

LILIES AND VIOLENCE:
LAVINIA'S BLUSH IN THE SONG OF ORPHEUS

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accepit vocem lacrimis Lavinia matris
flagrantis perfusa genas, cui plurimus ignem
subiecit rubor et calefacta per ora cucurrit.
Indum sanguineo veluti violaverit ostro
si quis ebur, aut mixta rubent ubi lilia multa
alba rosa, talis virgo dabat ore colores.
illum turbat amor figitque in virgine vultus;
ardet in arma magis . . .

(Verg. *Aen.* 12.64–71)

Lavinia received her mother's speech with tears bathing her burning cheeks; blazing redness cast fire over her and ran through her heated face. As when someone violates Indian ivory with bloody purple, or when lilies mingled with many roses grow red, such colors did the maiden's face give forth. Love agitates [Turnus] and he fixes his face on the maiden; he burns for arms the more . . .

LAVINIA NEVER SPEAKS A WORD in the *Aeneid*, but her feverish blush sets Turnus on fire.¹ The double simile has many erotic associations. Dyed ivory recalls most closely an Iliadic simile comparing Menelaus' wound to a horse's cheekpiece: transported to a king's bedroom, we see the ivory ornament desired by many (Hom. *Il.* 4.141–47)—a reminder of the contest over Menelaus' wife. The motif of "two flowers," one white and one some shade of red, recalls a hymeneal topos familiar from epithalamium and elegy, as when Catullus (61.185–88) compares the blushing bride to "a white chamomile or orange poppy."² The two images together associate the violence of defloration with the eroticism of battle; both activities cause beautiful young virgins to be plucked or cut down like flowers.³

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1. Edgeworth 1992, 32 calls this "very likely the most beautiful color passage in the *Aeneid*, the still point around which the turbulent action of the final act of the *Aeneid* whirls." See his endnote for a list of other blushes in Latin literature (182). On the contrast between Lavinia's blush and her otherwise colorless personality, see Todd 1980, 27.

2. See Lyne 1990, 162. On the poetic combination of red and white, see Bömer 1969–86 on 3.423; Büchner 1970, 163–69; Rhorer 1980; Hinds 1987, 154; Edgeworth 1992, 177.

3. See Fowler 1987. On the association of red flowers (particularly roses) with both youth and death, see Brenk 1990.

I shall argue that Lavinia's blush is a defining motif in the Song of Orpheus (Ov. *Met.* 10.147–739). While it is not unusual for Augustan poets to “distribute” elements from a single passage in another poet,⁴ Ovid takes this practice to new lengths here, for the simile's imagery reappears under various guises in nearly every episode in the Song. By progressively “unpacking” the eroticism and violence latent in the simile,⁵ these virtuosic variations serve both to unify the Song's apparently disparate tales and to amplify the poet's comments on Virgil and Orpheus, on the nature of art and of love.⁶

In the story of Atalanta and Hippomenes (560–704), the youth's response to the maiden's blushing skin replays Turnus' response to Lavinia in such a way as to underscore, slyly, intimations of Turnus' mixed emotions in the *Aeneid*. It is the beauty of Atalanta's blushing ivory limbs that inspires Hippomenes to enter the contest for her, as Lavinia's blush inspired Turnus (*Met.* 10.591–96, 601–3):

aura refert ablata citis talaria plantis,
tergaque iactantur crines per eburnea, quaeque
poplitibus suberant picto genualia limbo,
inque puellari corpus candore ruborem
traxerat, haud aliter, quam cum super atria velum
candida purpureum simulatas inficit umbras.
.....
constitit in medio vultuque in virgine fixo
“quid facilem titulum superando quaeris inertes?
mecum confer!” ait . . .

The breeze bore back the streaming winged sandals on her swift feet; her hair over her ivory back and the bright-bordered ribbons at her knees were fluttering, and *her body had taken on redness within its girlish whiteness*, just as when a purple awning, drawn over a white atrium, dyes it with artificial shadows. . . . [Hippomenes] stood in the middle and, *his face fixed on the maiden*, said, “Why do you seek easy renown through surpassing the lazy? *Contend with me!*” . . .

Hippomenes' elevated diction resounds with the pride of an epic hero, especially in the phrase *mecum confer*.⁷ More specifically, *vultuque in virgine fixo* is a clear and unique echo of Virgil's *figitque in virgine vultus*. Although it

4. See, e.g., Knauer 1964, 395 and Hardie 1984 on Virgil's “distribution” of the Homeric Elpenor and the Lucretian Iphigenia, respectively. Distribution is in a sense the mirror image of the “conflation or multiple reference” described by Thomas 1986, 193–98.

