

“How Strangely Chang’d”:
The Re-creation of Ovid by African American Women Poets

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Classics and the Graduate Faculty of the
University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date Approved: 10 May 2018

The thesis committee for Rachel C. Morrison certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Abstract

This project examines the re-creation of Ovid by African American women poets. Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved Black woman writing in colonial America, engages with Ovid's account of Niobe in her *epyllion* "Niobe in Distress." Henrietta Cordelia Ray, who was active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, picks up where Wheatley left off in a sonnet called "Niobe." Elsewhere, in "Echo's Complaint," Ray also imagines what Echo might say to Narcissus if she had full control over her words—an imaginative exercise that has resonances with Ovid's *Heroides*. Finally, in her 1995 book *Mother Love*, the contemporary poet Rita Dove re-examines the tale of Demeter and Persephone from a number of different angles. In reworking the *Metamorphoses*, all three poets paint vivid images of vulnerable girls and bereft mothers. Moreover, Wheatley, Ray, and Dove play with Ovidian elements to explore themes of repetition, voice, motherhood, and power dynamics.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank Emma Scioli, who is a meticulous reader, an insightful commenter, and a caring mentor. Pam Gordon provided valuable encouragement in the early stages of my writing process, while Tara Welch's comments on the nearly-complete product were incisive and thought-provoking. My friends and colleagues Michael Fons, Kara Kopchinski, and Katri Niemi have been endless fonts of encouragement, laughter, and cheesecake. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Tim Hofmeister, Garrett Jacobsen, Rebecca Futo Kennedy, and Sue Ellen Turscak, whose love of teaching and of the classics have made me the reader and writer I am today.

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Introduction

This project examines the re-creation of Ovid by African American women poets. I have chosen to offer close readings of specific works by three chronologically disparate authors, all of whom retell myths that appear in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved Black woman writing in colonial America, reworks Ovid's account of Niobe in her *epyllion* "Niobe in Distress." Henrietta Cordelia Ray, who was active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, picks up where Wheatley left off in a sonnet called "Niobe." Elsewhere, in a longer work titled "Echo's Complaint," Ray also imagines what Echo might say to Narcissus if she had full control over her words—an imaginative exercise that has resonances with Ovid's *Heroides*. Finally, in her 1995 book *Mother Love*, the contemporary poet Rita Dove re-examines the tale of Demeter and Persephone¹ from a number of different angles.

Certainly, these three poets have much in common beyond their race, gender, and affinity for Ovidian mythology. The particular myths that they have chosen reveal an interest in the experiences of vulnerable girls and bereft mothers. From Wheatley's poignant description of Niobe's unanswered prayers for mercy to Dove's portrayal of Demeter "[b]lown apart by loss,"² desperate to convince those around her that they must urgently search for Persephone, these authors use myths from the *Metamorphoses* to explore issues of silence and voice. Whereas Ovid writes about women rendered voiceless by transformations into stone and curses from vengeful goddesses, these African American poets write about women who *do* have voices but whose words are ignored by more powerful figures.

¹ Although Dove engages with both Greek and Roman versions of the myth, she uses only Greek names (Demeter, Persephone, Hades). In the interest of consistency, I have followed her lead and will refer to Ceres as "Demeter," Proserpina as "Persephone," and Pluto/Dis as "Hades" throughout this project.

² Dove "The Search," 1.

Moreover, Wheatley, Ray, and Dove are all interested in poetic form. One early criticism of Wheatley, in fact, was that she was excessively devoted to poetic form, with some of her contemporaries viewing her command of the elegiac couplet as a sign that she was merely an imitator of Alexander Pope.³ Even critics reticent to praise other aspects of Ray's work acknowledge "her technical skill with poetic form as exemplary."⁴ Dove, writing in a literary moment much more open to experimentation with form than Wheatley or Ray, began *Mother Love* as a technical exercise. "One day I was thinking, 'I'm tired of all the male gods; what's a good female deity?'" she explained in a 1995 interview. "Since Rilke had written sonnets to Orpheus, I decided to write sonnets to Demeter."⁵ The book opens with "An Intact World," a prose preface reflecting on the nature of the sonnet and asking, "Can't form also be a talisman against disintegration?"⁶ Throughout *Mother Love*, Dove plays with sonnets, pushing the boundaries of what 14 lines can do. Her attention to form is one of several ways in which she reflects on her own identity as a poet and on how she fits into literary history.

Finally, all three women explore the idea of literary tradition and their place in it. The full title of Wheatley's Niobe story is "Niobe in Distress for her Children slain by Apollo, from Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book VI. and from a view of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson," so she explicitly puts her own work in conversation with Ovid's (and, for that matter, with Richard Wilson's). In her other poetry, she mentions Homer, Virgil, and Terence and talks about negotiating her own position within that poetic lineage.⁷ Ray does not mention previous authors by name, but her engagement with literary predecessors is evident. Not only is Ovid an

³ Walker 2011, 235.

⁴ Corkery 2008.

⁵ Bellin 1995, 23.

⁶ Dove "An Intact World."

⁷ Wheatley "To Maecenas."

influence, but her reading of Niobe builds on Wheatley's, while her Echo and Narcissus seem to have been mediated through John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Finally, Dove engages with a vast array of poetic influences. In addition to drawing from both Ovid and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, she has named Wheatley as a notable predecessor⁸ and mentions in "An Intact World" that she considers *Mother Love* a sort of female response to Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*.⁹

This project contributes to the subfield Michele Ronnick has termed *Classica Africana*,¹⁰ modifying Meyer Reinhold's term *Classica Americana*.¹¹ I am indebted to two recent works of scholarship in particular. Tracey L. Walters's *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition* (2007) provides an invaluable overview of how African American women writers in the United States have engaged with Greek and Roman mythology in their work. Even more recently, Nicole Adeyinka Spigner's "Niobe Repeating" (2014) examines Ovidian elements in the work of Black New Women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I aim to build on the work of Walters, Spigner, and others by offering analyses of Wheatley, Ray, and Dove that are grounded in close readings of the relevant sections from the *Metamorphoses*. In what ways, I ask, do these three poets reimagine stories from the *Metamorphoses*? How do elements of Ovid's language appear in these English poems? How do they create new meaning by making changes to Ovid's wording and version of events? And finally, why Ovid? What is it about him as a writer and the *Metamorphoses* as a text that attracts these three African American women poets?

⁸ Walters 2007, 136.

⁹ Dove "An Intact World."

¹⁰ Ronnick 1997.

¹¹ Reinhold 1984.

“How Strangely Chang’d”:

Phillis Wheatley’s Reinvention of Ovid’s Niobe

In 1773, an enslaved Black woman named Phillis Wheatley sat for “one of the oddest oral examinations on record,”¹² forced to prove to a committee of “the most respectable Characters in Boston” that she was “thought qualified to write”¹³ her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Many of these prominent men (including John Hancock) owned slaves; at least one had been a slave dealer.¹⁴ We do not know exactly how Wheatley convinced them that the book was really her own work—she never publicly commented on the examination—but many scholars theorize that at least some of the questioning would have focused on the many classical myths and texts to which she alludes in her writing.¹⁵ While many of these references appear in religious reflections or poems written to commemorate specific events, one unique piece retells a story from the *Metamorphoses* by combining passages that seem to be directly translated from Ovid with innovative additions that lead readers to reimagine the text. At 212¹⁶ lines, the *epyllion* “Niobe in Distress for her Children slain by Apollo, from *Ovid’s* *Metamorphoses*, Book VI. and from a view of the Painting of Mr. *Richard Wilson*” is Wheatley’s second longest poem. By playing with Ovid, Wheatley reimagines one piece of the classical tradition in a way that foregrounds the experiences of Black women in eighteenth-century America.

¹² Gates 2003, 6.

¹³ “To the PUBLICK” 1773, in Wheatley 1773.

¹⁴ Gates 2003, 15.

¹⁵ e.g. Gates 2003, Hairston 2011, Mason 1966. In recent years Brooks 2010, Carretta 2011, and Waldstreicher 2011 have suggested that, since many of these men had social ties to the Wheatley family, the attestation was the result of a series of less formal conversations, rather than one major oral exam.

¹⁶ Later editions of the poem include 12 additional lines, accompanied by a note that “This Verse to the End is the Work of another Hand.” Since scholars see no reason to believe that Wheatley wrote this verse or agreed to its inclusion (Robinson 1984, Shields 1988, Walters 2007), I will not include it in my analysis.

Scholars have long been divided over the question of just how much Latin Wheatley knew. In a letter published at the beginning of *Poems on Various Subjects*, her master John Wheatley writes, “She has a great Inclination to learn the Latin Tongue, and has made some Progress in it.”¹⁷ In her poem “America,” written when she was about fourteen or fifteen years old, Wheatley refers to Carthage as “Agenoria.”¹⁸ Wheatley scholar John Shields argues that she arrived at this otherwise unattested form¹⁹ by taking Virgil’s “Agenoris urbem”²⁰ (“city of Agenor”) and using the genitive of the name Agenor in order to create a nominative singular first-declension place name.²¹ Several years later, one of Wheatley’s hosts during her visit to London, John Thornton, wrote to a friend, “Phillis the African Girl...was over lately from Boston and staid with me about a week [...] she has made an uncommon progress in Learning, writes an uncommon good hand, [and] understands Latin.”²² There would be no reason for Thornton to mention that Wheatley understood Latin if that were not in fact the case. Moreover, Shields has offered evidence that Wheatley’s work engages with Dante’s *Commedia*, but since no English translations were available during her lifetime and there is no evidence that she knew Italian, she would have needed to read Dante in Latin.²³ Finally, reading “Niobe in Distress” alongside Ovid’s telling of the Niobe story yields fruit; there are Ovidian resonances present in Wheatley’s poem that suggest a deep engagement with the text.

¹⁷ “LETTER sent by the Author’s Master to the Publisher” dated Nov. 14, 1772 in Wheatley 1773.

¹⁸ Wheatley “America,” 35.

¹⁹ Augustine mentions a goddess named Agenoria in his list of gods, *De Civitate Dei* 4.11, but the form is otherwise unattested and seems never to have been used as a place name in classical literature.

²⁰ *Aen.* 1.338.

²¹ Shields 2015, 24-5.

²² Carretta 2011, 116.

²³ Shields 2015.

Wheatley opens the poem with an invocation to the Muse that establishes the dense layers of artistic inspiration at play. The first words of the poem, “APOLLO’S wrath to man,”²⁴ suggest a familiarity with μῆνιν as a suitably epic subject. Strikingly, the first line identifies Apollo as the story’s agent of wrath, ignoring the roles of his mother and sister in the punishment of Niobe. In the following lines, Wheatley makes more explicit her understanding of where she fits into an artistic genealogy:

Thou who did’st first th’ ideal pencil give,
And taught’st the painter in his works to live,
Inspire with glowing energy of thought,
What *Wilson* painted, and what *Ovid* wrote.
Muse! lend thy aid, nor let me sue in vain,
Tho’ last and meanest of the rhyming train!²⁵

Notably, Wheatley sees a single muse as the source of inspiration for both Ovid and the eighteenth-century Welsh painter Richard Wilson, whose work “The Destruction of the Children of Niobe” she likely encountered during her visit to London.²⁶ Identifying the same “glowing energy of thought” in Ovid’s portrayal of Niobe and in Wilson’s, she seeks to insert herself into the tradition. Demurring that she is the “last and meanest of the rhyming train” is, of course, a rhetorical move that assures readers of her humility. Nevertheless, Wheatley still asserts that she belongs in the train—that her work is born from the same source of inspiration as Ovid’s.

Wheatley takes a more sympathetic view of Niobe than Ovid does.²⁷ From the moment that she opens the poem by identifying her subject as Apollo’s wrath, rather than Niobe’s pride, Wheatley chooses to emphasize Niobe’s suffering and her experience of injustice. One of the subtler ways in which she remakes Niobe is by changing the placement of certain lines. Ovid’s

²⁴ Wheatley “Niobe in Distress,” 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 3-8.

²⁶ Shaw 2006, 42.

²⁷ Shields 1993, Walters 2007, Spigner 2014.

Niobe spends 32 lines of dactylic hexameter boasting to the women of Thebes about how she compares to Latona, while Wheatley's Niobe boasts for 24 shorter, iambic pentameter lines. Much of the material that Wheatley cuts from Niobe's speech, however, does not simply disappear altogether. Instead, she moves it into passages of narration. Ovid, for example, has Niobe remind the Theban women of her own impressive heritage:

mihi Tantalus auctor,
cui licuit soli superiorum tangere mensas;
Pleiadum soror est genetrix mea; maximus Atlas
est auus, aetherium qui fert ceruicibus axem;
Iuppiter alter auus; socero quoque glorior illo.²⁸

Tantalus is my father, who alone was permitted to touch the table of the gods; my mother is the sister of the Pleiades; great Atlas is my grandfather, who bears the axis of heaven on his neck; Jupiter is my other grandfather; I also boast him as father-in-law.²⁹

In Ovid's account, Niobe's family history is yet another source of pride that provides fodder for her own bragging. Wheatley, however, makes Niobe's heritage a part of her own third-person narration, describing her subject as:

The wealthy heir of *Tantalus* divine,
He most distinguish'd by *Dodonean Jove*,
To approach the tables of the gods above:
Her grandsire *Atlas*, who with mighty pains
Th' ethereal axis on his neck sustains:
Her other gran sire on the throne on high
Rolls the loud-pealing thunder thro' the sky.³⁰

Wheatley, who has just finished delineating her own artistic genealogy (Homer, Ovid, Richard Wilson), proceeds to introduce Niobe by describing her biological genealogy as simply a matter of fact. Wheatley's Niobe does not need to justify herself to her contemporaries or to readers,

²⁸ *Met.* 6.172-6.

²⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

³⁰ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 14-20.

because Wheatley, in the voice of the authoritative epic poet, does the work of justification for her. These lines are taken almost directly from Ovid, right down to the literal translation of “ethereal axis” for *aetherium axem*, but by changing their position and speaker, Wheatley gives them new meaning, granting Niobe the same sort of external attestation of her qualifications that appeared at the beginning of Wheatley’s own poems.

Likewise, Ovid’s Niobe claims dominion over the Phrygians, the fact that technically her husband is king coming almost as an afterthought:

Me gentes metuunt Phrygiae, me regia Cadmi
sub domina est, fidibusque mei commissa mariti
moenia cum populis a meque viroque reguntur.³¹

The Phrygian people fear me, the palace of Cadmus is under me as mistress, and the walls entrusted to the faith of my husband are ruled, along with the people, by me and my husband.

Even while describing her role as queen, Niobe delays mentioning Amphion. She describes the palace of Cadmus as lying under *her* control, neglecting to mention his actual heir just yet. When she finally acknowledges Amphion, the grammatical equality of the agents “me and my husband” (“meque viroque”) establishes that, at the very least, Phrygia is governed by a couple of equal co-rulers. Wheatley, too, presents Niobe as being at least equal to her husband, but again she moves this detail from the queen’s own speech to the scene-setting narration towards the beginning of the poem. Wheatley points to Niobe’s “potent reign”³² and urges her reader, “See in her hand the regal sceptre shine.”³³ There is no hint of Amphion’s existence for nearly ten more lines, and when she does briefly mention him, Wheatley does not even go as far as Ovid and suggest that the two are co-rulers. Instead, Wheatley gives readers the impression that the “potent

³¹ *Met.* 6.177-9.

³² Wheatley “Niobe in Distress,” 12.

³³ *Ibid.* 13.

reign” and “royal sceptre” of Thebes belong to Niobe alone. However, instead of making Niobe claim such power in her own words, Wheatley presents it as an objective fact of the story. Wheatley opens “Niobe in Distress” by joining the epic tradition and, thus, claiming an artistic authority that has historically belonged to men of European descent. Once she has claimed this poetic authority, her next act as author is to establish the political authority of the foreign-born queen Niobe.

Wheatley also spends more time than Ovid describing Niobe’s children. Ovid lists other reasons for the queen’s sense of superiority, but tells readers in advance that it is her pride in her children that will prove ruinous:

Multa dabant animos, sed enim nec coniugis artes
nec genus amborum magnique potentia regni
sic placuere illi (quamuis ea cuncta placerent)
ut sua progenies; et felicissima matrum
dicta foret Niobe, si non sibi uisa fuisset.³⁴

Many things gave her pride, but neither the skill of her husband nor the heritage of them both and the power of their great reign pleased her so much (although these things did please her) as her own children; and Niobe would have been called the happiest of mothers, if she had not seemed to be so to herself.

