

Epic Love Stories: Concepts of Gender and Identity in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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Rebekah, then at La Trobe University, was one of the winners of the Classical Association of Victoria's 2019 Undergraduate Essay Prize.

The reign of Augustus saw the creation of two of the most important epic poems of the Roman Empire. Written between 29–19 B.C.E, the early years of the Principate, Virgil's *Aeneid* reflects Augustus' emphasis on moral reform and a collective national identity based on traditional Roman values. By contrast Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written three and a half decades into Augustus' reign, emphasises that change and transformation are natural and inevitable, focussing on individual identities rather than the collective. Both epics contain great love stories that exemplify and question the Augustan ideals of gender and identity (however, it is worth noting that many of the love stories in the *Metamorphoses* are also stories of rape). These are two themes that strongly influenced and informed each other, as they implied one's place in society and the roles that men or women were allowed to take on. This essay will focus on these love stories and the ways in which they explore the Roman concepts of gender and identity, bearing in mind the Augustan context. It will be argued that both epics present the gender ideals of Augustan Rome and that gender and identity are tied to sexuality. Virgil, however, through his gendering creates a national identity for the Romans, whereas Ovid explores how one's gender impacts their individual identity and its implications for the individual. First, the gender roles in these love stories and how these contribute to identity will be explored. Then the ways in which gender roles are reversed and what this suggests will be considered. Finally, what the same sex love stories say about gender and identity in Rome will be explored.

Before diving into the texts it is worth briefly outlining how the Roman view of gender and identity was shaped by the emerging Principate. Gender was split into masculine and feminine, with one's gender being defined by if one was penetrated or was the penetrator.¹ Being a patriarchal society that was governed by the power of the father, ideals of masculinity reigned supreme with men expected to embody traditional values including: *virtus*, *vir* meaning man and thus masculinity, *pietas* to the gods, family and fatherland, and *dignitas*.² These traditional values were emphasised by Augustus after his victory over Marc Antony and Egyptian queen Cleopatra VII at Actium. Additionally, Augustus led a moral reform in which the (sexual) behaviours exhibited in the late republic were condemned, particularly targeting women and adultery. Women were expected to be faithful and dutiful to their husbands, with laws emphasising the production of legitimate children and the values of chastity and modesty, through the *lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis*.³ Thus Augustus sought to reshape the national identity by controlling gender roles and sexuality in a conservative manner that emphasised traditional values that he portrayed as lost in the late Republic.

The *Aeneid* contains several love stories that demonstrate the gender roles that were acceptable in Roman society, and the consequences for not conforming to those roles. The *Aeneid* reveals how gender roles influence the national identity and vice versa, and the importance of conformity to these roles. The tragic love story of Aeneas and Dido exemplifies this. Throughout the *Aeneid* the central character Aeneas represents the ideal Roman male. Characterised by his *pietas* (duty), Aeneas demonstrates the ways in which the Roman man is to be *pious* to his family, the fatherland and the gods. He

1 Olson (2014), 184.

2 McDonnell (2006), 2; Alston (1998), 213.

3 Williams (2010), 130.

predominantly demonstrates this in Book 2 when he carries his father, Anchises, and guides his son Ascanius from the burning city of Troy (*Aen.* 2.709–24). From here the Roman understanding of society and gender, with the *paterfamilias* at the top of the hierarchy, is established. Aeneas again demonstrates this when he chooses to found Rome rather than continue his love affair with Dido, telling her that founding Rome ‘is my love, and that this my homeland’ (*hic amor, haec patria est*) (*Aen.* 4.347). Here he very clearly shows that he loves his duty more than he loves Dido.⁴ His control and lack of emotion exudes the masculinity expected of a Roman man and is in sharp contrast to the passion of Dido.⁵ It can be said that in their relationship Aeneas symbolises the collective Roman identity, which is male. Dido on the other hand, now stands in contrast to her earlier introduction of a capable and powerful ruler (*Aen.* 1.496–510), traits often associated with men. She becomes decisively feminine when her love for Aeneas overwhelms her, causing her to become irrational (*Aen.* 4.75–89, 4.474–5). There are two things at play with Dido. For one, she represents the opposite of the Roman identity, the ‘other’: she is female, of eastern origin and a woman in power – as the queen of Carthage, Rome’s greatest enemy in the future, and she is reminiscent of Cleopatra VII, who had only recently been defeated when Virgil was writing.⁶ Dido is therefore seen as rejecting the expectations of the Roman woman by taking on masculine roles and embodying an identity different to that of Rome. As a result of this clash of genders and identities Dido must die, which is both symbolic of Rome’s recent victory over Egypt, as well as of the strengthening of the patriarchy and emphasis on traditional Roman values under Augustus.

