The centrality of rape to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the frequency with which his poetic voice springs from acts of violation have long disturbed modern readers. While many critics come to reject the founding of a male poetics on female suffering, Lynn Enterline describes how the unsettling effect comes often from Ovid’s ability to speak not only in the male voice but in the female, his “transgendered *prosopopoeiae*” ventriloquizing a variety of genders and thereby undermining through irony the poem’s violent masculinist fantasies. Ovidian poetry, as Lisa Starks-Estes has shown, comes out of the trauma of *fassusque nefas*, expressing the crime that cannot be spoken. These crimes of violation are part of a general pattern of terror and ecstasy, where a poetic voice arises out of a body seized by an outside force that pushes to the limits of feeling and expression. Ovid’s stories of violators and violations return again and again to scenes of sublime rapture that generate sublime terror, like the Maenads possess by Bacchic frenzy who destroy a poet in an orgy of blood and dismemberment that, paradoxically, produces a sublime and terrifying poem. Ovid’s stories become one model for sublime rapture, for the terror that pierces the limits of speech and knowing, and Shakespeare’s versions follow the *Metamorphoses* in that such rapture provokes yet more speech, feeling, thought, discussion, despite the moments where the rapture silences.
These stories share concerns with the same interconnected problems: desire, violation, consent, and interpretation. Rapture, poetic and sexual, is the central figure for that experience. As Enterline observes, “In an Ovidian universe, subjects may be just as ‘carried away’ by words (the original sense of raptus) as by implacable lovers.” Words have as much terrifying power to pull a person off to terrifying heights as the force of desire, which itself can appear as a passion within one’s body or as another body threatening to seize and carry one away. Words, Amor, and a man in the grips of mad amor can all be ravishers and rapists. As Melissa Sanchez argues, early modern English poets build off a classical tradition where “love is experienced as both the most private and voluntary and the most alien and invasive of emotions.” Desire is “both choice and compulsion,” a tyranny that comes from within and without, potentially destructive in its mix of pleasure and pain, threatening to contaminate even those who resist. Although Sanchez does not explore in any detail the Ovidian sources of those representations of desire, Ovid’s raptures are clear models for the Renaissance. Souls are trapped in wounded bodies, yet they persist in trying to communicate their trauma despite being betrayed by their transformed bodies. In this way, although Philomela finally weaves the words to express her traumatic rape to her sister, a creative act that sparks a revolt against the tyrant who violated her, almost inevitably the contaminating crime generates more nefas, culminating in a terrifying frenzy of child-murder and cannibalism.

Although Shakespeare never uses the word sublime nor likely had direct knowledge of Longinus’s newly-discovered work, he certainly recognized the rhetorical power that would go by that term. The high style that expresses terror and conveys that experience to an audience is, I would argue, something that Shakespeare finds in Ovid’s model. The long-
debated question about where the sublime resides—in the rhetorical performance of elevated style, in the great soul of the poet, or ecstasy it provokes in the audience—is one that Ovid’s poetry also raises as his most terrifying lines spring from both poetic and literal rapture. I am especially interested in an aspect of the sixteenth and seventeenth century sublime explored by David L. Sedley, “the skeptical construction of sublimity,” the ways that the sublime arises out of responses to skepticism. The sublime grows out of moments of doubt that press against the limits of human knowledge, and in Ovid, we see those moments occurring at the fragmentation of the self and the breakdown of knowledge and communication. Ovid’s sublime moments come, paradoxically, when words fail, when poetry is born of an inability to express what is known or unknown. His sublime, moreover, projects skepticism upon the ideological edifice built to support imperial power, resisting the models of poetry that would create certainty. Shakespeare thus learns from Ovid to create a sublime rapture that expresses the terror produced at the extreme limits of feeling and knowing.

Ovid gives his first model of poetic rapture in the myth of Apollo and Daphne. Apollo is first possessed by love after he boasts of his prowess to Cupid and mocks him, “lascive puer” (1.456). In a parody of Homeric heroes challenging one another and battling for kleos, Cupid promises victory over the god: “quantoque animalia cedunt / cuncta deo, tanto minor est tua gloria nostra” (“as much as all living things give way to a god, so your glory is less than mine,” 464-65). The male god loses control over his passions, which leads to the attempt to force the resistant woman, who herself has been hit by a dart that makes her flee from love. Rapture leads to rape. Cupid’s reference to the animalia that are
beneath gods reminds us that the living are defined by both breathing and having souls (anima) which the god must conquer along with their bodies. Daphne’s prayer (as Enterline discusses) produces her ironic transformation: a prayer to take away the beauty (forma) that has ravished Apollo leads to the change of her shape (forma). But this change of form is not a change of animus. Even as wood, she resists: “oscula dat ligno; refugit tamen oscula lignum” (I.556). We can hear in these lines Pygmalion massaging his creation’s ivory form till it yields to his caresses, yet here Daphne’s body and soul continues to flee and resist (“refugit”).