For Ovid, Niobe is prideful in general but particularly prideful when it comes to her children. He then lets readers know what will come: Niobe’s delight in her children will be what prevents this story from having a happy ending. Wheatley, on the other hand, devotes much more attention to the joy Niobe derives from her children. Her description is full of bright, sunny imagery:

Seven sprightly sons the royal bed adorn,
Seven daughters beauteous as the op’ning morn,
As when *Aurora* fills the ravish’d sight,
And decks the orient realms with rosy light
From their bright eyes the living splendors play,
Nor can beholders bear the flashing ray.³⁵

³⁴ *Met.* 6.152-6.

³⁵ Wheatley “Niobe in Distress,” 23-8.

The Wheatley scholar John C. Shields has observed that sunlight is a frequently recurring theme in her work, noting that “in her slender body of poetry she alludes to Aurora eight times, Apollo seven, Phoebus twelve, and Sol twice.”³⁶ Kidnapped from Senegal³⁷ as a young girl, Wheatley shared with her captors only one memory of her early childhood: “her mother poured out water before the sun at his rising.”³⁸ Shields infers that Wheatley’s family worshipped the sun, but whether or not this was the case, it seems to be true that she had a great deal of appreciation for sun imagery and associated it with motherhood. Thus, Niobe’s daughters in particular are beautiful like the morning, brightening the world around them. Wheatley’s description of Niobe’s children, Walters notes, “shifts our attention from Niobe’s insolence to Niobe’s maternal love.”³⁹ No longer does our primary first impression of Niobe center on her bragging; instead, we get a picture of an adoring mother who grows a little too daring.

Walters observes that Wheatley also presents a different view of Niobe’s demeanor than Ovid does.⁴⁰ When the women of Thebes gather to worship Latona, Ovid’s Niobe comes onto the scene angrily:

ecce uenit comitum Niobe celeberrima turba,
uestibus intexto Phrygiis spectabilis auro,
et, quantum ira sinit, formosa: movensque decoro
cum capite inmissos umerum per utrumque capillos
constitit, utque oculos circumtulit alta superbos⁴¹

Behold, Niobe comes with her celebrated crowd of companions, remarkable in Phrygian clothes with gold woven in, and, as much as her rage allows, she is beautiful; and moving with her beautiful head she stands with hair flowing over each shoulder, and standing tall she rolls her haughty eyes.

³⁶ Shields 1980, 103.

³⁷ Carretta 2011, 4-5.

³⁸ Odell 1834, 10.

³⁹ Walters 2007, 45.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Met.* 6.165-9.

Ovid's Niobe is on the move and full of rage. She is beautiful, he tells us—but he qualifies it by adding that she is only as beautiful as anger will allow. She herself is moving, her hair is sent or released (*inmissos*) over her shoulders. Wheatley's Niobe, on the other hand, is calmer and less emotional:

Beyond description beautiful she moves
Like heav'nly Venus, 'midst her smiles and loves:
She views around the supplicating train,
And shakes her graceful head with stern disdain⁴²

In contrast to Ovid, Wheatley does not qualify Niobe's beauty in any way. Here Niobe is not beautiful *in spite of* her rage, but instead "her graceful head" shakes "with stern disdain," so that even her expressions of anger carry connotations of regal dignity. What in Ovid was a "crowd of companions" here becomes a "supplicating train," a shift in language that widens the gap between Niobe and the women around her. Finally, Wheatley compares Niobe to a goddess: she "moves / Like heav'nly Venus." With this divine comparison, she softens the speech that Niobe is about to give by suggesting that it has its basis in fact: there *is* something godlike about her. Again, where Ovid has certain boasts come only from Niobe herself, Wheatley makes some of those claims in her persona as objective, authoritative narrator.

Certainly, Wheatley's Niobe is bold and impulsive in her speech. In fact, she makes a more explicit claim to divinity than does Ovid's Niobe, demanding that "tribute" be paid to her "goddesship"⁴³ and describing herself as "an empress with a goddess join'd."⁴⁴ Ovid's Niobe, by contrast, never explicitly calls herself a goddess. Instead, she implies it when she asks, "Why is Latona honored at altars, while my power goes without incense?" ("aut cur colitur Latona per

⁴² Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 57-60.

⁴³ Ibid. 68.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 74.

aras, / numen adhuc sine ture meum est?").⁴⁵ The use of *numen* is careful and deliberate, since of course it carries the connotation of divinity (especially since it appears alongside altars and incense), but could also simply refer to power and authority.⁴⁶ Later in the same speech, Ovid's Niobe boasts that she has "beauty worthy of a goddess" ("digna dea facies").⁴⁷ Again, she draws strong connections between herself and divinity, but does not quite claim to be a goddess herself. Wheatley's Niobe, on the other hand, does dare to call herself a goddess, but her boasts do not seem quite as shocking because she has been praised so much in the third-person narration. Although her words seem tragically ill-advised, she is more justified than Ovid's Niobe in making certain claims because the narrator reminds us that they are true.

Perhaps understandably, then, the speech of Wheatley's Niobe is better-received by the Theban women than that of Ovid's. Ovid writes that after Niobe tells them to stop worshipping Latona, the women "put aside and leave behind unfinished sacrifices, but as much as possible, they worship the goddess with quiet murmuring" ("deponunt et sacra infecta relinquunt, / quodque licet, tacito uenerantur murmure numen").⁴⁸ Wheatley's account, however, offers no hint that the other women might disagree with Niobe: "The Theban maids obey'd, / Their brows unbound, and left the rights unpaid."⁴⁹ Removing any suggestion that the women of Thebes might silently object to the orders of their queen does not only continue to generally make Niobe a more sympathetic figure; it also contributes to Wheatley's portrayal of Niobe as a rebellious subject herself. Instead of a queen resented by her subjects, she becomes someone who urges those around her to question the authority of Latona and other divinities.

⁴⁵ *Met.* 6.171-2.

⁴⁶ *Lewis & Short*, s.v. "numen."

⁴⁷ *Met.* 6.182.

⁴⁸ *Met.* 6.202-3.

⁴⁹ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 87-8.

Shields observes that Wheatley introduces the language of rebellion, which is not explicitly present in Ovid, into Latona's speech (and the responses of her children).⁵⁰ Ovid's Latona, though enraged, barely pays attention to Niobe—she does not even mention her name when describing the outrage to her children, instead choosing to speak in the passive voice (*dubitor, arceor*) and refer to the “daughter of Tantalus.” In Wheatley's retelling, though, impiety becomes insubordination. Latona tells Apollo and Artemis, “*Niobe* sprung from *Tantalus* inspires / Each *Theban* bosom with rebellious fires.”⁵¹ Where Ovid's Niobe was an out-of-touch queen whose whims sparked resentful murmuring among her subjects, Wheatley's is the leader of a rebellion, her words creating a dangerous possibility of uprising. Apollo adopts the same language, promising his mother that he will “punish pride, and scourge the rebel mind.”⁵² Ovid's Latona seeks to defend her honor as a goddess, whereas Wheatley's aims to quash a potential rebellion.

Viewing Wheatley retroactively through the lens of nineteenth-century Black New Women authors, Spigner reads Niobe as “the black enslaved mother, Latona [...] as the white mother-nation.”⁵³ In this battle between a smaller, more powerful family and a larger family whose bodies are at their mercy, Spigner sees Wheatley making an old story freshly relevant to the increasing prevalence of plantations in the eighteenth century.⁵⁴ Of course, as the only slave living in a small Boston household, Wheatley would have had a very different experience of American slavery than someone on a large Southern plantation. By the time “Niobe in Distress” was likely written, however, Wheatley had already made connections with members of the

⁵⁰ Shields 1993, 106.

⁵¹ Wheatley “Niobe in Distress,” 95-6.

⁵² *Ibid.* 104.

⁵³ Spigner 2014, 77.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

growing abolitionist movement,⁵⁵ so it is not unreasonable to think that other people's varied experiences of American slavery would also have haunted her imagination. Whether she had plantation dynamics in mind or not, it is still the case that Wheatley, by having more powerful figures accuse Niobe of "rebellion" before enacting violence on her family, gives the story resonances with the world of eighteenth-century American slavery. By making small changes, Wheatley has transformed a story from Ovid's Roman epic into a distinctly American epic—and, in particular, one that centers the experiences of African American women.

For the most part, Wheatley's description of Niobe's sons dying is one of the sections where she stays the closest to Ovid. The few changes she does make here simply expand or intensify moments and sentiments already present in the *Metamorphoses*. In their 1855 *Cyclopaedia of American Literature*, the Duyckinck brothers write that in this section of the poem, "there is one line, at least, which would do honor to any pen."⁵⁶ Just before the slaughter begins, Wheatley writes, "With clouds incompass'd glorious Phœbus stands; / The feather'd vengeance quiv'ring in his hands."⁵⁷ "This is not a translation of anything in Ovid," observe the Duyckincks, "for that writer has neglected so striking a position for his Deity."⁵⁸ Ovid does mention that Apollo and Artemis travel through the clouds,⁵⁹ but the Duyckincks are correct that there is no such moment of dread and anticipation in the Latin. Instead, this moment comes from the Richard Wilson painting that Wheatley cites as the other inspiration for her poem. Otherwise, however, Wheatley's description of the deaths of Niobe's sons closely follows Ovid's account.

⁵⁵ Carretta 2011, 195.

⁵⁶ Duyckinck 1855, 368.

⁵⁷ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 107-8.

⁵⁸ Duyckinck 1855, 368.

⁵⁹ *Met.* 6.216-7.

After the slaughter of Niobe's sons, Ovid writes that when she finds out what has happened, she is both surprised and angry "that the gods had dared this, that they had such a right" ("quod ausi / hoc essent superi, quod tantum iuris haberent").⁶⁰ Wheatley expands this moment into several lines of direct speech, which culminate with Niobe demanding, "Why sleeps the vengeance of immortal *Jove*?"⁶¹ What was generalized in Ovid becomes specific in Wheatley. Here, Niobe does not only marvel at the entitlement of Latona, Apollo, and Artemis; she also seeks acknowledgment from a higher divine authority that she has been wronged.

Both Ovid and Wheatley emphasize the changes wrought in Niobe by the death of her sons (and subsequent suicide of Amphion). Ovid suggests that it is as if the two Niobes are different people:

heu, quantum haec Niobe Niobe distabat ab illa,
quae modo Letois populum summouerat aris
et mediam tulerat gressus resupina per urbem,
invidiosa suis, at nunc miseranda uel hosti!⁶²

Oh, how far away this Niobe stood from that Niobe, who had recently driven the people from Latona's altar and had walked proudly through the middle of the city, enviable to those around her, but now to be pitied even by an enemy!

He cleverly puts the two instances of "Niobe" right next to one another, but then illustrates just how far from one another they are: the old one was an object of envy to her loved ones, while the new one must be pitied even by her enemies. Ovid characterizes the old Niobe by her movements: she drove the Theban women away from the altars and walked proudly through the city. The new Niobe, however, has grown passive: she is *miseranda*, to be pitied. In the following lines, she lies down next to her sons' bodies. Although Ovid does not extensively

⁶⁰ *Met.* 6.269-70.

⁶¹ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 168.

⁶² *Met.* 6.273.

describe the new Niobe after noting that she has changed, he uses motion to convey her new demeanor: she is no longer standing, but lying down next to what she has lost, when she addresses Latona this time.

Wheatley maintains this change in posture from Ovid: Niobe “[w]ith lofty head directs her steps no more,”⁶³ and instead “[I]ay overwhelm’d with grief, and kiss’d her dead.”⁶⁴ Wheatley, however, further elaborates on how this new Niobe differs from the old one. She is “less haughty than before,”⁶⁵ a striking statement because Ovid makes no such claim. Ovid’s Niobe has stopped standing tall and is now lying prone the ground, which might indicate that she has been humbled, but might instead simply mean that she is resigned or overwhelmed with grief. Wheatley, however, outright tells us that Niobe is not as prideful as she recently was, which might shape our understanding of the speech that follows. Moreover, Wheatley adds a brief description that does not come from anything in Ovid’s text: “How strangely chang’d!—yet beautiful in woe.”⁶⁶ For Ovid, the metamorphosis of Niobe does not come until the end of the story, when she turns to stone. Wheatley, however, does not include that transformation, choosing instead to end her account in the moment that Niobe’s youngest daughter dies. This line, then, is the closest Wheatley comes to showing a metamorphosis: she tells us that Niobe has been “strangely chang’d,” a completed action in the past, but that she remains “beautiful in woe.” Ovid’s Niobe turns into a striking statue and, he writes, “even now the marble drips with tears” (“lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant”).⁶⁷ Wheatley’s Niobe is

⁶³ Wheatley “Niobe in Distress,” 172.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 178.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 171.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 175.

⁶⁷ *Met.* 6.312.

already, while still fully human and with seven living children, someone to be looked at and admired.

In keeping with her early transformation, Wheatley's Niobe is slightly more diplomatic than Ovid's in her address to Latona. After urging Latona to feast on her pain, Ovid's Niobe ventures to say:

Exsulta victrixque inimica triumpha.
Cur autem victrix? miserae mihi plura supersunt,
quam tibi felici: post tot quoque funera vinco.⁶⁸

Exult and triumph, victorious enemy. Why, however, victorious? More remain for me in my misery, than there are for you at your happiest; even after these deaths I am victorious.

Ovid's Niobe admits that she has been defeated, but then retracts the admission, unable to refrain from noting that even now she has many more children than Latona. Wheatley softens Niobe's stance by having her offer a qualifying, "If I've offended"⁶⁹ and refer to herself as "wretched."⁷⁰ In the final words of her speech, Wheatley's Niobe still insults Latona, but she is more hesitant than Ovid's:

Rejoice triumphant, my victorious foe,
But show the cause from whence your triumphs flow?
Tho' I unhappy mourn these children slain,
Yet greater numbers to my lot remain.⁷¹

In its essence, the slight remains the same in the two texts: Niobe cannot help but draw attention to the fact that she still has more children than Latona does. Here, however, her phrasing is less aggressive than in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's Niobe ends on the word *uinco*: "I conquer." After describing Latona as *uictrix*, she concludes by claiming that in fact, she herself is the conqueror.

⁶⁸ *Met.* 6.283-5.

⁶⁹ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 181.

⁷⁰ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 183.

⁷¹ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 185-8.

Wheatley's Niobe makes no such claim, but instead ends with the subtler "greater numbers to my lot remain." It is, of course, still enough of an insult to provoke further slaughter from vengeful gods, but this impersonal calculation is certainly not as bold as the insinuation in the *Metamorphoses* that Niobe has conquered Latona. Moreover, one scholar notes that there is a "self-sacrificing and heroic" element in the speech of Wheatley's Niobe,⁷² who asks the gods "take this wretched life you deign'd to save"⁷³ as she mourns her children.

Wheatley's account of the deaths of the first six daughters is more or less a direct translation of Ovid. Strikingly, neither poet mentions Apollo or Artemis in these sections. As soon as Niobe finishes speaking, Ovid writes, "the string of the tightly-stretched bow resounded"⁷⁴ ("sonuit contento nervus ab arcu"), which Wheatley renders as "the bow-string twang'd with awful sound."⁷⁵ In both cases, what was a feud between two individuals now becomes impersonal and seemingly inevitable. The wrath of the gods is an unstoppable force that Niobe has unleashed by addressing Latona.

In both versions, there is a pause before the murder of the youngest daughter. Audiences might expect a reprieve now that Niobe does not have as many children as Latona, Anderson notes, and moreover there was precedent, reported by Apollodorus and Hyginus, for allowing the youngest child to survive.⁷⁶ Ovid heightens the tension of the moment by having Niobe admit defeat and plead for mercy:

Quam toto corpore mater,
tota veste tegens "unam minimamque relinque
de multis minimam posco" clamavit "et unam."⁷⁷

⁷² Hayden 1992, 443.

⁷³ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 183.

⁷⁴ *Met.* 6.286.

⁷⁵ Wheatley "Niobe in Distress," 189.

⁷⁶ Anderson n.6.297-300.

⁷⁷ *Met.* 6.298-300.

The mother, covering the child with her whole body, with her whole cloak, cried,
“Leave this one who is the littlest, out of the many, I am just begging for the
littlest one.”

The repetition of *toto* and *tota* reminds us how all-important this moment is: bereft of her husband and thirteen oldest children, Niobe can only devote everything she has to this one remaining daughter. Wheatley introduces a different kind of repetition into this scene:

One only daughter lives, and she the least;
The queen close clasp'd the daughter to her breast:
“Ye heav'nly pow'rs, ah spare me one,” she cry'd,
“Ah! spare me one,” the vocal hills reply'd.⁷⁸

Ovid uses a chiasmic structure to have Niobe beg for her daughter's life twice: she pleads for *unam minimam* and then, a line later, *minimam...et unam*. Wheatley, on the other hand, does not have Niobe make the same plea twice. Instead, Niobe asks once that her daughter be spared, and the hills echo her words back to her. Although Ovid includes repetition in his account, there is no such evocation of Echo. Not only does Wheatley allude to Ovid's repetition here, then, but she also alludes to his most famous repeater.

