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Barbara W. Boyd

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Still, She Persisted: Materiality and Memory in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*¹

Barbara W. Boyd

I. Materiality and Memory: An Introduction

- 1 At the conclusion of his discussion of the Apollo and Daphne episode in *Metamorphoses* book 1, John Miller leaves his reader with an open question²:

The tree nods (567 *adnuit*), as if acknowledging the presence of the patron divinity in the manner of the laurel that shakes at the epiphany opening Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo*. ... As if. "The laurel ... *seemed* to move its crown like a head" (566-67 *laurea ... utque caput uisa est agitasse cacumen*). The tree may in fact be sentient no more, the nod rather an illusory gesture of acquiescence Ovid leaves us suspended between two possibilities. The conscious remnant of Daphne may have welcomed the Apolline and Augustan *honores*, but the girl may have resisted the god's (self-) honorific appropriation too.

- 2 The absence of closure highlighted here is a familiar starting point for discussions of Ovid's relentless and brilliant ambiguity, extending from the intertextual and generic complexity to which Miller alludes to its deeper cultural and political implications, including, but not limited to, a potential critique of the gods. In this essay, I want to focus on one particular aspect of this potential, approaching it from a perspective that differs somewhat from the usual approaches to the story, again taking a cue from Miller. In the last sentence quoted above, we are asked to think about Daphne as two different things: as a "conscious remnant of Daphne," and as a "girl." We might call this a temporal distinction between Daphne's *beforeness*, as a subject, and her *afterness*, as an object; as Miller also notes, "The tree may in fact be sentient no more" The fundamental idea underlying this distinction is that Daphne's metamorphosis transforms her from a subject with agency to an object without it; thus, even if some conscious remnant of the individual survives, it has no way to communicate, and so has become powerless.

- 3 The connection between change and power is a central theme of contemporary Ovidian criticism.³ The tendency of critics writing on this connection is to posit the two as mutually exclusive—one cancels out the other. Such criticism is of course alert to Ovid's inclination to play with the tension between the two sides and to negotiate his own authority as he does so; but when we look at Ovid and his poetry under Augustus, it is difficult not to conclude that, at least in physical terms, Augustus had the ultimate triumph—the disempowered poet, literally marginalized, struggled vainly to the end of his days to reclaim his identity as a Roman. From exile, Ovid did in fact continue to speak, but it is unclear whether anyone in power was listening. The movement from agency to powerless objectivity in Ovid's exile poetry is clear.
- 4 There are other ways to communicate, however; indeed, the very survival in physical form of the poems that Ovid wrote in exile speaks to the power of objects, silent objects, to sustain ideas and, at least virtually, the persons who articulate them. But without speech, how can such communication function? Moving away from the subject/object binary, I propose two other ways of thinking about the manner in which an object or an event can continue to “speak”: materiality and memory. The more familiar of the two, memory, has a long history as the subject of ancient ideas about the organization of thought and the preservation of identity;⁴ the development of these ideas over millennia allows us to recognize memory as something that helps us to define our existence as participating in a network of shared language and experience. Memory connects the past to the present, and the present to the future; memories of things shared among groups of people connect children and parents, partners and friends, teachers and students over time. We all participate in the creation and maintenance of group memories, and we find comfort and confirmation in the memorialization of those group memories through monuments of various sorts. The very nature of such memorials or monuments marks them as signs of permanence in an otherwise constantly changing landscape, and through their presence they function as what Pierre Nora has called “sites of memory,” *lieux de mémoire*.⁵
- 5 But just as memory can be lost or partial, the objects that constitute physical reminders of them are prone to loss or fragmentation; students of the ancient Roman world need look no further than the Roman Forum to understand the coexistence of absence with presence. And this coexistence leads us inevitably back to the observance of a lack of closure with which I began this discussion, the durability of which is captured by Nora: “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.”⁶ Examples of contested definition surround us in the present, when within the last year—even the last few months—the fragmented memory embedded in Confederate war memorials meant to memorialize the South's “lost cause,” or in statues of Christopher Columbus erected to celebrate his “discovery” of the new world, or in the statues of King Leopold II meant to glorify Belgium's colonial activities in Africa, to name just a handful of examples, have all provoked conflict in a relentless, and inevitably failing, struggle to achieve closure. Even those monuments that are currently less controversial, like the memorial to the 9/11 attacks in New York City, or the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, were not always so; they stand as reminders of a contested history whose impact remains the focus of lively debate.

