## Terror and Sexual Assault: Ovid's Presence in Fiona Benson's Vertigo & Ghost

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Terror stalks the pages of Fiona Benson's acclaimed volume *Vertigo* & *Ghost* which exploded onto the literary scene in 2019, winning both the Forward and Roehampton prizes, and stunning reviewers and readers with its articulations of female petrification and anguish, much of which is situated in a world that is both classical and contemporary<sup>1</sup>. This recontextualisation of classical myth situates Benson's volume within a significant body of responses to Ovid by contemporary women writers<sup>2</sup>. Even since the publication of *Vertigo* & *Ghost* there have been

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<sup>1 —</sup> Benson (2019). All references will be to this edition.

<sup>2 —</sup> For some discussion of this phenomenon see Brown (2014) where she discusses the poetry of Maureen Almond, Josephine Balmer, Averill Curdy and Deryn Rees-Jones. See also Cox (2018) which offers analyses of poetry by Josephine Balmer, Averill Curdy, Alice Oswald, Clare Pollard and Jo Shapcott. See also Duffy (1999), which responds to classical myth, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with mordant humour. Earlier volumes which included women's responses to Ovid include Hofmann and Lasdun (1994), where Vicki Feaver, Eavan Boland, Jorie Graham and Alice Fulton feature, and Terry (2000) which includes contributions by Michèle Roberts, A.S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood and Marina Warner.

numerous important responses to Ovid: Nina Maclaughlin has published Wake, Siren: Ovid resung (2019)<sup>3</sup>, in which she retells tales from Ovid's Metamorphoses from a female perspective, Paisley Redkal explores conditions such as quadriplegia, cancer treatments and transitioning through the prism of Ovid's Metamorphoses<sup>4</sup>, and the Jermyn Street Theatre has created Fifteen Heroines – The Warl The Desert/ The Labyrinth for which fifteen female and non-binary writers updated the Heroides for the twenty-first century<sup>5</sup>. In addition Jhumpa Lahiri is planning a new translation of the Metamorphoses and has drawn upon Ovid to articulate her identity as a translator in Translating Myself and Others (2022)<sup>6</sup>, while Stephanie McCarter's new translation of the Metamorphoses (2022) is eagerly anticipated.

This flowering of interest amongst writers parallels increased interest in classical writers on university courses, and Ovid is amongst the most popular of these. Before we explore the Ovidian resonances within Vertigo & Ghost in depth I want to consider further the dark resonances that his poetry has recently acquired, in the hands of critics concerned by misogyny and violence in the contemporary world, and the ways in which such aggression has been legitimised and perpetuated by classical poetry. It is significant that increasing focus upon the violence and misogyny within Ovid's work is not only a facet of many of these new literary receptions, but is also featuring more heavily as factors for consideration within university programmes. Recognition of the brutality within the Metamorphoses, that has too often been relegated to little more than sinister undercurrents, recently led a group of undergraduates at Columbia to request that inclusion of the Metamorphoses on the curriculum should be accompanied by a trigger warning. In an important article in the New York Times entitled 'Reading Ovid in the Age of #MeToo' Katy Waldman explored the implications of this demand that was expressed by an opinion piece in a student newspaper:

The opinion piece sparked a predictable imbroglio. Less sophisticated critics decried Columbia's "self-centred Care Bears"; sharper observers objected to how the trigger-warning conversation disguised the larger preoccupations of the text, veiling ethical questions of force and consent





<sup>3 —</sup> Nina Maclaughlin (2019).

<sup>4 —</sup> Redkal (2019).

<sup>5 —</sup> Jermyn Street Theatre (2020). Contributors in order of publication: Lettie Precious, Charlotte Jones, Sabrina Mahfouz, Abi Zakarian, Hannah Khalil, April de Angelis, Stella Duffy, Isley Lynn, Chinonyerem Odimbs, Lorna French, Bryony Lavery, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Samantha Ellis, Natalie Haynes and Juliet Gilkes Romero.

<sup>6 —</sup> Lahiri (2022). See also Lahiri's moving essay about the project: https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/books/a39730549/jhumpa-lahiri-translating-myself-others/ Accessed May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022



in the language of personal harm. What was clear, even then, was that Ovid had the power to illuminate disturbing aspects of our contemporary culture. Students sensed something volatile and dangerous in the poem – something close to home<sup>7</sup>.

It is interesting that Elizabeth Gloyn's experience of exploring these 'volatile and dangerous' aspects of the Ovidian text was that the distance pertaining between Ovid's world and the contemporary world allowed male students to examine the depictions of violence and their implications without feeling targetted<sup>8</sup>. Alex Wardrop has also written about the dynamics of teaching so violent a text in a classroom, but in this instance highlighting the fact that the classroom is a space that does not feel safe for all within it<sup>9</sup>.