Ovid proceeds to describe Niobe's transformation into stone, but Wheatley offers only two more lines: “In vain she begs, the Fates her suit deny, / In her embrace she sees her daughter die.”⁷⁹ The echoing hills emphasize the futility of Niobe's prayers, since the gods do not actually respond. In the *Metamorphoses*, this moment is even briefer: “even as she is praying, the one for whom she prays dies”⁸⁰ (“*dumque rogat, pro qua rogat, occidit*”). While maintaining the sense of unanswered prayers, Wheatley makes Niobe the witness of her own tragedy. At the end of her story, Ovid's Niobe has become stone, a piece of art to be seen by others. Wheatley, on the other

⁷⁸ Wheatley “Niobe in Distress,” 207-10.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 211-2.

⁸⁰ *Met.* 6.301.

hand, ends her account with the image of Niobe watching her last daughter die. Either way there is a focus on her suffering, but one version ends with Niobe becoming a spectacle, while another ends with her watching the spectacle of the tragedy she endures.

Not only does Wheatley leave out Ovid's description of Niobe's transformation into stone, but she also ends her account before the revelation that "caught up in the whirling of a strong wind, she was carried back to her fatherland" ("validi circumdata turbine venti / in patriam rapta est").⁸¹ Ovid's Niobe is a foreign woman who is ultimately returned home, where she mourns her children from afar. Wheatley's Niobe, on the other hand, remains in Thebes, still a foreigner.

By ending her story before Niobe's physical transformation and return to her homeland, Wheatley in some ways hastens the transformation that Ovid describes. Immediately after the point where Wheatley stops, Ovid writes:

Orba resedit
exanimes inter natos natasque virumque,
deriguitque malis. Nullos movet aura capillos,
in vultu color est sine sanguine, lumina maestis
stant inmota genis, nihil est in imagine vivum.⁸²

She sits on the ground among her lifeless sons and daughters and husband, and grows stiff from evils. The wind does not move any of her hairs, her face is colorless and bloodless, her eyes stand motionless over her sad cheeks, there is nothing living in her likeness.

After describing Niobe's slowed movements and stiffening, Ovid tells us that there is nothing living left in her likeness—the first explicit reveal, for readers, that what is being described is no longer Niobe, but instead an imitation. Ovid explains in detail the process by which Niobe is frozen in time, becoming an image instead of a person. Wheatley, on the other hand, never

⁸¹ *Met.* 6.310-11.

⁸² *Met.* 6.301-05.

dehumanizes her subject. Instead, she ‘shows’ the moment Niobe becomes frozen in time, rather than ‘telling’ it. There is no instance of mystical transformation; there is only human grief, and then the story ends, with Niobe frozen in that moment of mourning.

As the second woman and first enslaved person to publish a book in the United States,⁸³ Wheatley has long received criticism of her work that is not entirely about the content of her work. “The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism,” sneers Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, dismissing her writing so that he can conclude that “Among the blacks” there is “no poetry.”⁸⁴ Voltaire, on the other hand, enjoyed her work a great deal and considered it evidence of “genius on all parts of the earth.”⁸⁵ In response to a poem she wrote in praise of his leadership and the revolutionary cause, George Washington sent her a thank you note in which he wrote that if she ever found herself in the neighborhood, he would be “happy to see a person so favored by the muses.”⁸⁶ British readers who enjoyed Wheatley’s poetry invoked her story to condemn “the hypocrisy of a colony that insisted on liberty and equality when it came to its relationship to England but did not extend those principles to its own population.”⁸⁷ Immediately upon publication, then, Wheatley’s poetry became fodder for debates over race and revolution.

These highly charged interpretative battles continued long after Wheatley’s untimely death in 1784, when she was about thirty-one years old.⁸⁸ Many twentieth and twenty-first

⁸³ Spigner 2014, 45.

⁸⁴ Jefferson 1787, 150.

⁸⁵ Flanzbaum 1993, 71.

⁸⁶ Carretta 2011, 156.

⁸⁷ Gates 2003, 34-5.

⁸⁸ Because she was kidnapped as a young girl, there is no official record of Wheatley’s date (or even year) of birth. Estimations of her age are based on the fact that the Wheatley family guessed that Phillis was about seven or eight years old “from the circumstance of shedding her front teeth” when they bought her in 1761 (Odell 1834).

century readers have struggled to make sense of some of the more troubling aspects of her work. Writing poetry as an enslaved person, Wheatley had a limited range of expression; some of the ideas she expresses are disconcerting, whether or not those ideas are what she would have written had she had the freedom to speak openly. Most notoriously, she opens the short poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” with the line, “’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,”⁸⁹ recasting her kidnapping and enslavement as positive developments because they led to her eventual conversion to Christianity. Henry Louis Gates Jr. recounts correspondence he exchanged with a writer named Walter Grigo, who discovered that one can rearrange the letters in the poem to create a much more subversive message. The title “On Being Brought from Africa to America” is an anagram for “Bitter, Go I, Ebon Human Cargo, From Africa,” Grigo argued, while the five italicized words in the poem can be rearranged into the phrase “grasp a great vision: no races in chains.”⁹⁰ Whether or not such anagrams were intentional, it is certainly the case that people have devoted a great deal of time and energy to reading Wheatley and interpreting her writing from both literary-critical and socio-cultural perspectives.

The reception of Wheatley’s work has been fraught since before her book was even published, a fact of which she was likely all too aware while she was writing. What does it mean, then, for her to engage in the reception of Ovid? Certainly there was a tremendous amount of cultural capital associated with classical learning in England and America during the eighteenth century. The ancient world was often invoked in debates over race and slavery. Immediately after disparaging Wheatley’s work, Jefferson writes that Terence and Phaedrus “were slaves[, b]ut they were of the race of whites,” and thus, in his view, capable of taking their place among

⁸⁹ Wheatley “On Being Brought,” 1.

⁹⁰ Gates 2003, 87-9.

the “rarest artists” of Rome.⁹¹ Wheatley also invokes Terence in “To Maecenas,” the poem that opens *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. She devotes much of the poem to Homer and Virgil, referencing their work and trying to describe what she loves about it. Inspired as she is by the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, however, they are not quite sufficient to fuel her own art: “I less happy, cannot raise the song, / The fault’ring music dies upon my tongue.”⁹²

The twist comes when she remembers “the happier Terence,”⁹³ in contrast to her “less happy” self. Up until this point in the poem, Wheatley has addressed a human “Maecenas,” wishing that she might be able to “claim the *Muses* with the *Mantuan Sage*.”⁹⁴ After mentioning Terence, however, she addresses the Muses directly for the first time:

But say, ye *Muses*, why this partial grace,
To one alone of *Afric*’s sable race;
From age to age transmitting thus his name
With the first glory in the rolls of fame?⁹⁵

Whereas earlier she spoke hesitantly, now she asks the Muses for answers: why, in the long history of poetry considered significant by eighteenth-century Americans, has there been only one other poet of African descent? Once she mentions Terence, Wheatley seems to grow more confident at the dual reminder of his existence and his uniqueness. She promises that she will “snatch a laurel” from the “honour’d head” of Maecenas.⁹⁶ “Snatch” is a playful word, especially since she adds in the next line that he will “smile upon the deed,”⁹⁷ but it also hints at the

⁹¹ Ibid. 152.

⁹² Wheatley “To Maecenas,” 35-6.

⁹³ Ibid. 37. There is also a footnote written by Wheatley herself, which explains, “He was an *African* by birth.”

⁹⁴ Ibid. 24.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 39-42.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 46.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 47.

challenges Wheatley anticipates facing in her artistic career. Even if the Muses do sing in her, she must still take action in order to be acknowledged as a poet.

Scholars have proposed many possibilities regarding who Wheatley's "Maecenas" might have been. Her master John Wheatley is certainly a possibility, as are any number of wealthy residents of Boston and London. Brooks, noting that many of Wheatley's poems are addressed to friends who have lost loved ones, has observed that she was "conscripted into emotional labor, trading consolation for the attentions of well-connected white women," which she leveraged until John Wheatley freed her at the urging of all those well-connected friends.⁹⁸ Wheatley understood all too well the pressures of patronage that could weigh upon a poet, but in the end her writing earned her freedom. In his *Lives of the Poets*, Suetonius writes that Terence "was a slave at Rome to the senator Terentius Lucanus, by whom, on account of his talent and nature, he was not only given a liberal education, but soon he was set free" ("serviit Romae Terentio Lucano senatori, a quo ob ingenium et formam non institutus modo liberaliter sed et mature manumissus est").⁹⁹ Terence, freed for his skill as a writer, held a powerful *mythos* in eighteenth-century America, where he was "the only classical dramatist widely read,"¹⁰⁰ praised by John Adams "for his good Morals, good Taste, and good Latin."¹⁰¹ Suetonius's description of Terence as "of a dark color" ("colore fusco"),¹⁰² combined with the cognomen "Afer," inspired heated debate over the exact shade of Terence's skin in eighteenth-century America. By

⁹⁸ Brooks 2010, 15.

⁹⁹ Suet. *Vita Terenti* 1.

¹⁰⁰ Reinhold 1984, 151.

¹⁰¹ *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. IV, p. 80 (letter to John Quincy Adams, Feb. 12, 1781).

¹⁰² Suet. *Vita Terenti* 5.

identifying the Roman playwright as “one [...] of *Afric*’s sable race,”¹⁰³ Wheatley takes a stance in this battle and establishes a link between herself and the writers of classical antiquity.

“To Maecenas” makes no mention of Ovid in its list of greats. “Niobe in Distress,” however, represents a similar kind of engagement with Greco-Roman antiquity: Wheatley evokes an artistic tradition and seeks to establish and understand her own place within it. In “To Maecenas,” Wheatley wishes she could “rival [Homer] and *Virgil*’s page,”¹⁰⁴ but in “Niobe in Distress,” she is not so much a rival as a co-conspirator with Ovid—and, for that matter, with the painter Richard Wilson. Wilson’s influence cannot be traced line by line in the same way as Ovid’s, but its presence can certainly be felt. Wilson was so captivated by this story that he did at least four Niobe paintings,¹⁰⁵ although scholars believe that Wheatley was inspired by the most broadly circulated and critically acclaimed of the paintings, called the Wilton-Beaumont version after the names of its first two owners.¹⁰⁶ The painting is strikingly dark: clouds swirl overhead as Niobe, surrounded by dead and dying children, clutches the smallest one to her chest. Meanwhile Apollo, emerging from another set of dark clouds, takes aim. There is no sign in the painting of any arrogance or impiety on Niobe’s part; instead, we see only her grief and vulnerability. Writing about statues of Niobe in Augustan Rome, Feldherr observes that “images affect the viewer synchronically, juxtaposing new and old in the same instant,” and thus have the “ability to present opposite states not one after the other but in shocking simultaneity.”¹⁰⁷ Images effect meaning in different ways than texts do, presenting an entire story through the lens of a single moment. Although Wheatley does tell more of the story, her focus echoes Wilson’s: a

¹⁰³ Wheatley “To Maecenas,” 40.

¹⁰⁴ Wheatley “To Maecenas,” 23.

¹⁰⁵ Bury 1947, 44-5.

¹⁰⁶ Hayden 1992, 437.

¹⁰⁷ Feldherr 2005, 142.

fully human Niobe overcome by grief, suffering at the hands of the gods for reasons that do not matter as much as the suffering itself.

Moreover, by listing Ovid and Richard Wilson alongside each other as sources of inspiration, Wheatley, too, makes it clear that she is “juxtaposing new and old in the same instant.” She is interested in engaging with classical tradition, but she is also invested in expanding the parameters of that tradition. By linking Ovid’s work to that of a contemporary Welsh painter, she puts old and new interpretations of Niobe in conversation with one another while adding some twists of her own. Through subtle changes, she turns Niobe into a more sympathetic figure, a mother whose children’s lives are at the mercy of the powerful. In doing so, she works towards “snatching a laurel” and taking her place in an ever-expanding web of artistic inspiration: Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Wilson, Wheatley.

“An Answ’ring Cadence”:

Henrietta Cordelia Ray’s Repetitions of Niobe and Echo

Over a century after Wheatley’s death, her work remained influential. As African American literary societies began to form in cities across America, many women’s clubs not only read Wheatley’s work, but named their groups after her.¹⁰⁸ One member of such a club was Henrietta Cordelia Ray,¹⁰⁹ the daughter of the activist and newspaper editor Charles Bennett Ray.¹¹⁰ Proficient in Latin, Greek, and French,¹¹¹ Ray taught in the New York public schools for many years before retiring in order to focus on her writing.¹¹² Most famous for her poem “Lincoln,” which was read at the unveiling of the Emancipation Memorial,¹¹³ she incorporated classical references into much of her work. In her most widely-known poem, Lincoln himself is credited with a “storied Spartan’s stern simplicity,”¹¹⁴ while many of Ray’s other works describe classical statuary¹¹⁵ or rework tales from classical mythology. Writing in 1926, the scholar and biographer Hallie Q. Brown named the recently-deceased Ray alongside Wheatley and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper as “three of our women whose songs have made music during three successive generations.”¹¹⁶ In recent years some critics have found some of Ray’s work overly sentimental, but even those reticent to praise her content acknowledge “her technical skill with poetic form as exemplary.”¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸ McHenry 2002, 244.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 242.

¹¹⁰ Corkery 2008.

¹¹¹ Brown 1926, 172.

¹¹² Corkery 2008.

¹¹³ Pulham 2016.

¹¹⁴ Ray “Lincoln,” 22.

¹¹⁵ See Morse 2017 and Pulham 2016 for more on Ray’s engagement with classical and neoclassical statues.

¹¹⁶ Brown 1926, 171.

¹¹⁷ Corkery 2008.

“Niobe” appears in Ray’s first book, 1893’s *Sonnets*. Strikingly, it is the only poem in the collection addressed to a mythological figure. After opening with “To My Mother,” Ray then turns her attention to broad subjects in poems like like “Life” and “Aspiration.” “Niobe” comes in the middle of the collection, right after “Self-Mastery,” and is followed by a series of sonnets reflecting on the work of famous artists—Shakespeare, Milton, Raphael, Beethoven, and so forth. This sonnet, then, ties together the disparate parts of the slim volume in which it appears: it is at once about motherhood, broad philosophical abstractions, and artistry.

The poem opens with the exclamation, “O Mother-heart!”¹¹⁸ Many of the sonnets in this collection begin by directly addressing their subject, whether it is “Sweet Mother!”,¹¹⁹ “Life!”,¹²⁰ or “O poet gifted with the sight divine!”¹²¹ What immediately stands out about “Niobe” compared to Ray’s other poems is the curious fragmentation applied to its subject in these first few words: already Niobe is “mother-heart,” as opposed to a full human mother. Given Wheatley’s influence in this moment of African American literary history, “it is possible,” Walters suggests, “that Ray is rewriting Wheatley’s version of the Niobe story.”¹²² Spigner takes a stronger stance, arguing that “[i]t is obvious [...] that Ray read Wheatley,”¹²³ and yet as evident as Wheatley’s influence is, Ray has chosen a different approach. Admired for her technical skill even by critics otherwise unimpressed with her work,¹²⁴ Ray chooses to condense the story of Niobe into a single sonnet. Where Ovid and Wheatley each devote well over a hundred lines to the grief of this Theban queen, Ray limits herself to 14. Moreover, whereas Wheatley ends her

¹¹⁸ Ray “Niobe,” 1.

¹¹⁹ Ray “To My Mother,” 1.

¹²⁰ Ray “Life,” 1.

¹²¹ Ray “Milton,” 1.

¹²² Walters 2007, 52.

¹²³ Spigner 2014, 93.

¹²⁴ Corkery 2008.

account before Niobe's transformation, Ray addresses her poem to a grieving mother who has already become stone.

Ray's omissions are even more striking than Wheatley's. Where Wheatley complicated or toned down Niobe's arrogance in order to make her a more sympathetic figure, Ray elides altogether any mention of what Niobe did to anger the gods. Immediately after addressing her heroine as "mother-heart," Ray begins to describe the action *in medias res*:

when fast the arrows flew,
Like blinding lightning, smiting as they fell,
One after one, one after one, what knell
Could fitly voice thy anguish!¹²⁵

There is no hint of *why* the arrows are flying. Walters offers two explanations for why Ray might omit this background: "Either Ray assumes readers are familiar with the story and do not need the background detail, or she is not concerned with Niobe's provocation of the gods."¹²⁶ The first suggestion is reasonable: not only would many educated nineteenth-century readers be familiar with Ovid's account, they might also have read Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress,"¹²⁷ and so Ray's elisions might in fact be a sort of invitation to read her poem as a response to Wheatley's. In light of these potential echoes of Wheatley, the second explanation Walters suggests might also be true: perhaps Ray does not include Niobe's impiety because she is uninterested in blaming Niobe for what happens to her children.