- 6 To describe the relentless insistence of absence on presence, Nora uses a remarkable analogy: places of memory are “moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.”⁷ His image of shells on the shore, solid if fragile tokens of the past, is itself indicative of the way in which we attempt to sustain memory. We often use things as a way to preserve memories—pictures, gifts, souvenirs—and if we lose one, we work hard to restore or replace it, whatever it is. This physical or material quality of the tokens we use to preserve memory takes me to the second aspect of “speaking” objects I want to examine, materiality. I allude to a recent trend in literary scholarship that looks at objects depicted in texts as material in concept, i.e., as material objects, crafted by human or divine hands, that can interact and communicate with humans, and vice versa, in meaningful ways. These things can at least sometimes transcend the usual boundaries we place in our thinking between animate and inanimate, between subject and object, between active and passive; after all, they do have power—the power to make us think, or feel, or do certain things, like those shells that Nora describes. To borrow the language of thing theorists, they should be seen as “agent objects,” or as “actants.”⁸ This approach has had a significant effect in some areas of ancient literary studies, especially in recent Homeric studies, by approaching the things of Homeric poetry as significant participants in the poems in which they appear: the interaction between Achilles and his shield, and between Penelope and her loom, are only the most obvious examples of the ways in which humans not only use but come to identify themselves with significant objects that work, in turn, to define their owners.⁹
- 7 In order to bring materiality and memory into conversation with each other, I return now to those tokens of memory that embody communal or shared memories, like monuments or memorials. Normally, we consider all these things to be voiceless and passive objects: they stand in one place, often in order to mark a place, never changing or moving—unable to do so, in fact—and noiseless. Yet if we think of them as things, or as “agent objects,” they really do in some sense possess the power to “speak” to us, in spite of their voicelessness, and to create a locus, both physical and psychological, within which a connection to some past event or person can be revived and experienced; indeed, one could argue that the best memorials are the ones that use no words at all, but that ask their viewers to provide meaning and interpretation. Even their immovability can be seen as a manifestation of power: we are compelled to go to them; they do not come to us. Much if not all of their power lies in a combination of two inseparable characteristics: their materiality and their vividness. On the latter, the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* is an apt resource, since he devotes a substantial portion of his discussion of rhetorical techniques to memory. He says that images, *imagines*, are a crucial part of memory; and in discussing their value for supporting memory, he says that the best *imagines* are those that are “doing something” (*aliquid agentes*, 3.22) or, as Frances Yates translates this, “active”;¹⁰ in other words, vividness is the crucial component in making something memorable. Seen from this perspective, objects that embody memory are thus not really passive at all, in spite of their lack of physical movement and voice; rather, by exerting emotional and sensory influence on those who see and experience them, they have the ability to prompt a response. In his discussion of Homeric materiality, Jonas Grethlein emphasizes the way in which the Homeric poems use objects to introduce “the presence of the past” into the poem;¹¹ and

it is that presence that sustains a continuing dialogue among the members of its successive audiences about meaning and interpretation.

- 8 Returning to Ovid, I propose to look at how this complex of ideas involving memory and materiality can offer a new way to view metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*. Through the embodiment of power in transformed things, Ovid uses several of the episodes in this poem about constant change to push back against mutability and loss of speech, and to assert a different kind of permanence. Much of Ovid's discourse about memory and materiality is linked through the trope of aetiology, i.e., the explanation of how something that exists now came into existence at a specific point in the past. In its emphasis on how things in the past shape things in the present, aetiology is by its nature a form of mnemonic device: even as its explanatory nature highlights the enormous gulf separating past and present, its logic both depends on and ensures temporal and cultural continuity.¹² The aetiological narrative thus establishes its subject as a sign of permanence in an otherwise constantly changing landscape.¹³

II. Deucalion and Pyrrha

- 9 I turn first to an extreme embodiment of permanence, stone, appearing in a myth that establishes the very basis of creation in found objects. The first 300 lines of the *Metamorphoses* trace an arc from the beginnings of creation to almost complete destruction, and underscore the balance of power that defines the relationship between gods and mortals: with his description of the dwelling of Jupiter as the "Palatine of high heaven" (*magni ... Palatia caeli*, *Met.* 1.176) and with the comparison of Lycaon's crime to the assassination of Julius Caesar (1.200-201), Ovid makes it almost impossible for his reader not to think in terms of the contemporary relevance of long-past events.¹⁴ He then introduces the almost inexplicable survival of Deucalion and Pyrrha, who effectively make the remainder of the poem possible through their recreation of the human race, following the advice of Themis to throw behind themselves the bones of their great mother (*ossa ... magnae ... parentis*, *Met.* 1.383). The results of this act of creation capture the fluidity of meaning between past and present, and between object and subject: after describing how the stones thrown by the couple gradually soften and grow into humans, Ovid concludes with a couplet that connects the mythical past with his own present, and that thereby asserts a new kind of permanence (*Met.* 1.414-15):

inde genus durum sumus experiensque laborum
et documenta damus qua simus origine nati.
Hence, we are a hard breed, experienced in trials,
and we give evidence of the source from which we were born.

- 10 This conclusion generally draws comment for two reasons: 1) its allusion to the Greek etymology behind the myth, in the supposed connection between the words *λᾶας* ("stone") and *λαός* ("people"), found first in Hesiod (fr. 234 M-W) and Pindar (*Ol.* 9.45); and Ovid's echoing of two important models, Lucretius 5.925-26 ("but that human breed in the fields was much harder, as was appropriate, because hard earth had created it," *at genus humanum multo fuit illud in aruis / durius, ut decuit, tellus quod dura creasset*) and Virgil *Geo.* 1.61-63 ("the time when first Deucalion threw stones into the empty earth, whence were born humans, a hard breed," *quo tempore primum / Deucalion uacuum lapides iactauit in orbem, / unde homines nati, durum genus*).¹⁵ But surprisingly unnoticed is the appearance, here for the first time in the poem, of Ovid's use of the first-person plural

(*sumus, damus, simus ... nati*) not once but three times in close succession to express a relationship between *then*—when the stones first became humans—and *now*—when we, that is, Ovid and his readers, enter the poem.¹⁶

- 11 The identification of “our” age with the Hesiodic iron age has long been recognized; in Ovid, however, the flood definitively undoes this identification (*Met.* 1.76-88):

Sanctius his animal mentisque capacius altae
 deerat adhuc et quod dominari in cetera posset.
 natus homo est, siue hunc diuino semine fecit
 ille opifex rerum, mundi melioris origo,
 siue recens tellus seductaque nuper ab alto 80
 aethere cognati retinebat semina caeli,
 quam satus Iapeto mixtam pluuiaribus undis
 finxit in effigiem moderantum cuncta deorum.
 pronaque cum spectent animalia cetera terram,
 os homini sublime dedit caelumque uidere 85
 iussit et erectos ad sidera tollere uultus.
 sic modo quae fuerat rudis et sine imagine tellus
 induit ignotas hominum conuersa figuras.

