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THE OVIDIAN *METAMORPHOSES* OF CAMILLE CLAUDEL

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The sculptress Camille Claudel (1864-1943) was largely forgotten until the early 1980s when the publication of Ann Delbée's novel *Une Femme* (1982) and Nuytten's film *Camille Claudel* (1988) starring Isabelle Adjani and Gerard Depardieu brought her back from the exile of oblivion into the public consciousness. No longer identified as a tragic heroine and victim she is now regarded as an artist whose audacious work is critically acclaimed in its own right independently of its biographic associations.

It was not until 1951, eight years after her death, that her work began to receive significant attention. Ironically this re-emergence into public consciousness began when the musée Rodin (dedicated to her lover and nemesis Auguste Rodin), hosted a retrospective exhibition of her work under the aegis of her brother Paul. Since then, and particularly since the 1980s, Claudel has received increased recognition and acknowledgement as an artist in her own right. Today, the wonderful *Age mûr* occupies a central position in the musée d'Orsay, and other works are on permanent exhibition in the musée Rodin.[1] A number of important retrospectives have also taken place, the most recent in Paris in 2008. Nevertheless, as late as 1952, Camille's brother, the writer Paul Claudel, continued to hold the view that her life was a complete failure (P. Claudel 1954: 332). Today, no longer considered a failure, Camille Claudel's reputation has been transformed. While her life story continues to fascinate, she is now regarded as an important and successful artist whose works continue to attract much interest.

In the following I will discuss the role of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the work of Camille Claudel. The titles she chose for her works such as *Vertumne et Pomone*, *Persée et la Gorgone* and *Niobide blessée* underline the connection she had with the poem. The *Metamorphoses* is long recognised as one of the most sustained and shaping literary presences in Western art. It is punctuated throughout with many allusions to sculptural and artistic motifs including references to marble, ivory and stone. Underlining the similarities between Ovid's poetry and that of an artist Viarre has remarked on the way in which Ovid 'sculpts forms and uses his material like a sculptor' (Viarre 1964: 123). Indeed the sculptural theme is introduced early on in the poem when Ovid, in his telling of how Deucalion and Pyrrha repopulate the earth following the deluge, likens the creation of the new race of mankind to the way in which the shape of a sculpture emerges from stone:

> And the stones [...] began at once to lose their hardness and stiffness, to grow soft slowly, and softened to take on form. Then when they had grown in size and become milder in their nature, a certain likeness to the human form, indeed, could be seen, still not very clear, but such as statues just begun out of marble have, not sharply defined, and very like roughly blocked-out images. (Ovid *Metamorphoses* I.400-406)[2]

With these lines Ovid asserts the close affinity which exists between creation and artistic creativity and perhaps it is this element of the poem which attracted Claudel's attention from the outset. It is known that from a young age Claudel had access to Ovid's works in her father's library (Caranfa 1999: 30-31); in addition, she had the advantage of three years of private tuition in Latin, maths and literature alongside her brother the writer Paul Claudel (P. Claudel 1954: 16).

By focusing on her sculpture I will show how, time and again, Claudel had recourse to the *Metamorphoses* using its myths to convey her psychological and emotional reactions to her own life story, often identifying herself with the characters portrayed. Her art is deeply personal, and her lyrical translation of the *Metamorphoses* reveals an erudite and intimate reception of the poem. A modern Prometheus (who creates the first man from clay (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.76-88)), Claudel clearly saw her work as being born of the earth; her instinctive and primeval urge to create from stone and clay was unrelenting and unstoppable:

> From childhood, Camille Claudel was extraordinarily wilful and tenacious.
> These characteristics, together with her untiring commitment to realising her primary objective of becoming a sculptor, later on in life, enabled her to sacrifice anything that

> frustrated her or impeded the full realisation of her plans [...] She was possessed of a violent passion for sculpture. (Morhardt 1987: 413)[3]

The Ovidian titles that she chose display a significant and highly personalised response to the *Metamorphoses*, expressing an engagement with Ovid's poem which goes beyond mere representation; it is an engagement which spills over into her personal life whereby, through self-portraits and her choice of emotive topics, she places herself at the centre of the work, implicating her life story with those Ovidian myths that have influenced her so much. Despite attracting brief mention from critics, there has not, as yet, been a sustained analysis of the Ovidian dynamic which is so pronounced in Claudel's work. Her last completed work, *Niobide blessée*, can be read as an allegory of her tragic life in which she enacts the roles both of Niobe and one of her doomed daughters, a Niobide.

