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Entertaining Arethusa

By Paul Murgatroyd, Hamilton

Abstract: This article highlights the entertainment aspect of the rape narrative at Ovid *Metamorphoses* 5.572–641 by pointing out many hitherto neglected instances of the various ways in which the poet pokes fun at both the rapist and the victim there and also mischievously tantalizes his readers. Thereby it tries to present a fuller and more nuanced appreciation of what is in fact a very clever and complex account.

At *Metamorphoses* 5.572–641 Arethusa's version of the river-god Alpheus' attempt on her virtue is consistently diverting, but so far only a few scholars¹ have commented on just some instances of all the wit and humour there.² Ovid's levity, which ranges from the farcical to the subtle, is at the expense of both his readers and his protagonists. We are manipulated, teased and frustrated: the narrative at several points leads us to suspect imminent rape of the nymph, and in the poet's own *Amores* 3.6.29–30 Alpheus out of love had pursued her when she flowed under the sea in the altered form of a stream to Sicily, where presumably the intercourse/intermingling of waters took place, as it does in other extant accounts;³ but there are also several hints at 5.572–641 that Arethusa may escape Alpheus in this particular rendition, so that we are kept in suspense, and in fact during the course of the passage and perhaps at the very end she does manage to evade his advances. As for the main characters, there is irreverent mockery of these divinities: Alpheus is presented as an amusingly incompetent rapist, while Arethusa is a figure of fun too in various ways. It is the purpose of this article to establish fully the entertaining aspects of this narrative, so as to provide a new reading that is more in step with Ovid.

Before getting down to the text it is necessary to consider context, as there is here a comically mind-bending complexity. These lines are part of a larger

- 1 See B.E. Stirrup, "Techniques of Rape", *G&R* 24 (1977) 170–184, W.S. Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 1–5* (Norman and London 1997) 557–564 and P. Jones, *Reading Ovid* (Cambridge 2007) 142–148.
- 2 On the often light-hearted approach to rape in Ovid see Richlin in A. Richlin (ed.), *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (Oxford, 1992) 170–172 and P. Murgatroyd, *Mythical and Legendary Narrative in Ovid's Fasti* (Leiden, 2005) 74–81.
- 3 It is only in *Met.* 5 that Arethusa actually or seemingly eludes the amorous god by going to Sicily: see P.M.C. Forbes-Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (Oxford, 1990), 305–6, L. Galassi, *Ovidio Opere II Le metamorfosi* (Turin 2000) 1001 and G. Rosati and G. Chiarini, *Ovidio Metamorfosi Volume III Libri V–VI* (Verona 2009) 229–230. An actual escape could be a (presumably rare) tradition that has not survived elsewhere or represent an innovation on Ovid's part (cf. the continuing affair of Mars and Venus at *A.A.* 2.589–592, with Janka's commentary ad loc.).

sequence. At 5.300 Minerva asked a Muse about the Muses' role in a contest of song when challenged by the daughters of Pierus, and the Muse duly described Calliope in response singing of how Persephone was carried off by Dis and how Ceres after finding her daughter thanks to information given by Arethusa invited the nymph to come out with her own tale. When that tale is produced, one goddess (the unnamed Muse) is telling another goddess (Minerva) how a third goddess (Calliope) told of a fourth goddess (Arethusa) telling her story to a fifth goddess (Ceres) and in the course of that telling how a sixth goddess (Diana) saved her from yet another deity (Alpheus), who also speaks.⁴ In addition, our passage on Arethusa and Alpheus forms an inset within the long narrative on the abduction of Persephone which contains clear parallels to it: both the inner and the outer tales concern rape and involve a descent, new status for the victim and a happy ending.⁵ And the nymph's lines here on Alpheus' activities also recall the prior verses in which she gave Ceres information about her missing child: 5.574–575 echo 5.487–488 and earlier Arethusa depicted the successful rape of Persephone by a god, while here she relates an unsuccessful attempt to rape herself by a god.

At 572–573 Ceres responds to Arethusa's previous words to her at 501–508, where the nymph said that she had seen that Persephone was in the Underworld when she made her way in the form of a stream from Elis to Sicily through the depths of the earth and the sea, and that she would explain the reason for that journey at another time, when Ceres was free from her anxiety over her child (thus reinforcing the link between Arethusa's two speeches to the goddess).