In her seminal essay 'Reading Ovid's Rapes', Amy Richlin points out how easy it has been to glide over much of the darkness in the violent narratives, distancing ourselves from it by focussing instead on the aesthetic qualities of the poetry:

But we must ask how we are to read texts, like those of Ovid, that take pleasure in violence – a question that challenges not only the canon of Western literature but all representations. If the pornographic is that which converts living beings into objects, such texts are certainly pornographic. Why is it a lady in the magician's box? Why do we watch a pretended evisceration <sup>10</sup>?





<sup>7 —</sup> Waldman (2018).

<sup>8 —</sup> Gloyn (2013) 'Focusing discussion so closely on the ancient text seemed to provide them with a safe space to consider the actions depicted there without feeling attacked or unable to participate' (680). See also Marturano (2020).

<sup>9 —</sup> Wardrop (2012) 'What Ovid's representation of the rape of Philomela gives me, along with the hurt, is a representation of the complexity of talking about what cannot be talked about, and of representing silence, and the complexity of finding ways to communicate, to teach, what cannot be spoken, and the shame displaced onto a survivor for a crime she did not commit [...] Teaching Philomela's and Procne's story becomes a way to illustrate how the 'topoi' – the scripts – of rape and sexual violence function in Augustan poetry, in terms of a dynamics between arma and amor and illustrative of anxieties over Romanitas and what constitutes a man, a vir, under Augustus. It also shows how rape is about silencing, isolation, disempowerment and shame. It shows me and the class that rape and sexual violence does something to tongues, to language, to meaning, as well as bodies. Teaching texts and images from antiquity that deal with rape and sexual violence demands a recognition of the vulnerability and violence of the classroom setting as well as of the course material. And that recognition is the first step in creating the space where silence, nefas, can be spoken' (20).

<sup>10 —</sup> Richlin (1992) 158. Though Richlin's is the best-known analysis of rape in Ovid, there were important earlier articles looking at this theme. See, especially, Curran (1978) who observes that: 'Although there are some fifty or so occurences of forcible rape, attempted rape, or sexual extortion hardly distinguishable from rape, one would scarcely guess the fact from reading most of the commentaries on the *Metamorphoses*, Ovidian scholarship in general, or the retellings of Ovid's stories in the mythological handbooks. Traditional scholarship, systematically ignoring this fact and refusing to take rape seriously, glosses over unpleasant reality and prefers euphemism to the word rape' (214). I am grateful to Elena Theodorakopoulos for directing my attention to this article.

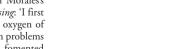
In recent years Ovid's reception has entered a new, chilling phase of reception, which does not focus upon identifying and naming the violence of the text, but rather seeks to find inspiration from it. In a book entitled Not All Dead White Men – Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age, which was published in 2019, the same year as Vertigo & Ghost, Donna Zuckerberg writes about the way that Ovid has been appropriated as a guide for internet forums populated by PUAs [pickup artists], who use his poems as reference guides for how to seduce or take women. This is largely due to the techniques he expounded in the Ars Amatoria, but the depictions of sexual violence in the Metamorphoses also play their part.

Zuckerberg probes the gap between the clever, decorous criticism being penned on Ovid and the sinister ways in which he is serving as a *praeceptor amoris* for PUAs in internet forums:

But the classicists who find the poem's premise so clever may not be aware of how seriously that premise is taken by the pickup artist (PUA), or "game", community. A pickup artist is an individual, usually a heterosexual man, who has intensively studied and attempted to master techniques to convince women to have sex with him; these techniques fall on a spectrum from flirting to manipulation to harassment to assault [...]. In an attempt to give themselves legitimacy and gravitas, some pickup artists look back to famous seducers from history and reposition them as the intellectual predecessors of the modern seduction community – and Ovid is one such venerated figure 11.

In the twenty-first century students of Ovid are not only found on Classics courses at university, but are also on internet sites, bolstering and encouraging each other to pursue women according to Ovidian precepts. This, Zuckerberg points out, places new and serious responsibilities upon classicists, whose job it is to articulate an understanding of Ovid's poetry: 'Treating the premise of this poem as fundamentally playful or subversive, as some scholars do, becomes irresponsible when there is a community using it today to normalize an attitude towards consent that would not be out of place in ancient Rome.' More chillingly she goes on to observe that 'whether or not we declare that Ovid cannot be serious, one must remember that the manosphere believes Ovid's ideas here are factually accurate – that women often *want* to be raped'<sup>12</sup>.