Ryan argues that a reading of Claudel's work should not be limited by the viewer's knowledge of her biography because such knowledge may undervalue her significant artistic achievement (Ryan 2002: 20) and overshadow Claudel's sophisticated engagement with classical and literary influences, thereby diluting the intellectual significance of her work.[4] However. in this instance, I contend that knowledge of Claudel's life-story is necessary to fully appreciate her deeply personal artistic response to Ovid. Indeed, I believe that Claudel herself in her choice of subject matter prompts such readings. Viewing mythological references as belonging to Claudel's psyche and her work, Fayard writes that 'one can see traces of myth slowly weaving themselves around her, like a spider waiting for its prey' (Fayard 2008: 84). Moreover, I believe that her life story would not be out of place as a myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Her sculpture demonstrates a very detailed understanding of the poem, and her literal translations encourage the viewer to engage with and contemplate Ovid's words. Surely it is no coincidence that in her choice of teacher and lover, she found a modern Ovid, Auguste Rodin, whose works and artistic practices evoke many of the themes expressed in the *Metamorphoses*.[5] Unlike Claudel, Rodin's formal education was limited; to compensate for this he read widely and it is recorded that 'in his private library there were several French translations of the *Metamorphoses* and of the *Ars Amatoria* that bear signs of repeated use' (Grunfeld 1987: 400). His sculpture reflects the influence of Ovid with many works having titles drawn from the *Metamorphoses* including *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide* (1884), a work, depicting a pair of lesbian lovers, which had initially been entitled *Femmes damnées*:

> When Rodin named the work *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* [...] he was protecting himself against public reaction to showing lesbians. Rodin's depiction of lesbian lovers brought to mind the Roman poet's concept of love as a restless malady, which acted as a springboard for Rodin's own reflections. (Elsen & Jamison 2003: 256)

Critics such as von Albrecht, Lampert, Somerville Story and Jarassé frequently allude to Ovid and the *Metamorphoses* when discussing the formal and ideological characteristics of Rodin's work and work practices. His iconic *Le Penseur* 'epitomized [his] identification with the anonymous hero and the great epic histories of Western civilisation, and thus with Dante, Ovid and the Bible' (Lampert 1986: 50).

Furthermore, not unlike Claudel, Rodin is perceived to have employed Ovidian myths as a means of responding to critical events in his life, particularly in the case of his sculpture *Orphée et Eurydice* (1887-1893). Butler associates his fascination with Orpheus with the period when his relationship with Camille Claudel was collapsing (Butler 1993: 271). Laurent also cites the Orpheus myth to reflect on the psychological aspects of the doomed Rodin-Claudel relationship (Laurent 1988: 118). Camille like Eurydice is swallowed up and confined to the shadows, an image evoked by one of Rodin's portraits of Claudel, *La Pensée* (c.1895) (fig.1). In this work Rodin incorporates the unfinished block of stone as a plinth to create the effect of a young girl's head emerging from the marble in which she appears to be imprisoned and constrained. The girl's melancholy expression, together with the density of the stone in which she is encased, emphasise her isolation from the rest of the world, she is both unreachable and untouchable.

> The portrait [...] prophetically anticipated the fate that was to befall her: the disintegration of her personality and the schizoid dissociation of thought and feeling that locked her in a

> prison whose walls were as solid as the marble that was her preferred material for sculpture. (Eisenwerth 1999: 41)

Claudel achieved a high degree of notoriety not only because she was Rodin's pupil and mistress, but also because of her behaviour which, from 1890 onwards, became increasingly eccentric and irrational. She is said to have been the inspiration for Ibsen's last play *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) (Eisenwerth 1999: 9). I am not alone in seeing Claudel as a quasi-mythological character as her life-story has prompted others to draw analogies drawn from mythology likening her to characters such as Icarus who 'flew very high and near the sun' (Lutz 2008). Recalling Ovid's words, 'perdiderint [...] me duo crimina, carmen et error' [*Though two crimes, a poem and a blunder, have brought me ruin*] (Ovid, *Tristia* II.207),[6] it is possible to view Claudel's life-story as comprising her own *carmen et error*; her *carmen* was her art, while her *error* was the defiant pursuit of a career in sculpture and a way of life which flagrantly flouted the accepted social mores of the day, trampling over the taboos of *fin-de-siècle* France. Like many of Ovid's famous artists such as the Pierides and Arachne, Claudel was destined to be punished, paying for her transgressions with paranoia, mental breakdowns, poverty and ultimately incarceration.