*Exigit alma Ceres, nata secura recepta,
quae tibi causa fugae, cur sis, Arethusa, sacer fons.
conticuere undae, quarum dea sustulit alto
fonte caput viridesque manu siccata capillos* 575
*fluminis Elei veteres narravit amores.*⁶

There is pawkiness in Ceres' nosiness here. Now that she has settled the business of Persephone, she is eager to find out about Arethusa (note the insistence in the double question with alliteration in 573) and actually questions her before doing anything at all about the crippling blight she caused at 474–486 throughout all Sicily (where she found traces of the loss of her daughter), so that *alma* in 572 of one who is not being kindly to Sicilians or life-giving has an ironical tinge.⁷

4 This complexity has been noted by B. Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (Cambridge 1970) 129, S.M. Wheeler, *A Discourse of Wonders* (Philadelphia 1999) 81–82, Rosati-Chiarini, op. cit. [n. 3] 231 and A. Barchiesi in P. Hardie (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid* (Cambridge 2002) 188–189.

5 Cf. S. Hinds, *The Metamorphosis of Persephone* (Cambridge 1987) 91–97 and G. Lively, *Ovid's Metamorphoses A Reader's Guide* (London 2011) 68.

6 The text used is the Oxford Classical Text by R.J. Tarrant (*P. Ovidi Nasonis Metamorphoses*, Oxford 2004).

7 These points are made by Anderson, op. cit. [n. 1] 557 and 558.

*'Pars ego nympharum quae sunt in Achaide' dixit
'una fui, nec me studiosius altera saltus
legit nec posuit studiosius altera casses.
sed quamvis formae numquam mihi fama petita est,
quamvis fortis eram, formosae nomen habebam.
nec mea me facies nimium laudata iuvabat,
quaque aliae gaudere solent, ego rustica dote
corporis erubui crimenque placere putavi.*

9 See OLD s.v. 3, 5, 6 and 7b. There may also be sport with the 'dowry' meaning of *dote* in 583 (she will bring her body as 'dowry' to her would-be 'husband', but in fact avoid union with him) and a joke in *crimenque placere putavi* in 584 (the attempt on her virginity is what is wrong, not her attractiveness).

These lines also establish her as the quintessential rape victim (lovely,¹⁰ naive and open to attack, because often outdoors), so that our anticipation starts to rise. It is aroused further at 585–591.

lassa revertēbar (memini) Stymphalide silva; 585
aestus erat, magnumque labor geminaverat aestum.
invenio sine vertice aquas, sine murmure euntes,
perspicuas ad humum, per quas numerabilis alte
calculus omnis erat, quas tu vix ire putares.
cana salicta dabant nutritaque populus unda 590
sponte sua natas ripis declivibus umbras.

In connection with 585–586, tiredness (which makes for vulnerability) and heat are common topoi in rape narratives.¹¹ Reinforcing that, *Stymphalide* has connotations of dangerous and speedy supernatural predators (the birds of Stymphalus). *Aestus erat* has an amatory ambiance, as it echoes the opening of *Amores* 1.5, leading one to expect another erotic encounter in which a female goes to a male during the daytime and has sex with him.¹² Moreover, at 587–591 there is a *locus amoenus*, which is the standard setting for an alfresco rape,¹³ and the gentleness and clarity of the water¹⁴ would naturally entice the hot and weary huntress to take off her clothes and bathe.

While mischievously creating expectation like this, Ovid continues the jesting. The aside *memini* in 585 is funny (she might well remember!). In 586, in addition to the foreshadowing of Alpheus' passion in *aestus*,¹⁵ the repetition of the noun fits wittily with the doubling in *geminaverat aestum*. At 587–591 Arethusa dwells on the river, naturally enough for one who is herself a spring, but she is thus in effect savouring her assailant. There is subtle inversion too: the water does not murmur now (587), but there will soon be a frightening murmur in it (597); Arethusa can see the bottom of the river and the stones but not the danger or the god; and whereas the river Alpheus moves very slowly in 589, the god Alpheus before long will be moving very quickly after her.¹⁶

10 For beauty as an invitation to violation see L.C. Curran, "Rape and Rape Victims in the Metamorphoses", *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 226–227.