<sup>11 —</sup> Zuckerberg (2019), 90.

<sup>12 —</sup> Zuckerberg (2019), 95 and 133. See also the chilling inspiration for Helen Morales's excellent analysis of the relationship between Classics and misogynist violence, *Antigone Rising*: 'I first knew I would write this book when a young man whose name should not be given the oxygen of publicity killed our students. Did the availability of guns and the perpetrator's mental health problems contribute to the killings? Yes and yes. Undoubtedly. But the killer's views about women, fomented by seething resentments in online "pickup artist" sites and detailed in a one-hundred-and-forty-page manifesto that he emailed to people before the massacre, were what drove him to kill. These views go



It is against the backdrop of heightened awareness of Ovid's capacity to articulate and, disturbingly, to foster violence and abuse that Fiona Benson's *Vertigo & Ghost* appeared. The 'vertigo' of the title is heavily charged: it carries the lurch of fear within girls who are at the point of realising that they have lost control of a dangerous situation. It also evokes the precarity of teenage girls, aware of how potent their sexuality is, and the ways in which they peer over the abyss into a world of violence and danger. The opening poem to Part One, 'Ace of Bass', which appears before an extensive sequence of poems devoted to Zeus, evokes life in a girls' boarding school, full of hormones and curiosity and an urge to explore sex:

and sex wasn't here yet, but it was coming, and we were running towards it, its gorgeous euphoric mist; pushing into our own starved bodies at night for relief, like the after-calm might last, like there was a deep well of love on the other side (1).

The teenage girls throw themselves at the possibility of sex and experience, perhaps believing in the well of love, but heedless of the vertiginous terrors that wells hold, the possibility of falling irreparably into disaster. The poem's position in the volume ensures a connection to Ovid's ravished maidens who appear as ghosts and haunt their descendants in this contemporary world that is every bit as bewildering and alien and beautiful and dangerous as Ovid's wonderland.

In these poems Zeus appears in the forms of various nightmares – he is the embodiment of every man born to power, who knows that such power will protect him from the consequences of the ways in which he chooses to exploit the vulnerable and powerless. He appears as Brock Turner, given a token punishment for the sexual assault of a girl because of his prowess as a star athlete; he is Donald Trump in his golden tower; he is every pimp and paedophile and domestic abuser and murderer<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, one of the effects of seeing him inhabit these different guises in a condensed sequence of poems, is to be reminded of how, when abuse







back to antiquity, and some of the beliefs about women that we have inherited from ancient Greece and Rome form the imaginative scaffolding that underpins our beliefs about women today. To ignore that history blinds us to how entrenched some violent social structures really are. The first step toward understanding, and therefore doing something to prevent, misogyny is to recognize how and where it is culturally hardwired. The killings in Isla Vista were the work of one individual, "a quiet, troubled loner". But they were also the work of thousands of years of our telling the same stories about the relationships between men and women, desire and control'. Morales (2021), 4-5.

<sup>13 —</sup> In a personal e-mail Elena Theodorakopoulos points out that this could be reminiscent of the many shapes assumed by Jupiter in the tapestry of Arachne. Curran observes of this that: 'Rape in the form of bestiality occurs in Arachne's catalog of rapes in which gods become bull, eagle, swan, snake, ram, horse, dolphin, hawk and lion'. Curran, 1978, 219.

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is unchecked, it swells from fantasy to attack to murder. Some of the most terrifying images of his power come from the poems where he is under surveillance, under lock and key, and yet is still able to exult in his capacity to dominate and to continue infiltrating his victims' minds and lives. This is apparent in the very first poem entitled [Zeus] in which Zeus is visited in prison by a victim, whose body registers harm simply by virtue of being in his presence. 'bullet-proof glass/ and a speaker-phone between us/ and still I wasn't safe', observes his victim bleakly. When she tries to record their conversation on a Dictaphone, the recording fails, leaving nothing to incriminate Zeus. There is nothing but her own voice 'vulcanised and screaming/ you won't get away with this' (5). The adjective 'vulcanised' cleverly depicts the vocal sounds being registered onto tape, while also charging the poem with the terror inspired by gods of the ancient world, such as Zeus and Vulcan. And, while not entirely unscathed, Zeus does get away with far more than he should do, because the judge is so impressed by his abilities as a swimmer. The poem [archives] draws explicitly upon the case of the Stanford University student and star swimmer, Brock Turner, who, in 2015, was arrested for sexually assaulting Chanel Miller and who made international headlines in 2016 because of the leniency of the sentence he was awarded, after he was found guilty of sexual assault and spent only three months in jail.