She breached the limitations imposed on middle class women of nineteenth-century France whereby 'women were supposed to occupy the domestic space alone' (Pollock 1992: 130). Claudel's courageous and bold pursuit of sculpture attracted considerable censure at a time when, '[t]o be a producer of art in bourgeois society in late nineteenth-century Paris was in some sense a transgression of the definition of the feminine' (Pollock 1995: 307).

Writing in her journal in 1882, the artist Marie Bashkirtseff laments her own lack of liberty, describing the inherent dangers a woman risks if she has such freedom: 'The woman who takes such liberties, particularly if she is young and pretty, must expect to be treated like an outcast. Notorious, strange and eccentric, she will be censured, and will experience even less freedom' (Bashkirtseff 1955: 288). This prescient paragraph, written long before Claudel's notoriety (she was still only seventeen), portrays a society intolerant of what was perceived as deviant behaviour and it anticipates Claudel's dismal fate. Bashkirtseff's language of blame and punishment identifies the risks which Claudel faced, the risks of finding herself on the margins of society, censured and reviled, replicating the fate of many of Ovid's artists:

> The human artists of the *Metamorphoses* show that art can have many effects other than that of creating order. It can provide a perilous, self-destructive isolation from reality; it can stir up jealous passions or provoke the anger of the gods. Indeed the artist is unable to predict or govern the consequences of his own work [...] It seems hardly accidental that so many of Ovid's artists are women, for this unprecedented characterization emphasizes their frailty and their liability to become victims of a harsh world. (Leach 1974: 133)

Even Claudel's chosen subject matter was very different from the accepted norms for women artists of her time, such as Morisot and Cassatt, who tended to depict domestic scenes. Highly ambitious, Claudel's moving demonstrations of the human psyche, ranging from the ecstatic *La Valse* to the despairing *Niobide Blessée*, are strong and audacious and not especially feminine. In one notorious instance, she was forced to alter *La Valse*, because of its overt sexuality and the nudity of the figures (Cassar 1987: 362).[7]

The influence of Claudel on Rodin's work has been acknowledged, especially her input in *Les Bourgeois de Calais* (1884-1895) regarding the modelling of the hands and feet.[8] As their relationship evolved, it developed into a dialogue of equals, Morhardt commented that '[Rodin] consults her on everything. He discusses every decision he has to take, and it is only when they are in agreement that he makes a definite decision' (Morhardt 1987: 421).

A comparison of Rodin's bronze *Pygmalion et Galatée* (1889) (fig.2) and Claudel's *Sakountala* (1888) (the later version in marble was retitled *Vertumne et Pomone* (fig.3)) gives witness to their close dialogue. The myth of Pygmalion is one of Orpheus' most famous songs in the *Metamorphoses,* telling of the sculptor Pygmalion and his statue which comes to life. Viarre regards this myth as 'the embodiment of artistic creativity pushed to its limits' (Viarre 1964: 49). It captures the fundamental character of Rodin's work: imparting life to stone.[9] In his conversations with Gsell, there is a striking

resemblance between Rodin's response to a marble copy of *Venus de Medici* and Ovid's words describing Pygmalion's interaction with the statue. Rodin remarked: '"It is truly flesh', [...] 'you would think that she will soften under my kisses and caresses' [...] 'when I touch this body, I almost expect to find her warm' (Rodin & Gsell 1911: 52), while Ovid writes:

> When [Pygmalion] returned he sought the image of the maid. She seemed warm to his touch. Again he kissed her, and with his hands he also touched her breast. The ivory grew soft to his touch, and its hardness vanishing, gave and yielded beneath his fingers, as Hymettian wax grows soft under the sun, and moulded by his thumb, is easily shaped to many forms and becomes usable through use itself. The lover stands amazed, rejoices still in doubt, fears he is mistaken, and tries his hopes again and yet again with his hand. Yes, it was real flesh! The veins were pulsing beneath his testing finger. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X.280-289)[10]

