

First & Last Name

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World Literature I-WEB/SCC

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Text: *Metamorphoses*

Passage: “When, in her wretched zeal, the old nurse finds  
that Cinyras is drunk with wine, deprived,  
without his lawful wife, she tells the king  
that a young girl is now in love with him;  
but she does not reveal the girl’s true name—  
the girl whose beauty she is quick to praise.  
And when he wants to know the young girl’s age,  
she says, ‘the same as Myrrha’s.’ When he tells  
the nurse to fetch the girl, she runs to find  
her Myrrha and, ‘My dear, we’ve won,’ she cries;  
‘you can rejoice!’ The wretched girl is stirred,  
and yet her joy is not complete; a sad  
foreboding grips her heart, but she is glad:  
the virgin’s mind is torn by such discord. (Book X. 298 - 311)

Question: How does the old nurse’s change from being horrified and dispelling warnings to being assistive and even promising Myrrha her desire show that life is full of hard decisions where no good answer seems to exist?

Issue: Issues of fact. We are not told by Ovid how the old nurse came to not only accept the desires of Myrrha, but to be assistive in her reaching her goal of sleeping with her father. This gap in information causes the reader to try to compose reasons why this woman, whose job it is to protect Myrrha, would help with such “wretched zeal” (Book X. 298)

Critical Approach: The reader-response criticism should provide an interesting and thought providing look at this passage. It is apparent that Ovid wants the reader to respond with intense emotions throughout his *Metamorphoses* work, and there is clear evidence that Ovid again wants to elicit such a response from his readers here. Ovid starts the reader tension in lines 86 – 99 when he first tells the readers that fathers and daughters should not read this, but if they “delight” in it, not believe the “truth” he tells (Book X. 86 - 99). If the reader believes it, the reader must believe that there is punishment for those who behave in such a way. Myrrha knows that what she desires is wrong and against law and common sense, but she tries to justify her thoughts through ideas of animal behavior. Ovid introduces the nurse first as “horrified” once she begins pry the information out of Myrrha (Book X. 263). Once she understands, the nurse goes from “warning word on word” to the dread promise that she will help to arrange the rendezvous (Book X. 281). Ovid pushes the reader to be amazed at such strange behavior by one whose employment is protection.

Answer: Ovid seems to be seeking a powerful response from the reader of this poem, especially in the relationship between Myrrha and her old nurse. The nurse wants the desires for suicide to abate in Myrrha and is willing to do anything to perform this duty. Had the nurse thought

through the outcomes of such an encounter between Myrrha and her father, Cinyras, she may have made a different decision. The old nurse's fear of Myrrha being bent on suicide apparently got the best of her. In many ways this is a deal with the devil, and there can be no winners. We know that the old nurse is just a means to an end for Ovid since she is not mentioned after Myrrha is revealed to her father and runs away. This story is about internal conflict. The reader, Ovid advises, should have internal conflict about reading and believing the story. Myrrha has internal conflict about her desires versus law and common decency. The old nurse has internal conflict about whether to allow Myrrha to commit suicide or to help her achieve her wretched desire. Cinyras is "struck dumb by grief" as he pulls his sword to kill his daughter (Book X. 356). Finally Myrrha asks some god to deny her both life and death. This poem is steeped with intense and life-changing decisions and the internal conflict each presents to the character and the reader's response to it. Many times in life we are presented with difficult decisions that leave the individual struggling if the decisions made were the proper ones.