In a later poem [surveillance: track and field] Zeus appears as a sports coach, promising his girls success if they will only allow him to 'groom' them 'I WILL MAKE YOU AS FAST/ AS SHOCK LIGHTNING' (7), he declares. A reader of Ovid might recall the swiftness of Daphne's flight as, charged with fear, she ran faster and faster in order to escape Apollo. The simile of lightning recalls the inexorable power of the gods of the ancient world and the helplessness of those they chose as victims. By figuring Zeus as a sports coach, driving his girls to success with words such as 'groom' which are chilled with menace, Benson demands that we see the horror and the abuse in myths that have been sanitised and aestheticized for centuries, as Helen Morales observes:

Ancient myth dramatizes sexual assault again and again. These myths have become a valued part of our culture. Go into any major art museum and you will see Daphne metamorphosing into a tree alongside works such as *The Rape of Europa, The Rape of the Sabine Women, The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus, The Rape of Philomela, The Rape of Proserpina* – the rape of Lucretia, Leda, Polyxena, Cassandra, Deianeira... There are more paintings displayed in art museums in Europe and North America







that feature a mythological rape scene than there are paintings displayed by female artists of color<sup>14</sup>.

This cognitive dissonance, in a world which overtly condemns sexual assault and rape and covertly tolerates it (and indeed over the centuries of Ovidian reception has largely failed to recognise its power to inflict lasting pain and trauma) is the very space in which Benson situates her response to Ovid. One indicator of quite how contemporary her receptions are is that they acknowledge the damage inflicted by domestic abuse. In [personal: speedo] Zeus still appears in the guise of an athletic god, whose partner inhabits a tiny range of behaviours because she lives constantly poised for the next attack. Benson's imagery as his partner notices how he 'bolts upright' and listens 'for the electricity/ crackling across his skin' (10) nods to the alignment of ancient gods with natural weather phenomena, but also depicts with distressing accuracy the mind-set of somebody so used to domestic abuse that her ear is attuned to the slightest change in tone, her eye to the smallest tension of a muscle. Living in this constant state of tension charges the atmosphere, so that storms appear always ready to erupt, a phenomenon that Benson conveys in her imagery of Zeus. Zeus's partner looks yearningly at a cluster of passing girls, the modern version of classical nymphs, and 'long[s] to escape/ in that conspiracy of women' (11).

In a brutal poem entitled {Zeus: anatomical dolls} Benson portrays the dolls used to help children articulate their experiences of sexual assault without actually having to verbalise what was done to them. The poem reminds us of just how young the victims of sexual assault at the hands of the powerful are, both in the classical and the contemporary world. But, in a disturbing distortion of the Russian doll image, behind the anatomical dolls lie a Punch and Judy doll, and Judy is 'trembling and bruised,' her bloody nose' (11). Her injuries dispel any notion that the assaults could be seen as acts of love. They also throw light on a disturbing tendency to sanitise and laugh at domestic violence through the staging of Punch and Judy shows. The poem closes with a howl of rage, an urge to pick up Judy's pots:

and wooden spoons to out you Zeus, to drive you through the streets with songs that find a name for you at last, you filthy pimp, you animal, you rapist (11).

The image of Zeus being pursued and vilified by angry women is reminiscent of the Ciconean women driven by fury to tear Orpheus to





<sup>14 —</sup> Morales (2021), 66.

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pieces, an episode recounted by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* X. However, the image is also charged by the fury of Zeus being misrepresented for centuries, by a failure to name him for what he is – a filthy pimp and a rapist. Ovid's *carmen perpetuum* has had to extend to the twenty-first century before the Emperor's clothes have been torn from him.

Zeus's abuse is also chillingly evoked in poems where he is able to don an urbane and charming guise, so that nobody thinks to protect his partner, his victim, as she tries to escape. He follows her to the station with a lavish bouquet – 'everyone around/ smiled at his courtly manners./ No police on the concourse' (12) [personal]. Eventually she does manage to slip his grasp and flee, but knows that any safety she finds is provisional and fragile. [transformation: Nemesis] shows us a dizzying set of metamorphoses, which look back to Ovid through the intervening contributions of writers such as Rudyard Kipling, whose Rikki-Tikki-Tavi makes an appearance and whose appearance here points to Benson's literary ancestry. No matter how hard the victim tries, she is unable to out-flee her pursuer:

I became a snake and hid on my belly he became a mongoose Rikki-Tikki-Tavi – (13).

The patterning of the poem on the page mimics the dance enacted by victim and pursuer – for every step she takes, he matches her and catches her at the end of the stanza. The poem closes with the image of hunter and prey falling 'screaming through the night' (13).