At first sight, the myth of Pygmalion appears to provide an appropriate analogy for the history of Camille Claudel's relationship with Rodin, with Rodin fitting neatly into the role of Pygmalion, sculptor, teacher and lover, while she, as his student and mistress, is both formed and handled by him.[11] The famous photograph of Camille Claudel sculpting *Sakountala* (fig.4) destabilizes this reading and serves to collapse the perception of Pygmalion as the preserve of the male artist, as traditionally depicted by Gerôme and Falconet, by placing Claudel in the position of the mythical sculptor. Here, every inch a woman, dressed in the contemporary fashion of the day (cumbersome restricting skirts and bustles), she engages with the 'messy', 'strenuous' and 'expensive' work of sculpting (Ayral-Clause 2002: 34). The photograph crystallises the paradoxical nature of her position for in her lifetime Claudel embodied both Pygmalion and his creation.

The Pygmalion topos is often employed to describe the relationship which exists between teachers and pupils in which the raw material of the pupil is moulded and formed by the teacher. Claudel and Rodin met in 1883 when the forty-three year old Rodin was appointed mentor to Camille who was still only eighteen. Their relationship evolved from that of mentor/*protegée* to that of lovers. By living and working with Rodin Claudel defied the boundaries of acceptable bourgeois behaviour. Describing her as a 'kept woman' (Rivière & Gaudichon 2006: 286) her mother considered her no better than a prostitute.[12]

A close examination of Ovid's Pygmalion reveals a disturbing underlying narrative. Ostensibly he is presented as a hero whose piety is rewarded by Venus who infuses life into his statue; however Pygmalion's actions in handling the inanimate statue contain sexual undertones, as he moulds and carves, touches and caresses the most intimate areas of its anatomy. Ovid grants the sculptor's *métier* a degree of eroticism in his sensual description of how the ivory is manipulated and handled, thus bringing together the themes of creativity and sexual desire (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X.252-258). Pygmalion's physical actions are replicated by Claudel in the way she handles and touches the statue. In the photograph she is absorbed in her work as she embraces the role of Pygmalion. An intense physicality is conveyed through her freedom to touch and mould the figure; it is a reminder that Pygmalion's creation of the ivory statue is born of desire.

I offer a reading of Rodin's version of *Pygmalion* (1889) in the light of his relationship with Claudel, both in artistic and emotional terms. This work shares certain similarities with Claudel's *Sakountala* particularly in its arrangement of the figures, with the female standing over the male, who is either seated or kneeling. Ovid tells how the maiden on coming to life, feeling Pygmalion's kisses, sees 'her lover and the sky at the same time' (Ovid *Metamorphoses* X.293-294); in contrast Rodin's female turns away from the male, as if avoiding his gaze. The female figure emerges from the stone, smooth and perfectly formed, while the male figure seems to dissolve into the base, his outlines and features less defined indicating emotional disintegration. I suggest that Rodin may be commenting on his sadness on the collapse of their relationship, recognising the pain that it has caused him, while simultaneously acknowledging the fact that Claudel is now fully formed as an artist.

In the *Metamorphoses* the inspiration for Pygmalion's statue derives from his reaction to and abhorrence of the sexual behaviour of the Propoetides (those women who Ovid, in the myth immediately preceding that of Pygmalion, tells us were the first prostitutes (Ovid *Metamorphoses* X.220-242)). Remaining celibate, Pygmalion creates a statue with which he acts out his unacknowledged desires, conveying a complex interplay between disgust, desire and creativity.

Caranfa remarks how Claudel's 'body became an obsession to Rodin' (Caranfa 1999: 125) mirroring Pygmalion's response to his statue. Butler writes:'If Rodin was not actually working with her naked body before him, surely we can see suggestions of Camille in the great female figures of the mid-1880s, such as *Meditation, Danaïde,* and the *Martyr*' (Butler 1993: 192).[13] With regard to the *Martyr*, Lampert writes: 'It is not necessarily a portrait of Camille, but the convulsive state expresses Rodin's mistress' self-destructiveness and doom' (Lampert 1986: 96). The drama of Claudel's life and work was spilling over into that of Rodin. This is underscored by Rodin's *Orphée et Eurydice*,[14] in which he depicts Eurydice, unable to hold on to Orpheus, melting back into the rough-hewn rock, the immensity of which stresses the powerlessness of the characters against their fate and the impermeability of the Underworld. Orpheus, dazzled as he comes back to the world shields his eyes, he can no longer see Eurydice and yet he cannot look forward without her. Following this episode Ovid introduces two sculptural motifs to demonstrate the extent of Orpheus' numbing grief and despair, firstly describing 'that frightened creature' transformed to stone on seeing Cereberus (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X.66-67), and then referring to Olenus who is transformed to rock in order to share his lover's punishment (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X.67-71). While Ovid transforms the hero into a literary monument, Rodin's *Orphée et Eurydice* completes the metamorphosis, translating the grief-stricken Orpheus into stone, and using it as an expression of his own turmoil.