A creature holier than these and more capable of lofty thought, and of the type that could rule over other things, was still lacking. The human was born, whether that master artisan of things, the source of a better universe, made him from divine seed, or whether the new earth, recently separated from the aether above, retained the seeds of its cognate sky. The one born of Iapetus fashioned this earth, mixed with rain water, into a replica of the gods who control all; and whereas other living creatures face the ground, to the human he gave a face raised upward, and ordered him to see the heavens and to raise his face directly to the stars. And so, the earth, which had only recently been rough and shapeless, was transformed, and took on the unfamiliar forms of mortals.

- 12 Prior to the flood, in the first instance of human creation narrated by Ovid, the invention of humans is the work either of a divine being (*ille opifex rerum*, 79) or, more probably, of Prometheus, who is said to have combined earth with water to create the human race—people of clay, or terracotta.¹⁷ As a consequence of the subsequent flood, these clay people, frangible and brittle from the outset, are effectively returned to their discrete elements. When the other gods learn of Jupiter's plan for the flood, they express concern over the loss of their worshipers; he responds by promising them another very different race of humans (251-52): *rex superum trepidare uetat subolemque priori / dissimilem populo promittit origine mira* (“The king of the gods forbids [the other gods] to be afraid, and promises new offspring dissimilar from the earlier population and of a marvelous origin”). This dissimilar race is made, as we have seen, of stone. Alessandro Barchiesi comments on the curious analogy thus established with the art of sculpture, which was thought of in terms of ancient genealogy as an evolutionary progression from the more ancient and primitive terracotta sculpture to a newer and more modern mode, sculpture in marble.¹⁸ I propose that we also see it as staking out a place for material permanence for humans in the poem: the replacement of terracotta with marble is not only a marker of modernization and of a move away from simplicity, but also suggests a new durability. Ovid's “we” are people born from stone, and they, we, are resistant if not to eternity at least to the vagaries of human experience.

III. Niobe

- 13 These vagaries, and stone's resistance to them, are perhaps nowhere more evident than in Ovid's narrative about Niobe and her children (*Met.* 6.146-312). The story is familiar, even proverbial: announcing a foolhardy competition with Latona on the basis of comparative fertility, Niobe lives to see all fourteen of her children¹⁹ brought down in quick succession by the arrows of Apollo and Diana (although in Ovid's version, Diana remains in the background). In her grief, Niobe cries inconsolably, and without pause, until she is finally transformed into stone (6.301-12):

orba resedit
 exanimes inter natos natasque uirumque
 deriguitque malis. nullos mouet aura capillos,
 in uultu color est sine sanguine, lumina maestis
 stant immota genis; nihil est in imagine uiuum. 305
 ipsa quoque interius cum duro lingua palato
 congelat, et uenae desistunt posse moueri;
 nec flecti ceruix nec brachia reddere motus
 nec pes ire potest; intra quoque uiscera saxum est.
 flet tamen et ualidi circumdata turbine uenti 310
 in patriam rapta est; ibi fixa cacumine montis
 liquitur, et lacrimas etiamnum marmora manant.

Bereft, she sat among her lifeless sons and daughters and spouse, and grew stiff with troubles. The breeze moves not a single hair, the color in her face is bloodless, and her eyes stand motionless above her mournful cheeks: nothing in her appearance is alive. And her tongue itself grows chill within, together with her hard palate, and her veins stop being able to move; neither is her neck able to be bent, nor her arms to create movements, nor her foot to go; and the innermost organs, too are stone. Nonetheless, she weeps, and enclosed in a whirl of powerful wind she is carried back to her homeland; there, fixed on the peak of a mountain, she melts, and even now the marble drips tears.

- 14 A veritable oxymoron, she is stripped of the ability to move, and at least in appearance seems no longer to be alive (*nihil est in imagine uiuum*, 305)—but her lack of mobility does not prevent her from continuing to cry.
- 15 Ovid's version of the Niobe story emphasizes her insolence—ignoring the lesson to be learned from Arachne's metamorphosis, says Ovid, Niobe refused “to yield to the gods and use lesser words” (*nec tamen admonita est poena popularis Arachnes / cedere caelitibus uerbisque minoribus uti*, 151-52). The Ovidian characterization of Niobe is not attractive; nonetheless, the death of her innocent children is truly pitiable—and Ovid emphasizes their innocence not only by depicting them at youthful pursuits but by underscoring their own instinct to save or help the others: Alphenor, the fifth son to die, is struck as he tries to raise up the bodies of his brothers Phaedimus and Tantalus, an act characterized by Ovid as “pious duty,” *pium officium* (250); and the second daughter, like the others unnamed, doubles over in death as she tries to comfort her mother (*solari miseram conata parentem*, 292).
- 16 Scholars have long noted the engagement of this episode with the visual arts in Augustan Rome. While Augustus' appreciation for analogies between himself and a number of the Olympians, including Jupiter, Mars, and Mercury, is well known, his clear favorite was Apollo.²⁰ The duality of Apollo, as god of divine vengeance on the one hand and as inventor and patron of the civilizing arts on the other, was adroitly