[Zeus: Danaë] wittily presents Zeus surveying Donald Trump, as he wallows in his excess of gold and narcissism. Zeus adopts the impoverished cadences of Trump's speech: 'I LOVE THIS PRESIDENT. HIS SHINY GOLD TOWER' (14), he declares. But as his sadism unfolds further, he highlights the cruel collusion of a world that not only fails to notice unkindness abuse, but indeed relishes it, if it happens within the world of the rich and the powerful: 'IT'S FUN/ TO WATCH HIS WIFE/ HER SMILE FALLING/ AS HE LOOKS AWAY' (14). The falling shower of gold of the original myth becomes the obscene wealth of the Trump family, their fragile smiles falling in the knowledge of the heavy price that will be exacted for which there will be no sympathy. Zeus points out that, in this instance, any thought of unhappiness is a source of entertainment for spectating humans.

The metamorphosis into gold is a theme that resurfaces in a number of poems. In [forensics] Zeus's DNA appears in imagery that borrows







from the divine constellations of the ancient world, but also evokes the flickering activity of cell-life under the modern microscope:

Zeus's cells under the lens comet-tailed and coursing gold. Corrosive. Legion (21).

The verb 'coursing' turns Zeus's matter into something fluid, perhaps looking back to all the moments in the *Metamorphoses* when humans become rivers, but the conflation of stars and fluids also looks back to the more chilling poem [Zeus] where the god is exulting in his murderous pursuits. As in [Zeus: Danae], in which Zeus assumed Trump's persona, this poem also is written in the upper-case letters that both denote the language of ruthless power, but also recall Trump's propensity to use upper-case letters in his tweets as if he were shouting <sup>15</sup>:

I LIKE THAT MOMENT
OF EXTINGUISHMENT
[...]
I PEER INTO ITS DEEP WELL
ITS TINY TRAIL OF STARS (19).

The poem powerfully conveys the resonances of the volume's title, Vertigo & Ghost. The ghost, the residue of the mortal, is only to be found in the 'tiny trail of stars', which debunks any idea of reward within the Metamorphoses, when its ruined girls become constellations as compensation for their destroyed lives. Zeus peers into the abyss of human disappearance, marvelling at the absence which acts upon him as headily and as addictively as any drug. The image of the well looks ahead to one of the most chilling poems of the book – a calligram entitled [transformation: Cyane]. Cyane appears in *Metamorphosis* V, when she attempts to rescue Proserpina, who is being abducted by Dis. She is a river nymph and Dis drives his chariot through her very being. Benson portrays the violation by creating a calligram that is a circle with a hole at its centre. The image of the poem draws the reader's eye, vertiginously, to its heart – it appears as a well, or the pupil of an eye, a bullet hole, or the plug hole that sucks down hope and the rags of dreams. These connotations of devastation and despair are heightened by the words used to form the calligram, words that speak of the girls' battered bodies that tell the stories of the





<sup>15 —</sup> I owe this point to Elena Theodorakopoulos.

assault that they have been forced to endure 'blue bruise of the aftermath, blue/ bruise of harm' (24)<sup>16</sup>. The poem voices the damage done not just to Cyane and to 'Persephone in hell or the war-stolen girl', but metamorphoses into a well that receives all the lost, suicidal girls. Where once Cyane became water, so now her poem is transformed into the well that is the home of violated girls. The poem is the very opposite of a poem from part 2 in which Benson wishes to harness the power of literature to reverse time and unravel death [itself an urge that chimes with Ovid's assertion at the end of the *Metamorphoses* that his literary works will enable him to defy death and live among the stars], so that her schoolfriend would still be alive. The line 'this poem is the hospital in which you are healed' 17 serves as a prayer which is the polar opposite of [transformation: Cyane], a poem that enacts the draining of life.

The bottomless well of [transformation: Cyane] forms the same hellish landscape as the 'oubliette' which shelters all of the damaged, dangerous facets of Zeus's psyche. In [Zeus: oubliette] Benson emphasises the absence of stars, imagery that has been associated with hell since Dante's emergence from the *Inferno* was symbolised by a vision of stars:

at the bottom of a starless lake or this long hole in the under-web where we shove our worst psychoses our soiled, repugnant images [33].