Their relationship was beginning to falter on a number of grounds. Having outgrown the teacher-pupil relationship, Claudel 'was tired of being told that she was a woman, that she was Rodin's student and that her work was Rodinesque' (Ayral-Clause 2002: 108). She was also feeling the strain and disappointment of Rodin's refusal to break with his long-time partner, Rose Beuret, mother of his son whom he finally married shortly before her death in 1917.

Early in 1892, Claudel moved out of the mansion that she had shared with Rodin. After her brother's departure for America in 1893 she became increasingly isolated. Reminiscent of that 'perilous self-destructive isolation' typical of Ovidian female artists referred to by Leach above, Claudel lived like a recluse. By 1898 her separation from Rodin was permanent; she was in serious financial difficulty and wholly dependent on her family. She was beginning to suffer from psychosis and paranoia; blaming Rodin for much of her predicament, she accused him of hindering her career and stealing her work. In 1905, after an unsuccessful retrospective, Claudel stopped exhibiting at the Salon. That year a marble version of *Sakountala* was commissioned, to be re-titled *Vertumne et Pomone* from the myth told in Book XIV of the *Metamorphoses.*

There is no indication as to why the title of this work was changed. Changing a title is a form of metamorphosis which transforms the way in which the viewer understands the work. I suggest that the revised title was prompted by a close reading of Ovid's account of the myth which Claudel may have seen as providing her with a direct response to her own circumstances.[15]

Pomona was the goddess of fruits, whose passion was to grow and nourish her plants. Claudel's female is imbued with a sense of wholeness and strength, her legs, especially her calves, are strong and muscular. Pomona symbolises fruitfulness and fertility and, like the sculptor Claudel, she shapes and forms her creation using a pruning hook (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV.628-631) in place of the artist's chisel. To protect herself from the unwanted attention of satyrs, Pomona locks herself away in an orchard (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV.635-636), while her suitor Vertumnus, disguised as an old woman, deceives her as to his true identity. In an allusion to Claudel's difficult relationship with her mother, Bonnet suggests that Claudel saw an autobiographical connection in Vertumnus' disguise as an old woman (Bonnet 2008: 47). In his efforts to seduce Pomona Vertumnus uses the analogy of an unfruitful vine (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV.661-8); this contrasts with Pomona's inherent desire to produce and create by exposing the potential barrenness of her life should she remain celibate. I believe that Claudel may also have seen this as an analogy for her own creativity, which she saw as damaged by her involvement with Rodin.

Claudel conveys Vertumnus' ardour; he clasps Pomona in a tight embrace; Pomona, appearing to swoon, is exhausted by her efforts to withstand his attentions. Vertumnus' body strains as he endeavours to kiss her, craning his neck, and arching his back, it is as if he will do anything to claim her. Towards the end of the poem, Ovid remarks how Vertumnus, fearing that his powers of persuasion have been ineffective, 'vimque parat' [*he is ready to force her will*] (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV.770). But force is no longer necessary 'sed vi non est opus, inque figura | capta dei nymphe est et mutua vulnera sensit' [*the nymph smitten by the beauty of the god, felt an answering passion*] (Ovid,

Metamorphoses XIV.770-771).The romance of these words is impaired by Ovid's language.'[V]imque parat' which implies a threat of force and is amplified with the inference of sexual aggression in the word 'vim' (Adams 1982: 198-199). This is further underlined by use of the word 'opus' which can be translated as intercourse (Adams 1982: 157) and 'the metaphor *uulnera* [which] is associated with the deflowering of a bride' (Adams 1982: 152). Such a vocabulary renders Vertumnus menacing, a fact underlined by his use of disguise to deceive Pomona. On seeing the sculpture, Paul Claudel wrote:

