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## UNREQUITED LOVE: POLYPHEMUS AND GALATEA IN OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*

By ALAN H. F. GRIFFIN

What is the cure for unrequited love? According to the Hellenistic poet Theocritus the cure is song.<sup>1</sup> To illustrate this thesis Theocritus wrote two poems about the lovesick cyclops Polyphemus.<sup>2</sup> Alexandrian poets were very interested in the subject of love, especially when it went wrong, and they were also keen to show off their literary knowledge and skills by borrowing and adapting ideas from their predecessors. The lovesick cyclops of *Idylls* 6 and 11 combined both concerns. Theocritus was able to demonstrate his literary debt to Homer by borrowing many grotesque details from the cyclops in Homer's *Odyssey*. He was also able to devote the bulk of his poems to making his point that the only successful cure for lovesickness is to be found in poetry and singing.

In Homer Polyphemus was a grim and grisly monster.<sup>3</sup> He ate visitors unfortunate enough to reach his shores.<sup>4</sup> There was nothing romantic about him and no object of his affection, apart from his sheep. Theocritus' Polyphemus is a changed character. He becomes, essentially, an ordinary lovesick rustic: the grotesque details of his appearance which Theocritus also throws in are there to show literary indebtedness to Homer.

When we come down to Roman times we find that Ovid in *Metamorphoses* Book 13 opts for the Theocritean rather than the Homeric Polyphemus, a somewhat pathetic figure who engages the reader's sympathy when he is spurned by his beloved. There is however a contrast between Theocritus' mild treatment of Polyphemus and Ovid's portrayal of a violent cyclops. Ovia here reflects the Homeric model.

The idea which we find in Theocritus and Ovid that a huge, uncouth, shaggy, one-eyed monster should become the helpless victim of his passion for a tiny nymph is, of course, quite bizarre. But hopeless passion is a common topic in literature and the Beauty and the Beast contrast is a popular theme of folklore. Anyone who has seen the film *The Elephant Man*,<sup>5</sup> or who knows the true story of John Merrick which inspired it, will admit that there can be great pathos when a grotesquely misshapen individual is smitten with admiration for a beautiful woman.

Ovid's treatment of Polyphemus' love for the nymph Galatea is an extended paraphrase of Theocritus' two idylls. It also draws on Homer and there are echoes of Virgil's *Eclogues*. Ovid, however, does not follow

his models slavishly: he introduces a number of new features which give the story a very different impact from its predecessors.

First of all it is worth noticing the context of the cyclops story in *Metamorphoses* Book 13. It is an inlay in the story of Scylla which is itself an inlay in the story of Aeneas. It was clever of Ovid to introduce these two Greek legends at the Aenean stage of the *Metamorphoses*. It has to be frankly admitted that the Roman section of the *Metamorphoses* (Books 12–15) is not the most successful. Ovid does not find it easy to make the transition from the timeless and fabulous world of Greek myth (Books 1–11) to the quasi-historical and historical worlds of Italy and Rome. We cannot blame him for that: it was an impossible task. He faced the further problem that Virgil had already dealt with the transition section in the *Aeneid*. Ovid was not foolhardy enough to try to compete with Virgil on Virgil's ground. And yet in a poem which extended from the creation of the world down to his own day Ovid could not simply omit Aeneas and the account of his journey from Troy to Italy. Ovid's solution to his difficulties was twofold. First, wherever possible he telescoped events concerning Aeneas which Virgil had already dealt with. Secondly, he works in as many new Greek myths as possible. The legends of Scylla and of Polyphemus in *Metamorphoses* Book 13 are good examples of this second expedient. Ovid was most at home in the world of Greek myth.

In Homer Polyphemus is an horrific character. In Theocritus he is pathetic and love-lorn. In Ovid he is an example of violent and hopeless passion. There are also touches of cruelty in the Ovidian narrative which add a serious note which is absent from the Theocritean version. At the same time Ovid includes enough burlesque and lightheartedness to prevent his reader remaining poker-faced throughout.

In the course of extensive travels around the Mediterranean after the fall of Troy Aeneas and his companions reach Sicily. They touch land at Zancle which was once the home of Scylla. Ovid avails of this opportunity to tell the Greek legend of Scylla's rejection of all suitors.<sup>6</sup> Ovid lets her describe her adventures to her hairdresser who turns out to be none other than the nymph Galatea who, in the manner of hairdressers, also has an interesting tale of her own to tell.<sup>7</sup> By linking the legends of Scylla and of Galatea in this way Ovid was able to attach not one but two Greek stories to this part of the Aenean narrative. He arranges his material like the brackets of an algebraic formula. The first bracket opens with the story of Aeneas, the second with the story of Scylla and the third with the story of Galatea. Each of these brackets is carefully closed in sequence. At the end of the story of Galatea Ovid returns to Scylla and concludes her legend before continuing with the account of Aeneas' journey.