The conflation of lost girls, fathomless water and our worst fears haunt a later poem from part 2 entitled 'Daughter Drowning', in which a mother evokes the frozen terror of seeing her child in mortal danger and being unable to act quickly enough to save her. The 'ghost' of the title *Vertigo & Ghost* carries as many resonances as the word vertigo does; one of these is the intratextual mirrorings and hauntings that pervade the volume. Here the small girl is her own self, but her vulnerability is charged with the tragic losses of the girls from the *Metamorphoses*, whose stories are revisited in part 1. The anguish and spiralling guilt of Ceres, wandering the earth in search of her lost daughter, could so easily have been the story of the mother in 'Daughter Drowning' who watches her girl:





<sup>16 —</sup> In a personal e-mail Elena Theodorakopoulos points out that the blue of the bruise matches the dark-blue contained in Cyane's name.

<sup>17 —</sup> It is also a line that speaks movingly of the therapeutic power of literature.



'as if she had dropped through unfathomed water, and her mother were a long way off, and hadn't even seen her start to slip' (69).

In an earlier poem [transformation: Io] the metamorphosis into water is a response to grief. Benson turns to an episode from *Metamorphoses* 1, where the young girl, Io, is transformed into a cow. Her father is griefstruck at her loss, and the only way in which she can alert him to her presence in the form of a cow, is to scratch out the tale of what happened to her on the ground. By opening the poem with the acronym CID, Benson ensures that she imprints the myth upon the contemporary world and that her readers' vision of Io is that of a staggering, broken being, who is being cared for in a sanatorium<sup>18</sup>. The depiction of her 'head swinging like a lantern' lurches sickeningly into the imagination. In the sanatorium she is unable to form words: 'mah she says mah' (16). The patient's inarticulate grunting in hospital offers a contemporary twist to the depiction of Ovid's desperate girl, terrified by her metamorphosis, and burning to tell her story to her father: conatoque queri mugitus edidit ore/ pertimuitque sonos propriague exterrita voce est. [When she tried to complain, a lowing sound issued from her lips, and she was afraid, terrified by her own voice]<sup>19</sup> (Met. 1. 637-638). And where once she rejected food from her father because she needed to embrace him instead (decerptas senior porrexerat Inachus herbas/ illa manus lambit patriisque dat oscula palmis [The aged Inachus plucked some, and held them out to her. She liked his hand, kissing her father's palms (Met. 1. 645-646), in Benson's version Io can no longer eat since the proteins unravelling her brain because of CJD leave her unable to control her motor functions:

at feeding time she turns from the spoon tonguing it of her mouth (16).

The typography reflects Io's awkward, jerky movements, while the term 'feeding time' rather than a specific meal reinforces the presentation of somebody who is no longer fully human, whose self is gradually becoming subsumed into the disease transmitted by cattle. Benson shows us a patient whose 'spongiform' brain (16) goads her with hallucinations of rapacious gods. The use of the word 'goad' is a clever one, for where one might have expected a heifer to be goaded and stung by flies, here Io is





<sup>18 —</sup> There are clear parallels here with Jo Shapcott's 'Mad Cow' sequence, which is also charged with Ovidian resonances. For a discussion of this see Cox (2018), 144-148.

<sup>19 —</sup> All translations of Ovid are taken from Ovid (1995).

tormented by hallucinations of divine sexual assault, hallucinations which drive her to a frenzy in which she screams and smashes her head against the wall (16). As the doctors rush to sedate her: 'her father weeps/ is a river of grief' (17). The father's metamorphosis into a river of grief looks back to the original myth in which Io's father was the river Inachus, on whose banks Io used to play. Benson closes the poem by reminding us of the emotions that charge both the original myth and her re-telling – in both versions the anguish tearing apart the protagonists, the terminally ill patient and her parents, or the heifer and her river father, stems quite simply from love. The madness and the desperation are fuelled by the inability to save, and to protect, those who are dearest to us, and our inability to stop trying. As Benson marvels at the power of this, she reminds us that the story of Io is one of the myths in which Ovid allows us to see the raw helplessness of parental grief: 'see how tenacious they are/ how truly humans love' (17).

Parental anguish and disfigurement also charge Benson's response to the myth of Callisto. [transformation: Callisto] opens with a traumatic birth necessitating brutal surgery followed by the removal of the child by social workers: 'Split urethra, fistula, stitched rectum./ Infant removed for its own protection' (35), a clear remodelling of the viciousness of the original myth in which Callisto loses her baby for many years and finds her beauty destroyed by Juno, who turns her into a bear. Benson's Callisto spirals into a self-loathing cycle of over-eating and cutting herself, eventually leaving home and living on the streets:

Her mother searches in the dark – every doorway and underpass [...]. *Callisto I love you come home* (35).