> She submits, blind, silent, she succumbs to this weight of love, one of her arms is hanging, as if laden down with fruit, the other covers her breast, protecting her heart which is the ultimate refuge of virginity. It is impossible to see anything which is at once more passionate or more chaste [...] It is the second before contact. (P. Claudel 1987: 393)

It is indeed the second before contact and Pomona is still not fully engaged with the embrace. Although leaning towards Vertumnus, Pomona maintains a sense of reserve, one hand held to her breast shielding her heart, she holds back; it is as if she remains out of his reach; her other hand is hanging limply, like the trailing vine mentioned by Vertumnus (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV.668). Claudel casts this moment in stone, Pomona will be forever hesitant, petrified, wavering between commitment and independence; perhaps it represents a wistful look-back to the days before her relationship with Rodin had been consummated, a wish to have that moment, before the act, frozen in time, a concrete expression of regret.

The motif of transformation to stone, and by association Claudel's *métier*, has a sinister presence in this myth through Vertumnus' cautionary tale of the hapless Iphis and Anaxarete. Iphis' love for Anaxarete is rejected and in despair he commits suicide. On witnessing Iphis' funeral cortege, the heartless Anaxarete is transformed to stone. Bonnet underlines the potential significance of this *mise en abyme*, referring to Vertumnus and Pomona as 'Roman gods, sung by Ovid who symbolise the danger of petrification which increasingly seemed to haunt Claudel' (Bonnet 2008: 46). This theme of petrification reoccurs in two other very personal works, *Persée et la Gorgone* (1902) and *Niobide blessée* (1907).

In *Persée et la Gorgone* (fig.5), Claudel, in the tradition of Caravaggio may have used her own face as the model for the gorgon, Ovid's other famous sculptor, Medusa. Ayral-Clause describing Claudel's Medusa as 'deformed with age, grief, and madness'. considers that this 'betrays a poignant foreboding of the tragedy that was going to strike, as well as an awareness of her own physical decline' (Ayral-Clause 2002: 158), I disagree with this interpretation, as I consider Claudel's gorgon to be almost expressionless and devoid of Caravaggio's theatrics, particularly given the fact that the decapitated Medusa is now dead and no longer able to express emotion.[16] Like many of Claudel's works such as *La vieille Hélène*, (1882-1905), I think that the quality of the work lies in its verisimilitude, an honest but unforgiving portrayal of a middle-aged woman. I also wonder if there may be a further autobiographical association in this portrayal reflecting the fact that many of Rodin's portraits of Claudel, such as *La Pensée* (fig.1) which were of 'disembodied heads' (Higonnet 1988: 7). Eisenwerth amplifies the autobiographical implication by suggesting that not only is the gorgon's head a self portrait, but that it is interwoven with the image of Claudel's great rival for Rodin Rose Beuret, he writes:

> The image not only recalls the contemporary photographs of the rapidly aging Camille; it is also reminiscent of Rodin's *Rose Beuret*, executed in marble by his assistant Antoine Bourdelle in 1898 [...] The latter resemblance can scarcely be coincidental, and it endows the head with a meaning whose psychological implication is bleak in the extreme. Interpreted literally, the message is that Camille wishes to kill her rival and at the same time to extinguish her own life. She is committed to murder and suicide in effigy. (Eisenwerth 1999: 98)

This 'bleak' view is undermined by a close examination of Ovid's poem which presents a far more sympathetic view of Medusa than would be suggested by the above interpretations. In making the Gorgon's face in her own image, I argue that Claudel identifies more with her creativity and victimhood rather than with her monstrousness; Ovid underlines how Medusa is a victim twice over, firstly she is raped by Neptune in the Temple of Minerva, and secondly, Minerva transforms Medusa's hair into snakes in punishment for the violation of her temple. Claudel's self-identification with Medusa

suggests an increasing sense of persecution especially given the fact that it is the victim who is punished.

The hands depicted at the base of *Persée et la Gorgone* underline Claudel's self-identification with the sculptress Gorgon given the fact that her hands are the tools of her *métier*. In the tangled mass of the Gorgon's remains, the hands have stiffened, and have taken on the aspect of coral, echoing the transformation of seaweed to coral by the Medusa head (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV.744-6), which Ovid projects as a miracle celebrated by the sea nymphs, the significance of which would have been underscored by the fact that coral was regarded as a valuable resource in Roman times.

