

Class Post:

<https://classroom.google.com/c/Mzg0NjMzMDI4Njg5/sa/Mzg0NjgzODIzMjI4/details>

What are the particular ways in which desire takes precedence over morality in the *Metamorphoses*?

Desire Or Die

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid has willfully instated the concept of “Passion knows no bounds” by presenting intricate relationships wherein desire, a very vital component of love is set on a pedestal. Here, the desire for a desired one stems from the physical degrees of separation between one’s self and them, as well as their status as pending conquests. Desire or “Passion” here is so eminent that it takes precedence over morality, putting the readers ill at ease. Thus the question I will be exploring here is “Is desire ever limited by morality?”

Ovid through its poems took me to an “Uneasy Utopia”. The reason I call it an Uneasy Utopia is because although reading the text agitated me at particular moments where force was used to satisfy desire, it also took me to a utopian world where the fulfillment of one’s desire was so highly regarded. “For all his valiant attempts to slip from her grasp, she/ finally/ held him tight in her coils like a huge snake” (Ovid 360).

Taking into consideration the world we live in, our wants and desires have been “suppressed and policed”(as mentioned my fellow classmate Sayona Pahwa) by the weight and fear of judgement, and to think of a time where desire was an indispensable part of love now looks like a Utopian reality to me.

Using the poems in the *Metamorphoses* as a medium, the Roman Poet Ovid charts how change, propelled by desire, continually occurs in the universe. This raging desire ultimately leads to the breakdown of moral values and rational behaviour. Though no moral judgment is passed on the virtue of their actions, there is a hint of morality in the characters. For example in the story of Myrrha, she says,

“I’m merely a victim of chance. - But why am I talking / like *this*? / Such thoughts are forbidden, I must dispel them. Of / course it’s my duty to love him, but just as a father.” (Ovid 335)

Here we can sense that Myrrha is morally obligated not to give in to her sexual desires for her father, as that would qualify as incest. The extreme nature of the passion here leads to an agonizing, almost unbearable pain which makes the character wish nothing but death for herself-

“Death seemed to her best. She rose from her bed determined /to strangle/ herself in a halter and tied her girdle around a crossbeam” (Ovid,380).

Thus we can establish that love for one here is a complex and torturous blend of agonizing pain and an unending desire. But does this “Passion” ever get limited by the boundaries of “Morality”?

Examining the story of Myrrha in a closer detail we initially come across a battle between Myrrha’s sexual desires for her father and her obligation to morality.

“The girl was fully aware of her guilty passion and battled/ against it. She said to herself: “Oh, where are these foul/ thoughts leading me?/ What am I trying to do? I pray to you, gods, by the/ bonds/ of family love and the sacred laws of parents and/ children,/ avert this evil; resist the crime in my heart-” (Ovid,320).

Myrrha also tries to blame her luck for being born in a country where incest is sinful and for being a daughter to the man she so dearly desires-

“And yet there are said to be/ countries/ where mothers can sleep with their sons and daughters/ can sleep with their fathers,/ and natural love is intensified by the double/ attachment/ How sad that it wasn’t my lot to be born in one of/ those places!/ I’m merely a victim of chance/” (Ovid, 330).

Ultimately with no resort to satisfy her shameful desire, her agonizing pain of an unconquered love leaves her no choice but to wish for death to bring an end to this passion-

“Desperate now, then ready to dare, her shame in/ conflict/ with wild desire, she could form no plan; and like an/ enormous/ tree which is almost felled and awaiting the final/ stroke/ of the axe(none knows which way it will fall, fear/ reigns all round it)/, So Myrrha, assaulted and shaken by warring emotions,/ swayed/ Uncertainly this way and that, inclining in either/ direction,/ unable to see any end or relief from her passion but death/” (Ovid, 370).

Her desire is so excruciating that she preferred death if her desire could not be satisfied. But alas, this passion lands Myrrha in her father's bed. In the fullness of time, her morality is sidelined and taken over by her desire for her father. And the crime is committed by her-

“Filled with her father’s unhallowed seed, she withdrew/ from the chamber/ bearing the fruit of her monstrous crime in her impious/ womb/ The act was repeated the following night and other nights/ after/” (Ovid, 470)

Myrrha’s story is a clear example of desire not being limited by morality. But do we really stand in a position to object to Myrrha’s desire? Yes, Myrrha’s desire for her father was against the laws of nature because of the complexity of its outcomes but does desire consider familial laws

before embedding itself? I think not! Throughout the *Metamorphoses*, we witness desire in various forms: for oneself as with Narcissus, for one's over stepping conjugal boundaries as with Tereus for Philomela, and even for one's own creation as with Pygmalion. And the only thing that stands constant in them is how the fire of Passion grows stronger, causes pain and suffering, and ultimately crosses all moral boundaries.

Even in the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela passion seems to cross moral boundaries causing pain and suffering. Tereus who is "ensnared in the toils of unbridled desire, he'd commit/ any crime/" (Ovid 465), abducts Procne,- "Tereus grabbed Philomela/ up to a stone hidden away in an ancient forest/." (Ovid, 520) rapes and tortures her to please himself until Procne rescues her sister-

" His virgin prize was alone, and he/ brutally/ raped her/". Tereus' passion grew gruesome and unruly, where he stooped to the very extent of cutting off the tongue of his desired one. Yet this didn't stop the horrid act, he continued to rape her- "Tereus debauched the bleeding body again and again/" (Ovid 560). The story clearly justifies that desire adheres to no moral bounds.

Inspired by one of my fellow classmates, Urvi Saxena's class posts "Can there be a clear demarcation between passion and morality?" I have come to realise that passion and desire leave little room for morality. And morality, on the other hand, leaves little room for exceptions, change, and judgment. This brings me to the conclusion that passion or desire can never be limited by the bounds of morality, and our attempts at limiting them will ultimately lead to agonizing pain and suffering that will necessarily transgress moral codes. Thus passion and morality are like oil and water that never blend into one.

Citations

Ovid. (2004). "Metamorphosis" (Reprint Edition). Penguin.