Length, of course, is not the only area in which Ray's account differs from both Ovid's and Wheatley's. There is a general trend towards impersonal language. Where Ovid and Wheatley write about the words and actions of Latona, Apollo, and Artemis, Ray simply

¹²⁵ Ray "Niobe," 1-4.

¹²⁶ Walters 2007, 53.

¹²⁷ Spigner 2014, 93-6.

describes arrows flying. Moreover, both Ovid and Wheatley describe the deaths of the first thirteen children in painstaking detail, using the names of at least some of the children and painting vivid images of the different fates met by each of them. By contrast, Ray does not differentiate between the first thirteen deaths—in fact, we do not necessarily even know how many older children Niobe has in Ray’s version of the story. Instead, the reader’s overwhelming impression is of the repetitiveness of the slaughter: the children are murdered “One after one, one after one.” With the words “what knell / Could fitly voice thy anguish,” Ray also introduces the theme of silencing or inexpressibility. Even before she is turned to stone, something stifles Niobe’s voice: there is no way to accurately express what she feels.

After rapidly describing the thirteen deaths that occupy a significant portion of the accounts by Ovid and Wheatley, Ray turns her attention to the event that dominates the final lines of Wheatley’s poem:

Sorrow grew
To throes intensest, when thy sad soul knew
Thy youngest, too, must go. Was it not well,
Avengers wroth, just one to spare?¹²⁸

Ray continues to emphasize the silencing of Niobe. In this moment, Ovid’s Niobe cries out, “Leave the littlest one—out of the many, I am just begging for the littlest one”¹²⁹ (“unam minimamque relinque / de multis minimam posco [...] et unam”), while Wheatley’s pleads, “Ye heav’nly pow’rs, ah spare me one.”¹³⁰ Here it is the poem’s narrator who dares to challenge the gods, addressed simply as “Avengers.” Ray’s Niobe, on the other hand, seems to know before her daughter dies that her “youngest, too, must go”—or perhaps she simply knows now, looking

¹²⁸ Ray “Niobe,” 4-7.

¹²⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.299-300.

¹³⁰ Wheatley “Niobe in Distress,” 209.

back. There is a retrospection running through Ray's version of Niobe that is not present in Ovid or Wheatley, where the story is told as it unfolds. Whereas Wheatley relies primarily on present tense verbs, Ray uses the past tense until the poem's final lines. Both the narrator and Niobe both already know how the story ends.

In the lines that follow, Ray reveals that Niobe has already been turned to stone:

Through
The flinty stone, O image of despair,
Sad Niobe, thy maddened grief did flow
In bitt'rest tears, when all thy wailing prayer
Was so denied.¹³¹

Here, we learn that Ray's Niobe, like Ovid's and Wheatley's, *did* speak up on behalf of her daughter, but her "wailing prayer" was ignored and now she has been silenced. The use of the word "image" recalls the moment in the *Metamorphoses* when Ovid reveals Niobe's transformation by saying that "there is nothing alive in her image"¹³² ("nihil est in imagine vivum"). The language of flowing grief also recalls the very end of Ovid's account, which concludes by saying that Niobe "flows, fixed there on the peak of a mountain, and even now the marble drips with tears"¹³³ ("Ibi fixa cacumine montis / liquitur, et lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant"). It is striking, of course, that Ray's account bears the most resemblance to Ovid's in the moment where she reaches material not covered by Wheatley. Notably, although she does describe the actual metamorphosis, Ray joins Wheatley in omitting another detail from Ovid's account: once transformed, the foreign queen is caught up in the winds and returned to her homeland.

Ray's final lines switch to the present tense, describing Niobe's eternal fate:

¹³¹ Ray "Niobe," 8-12.

¹³² *Met.* 6.305.

¹³³ *Met.* 6.311-2.

Alas! what weight of woe
Is prisoned in thy melancholy eyes!
What mother-love beneath the Stoic lies!¹³⁴

Ovid, Wheatley, and Ray all conclude with the image of a Niobe who is frozen in a moment of grief. Wheatley chooses to end as Niobe cradles her dead youngest daughter in her arms, while Ovid says that even now, she still drips with tears. Ray adheres closely to Ovid's final image, but offers more interpretation of it than Ovid does, describing the "weight of woe" trapped beneath the exterior of stone. Spigner suggests that the poem "reiterates Wheatley's work and asks its late nineteenth century readers to bear in mind that the conditions of black motherhood, while having escaped the bonds of chattel slavery, still include the barely healed wounds inflicted during slave times."¹³⁵ In other words, perhaps Ray's decision to put most of her poem in the past tense represents an engagement with Wheatley's reflections on Black motherhood in the United States by suggesting that even when certain forms of violence¹³⁶ are in the distant past, they can continue to cause grief.

One of Ray's later poems, "Echo's Complaint," treats a story from classical myth at greater length. Here Ray gives voice to the inner thoughts of the famously voiceless Echo—like Niobe, a woman turned to stone by grief after being punished for offending the gods. Whereas her sonnet "Niobe" featured a narrator lamenting Niobe's silent grief, however, "Echo's Complaint" centers the expression of a woman who is silenced or, at least, severely limited in her use of language in most versions of the story. In addition to drawing on Ovid's account of Echo in the *Metamorphoses*, Ray works within a distinctly Ovidian mode here. Like the author of the

¹³⁴ Ray "Niobe," 12-14.

¹³⁵ Spigner 2014, 100.

¹³⁶ Ray wrote years after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and American chattel slavery, the particular injustices that Wheatley might have had in mind, but of course different forms of racialized violence, including lynching, were prevalent during Ray's lifetime.

Heroides,¹³⁷ she imagines a complex interior life for a mythical woman whose side of the story has not often been told. Moreover, Echo uses elegiac language in her attempts to woo Narcissus. The poem barely acknowledges Narcissus's famous gaze except when asking him to redirect it, instead centering Echo's own desire. Even as Echo expresses desperation and a sense of incompleteness without Narcissus, she is always the subject, the one gazing and pursuing. Narcissus never even speaks directly. While the story ultimately ends in the same way, Ray reimagines Echo in a more active role, giving her more control over her words and how her story is told.

Just as she did with "Niobe," Ray elides some of the previous events in the story in order to focus her energy on a particular moment in time. Ovid explains how Echo came to have such limited powers of speech:

corpus adhuc Echo, non vox erat; et tamen usum
garrula non alium, quam nunc habet, oris habebat,
reddere de multis ut verba novissima posset.
Fecerat hoc Iuno, quia, cum deprendere posset
sub Iove saepe suo nymphas in monte iacentes,
illa deam longo prudens sermone tenebat,
dum fugerent nymphae. Postquam Saturnia sensit
'huius' ait 'linguae, qua sum delusa, potestas
parva tibi dabitur vocisque brevissimus usus',
reque minas firmat; tamen haec in fine loquendi
ingeminat voces auditaque verba reportat.¹³⁸

At that point Echo was still a body, not only a voice; and although she was chatty she had no other use of her mouth than what she now has: out of many words, she could repeat only the most recent ones. Juno had done this, because, when she might have caught nymphs lying beneath her Jove in the mountains, clever Echo used to hold the goddess with a long speech, while the nymphs fled. When Saturn's daughter discovered this, she said, "Of this tongue, by which I have been tricked, you will have only a small power and only the smallest use of your voice," and she confirms her threat with action; and still she repeats these voices at the end of talking and returns voices that she has heard.

¹³⁷ Walters 2007 also makes this comparison.

¹³⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.369-69. Text in Chapter 2 from Anderson.

For Ovid’s Echo, a transformation has already occurred—although he alludes to the fact that another transformation is coming when he mentions that at this point in the story, she still has a body. Like Niobe, she has been punished for offending a goddess, although her offense seems tamer than blasphemy: she only wanted to protect her friends from Juno’s wrath. For Echo, the woods and mountains are already dangerous. Words like *deprendere* and *fugerent* bring to mind images of hunting and chasing. In the following lines, Echo will begin to chase Narcissus while he is hunting, but the imagery also carries a particularly ominous resonance since it comes barely 100 lines after the death of Actaeon. These are the settings in which she needed to help her friends flee from danger, and in which she herself was caught and robbed of (most of) her voice.

By contrast, Ray never mentions how Echo came to have such limited powers of speech.

Before Narcissus came onto the scene, she seems to have led an idyllic life:

‘Mid sylvan haunts I dwelt of yore,
Where morning mists shone wondrously,
And fountains flung their diadems
Of liquid rainbows. Unto me
Each day was gladness; grottoes cool
With trickling rills and murm’rous leaves,
Lured me to seek their spacious shades¹³⁹

Introducing the scene by describing it as “sylvan” seems like a nod to the Latin origins of the story. Unlike in Ovid’s Latin, however, Echo’s life is peaceful and undisturbed. Ray’s descriptions of physical beauty in nature that will soon turn tragic are Ovidian, although they do not necessarily correspond to any particular lines in his account of Echo. What is most striking about Ray’s description in contrast with Ovid’s, however, is that this Echo is completely alone apart from Narcissus. Ovid’s Echo is *garrula* (“chatty”) before losing her voice: she is friends

¹³⁹ Ray “Echo’s Complaint,” 9-15.

with other nymphs and is talkative enough to distract Juno from searching for her wayward husband. Ray's Echo, on the other hand, is surrounded only by nature. The only sounds in her pre-Narcissus world seem to have come from features of the natural world such as "trickling rills and murm'rous leaves."¹⁴⁰ We never learn how she lost her voice—or even *that* she lost her voice—because there is simply nobody for her to talk to.

The solitude of Echo's early life makes the arrival of Narcissus all the more dramatic. Ovid introduces Narcissus briefly and matter-of-factly: "therefore when she saw Narcissus wandering off the beaten path and was inflamed, she followed his footsteps secretly"¹⁴¹ ("ergo ubi Narcissum per devia rura vagantem / vidit et incaluit, sequitur vestigia furtum"). Here, Echo's first sight of and subsequent infatuation with Narcissus are all tucked within a subordinate clause, these life-changing events described quickly so that Ovid can move on to the main action of the sentence: Echo begins to follow Narcissus. Ray, on the other hand, devotes more time to Echo's first impressions of Narcissus:

When Dawn in rose-decked chariot strewed
Pale gold down Twilight's violet aisles,
I first beheld thee: ah! how fair!
I trembled 'neath thy radiant smiles.¹⁴²

The sun is an overwhelming image here: not only does Ray vividly describe Dawn's activity that morning, but she also portrays Narcissus as "fair" and "radiant." In the previous stanza, Echo remembered fondly the "grottoes cool"¹⁴³ and "spacious shades"¹⁴⁴ within the forest. Now, she is no longer interested in relaxing in the shade. Instead, she uses the vaguely suggestive language

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 14.

¹⁴¹ *Met.* 3.370-1.

¹⁴² Ray "Echo's Complaint," 17-20.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 13.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 15.

of ‘trembling beneath’ his sunny presence. It is a distinct image from what we find in Ovid, but a related one nonetheless. Ovid’s Echo metaphorically catches fire and burns for Narcissus, whereas Ray’s leaves cool and shady familiar haunts in order to pursue his sunny presence.

Ovid continues to use fire imagery in the lines that follow Echo’s first glimpse of Narcissus:

quoque magis sequitur, flamma propiore calescit,
non aliter, quam cum summis circumlita taedis
admotas rapiunt vivacia sulphura flammis.¹⁴⁵

The more she follows, the more she burns with a nearer flame, not unlike when lively sulphur, smeared around the tops of torches, seizes flames that are brought near it.

Again, while Ray uses somewhat different imagery, the sense is similar:

Thou pensive, glidest through the groves,
While I, unthought of, with the breeze
In lightness vying,—followed near.¹⁴⁶

There is still a sense of mounting intensity, still the language of following and nearness. Instead of fire, however, Ray compares Echo to the breeze. Within the context of this story, the analogy is particularly poignant: eventually, a voice carried “on the breeze”¹⁴⁷ will be all that is left of Echo. Ray’s lines also subtly highlight a similarity between Echo and Narcissus: he glides, while she is as light as the breeze. In the *Metamorphoses*, the similarities between the two do not become evident until much later.

Even as she reminds us that Echo and Narcissus have their similarities, however, Ray also draws a contrast between the two. Narcissus is sunny and bright: in addition to the lines quoted above, he is described as walking and singing while “Day threw gold arrows o’er the

¹⁴⁵ *Met.* 3.372-4.

¹⁴⁶ Ray “Echo’s Complaint,” 21-3.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 69.

plain.”¹⁴⁸ Later, even as he is wasting away, Echo urges him, “Gaze not within the sunlit stream / So ling’ringly.”¹⁴⁹ It is at night, however, that Echo chooses to approach the sunny object of her affections:

Rememb'rest thou
That evening? All the lawns were bright
With lum'nous splendor; o'er the brow
Of yon fair mount, the stately moon
Looked calm-eyed on the sleeping world¹⁵⁰

Although Narcissus himself is associated with daytime and sunshine, Echo confesses her love to him in the evening. Just as she referred to the sun when introducing Narcissus, Ray takes care to create a vivid image of the moon when describing this significant moment in Echo’s life. Such attention to day and night is not found in Ovid’s account, and so it must be an intentional choice on Ray’s part. The sun and moon imagery suggest a celestial analogue for her characters: Narcissus is flashy and overwhelming, while Echo can only reflect him. Moreover, they can never shine at the same time, and thus can never be together.

Ovid’s Echo longs to express herself to Narcissus, but understands the limitations that now shape her use of language:

o quotiens voluit blandis accedere dictis
et molles adhibere preces: natura repugnat
nec sinit, incipiat; sed, quod sinit, illa parata est
exspectare sonos, ad quos sua verba remittat.¹⁵¹

Oh, how often she wished to approach with flattering words and employ soft entreaties! Nature fights back and will not allow her to begin; but, what it does allow, she is prepared to await sounds, to which she can return her own words.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 29.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 49-50.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 34-8.

¹⁵¹ *Met.* 3.375-8.

Ovid uses elegiac language like *blandis dictis* and *molles preces* here, casting Echo as a lover hoping to win over the object of her affections with words. Notably, the words she repeats are still identified as *sua verba*, her own words. Limited as her powers of expression are, Spigner notes, Echo thinks carefully about how best to put them to use: she prepares for eventually interacting with Narcissus, knowing that once he speaks, she can reply.¹⁵² And she does seem to have some control over *which* of someone’s final words she can repeat.¹⁵³ When Narcissus asks, “Why do you flee me?”¹⁵⁴ (“quid [...] me fugis?”), Echo repeats the whole sentence. When he asks, “Who is here?”¹⁵⁵ (“ecquis adest?”), she repeats only the final word, making it a statement instead of a question: “Someone is here”¹⁵⁶ (“adest”). Later, when he rejects her by saying, “I’ll die before all I have is yours”¹⁵⁷ (“ante [...] emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostri”), she changes the meaning significantly by repeating, “All I have is yours”¹⁵⁸ (“sit tibi copia nostri”). Constrained as her powers of speech are, Echo uses selective repetition in order to express her thoughts.

It is less clear exactly how much power Ray’s Echo has over her own speech. Echo recalls that one night, while the gods “held carnival,”¹⁵⁹ she confessed her love to Narcissus:

Yea, earth was jubilant, yet I,
 Apart from all the festive throng,
 Told to thine ear my soul’s complaint.
 Thou didst not heed my spirit’s moan;
 Then pity now, O peerless one!
 Oh! leave me not unloved and lone.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵² Spigner 2014, 108.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ *Met.* 3.383-4.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 3.380.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 391.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 392.

¹⁵⁹ Ray “Echo’s Complaint,” 42.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 43-8.

Again, both Echo and Narcissus are strikingly alone in this version of the story. In Ovid's account, Narcissus has been separated from his hunting companions when he meets Echo, but Ray makes no mention of these friends. Echo describes Narcissus as "peerless" three times,¹⁶¹ simultaneously praising his beauty and reminding readers that he is literally unaccompanied by any peers. Naturally, then, the pair are "[a]part from all the festive throng"¹⁶² when they speak with one another, like many other Ovidian pairs of hunter and hunted. It is worth noting that Narcissus never speaks in Ray's poem. Instead, Echo simply states that she shared her "soul's complaint" with him, and he did "not heed" it. Where Ovid makes much of the wordplay in their conversation, Ray is not concerned with the details of what Narcissus and Echo say to one another. Instead, she is more interested in Echo's ongoing inner thoughts.