exploited by Augustus even before he assumed this honorific name, as is evidenced by so much of the visual record of the first principate, and especially by what we know of the temple of Apollo on the Palatine. Among the myths that illustrate Apollo's power to bring vengeance through sudden, almost invisible death, few are as famous as that of Niobe and her children; and the familiarity of this myth, together with its message, was actively promoted by Augustus.²¹ Thanks to Pliny the elder (*NH* 36.28), we know also that a sculptural group of the dying Niobids (by either Scopas or Praxiteles) was displayed in the other temple of Apollo at the foot of the Capitoline, that restored at roughly the same time by Sosius.²² The imagery foregrounded in both temples serves a clear purpose: it emphasizes the inescapability of divine justice, especially justice provoked on behalf of a parent unjustly wronged. Insofar as Ovid's Niobe episode replicates in words the idea of vengeful *pietas*, it is in fact tempting to imagine that Augustus would have quite appreciated it, as a script rationalizing the necessity to avenge an affront to one's parent: just as Apollo avenged his mother Latona, so Augustus himself avenged his father Julius Caesar, doling out a harsh but just punishment. In this context, it is also worth noting another detail preserved by Pliny: at a later period in the first principate, that is, at a time when the memory of both the assassination of Julius Caesar and the years of civil war that followed had faded from the headlines, Augustus' heir apparent Tiberius included among the Apollo-themed decorations of the restored temple of Concordia in the Forum, now Concordia Augusta, a bronze group by the Greek sculptor Euphranor depicting Leto nursing the infants Apollo and Diana (*NH* 34.77).²³ Unlike the earlier Niobid displays that emphasized vengeance, this image foregrounds the importance of family and heredity, celebrates the fertility of peace, and announces future greatness—even as its harmonious theme acts, like Barchiesi's trope of the "future reflexive,"²⁴ to foreshadow the inescapable destruction it suppresses through the elision of Niobe and her children.

- 17 The reading I present here proposes that we see Ovid not only reflecting the imperial agenda but throwing his support behind it; in fact, that is how both Ulrich Schmitzer and Andrew Feldherr read the episode, when they promote a comparison of Niobe with Cleopatra—the haughty foreign queen, brought low by the just arrows of Leto's children.²⁵ In this reading, Niobe gets what she deserves, and her metamorphosis is a fitting end to her *hybris*, as she becomes an object of stone, unable to move from the peak of Mt. Sipylus. In this reading, her "tears" are most likely to be an illusion created by the natural presence of a spring that emanates from the rock: "Mt. Sipylus [in modern-day Turkey] does have a crag which can be imagined as a human head, which emits a trickle of water that can be called its 'tears.' So this story ends by becoming an *aition* ... of that natural formation."²⁶
- 18 But there is a more complex way to look at this metamorphosis, that sees the transformation not simply as either a lesson about *hybris* or an aetiology for a natural phenomenon (or both). As Gianpiero Rosati notes, Niobe's transformation is exceptional, because it does not nullify her grief ("non annulla il dolore").²⁷ The word *tamen* in 310, *flet tamen*, marks the continuity, as does *etiamnum* in 312, a familiar signpost of aetiological survival.²⁸ And the continuity here is not only intratextual but also intertextual, as Ovid recalls the first appearance of Niobe's lapidary survival, in Homer's *Iliad* (24.612-17):

καὶ γάρ τ' ἠύκομος Νιόβη ἐμνήσατο σίτου,
τῇ περ δώδεκα παῖδες ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ὄλοντο,
ἔξ μὲν θυγατέρες, ἔξ δ' υἱέες ἡβώνοντες.

τοὺς μὲν Ἀπόλλων πέφνεν ἅπ' ἀργυρέοιο βιοῖο 605
 χώμενος Νιόβῃ, τὰς δ' Ἄρτεμις ἰοχέαιρα,
 οὐνεκ ἄρα Λητοῖ ἰσάσκετο καλλιπαρῆω·
 φῆ δοιῶ τεκέειν, ἣ δ' αὐτῇ γείνατο πολλούς·
 τῷ δ' ἄρα καὶ δοιῶ περ ἐόντ' ἀπὸ πάντας ὄλεσσαν.
 οἱ μὲν ἄρ' ἐννῆμαρ κέατ' ἐν φόνῳ, οὐδέ τις ἦεν 610
 κατθάψαι, λαοὺς δὲ λίθους ποίησε Κρονίων·
 τοὺς δ' ἄρα τῇ δεκάτῃ θάψαν θεοὶ Οὐρανίωνες.
 ἣ δ' ἄρα σίτου μνήσατ', ἐπεὶ κάμε δάκρυ χέουσα.
 νῦν δέ που ἐν πέτρῃσιν, ἐν οὐρεσιν οἰοπόλοισιν,
 ἐν Σιπύλῳ, ὅθι φασὶ θεάων ἔμμεναι εὐνὰς 615
 νυμφάων, αἳ τ' ἄμφ' Ἀχελώϊον ἐρρώσαντο,
 ἔνθα λίθος περ ἐοῦσα θεῶν ἐκ κήδεα πέσσει.

For fair-haired Niobe remembered food, even when her 12 children were destroyed in the palace, six daughters, and six young men full of youth. For Apollo, angered at Niobe, slew the youths from his silver bow, and Artemis who shoots arrows slew the girls,

because Niobe compared herself to fair-cheeked Leto; she said that Leto had given birth to two, but she had birthed many, and so, though being two, they killed them all. Slaughtered, they lay there for nine days, nor did anyone bury them, and Zeus son of Kronos made the people stone; and on the tenth day the Olympians buried them. And Niobe thought of food, after she grew tired from shedding tears. And now, somewhere among the rocks, among the lonely mountains, on Mt. Sipylus, where, they say, are the beds of the divine nymphs, who move swiftly around Achelous, there, though being stone, she broods over her cares from the gods.