11 See ad loc. F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso Metamorphosen Buch IV–V* (Heidelberg 1976), Anderson, op. cit. [n. 1] and Rosati-Chiarini, op. cit. [n. 3].

12 We see subsequently that there are some entertaining twists, as this time it is the female who removes her clothes, she really is unwilling (rather than just putting up a token or teasing resistance) and she runs off (instead of standing there compliantly) and denies intercourse to the male.

13 See H. Parry, "Ovid's Metamorphoses: Violence in a Pastoral Landscape", *TAPhA* 95 (1964) 275–282 and C.P. Segal, *Landscape in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Wiesbaden 1969) 55–56.

14 Cf. Anderson, op. cit. [n. 1] ad loc.

15 See *TLL* I.1121.45–1122.57 and *OLD* s.v. 5a for *aestus* of the heat of love.

16 It is just possible that the slowness of the river and the darkness of the shade that enfolds it hint at mental slowness and moral and intellectual darkness in the bumbling rapist (see *OLD* s.v. *tardus* 5 and *caligo* 7).

Sexual violence seems more and more imminent at 592–595, where Arethusa goes further and further into the river, removes her clothing and then goes all the way in.

*accessi primumque pedis vestigia tinxi,
poplite deinde tenuis; neque eo contenta recingor
molliaque impono salici velamina curvae
nudaque mergor aquis.* 595

The stripping is (unintentionally) provocative,¹⁷ and the delay of her total entry into the water must have tantalized the river-god, so that we wince in anticipation here. On top of that there is reminiscence¹⁸ of Hermaphroditus' progress into Salmacis' spring, prior to her assault on him, at *Met.* 4.343–345 (*summa pedum taloque tenuis vestigia tingit; | nec mora ... | mollia de tenero velamina corpore ponit*). Again there are some clever touches to add to the fun. In 593 *neque eo contenta* leads me to think that Alpheus also will not be content with her just paddling in his water. In 594 the fastidious nymph (who affects lack of concern about her appearance) is careful to ensure that her clothing does not get creased. In 595 there is the joke of an incipient spring plunging into a river and play with penetration (she penetrates him, so it is not surprising that he wants to penetrate her, but in fact this is the only intermingling of the two in her version of the story).

At 595–600 rape seems a certainty, until the deity makes a hash of things.

quas dum ferioque trahoque 595
*mille modis labens excussaue brachia iacto,
nescioquid medio sensi sub gurgite murmur
territaque insisto propiori margine fontis.
“quo properas, Arethusa?” suis Alpheos ab undis
“quo properas?” iterum rauco mihi dixerat ore.* 600

Arethusa might have reflected that the river would have its own god, so that a quick and quiet dip would be advisable, but this amusingly unwary nymph goes on and on splashing about noisily, just asking for it. Her vigorous flailing around is brought out by a full four verbs (in connection with the first two the striking of Alpheus is apt but the pulling of Alpheus to her is inappropriate, while *labor* is used of water, so again there is sport with Arethusa's imminent liquid state, and the verb can also mean 'fall into error, go wrong'¹⁹). The nymph naked and off-guard in his element represents Alpheus' big chance, and he should have promptly grabbed her and ravished her there, like Cephisus at *Met.* 3.342–344 (compare also Salmacis at 4.356–360). But the sight of this beautiful female

17 Cf. Jones, op. cit. [n. 1] 144.

18 Noted by Bömer, op. cit. [n. 11] ad loc.

19 See *OLD* s.v. 3 and 10. Ovid could also have an eye to the use of *modi* to denote variations of posture in intercourse (cf. Tibullus 2.6.52 with Murgatroyd's commentary).

revealing all her charms as she twists and turns is too much for him and in 597 he lets out an inarticulate murmur of pleasure and lust (in a Golden Line, with comical onomatopoeia in the second hemistich). Coming up from beneath her, this must have been a great shock for Arethusa (picture her face!), and it ensures that she leaves the water at once. To compound his incompetence, when she is (ill-advisedly) standing on his bank still within his grasp (598), instead of going silent (so she might wonder if she had just been hearing things) or seizing her, in a disturbingly hoarse voice he comes out with a fatuous question, which reveals that, worryingly, he knows her name, which is repeated with intimidating insistence, and which just makes her hurry off when she had in fact stopped.²⁰