Once rejected, Echo continues to plead with Narcissus:

Gaze not within the sunlit steam
So ling'ringly, there but to see
What in my soul is mirrored: may
Not eyes of love thy mirror be?¹⁶³

Ray makes explicit the mirror imagery that runs through Ovid's account of Narcissus, even though the Latin never actually uses the word *speculum*. Nevertheless, as Narcissus addresses his own reflection in Ovid's version, mirror imagery is certainly present:

cumque ego porrexi tibi bracchia, porrigis ultro;
cum risi, adrides; lacrimas quoque saepe notavi
me lacrimante tuas; nutu quoque signa remittis¹⁶⁴

And when I reached my arms out for you, you reach out too; when I laughed, you laughed; I have also often noticed your tears when I am crying, and you return my signs with a nod.

¹⁶¹ Lines 26, 47, 62.

¹⁶² Ibid. 44.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 49-52.

¹⁶⁴ *Met.* 3.458-60.

Ovid introduces mirror imagery while simultaneously drawing parallels between Narcissus and Echo by having Narcissus use certain words twice, thus echoing his own speech. Whereas Echo could not change the endings of her words—and thus had to make do with, for example, *adest* instead of *adsum*—Narcissus can and does change forms even though, as he is about to discover, all of these verbs do in fact have the same subject. Ovid conveys mirror imagery by having Narcissus repeat *porrexi, porrigis; risi, adrides*; and, although they are technically different parts of speech, *lacrimas, lacrimantes*. Later in Ovid’s account, Echo, transformed by grief, sympathetically repeats Narcissus’s final words: “alas”¹⁶⁵ (“eheu”), “alas, boy loved in vain”¹⁶⁶ (“heu frustra dilecte puer”), and “goodbye”¹⁶⁷ (“vale”). Ovid, then, employs mirror imagery when he describes Narcissus gazing at himself, but he also uses repetition to draw parallels between Echo and Narcissus.

Ray has Echo herself note this similarity by suggesting that, since she is also enamored with Narcissus, her adoring eyes might be a better sort of mirror for him to admire. This creative alternative solution seems to be an allusion to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which Eve’s account of her first moments bears a striking resemblance to Ovid’s Narcissus story.¹⁶⁸ Upon hearing “a murmuring sound / Of waters issued from a cave,”¹⁶⁹ a noticeably Ovidian scene for an amorous encounter, Eve comes across a body of water, where she pauses to admire her own reflection. “[T]here I had fixed / Mine eyes until now, and pined with vain desire, / Had not a voice thus warned me,”¹⁷⁰ she recalls, suggesting that she would have met the same fate of Narcissus had

¹⁶⁵ *Met.* 3.495-6.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 3.500.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 3.501.

¹⁶⁸ Many scholars, Kilgour 2012 being among the most recent, have noted similarities between these scenes.

¹⁶⁹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.453-454.

¹⁷⁰ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.465-466.

this voice not redirected her attention, promising, “he / Whose image thou art, him thou shall enjoy”¹⁷¹ and “to him shalt bear / Multitudes like thyself.”¹⁷² Just as she alluded to Wheatley in her treatment of Niobe, Ray, who wrote a sonnet to Milton that was published in the same collection as “Niobe,” here recreates Ovid through the lens of intervening authors who engaged with his work. Ray’s sonnet to Milton praises the insight of the physically blind “poet gifted with sight divine”¹⁷³ who “linger[ed], vision-rapt, intent / To catch the sacred mystery of Heaven.”¹⁷⁴ Here, she alludes to Milton’s imagery in another story that deals with physical limitations. By having Echo suggest that Narcissus might more productively redirect his gaze to another person whose love can still serve as a sort of reflected image, Ray alludes to Milton’s recasting of the myth in his account of Adam and Eve. In doing so, she emphasizes Echo’s creative attempts at persuasion while also recalling Milton’s reading of Echo and Narcissus.

In the lines that follow, Ray’s Echo promises that she will follow Narcissus, “shadow-like,”¹⁷⁵ until he returns her affections. This image does have a direct parallel in Ovid, where the narrator warns Narcissus, “That which you see is the shadow of a reflected image”¹⁷⁶ (“Ista repercussae, quam cernis, imaginis umbra est”). The word *imago* is used not only to describe Narcissus’s reflection, but also his impression of Echo. When he first hears her, he suggests that they meet, “deceived by the likeness of another voice”¹⁷⁷ (“alternae deceptus imagine vocis”). The phrase *imago vocis* is used to denote an echo elsewhere in Latin literature,

¹⁷¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.471-472.

¹⁷² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.473-474.

¹⁷³ Ray “Milton,” 1.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 9-10.

¹⁷⁵ Ray “Echo’s Complaint,” 55.

¹⁷⁶ *Met.* 3.434.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 3.385.

¹⁷⁸ but here it is particularly striking that both Echo and Narcissus are described as an *imago*. Both Echo's repeating voice and Narcissus's reflection are imitations of things, not as 'real' as someone's initial statement or as Narcissus's actual body. Ray picks up on this theme of illusory likenesses and pushes the imagery further by casting Echo as a shadow and as the moon to Narcissus's sun. Just as a shadow is a vague imitation and the moon can only reflect the light of the sun, Echo, Ray's imagery suggests, reflects Narcissus back at himself.

Once rebuffed, Ovid's Echo immediately hides in shame and wastes away from grief, her bones turning to stone.¹⁷⁹ Ray's, on the other hand, is more persistent. After comparing herself to Aphrodite, she urges the object of her affections:

come
And let me kiss thy sunny hair,
Thy marble brow; ay, let me kiss
Thy dewy lips, thy peerless eyes.¹⁸⁰

Although the language here (especially "marble brow") has an Ovidian feel, Echo's continued boldness is a striking departure from Ovid's text. It is particularly notable, Walters and Spigner both observe, within the context of Ray's work as a whole. Ray, like many nineteenth-century Black women poets, adhered to strict codes of decorum, "subscribing to the rigid standards of Victorian ladyhood [...] thereby granting access to Victorian ladyhood that served to counter the racist stereotype of black female wanton sexuality."¹⁸¹ Writing ten years after Ray's death, the biographer Hallie Q. Brown characterized her work as displaying "her versatility, love of nature, classical knowledge, delicate fancy, and unaffected piety."¹⁸² While "Echo's Complaint" is

¹⁷⁸ Breed 2000, 328.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 3.393-401.

¹⁸⁰ Ray "Echo's Complaint," 59-62.

¹⁸¹ Tate 1989, 63.

¹⁸² Brown 1926, 175.

hardly indecent, its heroine's frank and persistent expressions of desire are somewhat unusual coming from a well-regarded nineteenth-century woman poet, especially one burdened with the additional weight of combating racist stereotypes about Black women's sexuality.¹⁸³

Ray's Echo continues to be bolder and more confident than Ovid's through the end. Her final words are still hopeful: "One clasp from thee, one long love-clasp / Will change to joy-notes all my sighs."¹⁸⁴ The poem then switches to third-person narration:

Thus wailed sad Echo: but to all
Her lamentation naught replied
Unmoved Narcissus¹⁸⁵

Up until now, Echo has had the power to tell her own story. Here, suddenly, after her final expression of hope that Narcissus will change his mind and, thus, change her sighs to "joy-notes," she begins to fade. An unidentified third-person narrator takes over for her. The word "wailed" is significant here: Echo did not write her complaint (like the heroines of the *Heroides*), nor was it an internal monologue (as we might expect from a character with famously limited powers of speech). At last, our mystery narrator reveals the answer to the question that has loomed over the poem: How is Echo expressing her complaint? It is also striking that our narrator tells us that Narcissus never replies to her. In Ovid's account, it is Narcissus who speaks, and Echo who can only reply by repeating some of his words back to him. Ray shifts the order in her retelling. Only Echo and the narrator speak in "Echo's Complaint." Narcissus never speaks directly; he can only refuse to reply.

The narrator concludes with this description of Echo's second transformation:

and the nymph,
Sweet Echo, thus in love sore tried,

¹⁸³ Walters 2007, 56.

¹⁸⁴ Ray "Echo's Complaint," 63-4.

¹⁸⁵ Ray "Echo's Complaint," 65-7.

Was seen no more; but on the breeze
Her voice was heard, her voice alone
Was left,—an answ'ring cadence there,
Love thrilling still its ling'ring tone.¹⁸⁶

Ovid describes the same metamorphosis thus:

vox tantum atque ossa supersunt:
vox manet; ossa ferunt lapidis traxisse figuram.
inde latet silvis nulloque in monte videtur,
omnibus auditur: sonus est, qui vivit in illa.¹⁸⁷

Only voice and bones are left; voice remains; they say the bones drew into the figure of a stone. There she hides in the forest and is seen on no mountain, but is heard by all. It is sound, which lives in her.

Ray's language is closer to Ovid's here than in most places. Both poets repeat the word *vox/voice* twice in rapid succession, perhaps to reinforce the theme of repetition. Both employ the passive voice, de-emphasizing Echo's agency: she is no longer seen, although she is heard. Both allude to the aspects of the natural world associated with Echo earlier in the story. Ray's Echo once described herself as "with the breeze / In lightness vying";¹⁸⁸ now she is no longer in competition with the breeze, but rather her voice is carried on the breeze. Ovid's Echo used to distract Juno while Jove was otherwise occupied "on the mountain" ("in monte," 3.363), and now she herself is seen on no mountain. Ray ends "Echo's Complaint" with what seems at first glance to be a more sentimental take on Echo's fate than what we find in Ovid: Echo's voice remains, "Love thrilling still its ling'ring tone."¹⁸⁹ This line, however, might allude to the rest of the story in the *Metamorphoses*. Ray, far more interested in Echo than she is in Narcissus, does

¹⁸⁶ Ray "Echo's Complaint," 67-72.

¹⁸⁷ *Met.* 3.398-401.

¹⁸⁸ Ray "Echo's Complaint," 22-3.

¹⁸⁹ Ray "Echo's Complaint," 72.

not retell the second half of the story. In Ovid's account, however, Echo makes a reappearance after the transformation of Narcissus, and in fact love *is* still thrilling her lingering tone.

"Niobe" and "Echo's Complaint" represent two different modes of reimagining characters and scenes from classical mythology, each of them Ovidian in its own way. "Niobe" fixes its attention on the ineffable grief of someone transformed and silenced by the more powerful. The *Metamorphoses* often focus on speechlessness as a symbol of how transformation excludes its subjects from their human communities,¹⁹⁰ for example in the cases of Io and Actaeon. Ray's sonnet emphasizes the silent grief "prisoned"¹⁹¹ within Niobe's changed form, while also engaging with Wheatley's treatment of the same myth. Through subtle changes, Wheatley highlighted the ways in which the story of Niobe, helpless to defend her children from the whims of the more powerful, might have resonances with the experiences of enslaved Black women in the United States. Over a hundred years later, Ray reflects on Niobe through Wheatley's lens. Wheatley's present-tense *epyllion* is retold as a past-tense sonnet. While the specific action which Wheatley described is now in the past, Ray suggests, the pain is still very much present.

"Echo's Complaint," on the other hand, represents a different sort of reworking of Ovid (and of authors who came between Ovid and Ray). Here Ray's engagement with the world of the *Metamorphoses* is more sprawling. Adopting the hitherto silenced voice of Echo, she takes her time in building her character and setting. "Niobe" represents a moment in time when its subject has lost all of her agency: she has been acted upon, and can only grieve the damage done by the gods. By contrast, "Echo's Complaint" makes Echo a more active participant in her story. Ray

¹⁹⁰ Von Glinski 2012, 117.

¹⁹¹ Ray "Niobe," 13.

emphasizes and expands upon certain threads we find in Ovid. The *Metamorphoses*, after all, use elegiac language to describe Echo's pursuit of her beloved: she approaches Narcissus with *blandis dictis* (flattering words) and *molles preces* (gentle entreaties).¹⁹² Ray's Echo, silenced no more, uses the full range of language at her disposal to woo Narcissus. The ending remains the same as what we find in the *Metamorphoses*: Narcissus is uninterested, and so spurned Echo wastes away until only her voice remains. Through her retelling, however, Ray makes Echo the active subject of her story.

Within the context of Ray's "Niobe," Spigner works through what Deleuze might mean when he says that "the heart is the amorous organ of repetition."¹⁹³ Deleuze distinguishes repetition from generality by defining repetition as artful and intentional. Since generality "belongs to the order of laws"—it is generality, for example, that the sun repeatedly rises and sets in the same way—repetition "is by nature transgression or exception."¹⁹⁴ Within a Deleuzian framework, Spigner argues, Ray is engaging in the transgressive "heart-work"¹⁹⁵ of repetition. Not only does she rewrite Ovid and Wheatley, but there is also a striking instance of linguistic repetition within the poem: she describes Niobe's children dying "One after one, one after one."

¹⁹⁶ This *one after one* rhythm, Spigner argues, pulses through the poem "[l]ike a heart buried under layers of stone."¹⁹⁷ Through repetition on both a micro and macro level, Ray crafts a subversive recreation of both Ovid and Wheatley. Although Niobe is turned to stone, her heart still beats, refusing to harden.

¹⁹² *Met.* 3.375-6.

¹⁹³ Deleuze 1994, 2.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 2, 5.

¹⁹⁵ Spigner 2014, 104.

¹⁹⁶ Ray "Niobe," 3.

¹⁹⁷ Spigner 2014, 105.

Spigner offers an intriguing Deleuzian reading of “Niobe,” but we might also use Deleuze’s theory of repetition as a way of thinking about “Echo’s Complaint.” Again, think of his distinction between generality and repetition. Generality can describe natural phenomena: the seasons repeatedly change in certain ways, a stream always flows in a particular direction, and so forth. Repetition “occurs when things are distinguished *in numero*, in space and time,”¹⁹⁸ and it “is the power of language.”¹⁹⁹ “Art does not imitate, above all because it repeats,” writes Deleuze, and this repetition is subversive and creates new meaning.²⁰⁰ An echo sounding back when someone shouts in a canyon would seem to be generality. Ovid, by personifying Echo and by giving her some control over exactly which words of someone else’s she repeats, begins to grant her the dignity of repetition rather than generality. Ray completes Echo’s transformation into the subject and creator of her own story. Moreover, by reworking Ovid (and Milton), Ray herself engages in Deleuzian repetition, reusing elements from other poems while creating her own new and distinctive work.

Wheatley began a process of expanding the canon, listing Ovid and Richard Wilson alongside one another while also reminding her audience that Terence was African and was once a slave. Ray continues this project, although in mythological poems like “Niobe” and “Echo’s Complaint,” she does not mention earlier authors by name.²⁰¹ Instead, her engagement with her literary predecessors comes through in softer and subtler ways: the stories she chooses to tell and the language she chooses to use in telling them. Not only does she reimagine Ovid when she revisits these myths, but she also takes into account the ways in which other writers have already

¹⁹⁸ Deleuze 1994, 270.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 291.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 293.

²⁰¹ Some of her sonnets, of course, are specifically addressed to writers like Shakespeare and Milton.

played with Ovid in the intervening centuries. “Niobe,” then, rewrites both Ovid and Wheatley, while “Echo’s Complaint” includes ideas from *Paradise Lost* as well as the *Metamorphoses*. In addition to expanding the canon to include more recent authors, including African American women such as Wheatley, Ray also reimagines these myths in ways that center the thoughts and experiences of women who have historically been silenced by mythology—women who are both literally turned into stone in Ovid’s account. Ray does not take only one approach as she invites audiences to rethink mythical characters: she makes Echo a more active participant in her own story, while by contrast removing any agency Niobe might have and emphasizing her helplessness. In both cases, however, Ray’s innovative repetition upends our expectations regarding agency and responsibility in well-known myths. By giving voice to figures like Echo and Niobe, Ray encourages readers to reconsider power dynamics in familiar tales.

“No Story’s Ever Finished”:

Rita Dove’s Endlessly Repeating Demeter and Persephone

Ray concluded her sonnet “Niobe” with the line “What mother-love beneath the Stoic lies!”²⁰² On the other end of the twentieth century, Rita Dove echoes some of this language with *Mother Love*, a book that plays with the potential and the limitations of the sonnet as a form while also exploring themes of motherhood, power, and voicelessness. Dove is a contemporary poet who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1987²⁰³ and served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993-5.²⁰⁴ As of current writing, she was recently named the newest poetry editor for the *New York Times* on April 27, 2018.²⁰⁵ Many of Dove’s poems engage with classical stories and themes. *The Darker Face of the Earth*, for example, reimagines Oedipus on an antebellum plantation, with Jocasta as a White woman and Oedipus her biracial son sold as a baby to hide his family’s secret. Across Dove’s varied body of work, scholars have noted a number of recurring themes: “adolescence and maturation, the underside of history, slavery, family love, identity, the language of music, and power relations inflected by race and gender.”²⁰⁶ Whether she is recounting a haunting story about Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic, in *Museum*, or writing about her grandparents’ lives in Akron, Ohio in *Thomas and Beulah*, Dove is interested in “history’s multiple perspectives and encodings, its constant flux, its reverberations.”