- 19 Niobe appears here as an *exemplum* used by Achilles in an effort to convince Priam that his mourning for Hector should not prevent him from eating. Niobe too lost her children, says Achilles; but after nine days of mourning—presumably a parallel with the nine days during which Achilles has held Hector's corpse—she allowed herself to eat. Achilles' version of the story contains a number of confusing elements that have aroused scholarly debate since the beginnings of Hellenistic scholarship on the text of Homer—one obvious example is that the children's bodies apparently remain exposed for a while, until the gods bury them (*Il.* 24.610-11). More important for this discussion, however, is the nature of the metamorphosis in this *exemplum*: Achilles never makes explicit the transformation itself of Niobe, although his last reference to her identifies her as a stone (λίθος, 617); rather, the explicit transformation occurs in 611, when Zeus is said to have made the people stone.²⁹
- 20 Achilles, meanwhile, uses the concluding four hexameters of this passage (614-17) to provide an epitaph for Niobe, now stone, but a stone that weeps—an epitaph not *on* stone, in this case, but *about* a woman who has become stone. This remarkable instance of epigraphic metatextuality in Homer³⁰ was athetized by Aristophanes and Aristarchus, because among other things it seemed to them laughable that Niobe would eat after being turned to stone, and as such, they felt, the passage is hardly suitable for providing consolation.³¹ What is important here, however, is not the authenticity of the lines *per se*; as I have argued elsewhere, the text that Ovid used must have contained them.³² Rather, I note that in this *exemplum*, one of the first instances of apparent metamorphosis in Greek literature, Homer does not emphasize the process of change itself; instead, three of the four verses are devoted to the place where she is now located, Mt. Sipylus in Lydia. Only in the last line does Homer move to the theme of eating, introduced by the *exemplum*'s concluding verb, πέσσει, here meaning, roughly,

“broods over”—but literally, “cooks” or “digests.” Ovid, on the other hand, suppresses the Homeric interest in eating as an indication of mortality, and instead brings out the aetiology implicit in the Homeric version, describing the change in elaborate detail (*Met.* 6.303-9); and in so doing he recalls Deucalion and Pyrrha’s characterization of post-diluvial humans as a *durum genus*.

- 21 The rich detail of Niobe’s metamorphosis in Ovid confirms that he is a good student of the author of the *ad Herennium*, who notes the importance of careful delineation to the creation of a memorable image (“We should, therefore, establish images of a sort that can cling longest in the memory ...For the same things that we remember easily when they are real, are not difficult to remember when they are imagined and carefully described,” *Imagines igitur nos in eo genere constituere oportebit quod genus in memoria diutissime potest haerereNam quas res ueras facile meminimus, easdem fictas et diligenter notatas meminisse non difficile est*, *Rhet. Her.* 3.22). In this case, of course, he also benefits from the other most important component of memory, according to the rhetorical handbook: place, *locus*.³³ As I noted earlier, the description of Niobe’s transformation links her specifically to a place, Mt. Sipylus; but the point of this detail is not simply to explain an actual outcropping of rock on a mountain in Lydia, but to sustain the survival of the image in the collective memory of Ovid’s readers.
- 22 Before leaving Niobe, I want to consider one other important aspect of Ovid’s description of her survival: her tears. The final two words of the aetiology, *marmora manant*, are especially noteworthy, and not simply because of their echoing alliteration. The noun *marmora* not only evokes the hardness and durability of Niobe, but also recalls those sculpted versions of Niobe and her children with which Ovid’s audience would have been familiar; and the verb *manant* not only captures the oxymoron of her transformation into weeping stone, but also creates a punning wordplay to hint at her permanence: *manant*, “flows,” also suggests the verb *manent*, “remains,” and in combination with the adverb *etiamnum* underscores the continuity into the present of Niobe’s grief. She is still; yet she persists.³⁴
- 23 In leaving this image of Niobe before us, I suggest, Ovid is also asking us to recall not only the “approved” Augustan interpretation of the story described above but its Homeric ancestor, whose purpose is *not* to illustrate *hybris* or just vengeance, but to offer gentle persuasion and consolation in the face of human mourning and loss. And Niobe’s durability, her material reality, located as it/she is in an actual place on the map of the known world, is the memorial to those emotions, a reminder that loss and sorrow inflicted by the gods are inescapably part of human experience. These emotions cannot simply be elided, however much the *princeps* and his heirs, with their emphasis on triumph, may wish to suggest that they can. Niobe’s permanence also suggests that resistance can take forms other than those we usually look for in Ovid: through the ability of material to preserve memory, and through the ability of memory to keep alive what might otherwise appear to be lost, Niobe’s stillness itself can be seen in terms of permanence and power, and as a witness to her suffering and loss. In this reading, Ovid’s Niobe becomes something other than a simple moralizing tale or political allegory; her story also embodies the transcendent power of grief in the face of profound loss.

IV. Daphne

- 24 I now turn to another example of Ovid's engagement with monumentality, an example that is, if anything, even less ambiguous than that of Niobe, and even more familiar. The very first metamorphosis narrated after the second creation of humans is that of Daphne, who is transformed into a laurel tree in order to escape Apollo. This familiar tale has invited scholarly interest for many reasons, from its announcement of the generic hybridity of the poem, mixing the themes and techniques of erotic elegy with epic, to its representation of gendered violence, to its satirical treatment of the gods.³⁵ But that is not all: it also thematizes permanence through materiality, here clearly articulated as the permanence of the victim's memory, with the victim herself as a site of memory. Ovid begins with a petty argument between Apollo and Cupid that quickly devolves into Apollo's vindictive infatuation with Daphne; this infatuation is played out in an excruciatingly sadistic pursuit, during which Apollo tries unsuccessfully to win the girl over. Her resistance is embodied in her flight: she says nothing in response to Apollo's self-promoting recitation of his resume, but simply runs (*Met.* 1.525-44). Finally, exhausted and defeated, she appeals to her father for help, which he provides by transforming her into a tree, the laurel (*Met.* 1.548-56):

uix prece finita torpor grauis occupat artus;
 mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro;
 in frondem crines, in ramos bracchia crescent; 550
 pes modo tam uelox pigris radicibus haeret;
 ora cacumen habet; remanet nitor unus in illa.
 hanc quoque Phoebus amat, positaque in stipite dextra
 sentit adhuc trepidare nouo sub cortice pectus,
 complexusque suis ramos, ut membra, lacertis 555
 oscula dat ligno; refugit tamen oscula lignum.