Her depiction of the gorgon was not the first time that Claudel had depicted serpentine hair. In the earliest version of *Le Dieu envolé* (the youngest figure in the composition *Age mûr* (fig.6)), entitled *l'Implorante* (which, like the Medusa head, is also considered to be a self-portrait) she chose to depict the young girl with tresses of snakes (Paris 1988: 71-72) indicative of her fellow-feeling with the gorgon Medusa. Fayard notes that hair, which is always a symbol of seduction, in this instance, is associated with madness (Fayard 2008: 81). It underlines the irony noted by Ovid in his allusion to Medusa's beautiful hair, when Perseus says: 'She was once most beautiful in form, and the jealous hope of many suitors. Of all of her beauties, her hair was the most beautiful' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV.795-6),

Age mûr (c.1902) (alternatively titled *La Destinée, Les Chemins de la vie* and *La Fatalité*), is also considered to be autobiographical, often seen as Claudel's interpretation of the three-way relationship between herself, Rodin and Beuret (Butler 1993: 274,348-9). Casting Beuret as the old crone embodying 'Time the great devourer' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.234) who, embracing the male (Rodin) consumes him in a lingering death and removes him from the grasp of the imploring Claudel.

I regard this work as further evidence of Claudel revisiting the *Metamorphoses* which had helped to shape her views on art and nature. Here she focuses on Pythagoras' discourse (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.60-479) in which he describes how life is continuously in flux moving inexorably towards renewal.[17] Ovid's words convey this restlessness and movement, through sound and repetition, particularly in verses XV.178–185, beginning with the all embracing 'cuncta' [*everything*] which is repeated towards the end with the phrase 'cuncta novantur'; while 'fluunt' [is in *flux*] is echoed by 'flumen' [*flowing water*] which occurs twice in line 181 as does 'unda' [*wave*] in line 182, 'urget' and 'prior' in line 183, [*urge, press forward*], and 'nova' [*new*] in lines 184 and 185; the repeated use of the *u* sound evokes the rhythmic movement of the sea. The forward moving dynamic of the poem is mirrored by the lines of Claudel's sculpture, relentlessly advancing as it unfurls into a mass of disordered lines; its tilting triangular outline, emphasised by the old woman's billowing cloak, evokes the movement of a sail across water while the undulating base suggests the sea.[18] The spectator, too, is drawn into the momentum, unconsciously enacting Ovid's words, moving around the sculpture, following its trajectory in perpetual motion.

The youthful figure who is kneeling underlines the Ovidian influence, straining to stand up, she seeks support from the central figure, yet she is still on her knees, 'poplite' re-enacting Ovid's portrayal of the developing infant: 'But soon [the infant] lifted itself up on all fours after the manner of the beasts; then gradually in a wabbling, weak-kneed fashion it stood erect supported by some convenient prop' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.222-224).

The forward propulsion of group evokes Pythagoras' description of the relentless advance of life. Claudel, 'forces the viewer to recreate the following inevitable phase in his/her mind' (Pingeot 1982: 290), compelling him/her to participate in both the work of art and the poem, to move around it undergoing a physical and mental transformation, reminding us of Ovid's words: 'Our own bodies also go through a ceaseless round of change, nor what we have been or are to-day shall we be tomorrow' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.214-6). Looking at the group from the rear, the central male figure, retaining the smoothness of youth, appears to stride purposefully forward as he spans the distance between youth and old age, 'strong and fleet, [...] pass[ing] over the span of youth' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.225-6). As the viewer moves around to face him, the sculpture itself seems to metamorphose and the forward momentum of the male figure appears to slow down. Less in control, less autonomous, he becomes trapped in the greedy grasp of time. In this cinematic depiction of the progression from youthfulness to old age, the spiralling shape which marked Claudel's earlier work, *La Valse*, is used to great effect, with every angle depicting a different stage in life's journey. On

reaching the front, the viewer sees that the male figure is now fully embraced and overcome by old age; the loose arrangement of his arms reflects Pythagoras' portrayal of the ageing wrestler Milo who weeps on seeing how his ageing arms hang flabby and weak (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.230-1). As the viewer's eye is drawn diagonally towards the apex, the male appears to age. No longer youthful and strong, he is slowing down, and his face now seems to be far older than his body, wrinkled and hollow, it belongs alongside that of the old woman, who represents destiny and old age.