5. As Lyne 1994, 198 observes, “the poet may pack his text with meaning and effects way beyond what his immediate audience can grasp, way beyond indeed what he himself may be consciously aware of. These meanings are left to be unpacked, gradually, by succeeding generations.”

6. Ovid's Orpheus has received some unflattering attention recently. Heath 1996, 370 concludes that “the saccharine story of Pygmalion's triumph is diluted by association with its sentimental and stupefied narrator.” Makowski 1996, 27 argues that Ovid seeks to “undermine the Vergilian characterization of Orpheus by satirizing him as an effeminate, gynophobic pederast.” The present article will not vindicate him.

7. As Anderson 1972 on 602–4 notes, *mecum confer* is the cry of “an epic hero challenging a foe to battle.” Shortly before, Hippomenes' *audentes deus ipse iuvat* (“the god himself helps the bold,” 586) is almost a quotation of Turnus' famous half-line, *audentes Fortuna iuvat* (“Fortune helps the bold,” *Aen.* 10.284); while such a sentiment is too much of a cliché to be identified with Turnus in particular, the similarity of word and tone sets the stage for more specific allusions later on. Seneca (*Ep.* 94.28) quotes the line with the “missing” half supplied, “audentes Fortuna iuvat, *piger ipse sibi obstat*.” The quotation by Seneca and the supplement

is common in Latin poetry to fix one's eyes on the beloved's face,⁸ the two phrases just quoted are the only places in extant Latin literature in which a person fixes his *face* (*vultus*) on another person.⁹ That Hippomenes does this in response to Atalanta's red-and-white beauty must be intended to recall Turnus' response to Lavinia's blush. Seeing something of Turnus in Hippomenes also gives additional point to the latter's metamorphosis. While Turnus is compared to a lion (*Aen.* 12.4–9), Hippomenes becomes one (697–704).¹⁰

Yet the problem with the "equation" (so to speak) Hippomenes = Turnus is that Atalanta is modeled most clearly, not on Lavinia, but on another *Aeneid* heroine. Running dry-shod over the sea and over a field of corn without bending the ears (645–55) is an unmistakable reference to the similar swiftness of Camilla (*Aen.* 7.808–11).¹¹ It is of course possible that Ovid has simply adapted two bits of the *Aeneid* without expecting us to think much about their original context; but it is also possible that he means his reader to recognize both allusions and draw out their implications. Ovid may be showing his alertness to the hints of "other versions" so dear to the Alexandrian poets. Turnus is in fact involved with two—the two—*virgines* in the *Aeneid*. When Camilla dashes on stage and makes her courageous speech to Turnus (11.502–6), he is spellbound (11.507):

Turnus ad haec oculos horrenda in virgine fixus

At this Turnus, fixing his eyes on the horrifying maiden, [spoke] . . .

Here and following Lavinia's blush are Virgil's only instances of the phrase *in virgine* and of someone fixing (with *figo*) his gaze on someone else. Camilla may be called *horrenda* here, but we know that she is admired and desired by a crowd of suitors. Amazons are, in any case, sexy: Camilla's forerunner Penthesilea was most famous for the effect she had on Achilles, who fell in love with her moments after he killed her.¹² If Virgil teases us with the suggestion of an erotic attachment between Turnus and Camilla,¹³ Ovid magnifies the hint by conflating both of Virgil's virgins in the person of Atalanta, whose ivory limbs blush from the swiftness of her running.

In the story of Hyacinthus (160–219), Ovid's "reification" of the Virgilian double simile brings out its latent violence.¹⁴ The "two flowers" motif

by an unknown author both suggest that the line was well known. Reynolds and Wilson 1968, 26 note the "gnomic quality of [this] half-line and the inviting vacuum it left to be filled."

8. See Bömer 1969–86 on 7.87.

9. The only other instances of *figo* or its compounds taking *vultus* as object both involve men fixing their faces (i.e., gazes) on the earth, with the verb *defigere* (*Sil. Pun.* 17.213–14, *Val. Max.* 6.1.7).

10. As Ovid probably realized, Virgil's lion simile owes much to Catullus' description of Cybele's lions (63.78–86). See Traina 1994, 23 and Conington 1883 on *Aen.* 12.7.