Her prayer hardly finished, a heavy sluggishness takes hold of her limbs; her soft breasts are girded with slender bark; her hair grows into foliage, her arms, into branches; her foot, moments ago so swift, clings fast with unmoving roots; a tree's crown takes her face; a gleam alone remains in her. Phoebus loves this tree too, and with his right hand placed on the trunk he feels her heart still trembling beneath the new bark; and embracing with his arms her branches, like limbs, he gives the wood kisses; but the wood shrinks from the kisses.

- 25 Again, the advice of the *ad Herennium* can be sensed in the background: first, Daphne's transformation is elaborately detailed, moving from the inside, with the sensation of sluggishness, *torpor*, in her limbs (548), outward, with the bark surrounding her breasts (549), and then from top to bottom, denoting each of the five appendages sprouting from her torso: arms become branches (550), feet develop roots (551), and her face tapers to a crown at the very top (552). Each physical detail emphasizes the material presence of the laurel tree; and this materiality is pushed to its logical extreme as Apollo feels the tree and senses the heart beating beneath the bark (554); the solid object, now fixed in place, still feels, and attempts to do the impossible by fleeing Apollo's kisses (*refugit tamen oscula lignum*, 556). In the words of Miller that I quoted above, we are invited to question the essential nature of Daphne at this point: is she merely an object now, or is there still someone or something with agency beneath the bark? As with Niobe, Daphne too is distinguished by her persistence and durability; as with Niobe (*flet tamen*, 6.310), Daphne's resistance is subtle but marked by the single word *tamen* (*refugit tamen*, 556). Although transformed, Daphne's beauty remains

(*remanet*, 552), its permanence underscored by the series of verbs in the present tense.³⁶ Although from Apollo's point of view she is now objectified, we know that there is still something more there.

- 26 Unlike the ephemeral movements, emotional and physical, of the attempted seduction and chase, this metamorphosis is permanent. A foreshadowing of the permanence to come appears even before the story itself begins, in the transitional passage Ovid uses to move from the killing of Python to the pursuit of Daphne (*Met.* 1.445-52):

neue operis famam posset delere uetustas, 445
 instituit sacros celebri certamine ludos,
 Pythia perdomitae serpentis nomine dictos.
 hic iuuenum quicumque manu pedibusue rotaue
 uicerat aesculeae capiebat frondis honorem.
 nondum laurus erat longoque decentia crine 450
 tempora cingebat de qualibet arbore Phoebus.

Primus amor Phoebi Daphne Peneia, ...

... and so that the passage of time would not be able to destroy the fame of the accomplishment, he established sacred games with much-frequented competition, called "Pythian," from the name of the conquered serpent. Here, whoever among the youths had won by means of his hands, his feet, or the wheel received the reward of the oak frond as an honor. Laurel did not yet exist, and Phoebus Apollo used to wreath his temples, ornamented with long locks, from whatever tree you like.

The first love of Phoebus Apollo was Daphne, daughter of Peneus ...

- 27 To celebrate his own victory over Python, Apollo instituted the Pythian games; and the prize awarded to victors in the games was an oak wreath—not for any particular reason, apparently, other than that the laurel did not yet exist (450), so that even Apollo himself made do with wreaths of anything available (*de qualibet arbore*, 451). Again Ovid plays with the temporality of his *perpetuum carmen*, by interrupting the straightforward narrative of post-flood events to introduce this allusion to a fixture in the Greek religious calendar and its changes over time.³⁷ And he then takes another bold step, shifting abruptly from Apollo's defeat of the monster Python to his first love, Daphne, without ever making explicit the logical connection between the first and the second of these. Only the implicit bilingual pun linking Latin *laurus*, laurel, to Greek δάφνη bridges the gap; but the explicit details of this association will have to wait.

- 28 The aetiology offered here is signaled, as usual, by temporal markers: *nondum* (450) is the most obvious of these, but the god's obsessive interest in achieving something permanent is also signaled by the clause that explains his motive for establishing the games in the first place, "so that the passage of time would not be able to destroy the fame of his accomplishment" (*neue operis famam posset delere uetustas*, 445). The same obsessiveness reappears at the close of the Daphne episode, framed as it is by a second aetiology—one that logically answers the question implied 100 lines earlier in the first aetiology, with its careful notice that the laurel did not yet exist (*Met.* 1.557-67):

cui deus 'at quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,
 arbor eris certe' dixit 'mea; semper habebunt
 te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae.
 tu ducibus Latiis aderis, cum laeta Triumphum 560
 uox canet et uisent longas Capitolia pompas;
 postibus Augustis eadem fidissima custos
 ante fores stabis mediamque tuebere quercum.

utque meum intonsis caput est iuuenale capillis,
 tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondis honores.' 565
 finierat Paeon; factis modo laurea ramis
 adnuit utque caput uisa est agitasse cacumen.

To her, the god said: "Since you are unable to be my wife, at least you will surely be my tree. My hair, my lyres, and my quivers will always possess you. You will attend the Latian leaders, when a happy voice sings the Triumph and the Capitoline looks upon the long processions; likewise, as a most faithful guardian on the Augustan doorposts you will stand before the doors, and you will protect the oak in the middle. And just as my head appears youthful with its unshorn locks, so you too always wear the unending honor of leaves." The Healer had finished; with her branches just created the laurel tree nodded and seemed to shake her tree's crown like a head.