The terror endured by Ovid's Callisto<sup>20</sup> who is unable to hide away from her own fear haunts the experiences of Benson's Callisto, who is driven out of town:





<sup>20 —</sup> Neve preces animos et verba precantia flectant,/ posse loqui eripitur: vox iracunda minaxquel plenaque terroris rauco de gutture fertur;/ mens antiqua tamen facta quoque mansit in ursa,/ adsiduosque suos gemitu testate dolores/ qualescumque manus ad caelum et sidera tollit/ ingratumque Iovem, nequeat cum dicere, sentit./ a! quotiens, sola non ausa quiescere silva,/ ante domum quondamque suis erravit in agris!/ a! quotiens per saxa canum latrantibus acta est/ venatrixque metu venantum territa fugit!/ saepe feris latuit visis, oblita quid esset,/ ursaque conspectus in montibus horruit ursos/ pertimuitque lupos, quamvis pater esset in illis' Met II (482-495). [Then, lest her prayers and imploring words should wake sympathy, the goddess deprived her of the power of speech. A harsh growling issued from her throat, angry and quarrelsome, frightening to hear; she had become a bear, but even so her mind remained unchanged, and she declared her grief with continual lamentations, raising to the stars in heaven such hands as she had, and feeling Jove's ingratitude, though she could not speak of it. Many a time, not daring to rest in the lonely wood, she wandered before the home and in the fields that were once hers. Many a time, barking hounds drove her through rocky places, and the huntress fled, terrified of the hunters. Often she forgot what she was, and hid when she saw wild beasts: though a bear herself, she



Cornered by a ranger one morning Callisto rakes at the air with her paws, is chased out of town with tranq guns and flares, their falling coals like meteors (35).

Unlike Ovid's Callisto her twenty-first century avatar is able to find some measure of tranquillity and harmony in the natural world<sup>21</sup>, but she can never settle into absolute peace because her dreams are haunted by the child she has lost, are filled by images of 'his small blind face searching for her voice' (36). In a poignant depiction of the chains of loss Benson points out that: 'Her voice when she calls for him/ is the voice of her own mother, weeping'. The poem closes angrily, with the injunction: 'Go ahead, Zeus. Constellate this!' (36). The closing line reminds us of quite how much is lost in the typical Ovidian compensation of turning wronged victims into stars - however beautiful the constellations, they can never encompass or convey the depth and power of the human grief fuelling the stories. Benson returns to these inadequately impassive constellations in part 2 of the volume. In 'Heavenly Bodies' she observes that 'Ursa Major constellates a stretcher/ and Ursa Minor is the stretcher of a child' (80)<sup>22</sup>. Despite the deficiencies of stars as compensation for horror, Benson finds herself longing to believe in the Ovidian compendium of transformation and endurance, when she looks at images of horror coming out of Syria, to hope that there may be some beautiful metamorphosis to set against the brutality and violence that have cut short childrens' lives:

a small boy cradling his baby sister who is dead, I want more than anything to trust that a child's soul flies up on a swan's white back, that there's room for them all in the deep expanding dark that they'll take their stations, their heavenly bodies burning (80).

Benson overlays classical myth on other occasions with stories of horrific abuse that have hit the headlines. In a short sequence [not Zeus: Medusa] she explores institutional or cultural abuse. In these poems Medusa hardens the faces of the women condemned to lose their children, while slaving in the Magdalene laundries:







shuddered at the sight of bears in their mountain haunts, and feared wolves too, though her father was one of them].

<sup>21 —</sup> Her experiences – from the pursuit by officials with weapons to appreciation of the simplicity and beauty of the natural world – mirror those of the narrator in Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes*, which is a story of a young woman's transformation into a sow, frequently seen as Ovidian.

<sup>22 —</sup> In the *Metamorphoses* Callisto and her son are transformed into Ursa Major and Ursa Minor.

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They will wash soiled sheets till their chapped hands bleed in the lye till their backs are deformed till their hair turns white (27).

Medusa has, in recent years, been brought to life by a number of different writers, such as Carol Ann Duffy in *The World's Wife* (1999) who have tended to explore the roots of her monstrosity, to understand why she became so corroded by rage and bitterness. Situating Medusa in a Magdalene laundry enriches this rehabilitiation, for how could you respond to such horror and injustice except with a face so distorted by grief that it would freeze and petrify the whole world?

Medusa's next appearance is as a young girl, being put to death by her male relatives, presumably for transgressing rules governing women and their sexuality. Chillingly the snakes of the classical myth are transformed into the burning tendrils of hair, as she is soaked in petrol and set alight: 'Her screaming flesh/ Her hair's bright snakes' (28). And her mother's love remains strong enough to drive her into the fire to try to save her daughter: 'What mother/ could walk/ into that inferno now./ Still I try' (29).