We must remain however with Scylla and Galatea in the hairdressing salon. Scylla consoles her distressed coiffeuse when sobbing interrupts the work. Galatea is encouraged to reveal the reason for her tears. It is worth noting, in passing, that Ovid shows great inventiveness in the *Metamorphoses* in varying such a simple and frequent motif as 'A answers B'. We have a good example here. *Nereis his contra rescuta Crataeide natam est*, 'the Nereid (Galatea) answered Crataeis' daughter (Scylla) as follows. . . .'<sup>8</sup>

Galatea explains that she was in love with a handsome sixteen-year-old youth called Acis. At the same time the cyclops Polyphemus was in love with her. The introduction of Acis into the story is an Ovidian innovation: he does not appear in any of Ovid's predecessors. Ovid gives us a triangular love tangle with much more explosive emotional potential than Theocritus' two poems. In *Idyll 6* the lovesick cyclops only has to deal with a coquettish 'come hither' approach on Galatea's part, and in neither *Idyll 6* nor *Idyll 11* is there any mention of another boyfriend. Ovid has also transferred Polyphemus' age in Theocritus to Acis.<sup>9</sup> From Homer onwards ancient writers thought that a young man was at his most handsome when he grew his first beard. Polyphemus is at this stage – say about sixteen – in Theocritus.<sup>10</sup>

Ovid's Galatea feels very strongly about Polyphemus. She tells us that she hated him as much as she loved Acis.<sup>11</sup> This calculated expression of hatred, coming as it does from her own mouth, adds a touch of cruelty to her attitude which is absent in Theocritus. This hate and the mockery of Polyphemus which follows reveal no sympathy on her part for her admirer.

Galatea's description of Polyphemus' attempts to beautify himself in her honour is broad farce. The Homeric-type monster combs his shaggy hair with a rake and cuts his beard with a scythe. Like a reformed bovver-boy he gives up drink and violence as a result of falling in love.

caedis amor feritasque sitisque immensa cruoris  
cessant, et tutae veniuntque abeuntque carinae.<sup>12</sup>

'Your love of murder disappears, your violent nature and your great thirst for blood: ships come and go in safety.' These verses are a burlesque of the Homeric rather than the Alexandrian cyclops. One of Polyphemus' visitors, the augur Telemus, prophesies that Ulysses will blind his one eye. Telemus made the same prophecy in Theocritus,<sup>13</sup> but Ovid turns it into word-play on *rapere. lumen . . . unum/ . . . rapiet tibi . . . Ulixes*:<sup>14</sup> 'Ulysses will steal your one eye' says Telemus. 'Someone else has already stolen it' replies Polyphemus (*altera iam rapuit*),<sup>15</sup> referring, of course, to Galatea.

Polyphemus begins to sing about his love for Galatea. First he settles

down on a cliff promontory. He puts away his walking-stick (a pine trunk) and takes up his hundred-reed pipe (there were usually only seven reeds). These details make Polyphemus seem ludicrously large as a companion for a delicate nymph. Galatea overhears the cyclops' song as she lies in Acis' arms behind a nearby rock. At this point of the story a rock shelters and protects Acis: at the end of the story a rock will kill him. Ovid is certainly innovating here. In paintings Galatea traditionally rode on a dolphin while Polyphemus sang of her charms. Ovid's picture of her listening to Polyphemus' song as she lay in Acis' embrace is certainly more piquant, but it adds to the theme of cruel mockery of the cyclops which runs through the story.

Polyphemus' serenade is a remarkable *tour de force* extending from verse 789 to 869. Galatea remembers the exact words of the song very clearly, 'I heard the words he sang and fixed them in my mind'.<sup>16</sup> There are many echoes of Homer, Theocritus, and Virgil's *Eclogues*.