- 29 Unable to undo her metamorphosis, Apollo now decides to do what he can with what is available to him, and declares that, since Daphne cannot now be his spouse, she can at least be his tree (557-58). We may well laugh surreptitiously at Apollo's cruelly opportunistic management of the situation; but that laughter cannot drown out the emphatic first word of his declaration of Daphne's destiny, *semper* (558). This emphasis is underscored by the series of future indicative verbs that follows (*habebunt, aderis, canet, uisent, stabis, tuebere*), capped in turn by a declaration of perpetuity in Apollo's command that she bear "the eternal glory of leaves" (*perpetuos semper gere frondis honores*, 565). Apollo can predict the future—that is one of his most distinctive talents (cf. 1.517-18)—and this declaration quite literally bears oracular force.
- 30 Apollo's obsessive emphasis on permanence and on the maintenance of memory verbalizes his determination to create with Daphne something much like what he had created at Delphi: a site of memory, *un lieu de mémoire*. Students of the power of Augustan images, like members of the Augustan audience, know that Apollo's prediction is in fact fulfilled: the laurel wreath *does* adorn the triumphant generals whose glorious procession delivers them to the Capitoline, and the laurel tree itself—together with the oak—now stands at the entrance to Augustus' house on the Palatine. Indeed, Apollo considers the laurel a surrogate for himself, whose job it is to serve as faithful guardian, *fidissima custos* (562), of the *princeps* and his household. And, as if to remind us of Apollo's benign role, Ovid closes Apollo's hymnic speech by identifying Apollo as *Paeon*, the Healer.
- 31 But Apollo does not in fact have quite the last word in this scene; rather, Ovid does, as he describes the final apparent movements of the tree as she nods and shakes her leafy tresses (566-67). Is this movement meant as capitulation, or as something else? We are confronted yet again with the quandary presented by Daphne's continuing presence in absence. Of course, Apollo *does* interpret her behavior and metamorphosis as capitulation; but as Barchiesi observes in commenting on the exceptional character of this metamorphosis, "Ovid signals the ambiguity of the situation through the lack of certainty between being and seeming."³⁸ In other words, we can set aside the clear division of object from agent, and understand Daphne's new state as that of an "agent object," whose very nature is a form of resistance—not perhaps the one she would most desire, but a condition that allows her to embody forever, *semper*, her determination not to capitulate. The tree-form that contains and encloses her also protects her and ensures her survival. Ironically, her very stillness is what makes her inaccessible.

- 32 It is useful to remember that Ovid writes this for readers who had either themselves seen or who knew from contemporary witnesses about the laurels in front of the Augustan *domus* (*Res Gestae* 34). The approved interpretation of the planting would of course be the laurel's association with Apollo, combined with its coincidentally convenient association with victory and triumph. And yet, it is also a permanent memorial to something else—a sign of Apollo's callous cruelty, a living memorial to the politics of whitewashing, and an evergreen witness to the gods' lack of pity and to the way in which victors shape history. Daphne *seems* to shake her head—seems to Apollo, who sees only what he wants to see; but with her shuddering presence Daphne invites Ovid's readers to see something else, as she guards the unforgettable memory of her own loss.
- 33 The relevance of materiality and memory to his own situation as forms of permanence was clearly on Ovid's mind as he worked on his poem. This is most obvious in the coda to the *Metamorphoses*, when Ovid asserts his own survival beyond the boundaries of time and space, a survival outside of his physical body, embodied instead in his poetry (*Met.* 15.871-79). He claims for his poetry, in other words, the status of *lieu de mémoire*, or of “agent object”: “with the better part of me I shall nonetheless be borne above the loft stars, enduring, and my name will be indestructible” (*parte tamen meliore mei super alta perennis / astra ferar, nomenque erit indelebile nostrum*, 877-78).³⁹ Ovid's assertion here anticipates by almost 2000 years Nora's comments about the sort of durability that Ovid claims:
- ... if we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial ... all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs, it is also clear that *lieux de mémoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.⁴⁰
- 34 Stopping time and forgetfulness, making memory material: I suggest that this is one way we can read not only the coda to the *Metamorphoses*, but many moments of change throughout the poem, change that paradoxically results in a forceful rejection of erasure. After all is said and done, Niobe, Daphne, and Ovid himself bear enduring testimony to the power of memory to move us.

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NOTES

1. This is a revised and expanded version of talks I gave at the Boston University Roman Studies Conference and the inaugural European meeting of the International Ovidian Society, both in 2019. I thank fellow Ovidians Patricia J. Johnson, Alison Keith, John F. Miller, and Jacqueline Fabre-Serris for their support, and Alessandro Barchiesi for alerting me to the Ciampino Niobids. I am also grateful for the astute and helpful comments of the anonymous readers.
2. Miller 2009: 348-49.
3. Mutability: Hardie 1992; loss of voice: Feeney 1992, Newlands 1995, Natoli 2017.
4. Yates 1966 is seminal; see also the prolific project on Roman memory directed by K. Galinsky, *Memoria Romana*, 2013-16 (<http://www.laits.utexas.edu/memoria/>).
5. Nora 1989.
6. Nora 1989: 8.
7. Nora 1989: 12.
8. For an introduction to the approach, see in particular Brown 2001.
9. In fact, my ideas here are inspired in part by Canevaro 2018 on the gendering of things in Homer, and how that gendering interacts with the characters to whom these things pertain.
10. Yates 1966: 9.
11. Grethlein 2008: 40.
12. Cf. Bing 1988: 71, in a discussion of Callimachus' *Aetia*.
13. See now Walter 2020, offering a compelling interpretation of the function of *aetia* as bridges between past and present: "The aetion ... engineers a stark move away from the narrative, only in order to confer upon it what is potentially its most powerful form of validation. The audience ... inhabits two layers of time at once The implication is that the audience can thus guarantee and testify to the truth of the narrative located in the (often fictional) past" (22).
14. See Barchiesi 2005 ad locc.
15. See Barchiesi 2005 ad loc. On the Virgilian passage, see also O'Hara 1996: 255.
16. Wheeler 1999: 103. Ovid uses the first person singular at *Met.* 1.175-76; second person singular at 1.162. Ovid may well have been reading Callimachus here: see fr. 496 Pf., ΛΑΟΙ Δευκάλιωνος ὅσοι γενόμεθα.