²⁰⁷ In interviews, Dove has acknowledged this thread in her work. “I will say that because of my birthright—my genetic makeup, if you will—I am more receptive to the stories of people who’ve

²⁰² Ray “Niobe,” 14.

²⁰³ <http://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/1987>

²⁰⁴ <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/laureate-1991-2000.html>

²⁰⁵ <https://news.virginia.edu/content/rita-dove-become-new-york-times-magazines-poetry-editor>

²⁰⁶ Pereira 1999, 183-4.

²⁰⁷ Stein 1995, 52.

been sidelined by history,” she told one interviewer. “One could argue that if there’s one influence being both female and African American has had on my aesthetics it is that I’ve had both the opportunity to watch from the sidelines, and to insert myself into the mainstream and insist upon my presence.”²⁰⁸ This interest in multiple perspectives and in voices that have been sidelined in traditional narratives permeates, not only Dove’s explicitly historical works, but also her mythological poetry.

Mother Love, described by *Publishers Weekly* as an example of Dove “at the height of her poetic powers,”²⁰⁹ retells the story of Demeter and Persephone. It began, Dove recalls, as a sort of technical exercise. “One day I was thinking, ‘I’m tired of all the male gods; what’s a good female deity?’” she explained in a 1995 interview. “Since Rilke had written sonnets to Orpheus, I decided to write sonnets to Demeter.”²¹⁰ In retrospect, she reflects that writing about Demeter in particular made sense at that moment in her life: “I had some readjustment to do as a mother,” because “my daughter Aviva was about five years old at the time, just about to enter kindergarten, to go out into the world.”²¹¹ It was only several years later, when Aviva walked into her mother’s room holding a book of Greek myths and announced, “Hey! You’ve been writing about me!” that Dove made the connection.²¹² Although Dove’s revelation about the book’s personal resonances is illuminating, *Mother Love*’s origin as a technical exercise is also evident in its concern with form and order. “The sonnet defends itself against the vicissitudes of fortune by its charmed structure, its beautiful bubble,” she suggests in the book’s brief preface.

²⁰⁸ Dungy 2005, 1036.

²⁰⁹ <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-393-03808-8>

²¹⁰ Bellin 1995, 23.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

“All the while, though, chaos is lurking outside the gate.”²¹³ Many of the books in the poem do adhere to a basic 14- (or, occasionally, 28-) line structure, but that chaos does constantly lurk outside the gate. The seventh and final section, “Her Island,” consists of a series of 14-line sonnets—except for one, abruptly in the middle, which has only 13 lines. Lofgren interprets “Her Island” as Dove “getting ready to bid farewell to the sonnet in any configuration to strike out on her own again” and the 13-line section as an instance where the author “gently mocks the reader’s desire for order, saying, in effect, that sometimes a sonnet has thirteen lines; sometimes life is messy.”²¹⁴ Throughout *Mother Love*, Dove’s attention to form reinforces her suggestion that stories repeat in endless variations: 14 lines about a mother and a daughter can mean so many different things. The moments when Dove abandons her chosen form point to the danger and chaos that constantly overshadow her characters.

Section I contains only one poem, the 28-line “Heroes.” Written in the second person, it “implicates the reader”²¹⁵ in its action from the beginning: “A flower in a weedy field: / make it a poppy. You pick it.”²¹⁶ Already the reader is identified with Persephone, picking flowers unsupervised. The line “make it a poppy” calls attention to Dove’s creative process and to the fact that this is a story often retold. It might have been any flower, the line suggests, but Dove (or even the reader) can decide that in this version, it is a poppy. From there, “Heroes” takes an unexpected turn when its second-person subject is confronted by the woman who owns the property and accidentally kills her. “Already the story’s starting to unravel,”²¹⁷ the narrator observes, setting the stage for the many reworkings of the myth that will come while also

²¹³ Dove 1995, “An Intact World.”

²¹⁴ Lofgren 1996, 141.

²¹⁵ Hurst 2012.

²¹⁶ Dove “Heroes,” 1-2.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

reminding us of that chaos lurking outside the gate that Dove foresaw in the preface. The first poem then concludes:

O why

did you pick that idiot flower?
Because it was the last one
and you knew

it was going to die.²¹⁸

These lines suggest a kind of self-destructive draw towards death, a theme that will occur later in the book. The phrase “idiot flower” is the first of many instances in which Dove juxtaposes a feature of the natural world (“flower”) with a word that is either explicitly modern (such as a form of technology that did not exist in the ancient world) or simply idiomatic in modern English (“idiot”). Already, then, Dove is showing us how she intends to proceed: she will blend old and new; stories will unravel; things might not go as expected.

Section II, which consists of a series of individually titled poems, many of them sonnets, contains much of the clearest engagement with Ovid’s particular treatment of the myth: the moment of abduction, the grief of Cyane, the wanderings of Demeter. “Party Dress For A First Born” introduces some of the section’s recurring imagery in a passage that contrasts Persephone’s past with her present:

When I ran to my mother, waiting radiant
as a cornstalk at the edge of the field,
nothing else mattered: the world stood still.

Tonight men stride like elegant scissors across the lawn
to the women arrayed there, petals waiting to loosen.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Ibid. 24-8.

²¹⁹ Dove “Party Dress For A First Born,” 6-10.

The images of field and cornstalk, of course, ground Demeter in her traditional portrayal. The phrase “the world stood still” hints at a more stable past amidst all of the changes and different versions at play in *Mother Love*. Comparing women to “petals waiting to loosen” brings to mind Ovid’s abduction scene, in which, when Persephone has torn her clothing while being seized, “the collected flowers fall from her loosened tunic” (“conlecti flores tunicis cecidere remissis”).²²⁰ The association of flowers with innocence, and especially with the endangered innocence of vulnerable girls and boys in fields and groves, has a long history in ancient poetry.²²¹ Combined with the description of men as “elegant scissors,” the imagery here is grimly erotic in a way that both echoes and modernizes Ovid’s framing.

It is a striking feature of *Mother Love* that certain plot points in the tale of Demeter and Persephone are not so much singular events as rhythms of existence: some moments are re-examined multiple times and from multiple perspectives. Within Section II, two sonnets in particular focus on the actual moment of Persephone’s abduction: “Persephone, Falling” and “Persephone Abducted.” The former opens with an account that is fairly close to what we find in the *Metamorphoses*:

One narcissus among the ordinary beautiful
flowers, one unlike all the others! She pulled,
stooped to pull harder---
when, sprung out of the earth
on his glittering terrible
carriage, he claimed his due.
It is finished. No one heard her.
No one! She had strayed from the herd.²²²

²²⁰ *Met.* 5.399.

²²¹ E.g. Catullus 11.23-4, in which a boy is like “a flower, after it has been touched by a passing plough” (“flos, praetereunte postquam / tactus aratro est”).

²²² Dove “Persephone, Falling,” 1-8.

From the flower-picking to the sudden appearance of Hades to the loneliness of Persephone's unanswered cries, this telling hits many of the same beats as Ovid's. The account in the *Metamorphoses* is as brief and stark as what we find in *Mother Love*:

quo dum Proserpina luco
ludit et aut violas aut candida lilia carpit,
dumque puellari studio calathosque sinumque
implet et aequales certat superare legendo,
paene simul visa est dilectaque raptaque Diti:
usque adeo est properatus amor.²²³

While Persephone plays in this grove she picks either violets or brightly-colored lilies, and while, with girlish excitement, she fills her basket and her pocket and tries to outdo her age-mates in flower-picking, almost at once she was seen and selected and seized by Hades; so sudden was his love.

In both cases, such brevity in the midst of lengthy and complex texts emphasizes just how sudden and shocking the abduction is: despite the build-up—*Mother Love*'s early poems warning us of trouble to come, the background that in the *Metamorphoses* Venus has set her sights on demonstrating her control over Hades—the actual kidnapping of Persephone is granted only a few lines. Dove's "herd" recalls Ovid's *aequales*, while her "glittering" carriage echoes the *candida* lilies in the *Metamorphoses*, although in some ways her language differs markedly—intentionally—from Ovid's. Ovid sets the harsh *rapta* aside gentler, more elegiac words like *dilecta* and *amor*, but Dove is not so ambiguous (yet); her Hades rides a "terrible / carriage" and we are not told of any of his feelings, except for the sense of entitlement conveyed by the idea that kidnapping Persephone is simply "claim[ing] his due." The abrupt "It is finished" in line 7 underscores the suddenness of the abduction.

²²³ *Met.* 5.391-6.

It is also worth noting what kind of flower Persephone picks in each account. In Section I's "Heroes," Dove opens on the image of "A flower in a weedy field: / make it a poppy."²²⁴ So soon after making it a poppy, however, she makes it a narcissus in "Persephone, Falling." The detail that this narcissus is "unlike all the others" might be a reference to the fact that Persephone herself, about to be plucked from the same field, has wandered off from her companions. Since it comes only a few poems after the line "make it a poppy," however, this unique narcissus might be a kind of self-aware wink at the nature of myth and retelling. Ovid's choice of flower is also ambiguous, after all. Our oldest extant source for the myth, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, has Persephone gather "roses and crocuses and beautiful violets throughout the soft meadow and irises and hyacinths and the narcissus" ("ρόδα καὶ κρόκον ἦδ' ἴα καλὰ / λειμῶν' ἄμ μαλακὸν καὶ ἀγαλλίδας ἦδ' ὑάκινθον / νάρκισσόν θ").²²⁵ Instead of listing many varieties of flower joined by a connecting "and," however, Ovid lists only two with a disjunctive "or": "either violets or bright lilies" ("aut violas aut candida lilia")—which suggests an elegiac interest in the contrast between red and white. By providing two possibilities regarding what kind of flower Persephone *might* have picked, then, Dove echoes Ovid. Unlike both Ovid and the author of the *Hymn*, however, Dove emphasizes not only the ambiguity, but also the uniqueness of the flower: by picking this one particular narcissus, her Persephone seems almost to pick Hades himself out of the ground.

In the final six lines of "Persephone, Falling," we realize that its most likely narrator is Demeter:

(Remember: go straight to school.
This is important, stop fooling around!
Don't answer to strangers. Stick

²²⁴ Dove "Heroes," 1-2.

²²⁵ *Hom. Hymn Dem.* 6-8.

with your playmates. Keep your eyes down.)
This is how easily the pit
opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground.²²⁶

Ovid does not describe the relationship between Demeter and Persephone before the abduction, so we do not know for sure if his Demeter ever warned her daughter of what dangers might await her, but Dove's series of parenthetical parental reminders suggests that her Demeter worries about the possibility of Hades or someone like him long before he arrives. Demeter's desperate warnings in "Persephone, Falling" reappear in Section III's "Persephone in Hell," where they punctuate Persephone's narration of her time in Paris. "*This is how the pit opens,*" she recalls; "*This is how one foot / sinks into the ground.*"²²⁷ The second part of "Persephone, Falling," then, represents an ongoing conversation between mother and daughter across time and space. As she grieves for her lost daughter, Demeter repeats all of the safety tips that have failed; as she encounters "hell," Persephone hears her mother's warnings echo in her mind. We might read Demeter's awareness of the dangers that threaten Persephone's well-being as a result of the fact that this Demeter has lived as a Black woman in the twentieth-century United States, and so her specific experiences have made her determined to protect her daughter from terrible possibilities that Ovid never imagined for his Demeter and Persephone. We might also, simultaneously, read the vigilance of Dove's Demeter as a reflection of the themes of repetition that run through *Mother Love*. In this text about motherhood and daughterhood, in which we are constantly invited to consider the ways that stories can be repeated with endless variations, perhaps this Demeter is conscious of the dangers that haunt this Persephone because she is a later incarnation

²²⁶ Dove "Persephone, Falling," 9-14.

²²⁷ Dove "Persephone in Hell," 128, 140-1.

of Demeter and exists in a later text about this eternally repeating figure—she has learned from the experiences of past Demeters.

In “Persephone Abducted,” we witness the kidnapping from what seems to be the perspective of the other girls who were with Persephone when it happened. “She left us singing in the field,” they conclude, “oblivious / to all but the ache of our own bent backs.”²²⁸ This description is not as idyllic as what we find in Ovid or the *Hymn*; rather than picking flowers for the fun of it, these friends of Persephone seem to be in pain from working in the field. They are oblivious, not because they are carefree and naive, but because they have troubles of their own to distract them. The girls recall, “She cried out for Mama, who did not / hear.”²²⁹ The image of Persephone crying out for her mother when she is abducted is an Ovidian image. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, she calls upon her father Zeus, who does not hear her.²³⁰ It is Ovid who writes, “The terrified goddess, with her sad mouth, cries out for her mother and her companions, but more often for her mother” (“Dea territa maesto / et matrem et comites, sed matrem saepius, ore / clamat”).²³¹ Like Ovid’s Persephone, then, Dove’s thinks primarily of her mother when Hades seizes her.

“Persephone Abducted” offers another sentiment that engages with the arc of Demeter’s story in both the *Homeric Hymn* and the *Metamorphoses*: “No one can tell a mother how to act: / there are no laws when laws are broken, no names / to call upon.”²³² These lines convey a heavy sense of despair at the lack of recourse available to a mother who has lost her vulnerable daughter. In both ancient accounts, there is no one who can really tell the grieving Demeter how

²²⁸ Dove “Persephone Abducted,” 13-14.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* 1-2.

²³⁰ *Hom. Hymn Dem.* 21-4.

²³¹ *Met.* 5.396-8.

²³² Dove “Persephone Abducted,” 5-7.

to act: she lays waste to the natural world until the other gods must attempt to bargain with her. In both cases, there are no names to call upon. Although Zeus makes promises, he is powerless to save Persephone once she has eaten the pomegranate seeds.

One of the most distinctly Ovidian poems in Section II is “Statistic: The Witness.” Ovid’s account of the Demeter and Persephone story includes a subplot absent from the *Hymn to Demeter*.²³³ the nymph Cyane lectures Hades on consent and urges him to soften his approach and woo Persephone with kindness instead. Neither Hades nor Persephone speaks in this scene, Zissos observes; in this famous, climactic moment, it is only Cyane who speaks.²³⁴ Of course, she will not speak for long. In the end Hades not only kidnaps Persephone anyway, but he also strikes Cyane’s pool and opens up a path to Tartarus there. Devastated by this metaphorical violation and also by what she has witnessed, the nymph turns to water. Ovid describes the transformation thus:

At Cyane, raptamque deam contemptaque fontis
iura sui maerens, inconsolabile vulnus
mente gerit tacita lacrimisque absumitur omnis,
et quarum fuerat magnum modo numen, in illas
extenuatur aquas.²³⁵

But Cyane, grieving for the kidnapped goddess and the disregarded rights of her fountain, bears an inconsolable wound in her quiet mind and is entirely consumed with tears, and she slipped away into those waters of which she had just recently been the great divinity.

Cyane is not the only nymph turned to liquid by trauma in Book 5 of the *Metamorphoses*; Arethusa, who helps Demeter find her daughter, also recounts becoming water while attempting to escape the pursuit of the river-god Alpheus. Putting these stories next to one another is a

²³³ Hinds 1987, 82.

²³⁴ Zissos 1999, 99.

²³⁵ *Met.* 5.425-9.

striking juxtaposition: Arethusa disintegrates at her own sexual assault, whereas Cyane melts away when Hades ignores her attempts to intervene on behalf of Persephone. Both of them eventually help Demeter with her search, a role that belonged to Helios in the *Homeric Hymn*.

“Statistic: The Witness” opens with an anonymous narrator describing how witnessing the abduction has affected her:

No matter where I turn, she is there
screaming. No matter how
I run, pause to catch a breath---
until I am the one screaming
as the drone of an engine overtakes
the afternoon.²³⁶

Ovid’s Cyane grieves with a silent mind (*mente tacita*) and cannot run because she becomes water. Dove’s unidentified Cyane proxy, on the other hand, runs and screams in an attempt to deal with what she has seen. The effect, however, is the same: her screaming is drowned out by “the drone of an engine,” so she might as well be silent. The overpowering “drone of an engine” here also fits into a general pattern that we can observe throughout *Mother Love*: language connoting modern innovations generally carries an ominous force when it appears suddenly in a poem with few other markers of time.

In the following stanza, Cyane tries (and fails) to talk herself out of dwelling on what she has seen:

I know I should stop looking, do
as my mother says---turn my head
to the wall and tell Jesus---but
I keep remembering things,
clearer and smaller: his watch,
his wrist, the two ashen ovals
etched on her upturned sandals.²³⁷

²³⁶ Dove “Statistic: The Witness,” 1-6.

²³⁷ *Ibid.* 7-13.

