatic placement at line end for this unusual pass., used in the middle sense, “I disrobe/take my clothes off”

594   **mollia . . . velamina** soft, flimsy garments are the standard wear of the elegiac woman (rather than a huntress; see e.g., Propertius 1.2; *Met.* 4.104, with note). *mollis* is a key erotic word of elegiac poetry; e.g., Ovid describes his earlier work at *Tr.* 2.307 as *versus . . . molles*.

**salici . . . curvae** The pliant willow provides a convenient clothes' hanger.

- 596   **excussaque bracchia iacto** = *excutioque et iacto bracchia*.  
Arethusa is an energetic and dangerously noisy swimmer.
- 597   **medio . . . sub gurgite** postponed prep., “from the depths of  
the river”
- murmur** cf. 587 *sine murmure euntes*. Arethusa was deceived  
by the apparent stillness of the water.
- 598   **propiori margine** abl. “of place where” (with *insisto*). Occa-  
sionally in poetry we find the abl. *i* ending for the compar. adj.  
in place of the usual *e*.
- 599   ‘**quo properas?**’ a formulaic question popular with Ovid, re-  
peated with sinister effect in the same position in the next  
line; cf. *Am.* 1.13.9 (of Aurora)
- suis Alpheos ab undis** The poetic word order distinguishes  
the river god Alpheus from his waters (*undis*).
- 600   **rauco . . . ore raucus** is a descriptive epithet for the sound of  
strong currents and bodies of water (*OLD* 2b). It emphasizes  
the change in the water, which has become dangerous, virile,  
and powerful—a type of metamorphosis.

### *Metamorphoses* 10.270–94 Pygmalion

For this narrative, perhaps the most famous in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid drew upon an old story according to which a king of Cyprus attempted sexual intercourse with a statue. Ovid changes this perverted narrative considerably: first, the narrator is Orpheus, the legendary musician; second, the protagonist is an artist, not a king; third, although Pygmalion falls in love with the statue, his courtship is oddly comic rather than lewd (he brings, for instance, love-gifts to the statue, such as shells, flowers, and a pretty necklace and earrings (10.259–65); finally, the story is less about love and sex than a highly influential parable about the ambitions and heroism of the artist, who can achieve the impossible. Characteristically, however, the poet does not maintain a high note for long. With the following tale of Myrrha, great granddaughter of Pygmalion, he