17. Barchiesi 2005 on *Met.* 1.82-83 develops the analogy with terracotta sculpture. See also Barolsky 2005: 152 on the “stoniness” of human beings in Ovid’s poem.
18. Barchiesi 2005 on *Met.* 1.404-406.
19. There is some variation from one version of the myth to another in the total number of children, but the total is usually split evenly between male and female: see Gantz 1993: 537.
20. For a comprehensive overview, see Miller 2009.
21. Miller 2009: 351: “Every visitor to the Palatine Temple of Apollo saw represented on one of the entrance doors the hybristic queen’s slaughtered children.”
22. In the aftermath of the Augustan promotion of the myth, many elite Romans found in it apt inspiration for garden decoration: see Newby 2012: 363-73 on the sculptural groups of the Niobids from the Horti Sallustiani and the Horti Lamiani; *eadem* 2016: 108-10 and 136-31. To this should now be added the group of Niobids found in 2012 during the excavation of an Augustan-era villa at Ciampino (on the outskirts of Rome) and securely identified, thanks to the ownership indicated on a lead pipe at the site, as belonging to Valerius Messalla Corvinus, friend and patron of Tibullus and other Augustan poets and father of a colleague of Ovid. Although the excavation has yet to be fully published, the dissertation by Lupi 2018 provides full details. Ewald and Zanker 2012: 70-74 discuss the appearance of the myth of Niobe on sarcophagi from the second century CE and later.
23. Kellum 1990 offers the fullest description of the Apolline thematics employed in this temple.
24. Barchiesi 1993.
25. Schmitzer 1990: 244-49 and Feldherr 2004-2005.
26. Anderson 1972 on *Met.* 6.310-12.
27. Rosati on *Met.* 6.310-12.
28. See Myers 1994: 66-67; and cf. O’Hara 1996: 90-91 on changes marked by the word *nunc* (his focus is on changes of names, but the extension to related changes in the identification of natural phenomena is straightforward).
29. Richardson 1993 on *Il.* 24.610-12 notes the likely etymological play.
30. See Scodel 1992 (although the Niobe-exemplum is not among her examples).
31. Richardson 1993 on *Il.* 24.614-17 provides a good discussion of the early criticism. On the “circular reasoning” of Aristarchus here, see also Schironi 2018: 674-76.
32. See Boyd 2017: 33-40 for Ovid’s interest in athetized passages in Homer.
33. *Rhet. Her.* 3.16: “We call *loci* those places which, in brief, are set off completely, naturally, and conspicuously, either by nature or by artifice, so that we can easily comprehend and grasp them with our natural memory” (*Locos appellamus eos, qui breviter, perfecte, insignite aut natura aut manu sunt absoluti, ut eos facile naturali memoria comprehendere et amplecti queamus*).
34. Ovid surely also knew the allusion made to Niobe by Callimachus in his second *Hymn*. An epiphany of Apollo is announced, and the speaker says that both nature and the gods fall silent so that Apollo’s music can be heard in all its perfection. This silence includes the absence of lament; and the two examples of unexpressed lament the speaker cites are Thetis, restraining her tears for Achilles, and a “marble rock like a woman, open-mouthed in sorrow” (καὶ μὲν ὁ δακρυόεις ἀναβάλλεται ἄλγεα πέτρος, | ὅστις ἐνὶ Φρυγίῃ διερὸς λίθος ἐστήρικται, | μάρμαρον ἀντὶ γυναικὸς οἰζυρόν τι χανούσης, *Hy.* 2.22-24). For another Hellenistic allusion to the silence of Niobe, see Hollis 1997.
35. Places to begin on each of these topics: elegy in epic: Knox 1986; gender and sexual violence: Richlin 1992; political commentary: Schmitzer 1990, Feldherr 2010.
36. An anonymous reader points out that the phrases *remanet nitor unus in illa* (552) and *refugit tamen oscula lignum* (552) both occur after the caesura and have the same scansion, thus reinforcing each other.
37. Barchiesi 2005 on *Met.* 1.446.

38. "Ovidio segnala l'ambiguità della situazione attraverso l'incertezza fra essere e sembrare" (on *Met.* 1.564-67). See Knox 1990 for the background to Ovid's version of the myth.

39. As an anonymous reader notes, the adverb *tamen* (15.877) marks Ovid's determination to survive, much as it does in the episodes of Niobe and Daphne.

40. Nora 1989: 19.

ABSTRACTS

This paper examines how a complex of ideas involving memory and materiality can offer a new way to view metamorphosis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Through the embodiment of power in transformed things, Ovid uses several of the episodes in the poem to push back against mutability and loss of speech, and to assert a different kind of permanence. Much of Ovid's discourse about memory and materiality is linked through the trope of aetiology, i.e., the explanation of how something that exists now came into existence at a specific point in the past. Aetiology is by its nature a form of mnemonic device: it both highlights the enormous gulf separating past and present, and ensures temporal and cultural continuity. The aetiological narrative thus establishes its subject as a sign of permanence in an otherwise constantly changing landscape.

INDEX

Keywords: materiality, memory, monument, aetiology, Pyrrha, Niobe, Daphne, Apollo, Augustus

AUTHOR

BARBARA W. BOYD

Bowdoin College
bboyd@bowdoin.edu