11. Ovid's simile actually applies to the swiftness of both Atalanta and Hippomenes. The two youths are "doubles" in other ways as well, for it is Hippomenes' "maidenly face" (*virgineus* . . . *vultus*, 631) that attracts Atalanta in the first place. As Janan 1988, 129 observes, "Atalanta—like Venus and Orpheus—desires one who reflects herself."

12. See, e.g., Proclus' summary of the *Aethiopis*. Quintus Smyrnaeus makes Achilles' sudden feelings for the fallen Amazon as strong as his feelings for Patroclus (1.720–21).

13. This would parallel Dido's mysterious reference to an intimacy between Aeneas and Anna, remnant of a version in which Anna rather than Dido was Aeneas' lover. See Austin 1971, x–xi.

14. On Ovid's "Reification of Figurative Language," see Kaufhold 1997.

appears in the Hyacinthus episode twice. First it is in a simile comparing the youth's broken neck to a broken flower stem (190–93):

ut, *siquis violas* rigoque *papaver* in horto
liliaque infringat fulvis horrentia linguis,
 marcida demittant subito caput illa gravatum
 nec se sustineant spectentque cacumine terram . . .

As when in a wet garden *someone breaks off violets or poppy or lilies* bristling with tawny tongues, and fainting they suddenly drop down their heavy heads and cannot support themselves and gaze at the earth with their crowns . . .

This simile prefigures Hyacinthus' transformation into a flower, deep purple (*ostrum*, the color of the dye in Virgil's simile) but shaped like a lily (210–13):

ecce cruor, qui fusus humo signaverat herbas,
 desinit esse cruor, *Tyrioque nitentior ostro*
flos oritur formamque capit quam lilia, si non
 purpureus color his, argenteus esset in illis.

Look! The gore which had been poured on the ground and marked the grass ceases to be gore, but *brighter than Tyrian purple a flower springs up and takes the form of a lily*, if it were not for the purple color of these, the silver of those.

The simile recalls most clearly the death of Euryalus, whose head droops like a broken "purple flower," *purpureus flos*, or a poppy (*Aen.* 9.435–37).¹⁵ The addition of "lilies" to the red and purple flowers accents the "two flowers" motif, the hymeneal imagery that stands behind the deaths of all these youths. Yet Ovid's simile is unique in presenting *three* flowers, and for this I believe Lavinia is responsible. The verb describing her transition from lily white to rosy red, *violaverit*, contains a third flower, *viola* (violet).¹⁶ Ovid has extracted that violet, turning Virgil's *violaverit siquis* into *siquis violas*, and with this wordplay has imported Virgil's suggestions of violence and violation. Other similes for dying youths show flowers drooping from spring rains or cut accidentally by the passing plow; Ovid shows someone actively snapping their heads off.¹⁷ His manipulation of the Virgilian similes thus doubly demonstrates the self-serving and carelessly destructive nature of Apollo's love.

The death and floral transformation of Adonis (708–39), which mirror those of Hyacinthus, direct our attention to an episode outside the Song but with direct bearing on its themes: the Rape of Persephone (5.385–571). Venus, mainly concerned (like Apollo) with memorializing her own grief, envies Persephone's ability to transform a nymph into mint (728–30), and the anemone that arises from Adonis' blood is the color of a pomegranate (734–36), the fruit that doomed Persephone to remain in the Underworld when she inadvertently tasted its seeds (5.533–42). A glance at Persephone's story—narrated five books earlier by Orpheus' own mother—reveals one reason why he chooses to shine the spotlight on the Underworld queen

15. See Edgeworth 1992, 15–17 on Ovid's many models for the Hyacinthus similes.

16. Ahl 1985, 256.

17. Anderson 1972 on 190–95.

at the end of his Song. Persephone is abducted while picking violets or lilies (5.392), and the falling of her flowers from her torn garment causes her "a virgin's pain" (5.398–401):

et ut summa vestem laniarat ab ora,
collecti flores tunicis cecidere remissis,
tantaque simplicitas puerilibus adfuit annis,
haec quoque virgineum movit iactura dolorem.

and as she had torn her garment at its upper edge, the flowers gathered in her tunic fell as it came down; such was the simplicity of her childish years that even this loss caused a virgin's pain.