In a particularly distressing expansion of two slight lines in the *Metamorphoses* (X, 155 and XI 156), Benson maps the abduction of Ganymede onto the horror of the Moors murders. [translation from the annals: Ganymede] opens with the heart-rending image of a mother unable to stop pacing over the moors, looking for her lost boy:

I was sent for the interrogation. Ganymede's mother was old now and dying, still trundling the moors looking for remains. He was her darling boy, her joyful one, and she appealed often on television. Everyone who saw her wept (40).

The poem is haunted by the bright, sweet face of Keith Bennett gazing from our television screens periodically as news reporters discussed Ian Brady's refusal to reveal to his grieving mother the location of his body on the moors. Her grief expands to fill the entire, vast landscape of the moors in a heart-breaking parallel to the way in which the terror of the pursued, abducted child alerts them to danger lurking everywhere.

Such omnipresent fear is portrayed in [transformation: Daphne]. Benson's version draws from a number of Ovidian myths – most obviously the myth of Daphne and Apollo in *Met* 1, but also alludes heavily to the myth of Actaeon, recounted in *Met* III, especially through its evocation of the hunting dogs, which looks back to the extended depiction of the way in which Actaeon's hounds pursued and killed him. At the start of the poem we are told that 'Zeus's son courses her like a hound' (31), which





recalls Ovid's evocation of Apollo as a dog in *Met* 1.533. As the poem progresses, however, the dogs multiply, when Benson recalls how the hounds displayed their pent-up savagery and energy at the races:

'the dogs streaked out, hurtling after a dummy on castors, which rattled over the sleepers of a long, greased rail. The pack was an unreadable blur (31).

The imagery perhaps also glances back to the *Ars Amatoria* and its guidance about where to take girls out; in book 1 Ovid praises the races as a spectacle which lends itself to the easy seduction of women. The 'unreadable blur' of the pack depicts the sheer speed and uniformity of their racing, but also wittily elides the detail of the Ovidian version, which uses the episode as the pretext for establishing a catalogue of names of the dogs. But the image of being hunted by hounds intensifies the terror of being unable to outrun your pursuer, of being able to find some corner in which you might feel safe: 'She's at the edge of her wits,/ retching with fear and he is *everywhere*' (31), we are told. Daphne's terror has filled the entire landscape. Benson maintains the imagery of hunting until the end of the poem, where we discover that Zeus has played his part here also, has passed the legacy of toxic masculinity down to his son, and aided and abetted a rape and murder:

Disconcerted, Apollo looks up from the field There's Zeus in the dark holding the lamp keeping it steady for the rape and the kill (32).

At first the ending of the poem seems even bleaker than the myths of the *Metamorphoses* until we recognise that Benson is highlighting the dark violence and savagery and breathless, blinding terror that have also been a part of a poem, so many of whose victims were just children.

Again and again Benson shows us a Zeus who's been institutionalised, who is locked away either in prison or in a psychiatric unit. And yet this is of scant relief to his victims, because he is able to 'pass through the vaults /and walls of this prison/ as if they were air' (32). His victims aren't safe because he inhabits their memories and fears, he has stolen into their minds and will always haunt them. He also assumes the guises of all the rapists, abductors and murderers who appear on our television screens and people our nightmares. We have seen how Benson gives new sobriquets to Zeus, chosen by his victims who 'drive you through the streets, with songs,/ that find a name for you at last,/ you filthy pimp, you animal, you rapist' (11). Morales reminds us of how difficult it is to shift centuries of viewing ancient literature as inhabiting a different sphere from the violence and abuse that poisons the contemporary world, but has 'worried





about whether it is a crass move to make: too academic, too contrived. I have decided to risk that criticism because turning to the ancient material helps us, I think, to see how long-standing and, therefore, how hard to banish certain cultural narratives are'<sup>23</sup>. As Benson challenges these cultural narratives, in her hands the *carmen perpetuum* of the *Metamorphoses* is wrested from centuries of receptions that have blunted the raw sickening power of its abuses and aggressions by focussing on aestheticization. The manipulative, scheming king of the gods segues easily into the contemporary psychopath, who continues to fantasise about murder and rape even within his prison. In [surveillance] Zeus is handed his medication by a nurse who observes:

These are for you, Zeus [...]. What nymphs go dancing in your brain, what tortures? (36).

One answer, of course, is that the screenplay of Zeus's fantasies is the tapestry of the *Metamorphoses*. By exposing the brute fear, the manipulations, and the callousness that subtend the poem's violence, Benson foregrounds the experiences of Ovid's victims and forces us to confront their stories in more contemporary settings. In her hands Ovid's *carmen perpetuum* metamorphoses into one long scream of pain and terror.

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