The phrase “stop looking,” which she later clarifies as “remembering,” emphasizes the immediacy of the memories: although Persephone’s abduction has already happened, Cyane is so troubled by it that she feels as if she is continually watching it unfold. Not only does “turn my head / to the wall and tell Jesus” serve as another marker of setting and culture, but the fact that this advice comes from Cyane’s mother gives us insight—however briefly—into another mother-daughter relationship. Finally, Dove’s Cyane experiences these intrusive memories as a list of fragmented physical details, “clearer and smaller.” This fragmentation in response to trauma parallels Ovid’s approach to describing his characters’ transformations. Consider Cyane’s moment of metamorphosis:

molliri membra videres,
 ossa pati flexus, ungues posuisse rigorem;
 primaque de tota tenuissima quaeque liquescunt,
 caerulei crines digitique et crura pedesque:
 nam brevis in gelidas membris exilibus undas
 transitus est: post haec umeri terqusque latusque
 pectoraque in tenues abeunt evanida rivos.
 Denique pro vivo vitiatas sanguine venas
 lympa subit, restatque nihil, quod prendere possis.²³⁸

You would see her limbs soften, her bones made bendable, her fingernails lose their hardness; and what was most delicate became liquid first of all, dark hair and fingers and legs and feet, for it is a brief transition from slender limbs to cool waters. After these, her shoulders and back and sides and chest are transformed, vanished into thin streams. Finally, instead of living blood, water runs through her violated veins, and nothing that you could lay hold of remains.

Ovid follows the same pattern when describing the metamorphoses of other characters, including both Niobe and Echo: a traumatic event is broken down into a series of small physical details that culminate with the reveal that something significant and irreversible has changed. Dove, then, follows this Ovidian pattern by listing these specific physical features: “his watch, / his

²³⁸ *Met.* 5.429-38.

wrist, the two ashen ovals / etched on her upturned sandals.” The upturned sandals are a disturbing detail: Is he dragging her? Does he rape her before carrying her away? Moreover, the contrast between Hades’s watch and Persephone’s upturned sandals seems to highlight his age and maturity and her relative youth. Notably, the fragmentation described by Dove’s Cyane figure is not her own; instead, she relates her fragmented but repetitive memories of Hades and Persephone. There is a sense of community trauma here: violation and transformation are not exclusively individual phenomena, but rather the violation of one vulnerable young girl can change the life of another.

“Statistic: The Witness” has a somewhat different ending from Ovid’s account of Cyane:

Now I must walk this faithless earth
which cannot readjust an abyss
into flowering meadow.
I will walk until I reach
green oblivion ... then
I will lie down in its kindness,
in the bottomless lull of her arms.²³⁹

This wandering fate initially seems to identify our narrator more with Demeter than Cyane, but the outcome is still reminiscent of the nymph: she lies down in and becomes part of “green oblivion,” just as Ovid’s Cyane becomes one with the body of water over which she once ruled. The earth seems to be a comforting presence here, evoking imagery of Gaia and of the earth as a mother—imagery that will return on the final page of *Mother Love*. In the decades leading up to the publication of *Mother Love*, feminist scholars had made a case for the story of Demeter and Persephone as an “archetypal narrative of women’s experience.”²⁴⁰ Although many of these arguments focused largely on themes of motherhood and daughterhood,²⁴¹ we might also

²³⁹ Dove “Statistic: The Witness,” 14-20.

²⁴⁰ Hurst 2012.

²⁴¹ e.g. Rich 1976, Hayes 1994.

consider the ways in which Ovid's version of the story foregrounds other kinds of connections between women, especially in the interactions that Demeter has with Cyane and Arethusa. Although Dove mentions neither Cyane nor Arethusa by name, "Statistic: The Witness" illustrates her Ovidian emphasis on the relationships between women aside from Demeter and Persephone, and especially on the ways in which trauma can be communal. Like Cyane turned to water, this unnamed witness is forever changed by her secondhand experience of her friend's violation.

Section II of *Mother Love* also builds on the Ovidian account by exploring Demeter's reaction to the loss of her daughter and her subsequent wanderings. Here, too, Dove moves between a variety of perspectives: sometimes we learn directly what Demeter is thinking, other times we are privy to the gossip of her friends and neighbors. The first of these poems centering her wanderings, "The Search," comes directly after "Persephone, Falling." In it, Demeter's neighbors talk among themselves about the changes that Persephone's disappearance have brought about:

Blown apart by loss, she let herself go---
wandered the neighborhood hatless, breasts
swinging under a ratty sweater, crusted
mascara blackening her gaze. It was a shame,
the wives whispered, to carry on so.²⁴²

Grief manifests differently in Ovid's Demeter and in Dove's, but in both cases, the poets describe specific physical consequences of mourning. Ovid's grieving mother destroys crops, whereas Dove's is so preoccupied with finding her daughter that she has begun destroying herself through neglect. The neighbors' judgment that Demeter is being overly dramatic also

²⁴² Dove "The Search," 1-5.

reflects the story in the *Metamorphoses*. None of the other gods in Ovid's account shows any concern for Persephone. When Demeter begs Zeus to act on behalf of his abducted daughter, his initial response is to correct her by insisting that she does not really understand what has happened: "But if only it is pleasing to apply the true names to things, this deed is not an injustice, it is in fact love" ("sed si modo nomina rebus / addere vera placet, non hoc iniuria factum, / verum amor est").²⁴³ The fact that none of Ovid's other gods express any sympathy for Demeter and Persephone also contributes to the sense that this Demeter, too, is thought to be "carrying on" unnecessarily. Dove foregrounds Demeter's sense of helplessness by showing us that, in fact, no one around her feels the urgency of rescuing Persephone.

"The Search" ends with a jarring reminder of how Dove's Demeter grew to be so savvy about the dangers awaiting Persephone:

The men watched more closely, tantalized
by so much indifference. Winter came early and still
she frequented the path by the river until
one with murmurous eyes pulled her down to size.
Sniffed Mrs. Franklin, ruling matron, to the rest:
*Serves her right, the old mare.*²⁴⁴

The casual brutality of a man "pulling her down to size" and of a neighborhood woman dismissively concluding that it "serves her right" reinforce the sense of powerlessness that Demeter feels as everyone refuses to help her find and rescue her daughter. Where Ovid's Demeter faces a king of the gods who tells her that no injustice really occurred, Dove's faces a whole community (and especially Mrs. Franklin) who says the same thing—both about the abduction of the daughter and the violation of the mother.

²⁴³ *Met.* 5.524-6.

²⁴⁴ Dove "The Search," 9-14.

“The Search,” with its troubling reminders of how vulnerable Demeter and Persephone both are, is immediately followed by “Protection,” which opens with Demeter wondering, “Are you having a good time? / Are you having a time at all?”²⁴⁵ These lines also reappear in Section III’s “Persephone in Hell,” so they represent the dialogue across space and time that happens between mother and daughter throughout the book. After wondering how Persephone is doing, Demeter gives an example of how everything now reminds her of her missing daughter:

Everywhere in the garden I see the slim vine
of your neck, the stubborn baby curls ...

I know I'm not saying this right.
“Good” hair has no body
in this country; like trained ivy,
it hangs and shines. Mine comes out

in clusters.²⁴⁶

By comparing Persephone’s neck to a vine, Dove continues her pattern of identifying Demeter and Persephone with natural and growing things, a nod to Demeter’s agricultural roots. These lines are also significant because Demeter’s contrasting of her daughter’s “stubborn baby curls” with the bodiless “‘good’ hair” popular in the United States are one of the few direct indications that Demeter and Persephone are African American women in this book. Walters, comparing these lines to passages in works by Gwendolyn Brooks and Toni Morrison that also rework the myth of Demeter and Persephone, notes that Demeter’s characterization of her daughter’s hair as “stubborn” suggests that she has “fallen victim to the White aesthetic,”²⁴⁷ viewing her own hair and her daughter’s as inconvenient and less-than due to the ubiquity of White beauty standards. Nevertheless, the scare quotes around “good” indicate that Demeter recognizes the way the

²⁴⁵ Dove “Protection,” 1-2.

²⁴⁶ Ibid. 3-9.

²⁴⁷ Walters 2007, 157.

dominant culture has shaped her understanding of how hair “should” behave and that she does not particularly envy “bodiless” hair. Here, hair that does not conform to the White aesthetic seems to be something that connects mother and daughter, which makes Demeter’s hair loss a physical representation of her grief.

Another interesting piece in Section II is “Grief: The Council,” which at 41 lines breaks free from all the boundaries Dove proposed when she wrote about sonnets in the book’s preface. Given the mythological influences in *Mother Love*, the reference to “the council” in the title of this poem brings to mind a council of the gods. Demeter is not present at this council, though; instead, “Grief: The Council” shows us how Demeter’s friends plan to help her through her pain at the loss of Persephone. It is unclear whether or not this is the same group of women who spoke of Demeter in hushed tones in “The Search,” but their approach is certainly gentler here. Much of their conversation centers around discussing the specific ways in which each of them can provide support to Demeter:

Sister Jeffries, you could drop in
tomorrow morning, take one
of your Mason jars, something
sweetish, tomatoes or bell peppers [...]

Miz Earl can fetch her later to the movies---
a complicated plot should distract her,
something with a car chase through Manhattan,
loud horns melting to a strings-and-sax ending²⁴⁸

The names and the vivid physical details help to locate Demeter—who is only ever referred to in *Mother Love* as “Demeter” or “she”—within a specific time and place. She has a powerful and timeless name, but she is also someone who can be cheered up by a movie with a car chase or a

²⁴⁸ Dove “Grief: The Council,” 25-8, 31-4.

Mason jar of tomatoes. Moreover, at the risk of stating the obvious, this scene has no parallel in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid describes Demeter's conversation with Zeus, while an earlier scene revealed that Aphrodite had plotted to demonstrate her power by inflaming Hades with a passion for Persephone. There is no scene, however, in which a council gathers in order to brainstorm ways to help Demeter. Dove has given Demeter a support system that she does not have in the source material, although we might think of it as building on a trend we see in the *Metamorphoses*, in which Demeter is helped by a series of other women (Cyane, Arethusa).

Although the women of "Grief: The Council" care about helping Demeter recover from her loss, they are still dismissive of her concerns in some ways. The poem opens with one woman recounting her advice to the others:

I told her: enough is enough.
Get a hold on yourself, take a lover,
help some other unfortunate child.²⁴⁹

As in the *Metamorphoses*, Demeter feels that she has suffered a world-stopping loss, but those around her view Persephone's disappearance as an event that is sad but all too common. Just as in the *Metamorphoses* Zeus suggests to Demeter that Persephone's abduction is simply a prelude to a sensible marriage to Hades, here Demeter's friends urge her to move on to the next phases of her life: taking a lover, caring for another child (a nod to the Demophon episode from the *Hymn to Demeter*, which Ovid does not include). Another woman recalls giving Demeter similar advice:

Yes it's a tragedy, a low-down shame,
but you still got your own life to live. Meanwhile,
ain't nothing we can do but be discreet
and wait. She brightened up a bit, then [...]

²⁴⁹ Ibid. 1-3.

I bet she ain't took in
a word I said except that last²⁵⁰

Again, the people around Demeter are dismissive of her panic and do not consider the situation as urgent as she does. Dove has provided her Demeter with a community that takes a “tough love” approach, and so here she has more support than she does in the *Metamorphoses*. Nevertheless, Dove’s Demeter shares the sense of helplessness felt by Ovid’s: young girls go missing all the time in both worlds, or so it seems, and so only Demeter is alarmed by the abduction of this one particular missing girl.

Section III consists of one long poem, “Persephone in Hell,” which complicates our understanding of that one particular missing girl. Whereas Section II showed us a Demeter devastated by the sudden abduction of her young daughter, Section III is narrated by a Persephone who is “not quite twenty”²⁵¹ when she chooses to travel to Paris of her own accord. We might view Section III as a continuation of the story begun in Section II, in which case the dismissive reactions of Demeter’s friends and neighbors seem less callous. If Persephone is a young woman who has chosen to travel abroad for a while, rather than a little girl kidnapped under mysterious circumstances, then advice like “Get a hold on yourself”²⁵² begins to sound more sensible. On the other hand, though, because *Mother Love* suggests that the same stories recur in different ways across time and space, it is possible that the panicked Demeter of Section II is not exactly the same woman as the mother of Section III’s Persephone. Either way, “Persephone in Hell” refocuses our attention, introducing us to a different perspective and, eventually, bringing Hades into the story.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 6-9, 15-16.

²⁵¹ Dove “Persephone in Hell,” 1.

²⁵² Dove “Grief: The Council,” 2.

Notably, however, although Paris is Persephone’s “Hell,” she does not meet Hades until she has already been there for a while. At first, she talks about the excitement of exploring the city, living with several other girls, ordering food with her “seven words of French.”²⁵³ A few lines later, she tells us her order—“*une baguette et / cinq croissants beurre, s’il vous plaît*”—which is actually nine words, suggesting that the number seven, alongside talk of food and eating, might be meant to bring to mind the seven pomegranate seeds that doom Persephone in older tellings of the myth. Whereas the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* has Hades feed the seeds to Persephone in order to trick her, the *Metamorphoses* makes her consumption of the seeds an accident. After Zeus promises Demeter that she can have her daughter back as long as Persephone has not eaten anything in the underworld, Ovid writes:

Non ita fata sinunt, quoniam ieiunia virgo
solverat et, cultis dum simplex errat in hortis,
Poeniceum curva decerpserat arbore pomum
sumptaque pallenti septem de cortice grana
presserat ore suo.²⁵⁴

The fates do not allow it, since the young maiden had broken her fast and, while she was wandering in well-tended gardens, a simple girl, she had plucked a red-purple fruit from a curved tree and had put seven seeds taken from the pale rind into her mouth.

For Ovid, there is no plotting and planning here: Persephone is described as *simplex*, she is wandering, and in her innocence she happens to eat seven seeds. Likewise, when Dove’s Persephone speaks of having a mere “seven words of French” with which to order food, it is not so much a literal reckoning of how many words she knows as a sign of how unprepared and inexperienced she is. In an unfamiliar “Hell,” she wanders and makes decisions not fully understanding her circumstances, but knowing only that she is hungry. At the same time, the fact

²⁵³ Dove “Persephone in Hell,” 12.

²⁵⁴ *Met.* 5.534-8.

that she uses her own words—however few they might be—to request food in Hell is significant. This Persephone has more agency in her story than the girls we find in the *Homeric Hymn* or in the *Metamorphoses*.

By delaying the introduction of Hades, Dove has time to begin to explore one of the differences between her version and the ancient accounts: her Persephone is young and innocent, but she is not virginal. “There was love, of course,”²⁵⁵ she says after listing some of her favorite haunts and pastimes in Paris. Having catalogued several of the “boys”²⁵⁶ in the same way she catalogued the shops and shopkeepers, she adds:

I don't believe I was suffering. I was curious,
mainly:
How would each one smell, how many ways could
he do it?
I was drowning in flowers.²⁵⁷

In the *Metamorphoses* and other ancient texts, flowers are often associated with young girls about to lose their virginity. The phrase “drowning in flowers,” then, has an Ovidian feel to it, recalling the danger associated with flower-picking from the beginning of *Mother Love*. The phrase “I don’t believe I was suffering” adds a layer of complication, though: for now, at least, Persephone does not *mind* drowning in flowers. It also suggests that Persephone is responding to her mother’s interpretation of what is happening. “Mother worried,”²⁵⁸ Persephone tells us matter-of-factly, and throughout “Persephone in Hell” occasional italicized lines convey Demeter’s concerns, in some cases repeating language from Section II, such as “*are you having a good time / are you having a time at all,*”²⁵⁹ an echo of lines from “Protection.” By scattering

²⁵⁵ Dove “Persephone in Hell,” 67.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 72-6.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. 48.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 96-7.

Demeter's lines throughout Persephone's first-person narrative, and by having them recall some of Demeter's lines in the previous section, Dove creates the impression that Demeter is still searching for her daughter (even if Persephone does not necessarily want to be found).

Like Ovid, Dove is far more interested in Demeter and Persephone than she is in Hades. The *Metamorphoses* scarcely mention Hades in this story, except to identify him as Persephone's kidnapper²⁶⁰ and to illustrate how quickly her mood changes when she is reunited with her mother: "for she who could recently seem gloomy to Hades, now has a joyful appearance" ("nam modo quae poterat Diti quoque maesta videri, / laeta deae frons est").²⁶¹ Overall, the focus is on Demeter and, to a lesser extent, Persephone. Likewise, *Mother Love* tends to devote attention to Hades only when he is relevant to the relationship between Demeter and Persephone. "Hades' Pitch," which opens Section IV, describes Persephone's reaction to the pursuit of Hades. Although part of her wonders if she is "falling for him out of sheer boredom,"²⁶² another part is "secretly thrilled"²⁶³ by his advances. The final lines of the sonnet, however, still foreground her relationship with Demeter:

She sighs
just as her mother aboveground stumbles, is caught
by the fetlock---bereft in an instant---
while the Great Man drives home his desire.²⁶⁴

The word "aboveground" recalls the traditional geography of the myth, in contrast to this version which spans continents instead of the underworld and upperworld. Similarly, the phrase "bereft in an instant" brings to mind the suddenness of Persephone's abduction in the *Metamorphoses*

²⁶⁰ *Met.* 5.395.