The erotic violence latent in the "two flowers" image could hardly be clearer. Ovid has turned the metaphor of "defloration" into visible reality.¹⁸ "This deed is not injury, but love" (*non hoc iniuria factum, / verum amor est*, 5.525–26), says Jupiter to Persephone's mother. This is undoubtedly Jupiter's most revealing statement about what *amor* means to him (and to his brother Pluto, and to most of the male gods in the *Metamorphoses*): rape, or, in this case, child molestation.¹⁹ Orpheus himself likens his love for Eurydice to that of Pluto for Persephone, reminding the pair that "love joined you, too" (*vos quoque iunxit amor*, 10.29). His loss of Eurydice causes him to transfer this love to boys and "pluck the first flowers [of their virginity]" (*primos carpere flores*, 10.85). Though the metaphor of virginity as a flower to be plucked is common,²⁰ the (literal) defloration of Persephone and the broken neck of Hyacinthus give a sinister cast to that figure of speech.

Another character intimately connected with both the Song and the Virgilian double simile is the prototype for metamorphosis into a flower—and for the obsessive self-love to which he also gave his name. It is no coincidence that the interplay of red and white appears most vividly, and twice, in reference to Narcissus.²¹ As he stands like a *marble* statue gazing into a mirror, it is the blushing of his *ivory* skin that makes him especially attractive to himself (3.418–24):

adstupet ipse sibi vultuque immotus eodem
haeret, ut e Pario formatum marmore signum;
spectat humi positus geminum, sua lumina, sidus
et dignos Baccho, dignos et Apolline crines
impubesque genas et eburnea colla decusque
oris et in niveo mixtum candore ruborem,
cunctaque miratur, quibus est mirabilis ipse.

18. See Hinds 1987, 31 on the double entendres in this passage. It seems likely, as Hinds suggests (79–80), that in making Persephone pluck violets or lilies Ovid is "commenting" on a discrepancy between the two catalogues of flowers in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (5–8, 425–28), one of which contains violets and the other lilies. As in the similes for Hyacinthus, Ovid combines learned literary commentary with the "two flowers" motif.

19. Johnson 1996, 22 states that Jupiter's speech reveals the "cardinal tenet in the patriarchal system: rape's real name is love."

20. See OLD, s.v. "flos" 8.c.

21. See Farrell 1991, 12 on the clear allusion to the plucked flower image from Catullus' hexameter wedding hymn (62.39–44) in Ovid's introduction of Narcissus (3.353–55)—an ironically hymeneal prelude to the episode of a man who longs to marry himself (not to mention one who turns into a flower).

He is stupified at his own self and stands there immovable with the same expression, *like a statue formed from Parian marble*; planted on the ground he gazes at twin stars, his own eyes ["lights"], and locks worthy of Bacchus, worthy even of Apollo, and his youthful cheeks and *ivory* neck and the beauty of his mouth and *redness mingled with snowy whiteness*, and marvels at all the things by which he himself is marvelous.

Later, having bared his breast in grief,²² the statue turns on itself as Narcissus dapples his white flesh rosy red with *marble* hands (3.480–85):

dumque dolet, summa vestem deduxit ab ora
nudaque marmoreis percussit pectora palmis.
pectora traxerunt roseum percussa ruborem,
non aliter quam poma solent, quae candida parte,
parte rubent, aut ut variis solet uva racemis
ducere purpureum nondum matura colorem.

And while he grieved, he drew down his garment from its upper edge and struck his bare breast with *marble* palms. His breast when struck assumed a *rosy redness*, not unlike apples which are *red on one side and white on the other*, or as when grapes in variegated clusters not yet ripe take on a purple color.

The red-and-white that began as a titillating blush has turned into a mark of violence. And in some sense Narcissus stands behind all of the blushes in the *Metamorphoses*, revealing Ovid's insight into an aspect of the erotic love he so elaborately depicts: it is often, in a word, narcissistic.²³ This theme is especially prominent in Orpheus' Song. Venus says that Adonis would look just like herself if he were a woman (587); Atalanta is attracted to Hippomenes because of his maidenly features (631); most obviously, Pygmalion falls in love with his own artistic creation, an extension of himself.²⁴

Blushing plays an important role in the episode of Pygmalion (243–97), which is framed, not coincidentally, by two stories marked by the conspicuous departure of blushes (Propoetides, 238–42; Myrrha, 298–502). Pygmalion becomes a misogynist out of disgust at the Propoetides, who turn to stone when they lose the sense of shame represented by their ability to blush (241–42):

22. The phrase *summa vestem deduxit ab ora*, as Anderson 1997 on 3.480–81 notes, will be echoed by the tearing of Persephone's garment, *summa vestem laniarit ab ora* (5.398, discussed above). What for Narcissus represents self-imposed grief becomes for Persephone, appropriately enough, an image of rape and defloration.