Some may regard the rhetoric of the soliloquy as overdone, others (including me) find it an effective demonstration of Ovid's immense fertility and *copia verborum*. Theocritus<sup>17</sup> and Virgil<sup>18</sup> provided models for the lists of comparisons which Polyphemus makes to illustrate Galatea's good and bad qualities.<sup>19</sup> Ovid expands his models into two sets containing fifteen comparisons each. The first set describes Galatea's beautiful qualities. It begins with a pun on her name which, in Greek, means something like 'milky' or 'milk-white'. Ovid artfully describes her as 'whiter than snowy privet leaves'<sup>20</sup> and the same idea recurs when she is preferred to 'swan's down and curdled milk'.<sup>21</sup> Ovid supplies a splendidly unexpected climax to his list of Galatea's good qualities when 'if only you would not flee from me' interrupts its pattern.<sup>22</sup>

The second set of fifteen comparisons describes Galatea's less attractive qualities ('more obstinate than an untamed heifer. . . . vainer than a peacock . . . more cruel than fire . . .').<sup>23</sup> This second set of comparisons, like the first set, concludes with a melancholy reference by the lovesick cyclops to the fact that Galatea is always able to show him her heels whenever he tries to approach her.<sup>24</sup> Polyphemus, it seems, was not a runner.

Polyphemus tries another line of approach to Galatea. As a man of property he offers her a very comfortable life-style if she consents to marry him (verses 810–37). Anaphora and repetition are used skilfully by Ovid to give the impression of a long catalogue of wealth and possessions. There is a triple anaphora of *sunt* in verses 810–14 and anaphora of *sunt* also in verses 826–7. Repetition is found in verses 821–2 (*multae . . . / multas . . . multae*) and in verses 829–30 (*pars . . . / . . . partem*). This catalogue style is reminiscent of Virgil *Eclogue* 2 in which

Corydon describes his possessions and promises gifts of flowers and fruit in the hope of enticing Alexis to live with him.<sup>25</sup> Corydon promised Alexis 'waxen plums':<sup>26</sup> Ovid's Polyphemus goes one better and offers Galatea purple plums as well.<sup>27</sup> The cyclops also distinguishes between the two types of grape, and offers both.<sup>28</sup> In Ovid, as in Virgil, the fruits are carefully chosen to appeal to the recipient's sense of colour, touch, and taste. The grapes and plums are golden and purple and black, the quinces are waxen. The strawberries and cherries are red. Some of the fruit is hard and some is soft, some is shiny, some is dull. The description of the plums as 'luscious' (*generosa*) and the strawberries as 'soft' (*mollia*) encourages Galatea to taste them. All in all it adds up to a very appetizing dessert. Ovid's echoes of *Ecolgue 2* in this section (verses 810–37) are deliberate: they artfully impart a Virgilian pastoral tinge to Ovid's grotesque pastoral story. This is just the sort of literary titillation that appealed to a sophisticated audience in the Augustan Age.

Polyphemus draws Galatea's attention to his huge flocks and boasts 'Should you ask, I could not tell you how many I have. It's only a poor man who counts his flocks'.<sup>29</sup> *Pauperis est numerare pecus* is a memorable and unexpected aphorism.<sup>30</sup> One cannot help wondering, however, whether Polyphemus' grand refusal to count his sheep may not have been an attempt by him to conceal his innumeracy from Galatea. Like the rabbits in Richard Adams's *Watership Down* Polyphemus may be vague when it comes to counting and require a word (*Hrair*) which means a thousand, or any number more than four.<sup>31</sup>

Polyphemus has found some pet animals as a present for Galatea.<sup>32</sup> Ovid very cleverly delays revealing the precise species of animal until the last possible moment. 'I have found twins' says Polyphemus, 'that can play with you. They are so alike that you can scarcely tell them apart. I found them on a mountain top. They are the cubs of a shaggy bear'. *ursae* is kept as the final word (verse 836). This detail involves an ingenious and intelligent use of his models.

A burlesque section follows in which Polyphemus boasts about his good looks which he has recently seen reflected in a clear pool. Ovid is here indebted to Theocritus and Virgil, but adapts their material.<sup>33</sup> Ovid's extensive description of the cyclops' hirsuteness (verses 844–50) is a deliberate perversion of the fond and admiring references to the beloved's beautiful hair which is a commonplace in Latin love elegy. A passing reference to the cyclops' shagginess in Theocritus gave Ovid this idea to develop.<sup>34</sup> The disdain of the cyclopes for the gods, which Ovid touches on at verses 842–4, is a traditional notion going back to Homer.<sup>35</sup>

Polyphemus suddenly and dramatically loses confidence in his

powers of persuasion and in an outburst begs Galatea to take pity on him (verses 855–6). His emotion conquers his reason, as often happens with characters in the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>36</sup> Overwhelmed by his feelings he loutishly insults and threatens Acis. It is only at this point that Ovid makes it clear that Polyphemus has known all along about Acis' relationship with Galatea. The cyclops spits out his rival's name with hate at the beginning and end of verse 861 (*Acin . . . Acin*). He then makes a vile joke to the effect that the only future intercourse between Acis and Galatea will occur when Polyphemus tears Acis limb from limb and scatters his remains over Galatea's waves. Polyphemus' reformed character disintegrates: he reverts to being a violent thug.