*sicut eram, fugio sine vestibus (altera vestes
ripa meas habuit); tanto magis instat et ardet,
et quia nuda fui, sum visa paratior illi.
sic ego currebam, sic me ferus ille premebat,
ut fugere accipitrem penna trepidante columbae, 605
ut solet accipiter trepidas urgere columbas.*

There is more humour at 601–603: the natural and sensible course would have been for Arethusa to emerge on the bank that had her clothes, but presumably in her panic she did not think of that, and now she is not going to go back across that terrifying stretch of water to get them; so she decides to run, but this just arouses Alpheus further (because of the jiggling bare flesh and the excitement of the chase). The fiery verb *ardeo* is neatly applied to a river-god, and *paratior* means that (as Arethusa sees it) the fool Alpheus thinks that her nudity amounts to readiness for sex with him, a complete stranger (the adjective will mean that she is physically ready for rape, because there are no clothes to impede it, and also morally and mentally prepared²¹).

In 604 *curro* is often used of streams, and there is also play with the sexual sense ('have intercourse with') of *premo*.²² At 605–606 a nymph *would* use a rustic comparison, but in reality the analogy is laughably inept, as Alpheus wants to bed her, not kill her and eat her. The twofold point of view makes this into an epic double simile (of an undignified lustful chase). To increase the mock-heroic aspect there is allusion to Homer *Iliad* 22.139–144,²³ where similarly in

20 And *quo properas?* is rich from someone who will be shortly hurrying himself. Anderson, op. cit. [n. 1] 562 points out that Alpheus is made into a comic figure in this feminist account.

21 See *OLD* s.v. 4.

22 See *TLL* IV.1514.10–1515.17 and *OLD* s.v. *premo* 2b. *Ferus* in that line is the closest that Arethusa comes in her whole account to criticizing Alpheus. It may well be that because his desire for her is proof of her (secretly prized) attractiveness she felt flattered (at being fancied by an idiot like him!).

23 See Jones, op. cit. [n. 1] 145. Ovid just might have in mind also Virgil *Aeneid* 11.721–724, as is suggested by L. Fratantuono, *Madness Transformed. A Reading of Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Lanham 2011) 140.

an extended image in an epic poem one person (Achilles) following hard on the heels of another (Hector) with violent intent is likened to a hawk closely pursuing a trembling dove. The simile that Homer employed of the furious, vengeful Achilles harrying poor, doomed Hector in their climactic duel at a very solemn point of the *Iliad* is cheekily transferred by Ovid to a trivial erotic context. Achilles, of course, did catch his prey (as hawks usually do), which intimates that Alpheus may be successful in his pursuit of Arethusa. But, by way of a tease, at the same time there is also an unmistakable echo of *Met.* 1.506 (*sic aquilam penna fugiunt trepidante columbae*), of Daphne fleeing Apollo, and she escaped her pursuer (thanks to metamorphosis).

*usque sub Orchomenon Psophidaque Cyllenenque
Maenaliisque sinus gelidumque Erymanthon et Elin
currere sustinui, nec me velocior ille;
sed tolerare diu cursus ego viribus impar* 610
non poteram, longi patiens erat ille laboris.

At 607–611 we are encouraged to believe that Alpheus will now catch Arethusa by the list of all the places passed, the length of the chase, the god's obvious determination and especially the stress in two whole lines on her now tiring and being comparatively weak at 610–611. But such anticipation is cheerfully crushed at 612–613, where she continues to flee ahead of Alpheus (and the repetition of *curro* at 604, 609 and 613 brings out how she runs on and on, as streams do). There is amusing hyperbole at 607–608 in the truly epic extent of the flight, which covers more than one hundred miles.²⁴ It is particularly funny that Alpheus cannot catch up with a female who has already exerted herself hunting, making her way back over sixty miles from Stymphalus and swimming vigorously (she really is *fortis*, as she claims at 581!), and that he does not think to try to reassure her or sweet-talk her, or to employ his divine powers to her disadvantage (e.g. by confronting her with a ferocious creature²⁵) or to his own advantage (e.g. by swooping down on her and carrying her off in the form of an eagle²⁶). There is also a pawky touch in Arethusa going on about the length of her overland travel to Ceres (who has just covered the entire earth in her search for Persephone) and wit in the separation of *ego* and *ille* (with *ego* put first) in 609 and 610f.