Apollo makes Daphne one more offer, to be forever the symbol of Roman triumph, particularly ironic given how Cupid has just stolen Apollo’s epic glory. She seems to respond: “factis modo laurea ramis / adnuit utque caput visa est agitasse cacumen” (I.566-67). The verse is ambiguous, making it difficult to translate into English this nod that may be consent or just a tossing motion (agitasse) of the branches of the tree: the tree nods (in consent?), so that the top seems to move (visa est agitasse). A.D. Melville gives, “the laurel in assent / Inclined her new-made branches and bent down, / Or seemed to bend, her head, her leafy crown.” What is seen here? Is it a nod, of acceptance, or of submission? Or just the wind? Whose anima is animating the laurel, Daphne’s or the breeze, or the divine mind (animus) who interprets the motion as a sign of consent? What does Daphne intend to communicate, if anything? Ovid’s narrator does not say whether we are to accept the interpretation that Apollo is giving to it, and Daphne can no longer speak and offer her explanation—though even if she could, as we have seen, even the most unambiguous of spoken signs can be given another interpretation, can have their meaning stolen away and ravished. The entire poetic tradition is thus grounded on not only Daphne’s resistance to
Apollo but to a silence that may or may not be a consent, to what is seen (visa est) by the poet or his reader, both of whom ventriloquize the silent figure. The figure for this ambiguous consent is, significantly, the tops of her branches, her elevated soul trapped in the highest laureate branches.

This first rapture and attempted rape perhaps keeps more to the mock heroic than the sublime, but the silencing of Daphne’s voice even as her body continues to resist sets the pattern. The sequence of rapes that follows becomes an increasingly terrifying struggle to voice consent. Actaeon violates Diana, and for that he is punished by not just dismemberment but a loss of voice.

“me miserum!” dicturus erat: vox nulla secuta est!

ingemuit: vox illa fuit, lacrimaeque per ora

non sua fluxerunt; mens tantum pristina mansit.

quid faciat? (III.201-04)

This moment of being trapped evokes sublime terror. He is about to say, Me miserum, the moan of an entire tradition of erotic lament, but no voice comes out. Me miserum turns to ingemuit, words transformed into a voice that expresses itself without words. His mind is trapped in a body that is not his, with tears running down his face, in Ovid’s beautiful enjambment, “per ora / non sua.”11 The terror is expressed in a simple but perplexed question, “quid faciat?” What should he do? With no words, there is nothing to do but flee and groan. As his dogs tear him apart,”gemit ille sonumque, / etsi non hominis, quem non tamen edere possit / cervus, habet maestisque replet iuga nota querellis” (III.237-39). The sound is not human, yet not something any deer could utter. The traumatic moment comes
at the height of terror and can only be expressed in a voice somewhere between the human and animal, not animal but not verbal, either.

Tereus begins like these others, inflamed by the sight of Philomela, compared to dry leaves bursting in flame ("quam si quis canis ignem supponat aristas / aut frondem positasque dremet faenilibus herbas" VI.456-57). Passion drives him to plot rape but also makes him eloquent: “facundum faciebat amor” (469). The threat and her resistance inspire Philomela to equal eloquence. Both before and after the rape, Philomela speaks, defending herself and accusing him of nefas. It is her accusations that provoke him to cut out her tongue, her promise to proclaim his unspeakable crime to all the world:

ipsa pudore
proiecto tua facta loquar: si copia detur,
in populos veniam; si silvis clausa tenebor,
inplebo silvas et conscia saxa movebo;
audiet haec aether et si deus ullus in illo est!

(VI.544-48)

She will put shame aside and proclaim what he has done everywhere, in the crowds of people, in the woods, wherever fate allows her. She proclaims that if there is a god—the second time she has asked if there are gods (see 541-42)—he will hear her. In response, the tyrant cuts out her tongue to silence her ("Talibus ira feri postquam commota tyranni / nec minor hac metus est," 549-50). That tongue becomes the enduring symbol for silenced eloquence:

Radix micat ultima linguae,
ipsa iacet terraeque tremens inmurmurat atrae,
utque salire solet mutilatae cauda colubrae,

palpitate et moriens dominae vestigial quaerit.

(VI. 557-60)

That image of the murmuring, palpitating tongue, throbbing like a mangled snake, trying to return to the feet of its mistress is at once grotesque and sublime, and it marks a height of the poem’s terror, though it is just the start of the unspeakable blood of Philomela’s story.