23. On the narcissism of Orpheus himself, see Anderson 1989, 3. Ahl 1985, 236–70 rightly discusses Hermaphroditus along with Narcissus and Pygmalion (including a section on "Lavinia's Ivory Blush," 264–67): all three exemplify love's narcissism and fusion of self with other, Hermaphroditus most graphically. His blush rivals (and alludes to) those of Lavinia and Narcissus in its mingling of red and white (4.331–33): "hic color aprica pendentibus arbore pomis / aut ebori tincto est aut sub candore rubenti, / cum frustra resonant aera auxiliaria, lunae." ("This is the color of apples hanging from a sunny tree, or of dyed ivory, or of the moon reddening beneath its whiteness when the helpful bronzes sound in vain." [See Anderson 1997.]) In a simile with obvious similarities to Pygmalion's ivory maiden, the whiteness of Hermaphroditus' skin resembles the sheen "when someone covers ivory statues or white lilies with clear glass" (*ut eburnea si quis / signa tegat claro vel candida lilia vitro*, 4.354–55).

24. For an opposite view, see Lateiner 1984, 19: "In addition to his skill, it is Pygmalion's spiritual purity, his sinless piety and his recognition of the spirit *outside* himself that transcends the skill of art." Viarre 1968, 247 sees the statue as a symbol of the absence of love and compares Pygmalion to Alcione, whose kiss brings her husband back to life.

utque pudor cessit sanguisque induruit oris,
in rigidum parvo silicem discrimine versae.

And when shame ceased and the blood of their faces grew hard, they were changed to hard flint with little change.

Similarly, Myrrha's power to blush deserts her as she is about to perform a wicked sexual act: on the threshold of her father's bedroom, "color and blood flee, and the spirit abandons her as she goes" (*fugitque / et color et sanguis, animusque relinquit euntem*, 458–59). The Propoetides' loss of facial blood is conjoined with their metamorphosis into stone. For Myrrha, too, the loss of "color and blood" is simultaneous with the departure of *animus*, a symbolic death. Pygmalion's ivory statue, conversely, comes to life when she gains the power to blush (292–94):

dataque oscula virgo
sensit et erubuit timidumque ad lumina lumen
attollens pariter cum caelo vidit amantem.

The maiden sensed the kisses given and *blushed* and, raising her timid eye ["light"] to the light, saw the sky and her lover at the same time.

This ought to be a triumphantly happy ending—and yet it is darkened by the tragic fate of Pygmalion's descendants (Cinyras and Myrrha) and of his predecessor in narcissism. As the ivory maiden gazes up at her creator, seeing at once the light of the sky and that of her own eyes reflected in his, so the statue-like reflection of Narcissus had gazed up at his own blushing and captivated self.²⁵

I have argued that Lavinia's blush inspired Ovid no less than Turnus, becoming a defining motif for the Song of Orpheus and to some extent for the entire Song of Ovid. The question remains, Why? I shall close not with an answer but with a thought. In an article entitled "Red and White in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: The Mulberry Tree in the Tale of Pyramus and Thisbe," C. Rhoter discusses many of the episodes that I have discussed, seeing throughout the *Metamorphoses* the clash of "violent, erotic red and innocent, unawakened white." She concludes that the metamorphosis of the mulberry tree, whose white berries are dyed red with blood, "is far from incidental to the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. Rather it is the central image of a story which speaks to Ovid's abiding concern with the confrontation of innocence and passion in a world where the boundaries of civilization are only the lost dream of an irreclaimable past."²⁶ Perhaps Ovid saw that those boundaries were already threatened—some might say, already dissolved—in the great civilizing epic of his predecessor.²⁷

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25. Leach 1974, 125: "[Pygmalion's] love for a self-reflecting image recalls the passion of Narcissus and it is clear that Pygmalion would fare no better if Venus did not grant his wish." Rosati 1983 compares the narcissistic tendencies of Narcissus, Pygmalion, and Ovid himself; see especially 41–51, 65–67.

26. Rhoter 1980, 82, 85.

27. On Ovid's "pessimistic" reading of the *Aeneid*, see Knox 1995, 202 and Casali 1995.

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