At 612–613, ingeniously, while in the very act of frustrating our expectations that the nymph is now as good as captured, Ovid arouses suspicions that at any rate she will be caught before too long, because of the nature of the ground that she runs over there and by means of a reminiscence of *Met.* 3.226–227 (*per rupes scopulosque adituque carentia saxa | quaque est difficilis quaque est via nulla*

24 See Stirrup, art. cit. [n. 1] 176 and Anderson, op. cit. [n. 1] ad loc.

25 Such as the bull sent by Neptune at *Met.* 15.506–513.

26 Like Jupiter at *Met.* 10.155–161.

In 618 *fessa labore fugae* and *deprendimur* depict the nymph as on the very point of being grabbed. But in that verse Ovid again points to Daphne, who prayed to her divine father for help and thus eluded Apollo (*victa labore fugae, spectans Peneidas undas*, | ‘*fer, pater*’ inquit, ‘*opem*’ at 1.544a and 546), leaving us to wonder if Arethusa too will escape thanks to an appeal; and she does, so that the reader expecting a rape is frustrated, just like Alpheus. Arethusa’s actual entreaty is rather wordy for someone who is exhausted and running at high speed (*cui ... | ... pharetra* all seems quite redundant after *armigeræ ... tuæ*), and it might even slow her down somewhat. I also wonder why she has left it until this late to petition the goddess – did she just not think of asking for help until now or (even more silly) did she imagine that when enticingly naked and already tired she could outdistance an aroused god? The virginal Diana is, of course, exactly the right deity to turn to in such a plight, and one can easily imagine her taking a quiet delight in thwarting a rapist. And I suspect a quirky little joke in the response attributed to her: how do you carry a cloud, even if it is a thick one?³¹

*lustrat caligine tectam
amnis et ignarus circum cava nubila quaerit
bisque locum, quo me dea texerat, inscius ambit
et bis “io Arethusa, io Arethusa” vocavit.*

625

Here we see once more Alpheus the incompetent rapist, with *ignarus* plus *inscius* bringing out how comically baffled he is. Why is he circling the cloud – does he think that he can see into it? And why does he go round it twice – does he imagine he may have missed something the first time which he will pick up if he tries again? Why doesn’t he plunge into the cloud to find her or send in a fierce animal vel sim. to drive her out? If he is going to just stay outside it like this, he would be better off keeping quiet (in the hope that she might eventually conclude that he has gone away and so come out) or even trying to court her (assuring her that he won’t hurt her, loves her, wants a permanent relationship etc.). Instead he comes out with the bald *io Arethusa, io Arethusa*, to which she is hardly likely to respond, especially after she has fled from him for over a hundred miles and appealed to Diana for help against him. And, as one who does tend to repeat himself because bankrupt of ideas and winning words (cf. 599–560), he reiterates his cry, pointlessly (when she does not react the first time, it must be because she does not want to have anything to do with him, not because she is hard of hearing). There are witty touches as well. Doublets in the Latin mirror reduplication of actions: the ignorant questing around Arethusa’s hiding-place is mentioned (with rhyming line endings) in 623 and 624, and the twofold *bis* at 624–625 fits with the concomitant shout of *io Arethusa, io Arethusa* (itself a pair) each time. At 622–623 Arethusa *caligine tectam* is surrounded in the word order by the encircling river (*lustrat ... | amnis*), and so is the cloud in which she

31 Cf. the notion of Dawn’s horses tripping on a thick cloud at *Am.* 1.13.30.

lurks (*ignarus ... quaerit* encompasses *cava nubila*). In 624 Ovid is exploiting the common application of *ambio* to water that flows around a place; and in 625 he puts into the mouth of a god addressing a nymph the word *io*, which was used in the ritual invocation of various divinities by humans.³²