That blood brings us to Macbeth. That tragedy is not perhaps the most obviously Ovidian of Shakespeare’s plays, though some have seen parallels, if not direct allusions, to Ovid’s versions of Medea in Metamorphoses and Epistolae (or his lost tragedy on her). I would argue that its nightmare images of bloody transformations and equivocations reflect an Ovidianism that has matured since Titus Andronicus and the early poems to become an underlying quality of Shakespeare’s poetic project. Titus Andronicus by contrast can be so open about its engagement with Ovidian wit as to seem to some readers to be crude. The blazons literalized upon tortured and dismembered bodies push right up to parody.

Marcus’s apostrophes to the silenced Lavinia are right on the line between sublime terror and grotesque comedy: “Fair Philomela, why, she but lost her tongue, / And in a tedious sampler sew’d her mind; / A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met, / And he hath cut those pretty fingers off / That could have better sew’d than Philomel” (II.iii). And the gleeful contrapasso of the final revenge scenes—“Enter Titus like a cook”—plays on ironies whose tone is never quite stable. We do get some of that grim comedy in Macbeth, and it’s significant that the farcical Porter’s knock-knock jokes revolve around equivocation: “O come in, equivocator” (II.iii.11). That comedy comes at the moment of greatest dramatic tension as the audience waits to see the consequences of the murder and to see how well
the Macbeths can equivocate: “To know my deed, ’twere best not know myself” (II.ii.70).

Lennox recounts the terror of the night: “Lamentings heard i’ th’ air; strange screams of death, / And prophesying, with accents terrible” (II.III.56-57), while Macbeth replies to that sublime terror with a comic litotes, “’Twas a rough night” (II.iii.61).

Yet Macbeth himself is associated with sublime rapture. Prone to epileptic fits, he can be seized by sudden visions and passions that lead him on, daggers of the mind. He will do “all that may become a man” (I.vii.46), but finds himself unmanned by words that play upon his fantasies and desires. The first report we have of him is a description of him dismembering a man: “he unseam’d him from the nave to th’ chops / And fix’d his head upon our battlements” (I.ii.22-23), the body as fleshly parts, terrible but presented by the messenger with brutal glee. When Macbeth appears in person, he speaks just two lines—“So foul and fair a day I have not seen” and “Speak, if you can: what are you?” (I.iii.38, 47)—before being ravished by the witches’ prophecy. Then only Banquo can speak and ask the questions:

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?—I’ th’ name of truth,
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show? My noble partner
You greet with present grace and great prediction
Of noble having and of royal hope,
That he seems rapt withal: to me you speak not.

(I.iii.51-57)
Banquo seeks the truth in questions and observations, while Macbeth is trapped in his thoughts and fears, seeking knowledge within. Banquo repeats, “Look how our partner’s rapt” (I.iii.142). Macbeth’s rapture has him gripped in “horrible imaginings” that leave him unable to speak (138). His rapture comes both from the witches’ words and from his own fantasies. Their precise origin is unknowable. He is trapped, silenced by his thoughts: “My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man that function / Is smother’d in surmise, and nothing is / But what is not” (139-42). “Smothered in surmise,” he cannot speak, move, breathe, function. The line between reality and fantasy is lost in the surmise, “nothing is but what is not.”

Macbeth echoes Banquo’s words about his rapture in his letter to his wife:

They met me in the day of success; and I have learn’d by the perfectest report, they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanish’d. While I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who all-hail’d me ‘Thane of Cawdor,’ by which title, before, these weird sisters saluted me, and referr’d me to the coming on of time, with ‘Hail, king that shalt be!’ This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell. (I.v.1-14)

The witches have the “more in them / Than mortal knowledge,” seeming to know beyond what a mortal body can or should know, “mortal” being of course a pun. That teasing knowledge ravishes Macbeth: he “burned in desire / To question them more,” as if pricked
by Amor’s dart like Apollo or Tereus or so many other Ovidian ravishers—though we have seen that he was in fact rendered speechless. With them vanished, Macbeth is left “rapt / In the wonder of it,” wonder seizing control over him, leaving him with questions he cannot voice. Macbeth’s raptures lead immediately to his transformation to Thane of Cawdor.

