Being Overshadowed: An Ovidian Antecedent for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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COLERIDGE'S MARINER BEGINS HIS STORY BY EXPLAINING HOW HIS SHIP, after crossing the equator, was blown south. As he does so (though only in the revised version of 1817) he personifies wind and vessel as pursuer and pursued:

> And now the storm-blast came, and he
> Was tyrannous and strong:
> He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
> And chased us south along.
>
> With sloping masts and dipping prow,
> As who pursued with yell and blow
> Still treads the shadow of his foe,
> And forward bends his head,
> The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,
> And southward aye we fled. (41-50)[1]

The ship as characterized here anticipates the Mariner's much later comparison of himself with

> … one, that on a lonesome road
> Doth walk in fear and dread,
> And having once turned round walks on,
> And turns no more his head;
> Because he knows, a frightful fiend
> Doth close behind him tread. (446-51)

But what counts as an anticipation from the reader's point of view may be understood as being, from the Mariner's point of view, the product of retrospection. We may, in other words, consider his telling as conditioned by the events of the tale as a whole. Having shot the albatross and (as he believes) caused the deaths of his shipmates, he is evidently guilt-ridden, his epiphany at 282 ff. notwithstanding. He tells his tale as a penitential act, which is to say that he feels that he deserves to be punished. It could be that he projected this fear on to the inanimate ship from the outset. Be this as it may, the Mariner's comparison of the ship to a person unable to get ahead of the shadow of his violent pursuer is remarkable. We register not only the fear of such a person, but also his near-despair.

A similar evocation of the experience of being overshadowed by a pursuer is to be found in a passage embedded in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* V. It arises in

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[1] All quotations are taken from the 1834 version of the *Rime* in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works*, I (*Poems [reading text]:* Part 1), ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. Ll. 41-50 do not appear in the 1798 version.

the course of the nymph Arethusa's explanation to Calliope of how she came to be transformed into a sacred spring. Her transformation was, she says, a consequence of her pursuit by the river-god and would-be rapist Alpheus:

> *Sic ego currebam; sic me ferus ille premebat*
> *Ut fugere accipitrem penna trepidante columbae*
> *Ut solet accipiter trepidas agitare columbas* (605-05)[2]

So I ran, so he fiercely pursued; as doves are wont with trembling wings to fly from the hawk, or as the hawk is wont to drive through the clouds the trembling doves.

> *Sol erat a tergo: vidi praecedere longam*
> *Ante pedes umbram: nisi si timor illa videbat.*
> *Sed certe sonituque pedum terrebar; et ingens*
> *Crinales vittas afflabat anhelitus oris.* (614-17)

The sun shone behind me, I saw a long shadow advance before my feet, if it was not perhaps my fear that saw it; but I certainly heard the sound of his steps close behind me, and his shorter breath fanned my parting hair.[3]

Although Diana turned Arethusa into a fountain out of pity, and thus in order to save her, Arethusa's metamorphosis is as suggestive of the paralysis of terror as it is of release or rescue: *Occupat obsesses sudor mihi frigidus artus* [632]—"A chilly sweat spreads upon my limbs thus besieged".

That the story of Alpheus and Arethusa had been significant for Coleridge is obvious from the prominence of the former, as "Alph, the sacred river", in the second line of *Kubla Khan*.[4] We are told that the river runs into a "deep romantic chasm", where it becomes turbulent. Its "turmoil", which produces the fountain that Alpha's prey Arethusa was to become, is fancifully attributed to the breathing, not of the river, but of the earth through which the river takes its course:

> But oh that deep romantic chasm which slanted
> Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
> A savage place! as holy and inchanted

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[2] Text and translation taken from *Ovid's Metamorphoses Translated into English Prose*, 5th edn. (London, 1822), p. 198. (The translator remains un-named in this edition.) I accessed the University of Toronto Robarts Library copy at http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/ovid.html

[3] *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, pp. 198-99.

[4] Alpheus is first mentioned in the *Metamorphoses* in the list of rivers incorporated in the second book (at 227-71). Interestingly, Anthony S. Kline has suggested that this earlier (and extremely brief) mention might lie behind the second line of Coleridge's famously incomplete vision, proposing it as "the idea for Coleridge's '*Alph*, the sacred river" in *Kubla Khan*?' See his *Ovid's Metamorphoses: A Complete English Translation and Mythological Index,* University of Virginia E-Text Center, 2000, accessible at http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm. On Alph in *Kubla Khan,* John Livingston Lowes cites Virgil (*Aeneid* III, 694-96), Thomas Taylor's translation of Pausanius, Strabo, and Seneca—but not Ovid. See *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination,* 2nd edn. (London: Constable, 1951), pp. 393-96.

> As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
> By woman wailing for her demon lover!
> And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
> As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
> A mighty fountain momently was forced: (12-18)[5]

To return to the *Rime:* assuming that Coleridge recalled *Metamorphoses* V when revising that poem, and acknowledging that it is impossible to avoid circular argument here, one would have to conclude that he was struck most of all by Arethusa's sense of being overshadowed by Alpheus, which testifies so vividly to the river-god's awful and seemingly inescapable imminence.[6] And yet Arethusa expresses a strange doubt as to whether her impression of the shadow is objective, or just the product of her (albeit justified) fear. With a somewhat similar effect, Coleridge's Mariner sections off (as it were) his intimation of the same impression in a simile, thus acknowledging that it is not intrinsic to the scene he is characterizing—and acknowledging the effect that fear can have upon the imagination. That Arethusa feels above all the breath of Alpheus is also significant, lending further credibility to the possibility that Coleridge's model for the storm blast was Ovid's panting river god. Significant, too—given that the storm-blast as described by the Mariner has "o'ertaking *wings*" (43, italics mine)—is the fact that Ovid compares Alpheus in his pursuit of Arethusa with a hawk in pursuit of a dove.

Coleridge's recourse to the pagan Ovid may have a broader, thematic, significance. The Mariner's Christianity is of the kind that those conditioned by the Reformation and the Enlightenment tended to view as quintessentially superstitious and even (in its—as they thought—pointless veneration of saints) polytheistic. Whether in his function as character or teller, the Mariner seems throughout the tale to apprehend nature in a fearfully superstitious—and thus quasi-pagan spirit.

[5] Quoted from Mays' edition, PW I i 512-14