*quid mihi tunc animi miserae fuit? anne quod agnae est,
si qua lupos audit circum stabula alta frementes,
aut lepori, qui vepre latens hostilia cernit
ora canum nullosque audet dare corpore motus?*

Anticipation of violation is re-animated by the comparison of Arethusa to weak and helpless animals at the mercy of fierce, powerful and pitiless predators quite capable of bursting in (and the plurality of the wolves and dogs increases the menace and lessens the likelihood of escape). However, at the same time there are here two more nods to the earlier account of Daphne's evasion of Apollo:³³ 626–627 recall the analogy of the lamb fleeing the wolf (*sic agna lupum*) at 1.505–506, and 628–629 bring to mind the image at 1.533–534 *ut canis in vacuo leporem cum Gallicus arvo | vidit*. Again a huntress is likened to prey, and a nymph naturally thinks of rustic correspondences, and they are inept (given Alpheus' actual intentions). And again there is burlesque, because at 626–627, dexterously, Ovid is also looking to Virgil's simile comparing the raging Turnus (unable to get into the Trojan camp) to a howling wolf at a sheepfold in *Aeneid* 9.59–62 (*ac veluti pleno lupo insidiatus ovili / cum fremit ad caulas ... | ... tuti sub matribus agni | balatum exercent*).³⁴ Ovid's redeployment of such grave imagery is impudent, and it also helps tantalize us in connection with Alpheus and Arethusa, because in Virgil the lambs stay safe and Turnus does not penetrate the Trojan stronghold. There is a jocular aspect to the questions here too (doesn't the nymph know how she felt, and couldn't Ceres guess?) and to the tactlessness in bringing out at length the terror of a rape victim in front of the mother of a girl who has just been abducted. There is more droll arrangement of words as well: at 626–627 *agna* is pointedly separated from *lupos*, and the *lupos ... frementes* encompass the *stabula alta*. And in 629 in this erotic context it is easy enough to see an unintentional double entendre produced by this staunch virgin and an unwitting allusion to the absence of sexual movement on her part in *nullosque audet dare corpore motus*.³⁵

32 See *TLL* I.1848.8–29 (on *ambio*) and VII.2.281.44–49, 59–69, 282.1–2 (on *io*).

33 Both are noted by Bömer op. cit. [n. 11] without comment.

34 Anderson and Jones op. cit. [n. 1] point out the Virgilian influence here. Less certain, but possible, is Jones' suggestion that at 628–9 our author is indebted to Homer *Iliad* 17.674–678 (if so, there would be further parody).

35 Cf. Martial 11.104.11 *nec motu dignaris opus*, and on *moveo* and its derivatives applied to sexual motions see J.N. Adams *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London 1982) 195.

non tamen abscedit (neque enim vestigia cernit 630
longius ulla pedum); servat nubemque locumque.
occupat obsessos sudor mihi frigidus artus
caeruleaeque cadunt toto de corpore guttae;
quaque pedem movi, manat locus eque capillis
ros cadit, et citius quam nunc tibi facta renarro 635
in latices mutor.

Expectation of rape is increased here. Firstly 630–631 dwell on Alpheus' refusal to leave, intimating that there is no escape for Arethusa (and leaving open the possibility that he may lose patience and finally charge in and take her). Then at 632–636 she changes into water, which encourages the conclusion that surely he will mingle with her now in her liquid form, as in so many versions of the story. There is much that is flippant about the metamorphosis. After Diana's helpful intervention Arethusa gives the game away by revealing herself, and does so through sweating, and sweating out of fear³⁶ of an inefficient assailant who for some reason best known to himself does not penetrate the cloud and seize her. Grotesquely the change is due to a massive amount of unladylike perspiration (so much that total transformation takes place very quickly), including sweating from the head, sweaty feet and blue sweat, with pattering drops wickedly conjured up by the frequency of *c* and *q* at 633–635. We may also note that fear of a water god causes a watery discharge and transfiguration into a water goddess, that what seizes Arethusa's beleaguered body in 632 is not Alpheus but *sudor*, and that with *frigidus* in that line Ovid is very probably toying with the sense 'frigid, sexually unresponsive'.³⁷

sed enim cognoscit amatas
amnis aquas positoque viri, quod sumpserat, ore
vertitur in proprias, ut se mihi misceat, undas.