This scene of metamorphosis is made even darker by Lady Macbeth immediately turning into a fiend of ambition:

Yet do I fear thy nature,

It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way. (I.v.16-18)

She fears that he is maternal, filled with the milk that makes him kind, that makes him feel human kinship. We might think here of Procne and Philomela, the child-murderers. Ovid’s sisters are impelled by a cause, revenge, but they must also master maternal pity, the “milk of human kindness.” Procne sees her son Itys and she has an idea, looking at him with pitiless eyes (“oculisque . . . inmitibus,” V.621). Once he embraces and kisses her, she relents, feeling maternal love: “mota quidem est genetrix, infractaque constitit ira / invitique oculi lacrime ma duere coactis” (627-28). Philomela’s “stolen tongue” (“rapta...lingua”) then stops the tears falling from her eyes: “‘cur admovet’ inquit / ‘alter blanditias, rapta silet altera lingua? / quam vocat hic matrem, cur non vocat illa sororem?’” (631-33). It is a chilling scene as the mother feels the swell of opposed passions, leading to a frenzy of dismemberment that echoes the Bacchic attack on Orpheus the woman-hater. Lady Macbeth, of course, will soon pray to the spirits: “Unsex me here,” “Make thick my blood, / Stop up th’access and passage to remorse,” “Come to my women’s breasts, / And take my milk for gall” (I.v.41-48). Nonetheless, Lady Macbeth will be the one to hesitate
when the sleeping Duncan looks like her father, while Macbeth, after hesitation, will kill all
the maternal feeling in him and slaughter first a father and then mothers and babes (who,
onece he is king, are in theory his children).

Lady Macbeth also plays the witch Medea praying to Hecate:

Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,

And chastise with the valor of my tongue

All that impedes thee from the golden round,

Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem

To have thee crown’d withal. (15-30)

The witchcraft begins like a literal potion poured in the ear but transforms into the magic
of eloquent words. Her tongue will do the heroic work. The version of the Medea legend
that Ovid tells in Metamorphoses begins with an emphasis on her loss of control to powerful
burning passion, a “validos...ignes” (VII.9). (Medea’s address to Jason in Ovid’s Epistolae 12
likewise expresses her tortured emotions of love and anger.) She wavers over what to do,
even worrying that he might not be what he seems, that he might betray her, before giving
herself fully over to the passion. The remainder of the story Ovid tells there in
Metamorphoses follows her and her devotions to Hecate, a series of terrifying blood
sacrifices. Ovid amplifies her bloody witchcraft at length, but while her ultimate sacrifice of
her son by Jason remains always in the background, he barely speaks of it: “sanguine
natorum perfunditur inpius ensis, / ultaque se male mater Iasonis effugit arma” (VII.396-
97). The mother’s most famous crime is the one that resists description.

Macbeth performs the murder of Duncan while in the fit of a nightmare vision:
Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
(I.iii.33-39)

This “fatal vision,” where does it come from? It is “sensible” to sight but not to feeling. Is it there or just a projection of the mind, born of his rapture?

Mine eyes are made the fools o’ th’ other senses,  
Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still;  
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before. There’s no such thing:  
It is the bloody business which informs  
Thus to mine eyes. (44-49)

Macbeth vacillates between mystical and naturalistic explanations of what he sees. Is the rapture from within his mind, or from the dark magic? He expresses both fear and doubt.

As Macbeth approaches the sleeping king, he thinks of Hecate and then recalls another violator of the bedroom:

Now o’er th’ one half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain’d sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate’s offerings, and wither’d Murther,
Alarum’d by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl’s his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin’s ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it. While I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives. (49-61)

Macbeth participates in the worship of Hecate, Medea-like, and thinks of himself in the role of the rapist Tarquin. Tarquin’s strides are those of the ravisher but also of the man ravished with loss of control, the tyrant possessed by the overwhelming desire to seize whatever he wants. As Ovid describes him, “interea iuvenes furiales regius ignes / concipit et caeco raptus amore furit” (Fasti 761-62). He is burning, “seized (raptus) by blind love.” Indeed, the vision of the dagger leading Macbeth on as the wolf howls is a nightmare born out of a memory of Ovid:

nox erat et tota lumina nulla domo:
surgit et aurata vagina liberat ensem
et venit in thalamos, nupta pudica, tuos.
utque torum pressit, “ferrum, Lucretia, mecum est”
natus ait regis, “Tarquiniusque loquor!”
illa nihil: neque enim vocem viresque loquendi
aut aliquid toto pectore mentis habet,
sed tremit, ut quondam stabulis deprensa relictis
parva sub infesto cum iacet agna lupo.
quid faciat? pugnet? vincetur femina pugnans.
clamet? at in dextra, qui vetet, ensis erat.
effugiat? positis urgentur pectora palmis,
tunc primum externa pectora tacta manu. (Fasti II.792-804)

Macbeth, like Tarquin, is the wolf preying on the object of his desire, with the difference that he feels Lucretia’s fear. “Quid faciat?” She cannot speak, while Macbeth fears to turn words into action. Ovid presents her as a sheep stalked by Tarquin the wolf, while Macbeth imagines the murderer and ravisher startled by the howl of the wolf. Macbeth seems not to notice the irony that Tarquin’s tyrannical seizure of Lucretia leads to his destruction, but the mention of Tarquin brings Ovid’s anti-imperial theme into the play.