The *Metamorphoses*, however, presents a reversal and defiance of traditional gender

roles and identity. There are several love stories in which Ovid has the female act in a masculine manner and consequently they have their identities erased, thus demonstrating the role women were expected to play in society. These include the tale of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (*Met.* 4.274–388), and the story of Iphis who wishes to marry Ianthe (*Met.* 9.666–797). It is worth noting that the first episode is not a reciprocal love story, but rather a tale of desire and rape that typically gives male characters the *potestas* (power) over the female characters, and particularly evokes the story of Apollo and Daphne (*Met.* 1.451–467). Salmacis’ gender role reversal is somewhat reminiscent of Dido’s destructive femininity in that they both display a certain amount of power and exhibit an uncontrollable passion that results in their destruction. From the start Salmacis does not conform to Roman expectations of a woman. She refuses to take part in the virginal activities associated with the goddess Diana, instead focussing on narcissistic activities of bathing and self-maintenance (*Met.* 4.310–316).⁷ This is arguably reminiscent of the decadent women of the late republican period that Augustus was attempting to counter with his moral reforms, such as Clodia whose decadence and wealth was used against her in Cicero’s defence of Marcus Caelius Rufus (*Pro Caelio* 35, 38). Once Salmacis spotted her love she ‘at once wanted to possess him’ (*visumque optavit habere*) (*Met.* 4.316). Hermaphroditus’ effeminate description (*Met.* 4.329–336) suggests that he is in the passive female role, one that would rather be penetrated,⁸ thus reinforcing the masculinity of Salmacis’ actions. In her frenzied passion Salmacis attacks Hermaphroditus, who persistently struggles against her (*Met.* 4.357–370). Ultimately, it is Salmacis’ prayer that they never be apart that results in the erasure

4 Perkell (2004), 368.

5 Oliensis (1997), 303.

6 Evans (2003), 51, 54; McManus (1997), 107.

7 See Robinson (1991), 218.

8 Robinson (1991), 213–14.

of her identity, with their bodies becoming merged into one and the single person being referred to as the male Hermaphroditus (*Met.* 3.370-82). Thus for altering the power structure in which man retains power over the woman and abandoning female values, Salmacis is punished by having her identity erased completely, enforcing her conformity.⁹ This is reminiscent of the Augustan ideology that enforces silence and 'deletes women' from the national narrative.¹⁰

By contrast, Ovid presents a gender reversal with a happy ending in the love story of Iphis and Ianthe, yet again considering the place that gender and identity have in the Roman world. Iphis is born female but is raised male and identifies her role as such (*Met.* 9.705-6). She too wishes to 'possess' (*frui*, *Met.* 9.724) her love Ianthe, passionately describing her forbidden love and reminding herself that to 'Remember what sex you belong to' (*quid sis nata, vide*) (*Met.* 9.746-47). Iphis appears to exhibit the same amount of passion that Salmacis does, however, her self-control and reasoning are similar to a man.¹¹ She realises that she would be defying her feminine identity (*Met.* 9.746-53). For refusing to break from gender expectations Iphis is rewarded by being transformed into a man so she can marry Ianthe (*Met.* 9.786-91), yet again erasing the female identity from the narrative. Therefore, these two tales from the *Metamorphoses* reveal the importance of sexuality in the Roman concepts of gender and identity and the need to conform.

Virgil and Ovid also explore gender and identity through male same-sex relationships. The two same-sex stories they have in common are ones of pederasty, the relationship between an adult male and an adolescent male.¹² By including pederastic relationships in their respective epics,

Virgil and Ovid demonstrate the ways that sexuality dictates gender and identity in the Roman world. The tragic love story of Nisus and Euryalus (*Aen.* 5.294-345, 9.177-446) and its Ovidian parody, Athis and Lycabas (*Met.* 5.48-73), demonstrate the characters' conformity to Roman sexual power structures in that one is feminised, taking the passive role, and the other is masculine in the active role. Both Athis and Euryalus are portrayed effeminately, described as 'a pure and innocent boy of sixteen' (*bis adhuc octonis integer annis*) (*Met.* 5.50) and 'no lovelier youth' (*quo pulchrior alter non fuit*) (*Aen.* 9.179-180). This effeminacy was linked to homoerotic passivity and demonstrates the 'culturally constructed femininity of boys who have not yet reached manhood',¹³ which Wheeler also identifies in the Iphis episode.¹⁴ By contrast Lycabas and Nisus take the masculine and active role in their respective relationships. Yet the tragic deaths of both pairs of lovers suggests that their bending of gender roles was not wholly beneficial for Roman identity, as it goes against the idea and image of the strong and dominant empire that Augustus was building. They thus present the idea that one must forfeit their individual identity for the sake of the collective Roman identity.

This essay has shown how the epics by Virgil and Ovid have explored Roman concepts of gender and identity through their love stories. It has been argued that both poets have demonstrated that Roman gender and identity was tied to sexuality, which was heavily regulated during the Augustan period. They portray the man as having *virtus*, *pietas* and *dignitas*, and as being the one with the power who is the active participant in the relationship. Women on the other hand, were expected to be chaste, modest and passive in the relationship. Diverging from these expectations consequently meant straying from the masculine national identity that Augustus was building, which

9 Segal (1998), 21.

10 Sharrock (2002), 100, 105.

11 Pintabone (2002), 265.

12 Meban (2009), 243.

13 Oslon (2014), 194.

14 Wheeler (1997), 197.

Virgil exemplified in his most famous love story: Aeneas and Dido. Ovid on the other hand, through his love stories of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, and Iphis and Ianthe demonstrate the loss of individual female identity as a result of straying from gender norms, again showing how in Rome masculinity was dominant. Further, the same-sex relationships in both epics demonstrate how sexuality defined gender, as it was dependant on the characterisation of who was in the active or passive role.

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