At this point Arethusa exposes herself by flowing out from her hiding-place into plain sight, which leaves one wondering why she couldn't control herself and just pool inside the cloud or at least come out of it on the other side, away from Alpheus. Even that slow god realizes that the new stream emerging has to be her (*cognoscit amatas* | ... *aquas* must mean that he detected/recognized the one he loved in her liquid form, but *amatas aquas* 'beloved water' is an inherently comical expression, and there will be a pun on carnal knowledge in *cognoscit*³⁸). At 637–638 Alpheus acts, finally doing something sensible and useful, although the demonstration of his divine powers there makes his earlier failure to employ

36 There is no parallel for such a lather of terror causing the alteration, and this farcical detail may well be an innovation by Ovid.

37 For *occupo* used of one person taking hold of another one see *OLD* s.v. 1; and for *frigidus* 'frigid' see *TLL* VI.1.1329.73–80 and *OLD* s.v. 8d.

38 See *OLD* s.v. 5b and *TLL* III.1503.83–1504.36.

them profitably appear even more odd and foolish. Now our anticipation is at its height, and it seems clear that we have reached the rape at last with the standard intermingling of the waters of Alpheus and Arethusa. The purpose clause suggests this, with *se mihi misceat* denoting not just mixture of streams but also copulation,³⁹ and by way of reinforcement there is aural linking of the protagonists (in the alliteration of a(m) in *amatas/amnis aquas*) and contact and embracing in the word order (the juxtaposition in *amnis aquas* and *se mihi*, and the enfolding of *amnis* by *amatas aquas* and of *se* by *mihi* and *proprias undas*).

However, Arethusa's ending promptly confounds our carefully encouraged assumption and denies us the much awaited mating:

Delia rupit humum caecisque ego mersa cavernis
advehor Ortygiam, quae me cognomine divae 640
grata meae superas eduxit prima sub auras.

Just when Alpheus must have thought he had Arethusa, with an amusing surprise Diana intervenes a second time,⁴⁰ to help yet again the inept nymph, and to frustrate the randy river-god. Diana acts swiftly, splitting the earth in just three dactylic words; so too by the end of the line Arethusa is under the ground, and after only two more words she has made it all the way to Ortygia. The obvious thing for Alpheus to do is to follow her, with the matching speed that he evinced earlier, and to go to Sicily and combine his waters with hers, as he does in other surviving accounts. But that does not happen at 640–641, where Arethusa runs on about Ortygia, which (unlike Alpheus) is *grata* to her. Nor does it happen after that: in 642 (*hac Arethusa tenus*) the nymph abruptly ends her tale. So we are invited to conclude that Alpheus did not go after her and enjoy a liquid union with her after all. There is fun to be had in speculating why he would not have done that. Could he not work out where she had gone? Or, if he could work that out, was he too dumb to think of chasing her under the ground, or scared of the dark, or miffed at her continuing intransigence? None of the feasible reasons reflects well on the god.

But there is a final tease here. Arethusa as a narrator is not entirely reliable (given the protestations about her beauty at 580–584), and so it is quite possible that Alpheus did actually come together with her (*hac ... tenus* could mean that there was more to tell) and that she is suppressing that fact out of coyness or to puff herself again, representing herself as the victor in this conflict. This also raises the possibility that there was twisting and exaggeration by her earlier in her account (e.g. at 607–613) in a (futile) attempt to show herself in a good light.

In conclusion, although comedy is, of course, a subjective matter, and some readers may not be convinced by every single example of it that I see in this

39 So Bömer op. cit. [n. 11]. Cf. also Adams op. cit. [n. 35] 180–181.

40 The twofold intervention is without parallel, and after Arethusa had turned herself into a spring it seemed that there was nothing left for Diana to do.

passage, I trust that I have shown that there are enough definite instances of humour and wit to establish that this is a decidedly entertaining account. I also hope that in the process of demonstrating that I have heightened perception of the subtlety, erudition, ingenuity, and complexity of this narrative.

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