Galatea did not only overhear the cyclops' song as she and Acis snuggled behind a nearby rock. She also stresses the fact that she had watched the whole performance (*nam cuncta videbam*, 870). This somewhat callous detail reinforces the earlier impression that Galatea's character was on the hard side. Polyphemus, admittedly a partial witness, refers repeatedly to her fierceness and haughtiness (verses 798–804; 858). Galatea illustrates the view which Ovid expresses elsewhere that beautiful women are proud and disdainful.<sup>37</sup>

Polyphemus catches sight of Acis and Galatea in each other's arms. The pair are described as 'neither knowing nor fearing any such thing' (*ignaros nec quicquam tale timentes / me videt atque Acin*, 873–4). It is hard to make sense of *ignaros* in this context, an indication, perhaps, of lack of revision by Ovid. The infuriated cyclops roars when he spies the couple. Ovid has the cyclops' splendid roar in *Aeneid* Book 3 in mind,<sup>38</sup> but the unexpected bathos of Ovid's treatment does not improve on Virgil's. According to Ovid the cyclops' roar was 'as great as a furious cyclops' roar ought to be.'<sup>39</sup> This weak comparison may be a sign of hasty writing.

Galatea escapes by diving into the sea. Acis, bombastically termed a hero, unheroically turns tail in flight, calling on his parents and girlfriend to help him.<sup>40</sup> A general lightheartedness pervades this section describing Acis' grisly fate. Polyphemus hurls a rock at Acis which squashes the youth.<sup>41</sup> The only help that Galatea can offer is to turn his oozing blood into a river which bears his name. Galatea stresses that the new river god was indeed Acis: her affectionate repetition of his name in verse 896 contrasts with the hate-laden repetition of his name in verse 861.<sup>42</sup> Ovid, however, does not make it clear whether or not Galatea is united to Acis after his metamorphosis. This lack of clarity is additional evidence that the concluding section of this story did not receive its final polish.

The Acis and Galatea episode demonstrates Ovid's ability to assimilate and transmute material borrowed from previous writers. This is

no mere scissors and paste technique. There is too much burlesque in the story for real seriousness, but it would be wrong to dismiss it as a *jeu d'esprit*. Throughout the *Metamorphoses* Ovid shows a continuing interest in human emotions, the varieties of love and the behaviour of characters under stress. These are the aspects of the stories which he chooses to dwell on and develop. Ovid did not have the jargon or resources of modern psychology at his disposal, but it is clear that he shows an interest in the nature of self-love and self-destruction in the story of Narcissus, of sanity and its limits in the story of Byblis smitten with incestuous love for her brother, and of conjugal love in the story of Alcyone bereft of her husband. The story of Acis and Galatea deals with the subject of hopeless passion which ultimately destroys what it seeks to achieve, namely reciprocal love. Ovid however does not appear to be without some sympathy for Polyphemus in his helpless plight, oaf, buffoon, and lout though he may be. Ovid's introduction of Acis, the successful rival, into the story increases the reader's feeling of pity for Polyphemus as the underdog. When Acis and Galatea, locked in an embrace, watch and listen to Polyphemus as he exposes his emotional and sexual distress, their behaviour smacks of voyeurism. The serious artistic achievement of Ovid's Acis and Galatea is that it demonstrates what a great writer can do in exploring the conundrums of emotional suffering as spectacle.

## NOTES

1. Theocritus (c. 300–c. 260 B.C.) was born in Sicily and later found a literary patron in Ptolemy Philadelphus at Alexandria in Egypt.

2. *Idylls* 6 and 11 are set in Sicily, though probably not written there.

3. Homer *Odyssey* 9.105–542.

4. Homer *Od.* 9.287–95.

5. *The Elephant Man*, directed by David Lynch (1980) with Anthony Hopkins, John Hurt, and John Gielgud.