²⁶¹ *Met.* 5. 569-70.

²⁶² Dove "Hades' Pitch," 8.

²⁶³ *Ibid.* 5.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 11-14.

and in Section II of *Mother Love*. These lines also emphasize the way that the actions of Hades—here referred to (perhaps mockingly) as “the Great Man”—simultaneously affect both Demeter and Persephone despite the distance between them.

The heart of Section IV, however, comes when Demeter and Persephone speak in person in “The Bistro Styx.” After being physically separated for so long, mother and daughter are reunited at last—but it does not go as happily as the reunion in the *Metamorphoses*. Here, Persephone is perfectly happy to remain in “Hell” with Hades—living, Demeter thinks privately, as “the brooding artist's demimonde.”²⁶⁵ Indeed, one of Demeter’s primary criticisms of Hades here is that he makes bad art. When Persephone refers to “our Art,”²⁶⁶ Demeter is disappointed that Hades has persuaded her to join in his grim creations:

he'd convinced
her to pose nude for his appalling canvases,
faintly futuristic landscapes strewn
with carwrecks and bodies being chewed
by rabid cocker spaniels.²⁶⁷

The image of Hades as a self-important artist who deploys the grotesque for shock value is striking. Dove has stripped the figure of his divine power over the underworld, and all that is left is a shallow devotion to a gruesome aesthetic. Dove’s Persephone, however, is still drawn to him. Throughout her lunch with Demeter at the Bistro Styx, Persephone is ravenous. Ovid’s Persephone eats seven pomegranate seeds by accident and finds herself trapped (at least for part of the year) with Hades; this Persephone, perhaps thanks to a blending of the original Ovidian imagery with the Biblical tale of Eve eating a more tempting fruit, is utterly taken in once she

²⁶⁵ Dove “The Bistro Styx,” 19.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 37.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 37-41.

has tasted the fruit—not only trapped by the decree of the fates, as in the *Metamorphoses*, but also trapped because she *wants* to remain with Hades. “The Bistro Styx” ends with Demeter asking a question that goes unanswered:

“But are you happy?” Fearing, I whispered it
quickly. “What? You know, Mother”---

she bit into the starry rose of a fig---
“one really should try the fruit here.”
I’ve lost her, I thought, and called for the bill.²⁶⁸

After spending the first half of the book physically distant from one another, Demeter and Persephone are at last reunited only to spend their meeting speaking past one another. Persephone either does not hear or does not care to answer Demeter’s question. Instead, she remains fixated on the fruit. Within the context of the myth, it is poignant that the line “one really should try the fruit here” marks the moment that Demeter realizes she has lost her daughter. Ovid’s Demeter also grieved that her daughter tried the fruit in “Hell,” but Ovid’s Persephone did not then become an evangelist for the fruit; in that case, it was an accident. Dove’s Persephone, by contrast, wants to remain in Hell.

Not only does this unhappy reunion represent a fragmentation in the relationship between mother and daughter, but it also marks the middle of *Mother Love*, where Dove’s narrative differs from Ovid’s most sharply. Lofgren has suggested that the book’s seven sections represent a movement into and back out of Hell.²⁶⁹ Section V “initiates a movement upward”²⁷⁰ by beginning to set up a reconciliation between mother and daughter as Persephone starts to realize that her relationship with Hades is unhealthy. In a kind of ring composition, Section VI recalls

²⁶⁸ Ibid. 67-71.

²⁶⁹ Lofgren 1996, 141.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

Section II: once again, a series of short (mostly 14-line) poems invites us to re-examine the myth from different angles. “Demeter, Waiting” presents a fairly traditional take on Demeter, raging through the winter:

She is gone again and I will not bear
it, I will drag my grief through a winter
of my own making and refuse
any meadow that recycles itself into
hope. Shit on the cicadas, dry meteor
flash, finicky butterflies! I will wail and thrash
until the whole goddamned golden panorama freezes
over. Then I will sit down to wait for her. Yes.²⁷¹

In many ways, Demeter’s protest via the weather recalls the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which devotes more attention to the natural consequences of Demeter’s grief than does the *Metamorphoses*. Regardless of the meteorological details, though, Ovid’s Demeter has a determination to her that we can see reflected in Dove’s account. In the hymn, Demeter speaks with Zeus only when summoned, but in the *Metamorphoses*, she visits him of her own accord and tells him that Persephone must be returned, refusing to be swayed by his insistence that a marriage to Hades would be an honor. She makes only one concession: “The fact that she has been stolen away, I will bear, provided that he returns her” (“Quod rapta, feremus, / dummodo reddat eam”).²⁷² In “Demeter, Waiting,” Dove’s bereaved narrator seems to know that the separation is temporary—she is waiting, not grieving, because she knows that Persephone will return—but even so, she “will not bear it.” Whereas Ovid’s Demeter is appeased by the shared schedule Zeus arranges, Dove’s refuses to accept lightly even a temporary forced separation.

²⁷¹ Dove, “Demeter, Waiting,” 7-14.

²⁷² *Met.* 5.520-1.

Although it is told from Persephone's point of view, "Missing" returns to the version of events presented in Section II: a girl abducted, rather than a young woman seduced by a consensual but troubled fling. Persephone begins:

I am the daughter who went out with the girls,
never checked back in and nothing marked my "last
known whereabouts," not a single glistening petal.

Horror is partial; it keeps you going. A lost
child is a fact hardening around its absence,
a knot in the breast purring *Touch, and I will*

come true. I was "returned," I watched her
watch as I babbled *It could have been worse...*²⁷³

Persephone's friends and witnesses appear again here after largely being forgotten in the intervening sections. The image of the fact of a lost child hardening around its absence is reminiscent of several stories from the *Metamorphoses*, most strikingly Niobe's transformation into stone. We also see a return to flower imagery in these lines: Persephone's absence is characterized by a lack of evidence left behind, "not a single glistening petal." The scare quotes around "returned" point to the reality of living with the aftermath of such an abduction. In the *Metamorphoses*, Demeter and Persephone are abruptly appeased by Zeus's proposed shared custody arrangement. Here, by contrast, Dove emphasizes the way that trauma lingers, the self-consciousness that Persephone feels as she watches her mother watching her and feels that she must downplay what she has experienced. "Missing" concludes with Persephone saying, "I am the one who comes and goes; / I am the footfall that hovers."²⁷⁴ The phrase "the one who comes and goes" alludes to Persephone's seasonal comings and goings in the traditional version of the myth, while "the footfall that hovers" harkens back to the line from "Persephone, Falling,"

²⁷³ Dove "Missing," 1-8.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 13-4.

later repeated in “Persephone in Hell”: “This is how one foot sinks into the ground.”²⁷⁵ The moment of abduction is intertwined with the image of one foot sinking into the ground, finalizing Persephone’s entrapment. By identifying herself as a hovering footfall in “Missing,” then, Persephone alludes to the sense of looming danger that runs through *Mother Love*: she is the foot eternally on the verge of sinking into the ground, the one always coming and going.

In Section VII, which consists of a single poem titled “Her Island,” Dove takes a more autobiographical turn. In a series of eleven interlocking sonnets, each of which begins with the final line of the previous sonnet, she recalls a trip that she and her husband took to Sicily, a site often associated with the abduction of Persephone.²⁷⁶ The first and last lines of the piece are similar: “Her Island” begins with “Around us: blazed stones, closed ground”²⁷⁷ and ends on “around us: blazed stones, the ground closed,”²⁷⁸ an echo which reinforces the themes of repetition and cyclicity that run through *Mother Love*. As Dove and her husband circle the island, searching for the spot where Persephone was taken, she eventually concludes, “Where the chariot went under / no one can fathom.”²⁷⁹ She continues:

Water keeps its horrors
while Sky proclaims his, hangs them
in stars. Only Earth---wild
mother we can never leave (even now
we've leaned against her, heads bowed
against the heat)---knows
no story's ever finished; it just goes
on, unnoticed in the dark that's all
around us: blazed stones, the ground closed.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ Dove “Persephone, Falling” 14 and “Persephone in Hell” 140-1.

²⁷⁶ Ovid describes Cyane, for example, as “the most famous among the Sicilian nymphs” (“inter Sicelidas Cyane celeberrima nymphas,” *Met.* 5.412).

²⁷⁷ Dove “Her Island,” 1.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 155.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 146-7.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 147-55.

She cannot find where exactly Hades seized Persephone, since he fled through the water, and “water keeps its horrors.” Within the context of a myth that foregrounds the stories of Cyane and Arethusa, this line is particularly poignant: Dove draws a connection between the nymphs’ traumatic transformations into water and the transience of their stories. Water does not leave many visible traces of its horrors. While water is an “it,” Sky is characterized as a “he,” perhaps an allusion to Zeus, and Earth as a mother. Moreover, in this story full of lost children and searching mothers, Earth is a “wild mother we can never leave.” Like the speech of Pythagoras in Book 15 of the *Metamorphoses*, these lines then put into words the mythological fluidity that has coursed through the whole book: only Earth “knows / no story’s ever finished; it just goes / on, unnoticed in the dark that’s all / around us.” The assertion that “no story’s every finished,” combined with the fact that the final line of “Her Island” echoes the first, reinforce the sense that myth repeats itself in endless variations across time and space.

Like Wheatley and Ray, Dove is interested in themes of repetition, motherhood, and power dynamics. By devoting an entire book, rather than an individual poem within a larger collection, to a single myth, she gains the ability to explore these themes in greater detail and from different perspectives. Moreover, the format of *Mother Love* reveals another, less Ovidian focal point: Dove is interested in consequences and lasting effects. The *Metamorphoses*, of course, feature many characters who are irreversibly changed. However, the format of an epic poem that moves quickly from one story to the next ensures that in most cases, Ovid does not linger on the aftermath of individual events. *Mother Love*, on the other hand, dwells on how things last and reverberate through the lives of the people affected. The unnamed narrator in “Statistic: The Witness” is haunted by her memories of Persephone’s abduction long after the

fact. One of Demeter's defining characteristics is her refusal to forget, even as her friends and neighbors urge her to move on. In "Missing," Persephone herself recalls being returned to her mother, but puts "returned"²⁸¹ in scare quotes, suggesting that it is not entirely possible, once abducted, to ever return entirely; history lingers.

²⁸¹ Dove "Missing," 7.

Conclusion

All three of these poets retell stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but what is especially interesting are the particular themes they choose to explore by way of Ovid. Through their reworkings of Niobe, Echo, Demeter, and Persephone, they paint vivid images of vulnerable girls and bereft mothers. Wheatley includes a passage not present in the *Metamorphoses* in which she describes Niobe's "[s]even daughters beauteous as the op'ning morn"²⁸² before tragedy strikes. Ray, meanwhile, focuses on Echo wandering through the forest, while Dove devotes considerable attention to different readings of Persephone's abduction. Likewise, Wheatley and Ray elide the blasphemy present in Ovid's account of Niobe in order to focus on her as a bereaved mother. Dove, by virtue of writing a much longer work, grants her devastated Demeter the space to work through grief and its aftermath. All three poets engage with the text of the *Metamorphoses* in order to tell stories about women (and their mothers and their daughters) that are both old and new.

Wheatley sticks closest to Ovid's text, reworking the Niobe story from Book VI almost line-for-line, including some sections that are nearly direct translation while also adding innovations of her own. Through subtle changes in language and framing, Wheatley makes her Niobe more sympathetic than Ovid's. Meanwhile, Latona, Apollo, and Artemis become concerned less with impiety and more with the possibility of Niobe fomenting rebellion. As she uses myth to tell a story about power dynamics, Wheatley also asserts her own identity as a contributor to the 'canon.' Through her references to Homer, Virgil, and Terence in "To

²⁸² *Met.* 6.153.

Maecenas” and to Ovid and the painter Richard Wilson in “Niobe in Distress,” she seeks to “snatch a laurel”²⁸³ and take her place in a literary tradition that she has been told is not for her.

In “Niobe,” Ray builds on Wheatley’s reading of the story while also reflecting on the way grief lingers. This Niobe, transformed long ago, is “prisoned”²⁸⁴ within her new form, her “weight of woe”²⁸⁵ and “mother-love”²⁸⁶ trapped behind a stony exterior. Whereas Ray’s “Niobe” focuses on a woman unable to speak or move, “Echo’s Complaint” features an Echo who has far more agency than her Ovidian counterpart. With the full range of language at her disposal, she becomes an active participant in her own story. Strikingly, especially given that Ray is generally characterized by her devotion to Victorian standards of feminine virtue, this Echo frankly discusses her own desires and, like Ovid’s Echo, subverts gender roles by aggressively pursuing Narcissus. Although she takes different approaches in reworking these two mythical figures, in both cases she upends our expectations regarding agency and responsibility in well-trod stories.

Finally, Dove’s *Mother Love* explores the story of Demeter and Persephone from different angles. Like Wheatley, she changes her framing in order to cast new light on familiar figures. Whereas Wheatley, however, describes a Niobe who differs from Ovid’s, Dove reinvents her characters not only in contrast with their ancient predecessors, but also in contrast to other versions of themselves within *Mother Love*. Sometimes Persephone is a child abducted while she picks flowers with her friends; other times she is a young woman seduced by a troubled artist while she is living in France. Sometimes Demeter is a panicked mother seeking justice for a little girl who disappeared; other times, she is working to come to terms with the choices of her adult

²⁸³ Wheatley “To Maecenas,” 46.

²⁸⁴ Dove “Niobe,” 13.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. 12.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. 14.

daughter. Like Ray, Dove is interested in the way that trauma lingers. In “Statistic: The Witness,” one of Persephone’s companions continues to be haunted by the abduction that she witnessed, forever changed by a secondhand trauma. Demeter’s worries and warnings to Persephone in flashbacks suggest that experience has made her all too aware of what terrible things could befall her daughter. Finally, Persephone herself recalls being “returned,”²⁸⁷ putting “returned” in scare quotes to signal that her return could not undo what happened to her. Dove’s characters are allowed to sit with and work through what happens in a way that Ovid’s, Wheatley’s, and Ray’s are not.

In considering these three poets together, other similarities begin to emerge as well. All three writers share an interest in silence and voice. Notably, both Niobe and Echo become literally voiceless in the *Metamorphoses* when they are turned to stone. Once Niobe transforms, “her tongue itself also melds with the now-hard roof of her mouth” (“ipsa quoque interius cum duro lingua palato / congelat”).²⁸⁸ Although she can technically still make noise, Echo shifts from having a *vox* to being merely an impersonal *sonus*.²⁸⁹ Demeter and Persephone are still physically able to speak, but they never express how they feel about the arrangement Zeus makes; instead, the narrative marches on. Wheatley, Ray, and Dove, however, present women who are *not* voiceless. Wheatley’s Niobe begs the gods to show mercy, and she never turns to stone, remaining a human woman with full power of speech. Ray’s Echo does not seem to share the limitations of her Ovidian predecessor. Dove’s Demeter urgently seeks to persuade those around her to search for her missing daughter, while Dove’s Persephone does reflect on her experiences in Hell. In short, all of these women *do* have voices, but when they use those voices, they are

²⁸⁷ Dove “Missing,” 7.

²⁸⁸ *Met.* 6.306-7.

²⁸⁹ Natoli 2017, 49.

often ignored by those around them, especially the more powerful—a pattern that might also reflect the growing subfield of *Classica Africana*. African American women poets have been engaging with the classics for a long time; often, however, many classicists have not been paying attention.

Moreover, these three poets are interested in repetition. In the final lines of “Niobe in Distress,” Niobe begs the gods, “ah spare me one” as she seeks to protect her last, youngest child, and ““Ah! spare me one,’ the vocal hills reply.”²⁹⁰ Repetition, these lines reveal, can utterly transform the meaning of a phrase by putting it into a new context and thus exposing how dependent language is upon voice. Ray, of course, by focusing on Echo herself, foregrounds the ways in which repetition can be a creative act. Finally, Dove presents multiple iterations of the same myth in *Mother Love*, engaging in repetition within her own work, which creates the impression that Demeter and Persephone, whose story—bound up as it is with the seasons—has always had a cyclical aspect to it, are endlessly repeating in different but connected ways. Wheatley, Ray, and Dove all engage in Deleuzian repetition: they reuse elements from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in order to create innovative and distinctive work.

²⁹⁰ Wheatley “Niobe in Distress,” 210.

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