Although rape is never named as one of Macbeth’s crimes, the murder of Lady Macduff and her children does violate the female domestic space. “Whither should I fly?” she asks (IV.ii.73), in confusion and terror, like Actaeon, Lucretia, and so many of Ovid’s threatened women: “Quid faciat?” The last we see of her, she is running away with the murderers—possibly ravishers as well—in pursuit. In her fear we can hear the fears of Lavinia and all the raped women of Ovid, the fear of masculine force. Lady Macbeth, who knows “how tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me” but promises she would “Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash’d the brains out” (I.vii.54-58), has given her husband her unsexed spirit—that is to say, her masculinized spirit. This has ultimately led to the murder of these children, all pity gone just as Procne once slit her
son’s throat as he was crying out “mater! mater!” and trying to put his arms around her neck (VI 640).

As the tragedy moves towards its denouement, metaphors and equivocations become literalized: blood on hands, sleepless nights, moving forests, bloody babes ripped from wombs. Tyranny, moreover, corrupts everything, everyone, every word, and Macduff and Malcolm will thus both be tainted by words and blood. Malcolm’s bizarre performance as a vicious would-be tyrant, for instance, corrupts him. Can anyone remain pure whose mouth has uttered such self-slander, particularly in a play where equivocal eloquence repeatedly become literal? Macduff only breaks his shocked silence with the understatement, “Such welcome and unwelcome things at once / ’Tis hard to reconcile” (IV.iii.138-39). Macduff is then tainted with the murder of his family:

But I must also feel it as a man:

I cannot but remember such things were,

That were most precious to me. Did heaven look on,

And would not take their part? Sinful Macduff,

They were all strook for thee! Naught that I am,

Not for their own demerits, but for mine,

Fell slaughter on their heads. Heaven rest them now! (221-27)

To feel it as a man is to feel the milk of human kindness, as opposed to “disput[ing] it like a man” (220). But the human and the man in him are sinful and naught, Macduff getting blame for the tyranny that has overtaken their world. And like Philomela, he wonders whether the heavens could look upon such crime and do nothing.
Macduff and Malcolm end the play covered in blood, a sacrifice that may be a contamination as much as a purification. One more son, Rosse’s, must die before Macduff brings the dismembered head of the tyrant on stage. Are the wars over, or is this merely a return to the opening scene of the play? The play’s ending promises a return to normal—and yet the norm has been rebellion and blood and the uncertainty of a history that may be written and yet remain equivocal and unknowable. The experience of sublime terror is not easily purged in catharsis, and the traumas of violation and ravishment remain behind.

Notes.

1 Leo Curran, “Rape and Rape Victims in the Metamorphoses,” Arethusa 2 (1978), began the current discussion.


4 Enterline, Rhetoric of the Body, 78.


6 Sanchez, Erotic Subjects, loc. 124.
Ovid uses *sublimis* to describe high and lofty things, like the palace of the Sun (II.1) or Tereus seated on his high throne (VI.650).


11 On Ovid’s use of the figure of the *os*, see Enterline, *Rhetoric of the Body*, 16-17, 39-61.

12 Cornwall cutting out Gloucester’s eyes for proclaiming that he “shall see / The winged vengeance overtake such children” is a Shakespearean parallel: “See’t shalt thou never” (III.vii.65-67). Eyes in *King Lear* are what the tongue is to Philomela’s story.


14 Quotations from Shakespeare are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Miflin, 1974).

15 Stark-Estes’s observations about how Shakespeare uses Ovid in his Roman plays to rework epic *virtus* and the masculine identity of the Augustan and Virgillian hero applies here to *Macbeth*, where masculinity is both under attack and running amok without constraints. The classic analysis of the tension between “the fantasy of a virtually absolute and destructive maternal power and absolute escape from this power” is of course Janet

16 On the tyrants of tragedy, and particularly on how tyranny stems paradoxically from a desire for total mastery that becomes a loss of control, see Rebecca Bushnell _Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance_ (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), and Gordon Braden, _Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger’s Privilege_ (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985).

17 On blood, both sacrificial and contaminating, in Shakespeare’s Ovidianism, see Stark-Estes, _Violence, Trauma, and “Virtus,”_ 129-35.