

Ovid's Apollo and Daphne,  
or, Apollo Loses Again

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Poor old Apollo! This beautiful and elegant god, capable of giving oracular truth and curing (as well as causing) disease, this beautiful and elegant god who had already become a symbol of classical beauty and reason even in the age of Augustus, was, if the truth be told, extraordinarily inept in matters of love or, more plainly said, sexual prowess!

Apollo did fall in love, or at least develop a burning passion for a variety of persons and semi-divine creatures of assorted sexes. Consummation of any of these passions, however, was at best occasional. Apollo, for all his power, beauty, etc. was frequently left with no alternative other than a cold shower.

One of the most embarrassing episodes for poor old Apollo was told by Ovid in Metamorphoses Book I, 452-567: "primus amor Phoebi Daphne Peneia", "the first love of Phoebus (Apollo) was Peneian (daughter of Peneus) Daphne".

Apollo made a rude remark to Cupid, implying that the younger god wasn't as important as Apollo himself. Cupid does get his revenge: he shoots an arrow of desire into Apollo, and an arrow which produces the opposite -- no desire -- into Daphne. Apollo's desire is described thus: "utque leves stipulae demptis adolentur aristis, / ut facibus saepes ardent, quas forte viator / vel nimis admovit vel iam sub luce reliquit, / sic deus in flammis abiit" (I, 492-495). Don't take this chap home to your parents!

Daphne's distaste for the god Apollo, who chases her through the woods, is indicated by the description Ovid

uses of him: "ut canis in vacuo leporem cum Gallicus arvo / vidit, et hic praedam pedibus petit, ille salutem / (alter inhaesuro similis iam iamque tenere / sperat et extento stringit vestigia rostro; alter in ambiguo est, an sit comprehensus, et ipsis / morsibus eripitur tangentiaque ora relinquit) : / sic deus et virgo; est hic spe celer, illa timore" (I, 533-539).

Daphne, in fact, finds the prospect of marriage (conubia, a neuter plural, is used by Ovid; marriage is perhaps not exactly what is meant) with Apollo so distasteful that she prays to Peneus, her river-god father, to save her, which he does by changing her shape. Ovid graphically describes Daphne as she changes into a tree, beginning from her feet, and being covered with bark. (Considering the alternatives, Apollo as the Gallicus canis quoted above, or a new identity as a tree, one might say that Daphne found Apollo's bite worse than her bark.)

Apollo is so desperate that even after Daphne is a tree he loves her and embraces her: "Hanc quoque Phoebus amat positaeque in stipite dextra / sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus / complexusque suis ramos, ut membra, lacertis / oscula dat ligno" (I, 553-556).

This is an extremely visual image. Here is the noble, elegant and cultured god Apollo, one of the protectors of the Roman state and a god the Emperor Augustus liked to emulate,\* standing in the middle of the woods hugging a tree. What is more, Apollo is not only kissing the tree, but fondling the tree trunk with his hand, as explained in the quotation

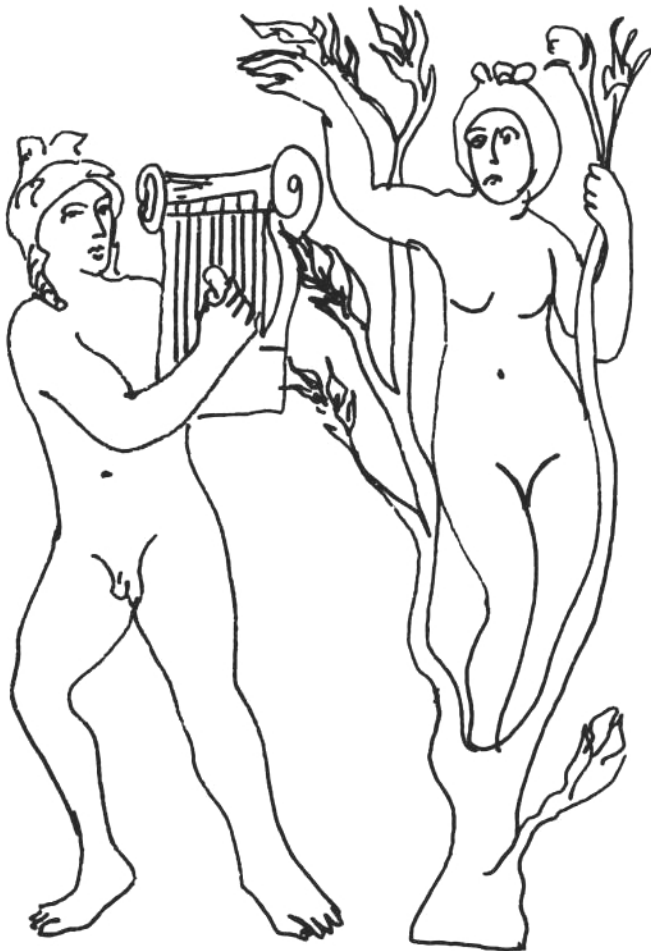
above.

Remember that Apollo as an ideal of classical male beauty was rarely represented with his clothes on (and there is certainly no reason to believe that he would have departed from his standard practice in the aforementioned circumstances), so that his nudity adds the final touch to the ridiculous picture of god and tree.

Ovid probably didn't win imperial friends by this small vignette of Apollo. He clinches the connection between Apollo and Augustus by decreeing that Daphne's new leaves (the laurel) will adorn Augustus'

door: "postibus Augustis eadem fidissima custos / ante fores stabis medicamque tuebere quercum" (I, 562-563). How do you think Augustus and his family would have reacted?

\*R. Syme, The Roman Revolution (Oxford, 1939), pp. 256, 448 and elsewhere, explains Augustus' use of his identification with Apollo, specifically at Actium and in contrast to Mark Antony's identification with Bacchus. Augustus at one point even wished to replace the Capitoline Triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva) with a new Palatine Triad (Apollo, Mars and Venus) favoured by the Julian clan.



Apollo and Daphne.

From a late 3rd-early 4th  
c. A.D. Coptic ivory.