6. 'ad *pelagi nymphas, pelagi gratissima nymphus*,| ibat et elusos iuvenum narrabat amores.' (*Met.* 13.736–7): 'Scylla used to visit the sea-nymphs (for the sea-nymphs were very fond of her) and she would tell them of the disappointed wooing of her young admirers'. The pattern-making in verse 736 (*pelagi nymphas, pelagi. .nymphis*) is neat and succinct. It makes the point that she chose the sea-nymphs as her confidantes because she was beloved by them.

7. Galatea's speech (740–45) consists largely of short phrases, suggesting that her tearful sobbing only allows her to get a word or two out at a time. The contrived dactyls of verses 739, 741, and 745 reinforce the impression of sobbing/weeping.

8. *Met.* 13.749.

9. *Met.* 13.753–4.

10. *Idyll* 11.9.

11. 'et, si quaesieris, odium Cyclopis amorne| Acidis in nobis fuerit praestantior, edam:| par utrumque fuit.' (*Met.* 13.756–8). Most editors read *nec* (for *et*) in verse 756. But this does not yield the required sense. *en* is found in one good manuscript. Read *et*. 'And, should you ask me, I could tell you which was stronger in me, my hate of Cyclops or my love of Acis: both were equal.'

12. *Met.* 13.768–9.

13. *Idyll* 6.23–4.
  14. *Met.* 13.773–4.
  15. *Met.* 13.775.
  16. *Met.* 13.788. Most editors read ‘*talia dicta meis auditaque verba notiva*’. *verba* however merely repeats the sense of *dicta* earlier in the verse. I prefer *mente notavi* (‘I fixed them in my mind’): *mente* was found by N. Heinsius in some manuscripts.
  17. *Idyll* 11.19–21.
  18. *Eclogue* 7.37–40.
  19. *Met.* 13.789–809.
  20. ‘*candidior folio nivei Galatea ligustri*’ (*Met.* 13.789).
  21. ‘... *cygni plumis et lacte coacto*’ (*Met.* 13.796).
  22. ‘*et si non fugias, riguo formosior horto*’. (*Met.* 13.797).
  23. *Met.* 13.798–809.
  24. *Met.* 13.797 and 805–9.
  25. Virgil’s second *Eclogue* is closely modelled on Theocritus’ eleventh *Idyll*, except that it replaces hopeless heterosexual passion (Cyclops for Galatea) with hopeless homosexual passion (Corydon for Alexis). The Victorian commentator Conington regarded this change as ‘degrading to Virgil’.
- The structure and patterns of *Met.* 13.810–14 are strongly reminiscent of the style of the *Eclogues*. In addition to the anaphora of *sunt, pendentia* in line 810 looks forward to *antra* in 811 and there is a chiasmic structure in 811–12 (*sol . . . . sentitur| . . . . sentitur hiems*). The impression is very much that of a Virgilian period.
26. *Ecl.* 2.53.
  27. *Met.* 13.817–18.
  28. *Met.* 13.813–14.
  29. *Met.* 13.823–4.
  30. Quoted by Seneca (*Letters* 33.4).
  31. *Watership Down* (Harmondsworth), p. 16 footnote.
  32. Polyphemus has eleven fawns and four bear-cubs as a present for Galatea in Theocritus (*Id.* 11.40–41). Corydon has two roes for Alexis (Virgil *Ecl.* 2.40ff.).
  33. *Idyll* 7.34–8 and *Ecl.* 2.25–7.
  34. *Idyll* 11.50.
  35. Homer *Od.* 9.273–8.
  36. Passion overwhelms reason in the case of Althaea in *Met.* Book 8, of Byblis in Book 9, and Myrrha in Book 10. There are many other examples of the same phenomenon elsewhere in the poem.
  37. ‘*fastus inest pulchris, sequiturque superbia formam*’ (*Fasti* 1.419).
  38. *Aeneid* 3.672–4.
  39. ‘*tantaque vox, quantam Cyclops iratus habere| debuit, illa fuit*’ (*Met.* 13.876–7). The cyclops’ roar goes back to Hom. *Od.* 9.395.
  40. ‘*terga fugae dederat conversa Symaethius heros*’ (*Met.* 13.879). *heros* is amusingly postponed to last place.
  41. The cyclops twice threw rocks at Ulysses (Hom. *Od.* 9.481 and 537).
  42. Note the chiasmus at *Met.* 13.896 (*Acis erat . . . . erat . . . . Acis*).