At the apex of the group, the two depictions of old age hark back to one of Claudel's earliest works *La vieille Hélène* (1882-1905), a portrait of the time-worn face of an old servant (Ayral-Clause 2002: 39). Whether it is serendipitous or deliberate, the title of this early work, an uncompromising rendition of old age, invokes Book XV of the *Metamorphoses* in which Pythagoras refers to an aging Helen of Troy,[19] who, on looking at her reflection, laments the deleterious effects of time.[20] In a neat twist, *Age mûr* unpacks Ovid's juxtaposition of the youthful Helen's abduction with the onslaught of time and old age, investing the aging process with characteristics of violence and aggression, while the theme of abduction conveys incapacity and confinement. The old woman's embrace contains and restricts the male, 'consuming all things in a lingering death' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VX.236).

Renewal and transformation of subjects and themes is a feature of Claudel's artistic practice. These practices radically alter the interpretation of certain works, introducing a slippage typical of Ovid's own writing practice which allows for multiple interpretations. In her last completed work, *Niobide blessée* (1906-07), her only full commission from the state, Claudel returns to the successful *Vertumne et Pomone*, but now, Pomona is depicted alone as the wounded Niobide. With this work it is difficult to overlook the uneasy question as to whether Claudel's artistic creativity was on the wane, and that for new work, she was recycling old ideas. The newly created void emphasises the male's absence; it is an absent presence underlining the solitude of the female and marking a shift to isolation. The theme of transformation to stone is also central to this work. Drenched with autobiographical significance, Schauder describes *Niobide blessée* as a narcissistic *mise en abyme* of her pain (Schauder 2008: 39).

In the *Metamorphoses* the myth of Niobe follows on from that of Ovid's most famous female artist, Arachne, famously punished by Minerva for her presumption in challenging the goddess to a weaving contest. Pride is central to Ovid's account of Niobe, who believes herself to be more exalted and worthy of worship than the goddess Latona, the mother of Apollo and Diana (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI.170-2). Niobe's pride derives from the fact that she has given birth to seven sons and seven daughters – testament to her fecundity and creativity, while she claims that Latona, with only two children, is almost childless. Latona exacts a terrible revenge for this affront, charging Apollo to kill Niobe's seven sons, piercing each one with an arrow. Failing to dent Niobe's pride, Latona also targets the Niobides until they too are all dead. The sound of a bowstring punctuates Niobe's final defiant gesture towards Latona (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI.286); it heralds the total destruction of her family, and her own transformation to stone (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI.301-309).

Claudel's described *Niobide blessée*, as 'a dying Niobide pierced by an arrow', (Gaudichon & Rivière 2008: 22).[21] Bonnet amplifies this, regarding the work as depicting, at once, both the mother transformed to stone and her dying daughter (Bonnet 2008: 47). This work fuses two elements of the myth into one work. It gives tangible expression to the metamorphoses recounted by Ovid, and it also highlights the prescience of Ovid's myths, which in this instance, help to articulate the distressing complications which beset Claudel. Many commentators have discussed Claudel's motives for her portrayal of the Niobide, suggesting that it was an expression of grief for her own lost powers of creativity. Others consider that it expresses grief for her absent children, as there is evidence that she may have become pregnant a number of times by Rodin and that she may have had at least one abortion (Elsen 2003: 241).

Niobide blessée may also have been an expression of the antipathy between Camille and her mother Louise-Athanaïse, who Bonnet, citing Lessana,[22] remarks 'had rejected her from birth' (Bonnet 2008: 47), thereby initiating the destruction of her daughter. The ultra-bourgeois Louise-Athanaïse could never bring herself to forgive Claudel for her choice of career, lifestyle and resulting notoriety. Moreover, Louise-Athanaïse appears to have been emotionally detached from her children; a detachment which was the result of the death of her own mother when she was only four, compounded by the death of her first son two weeks after his birth (Bocci-Crechriou 2004: 102-104);[23]

Paul wrote: 'Our mother never embraced us' (Cassar 1987: 185). Damaged by loss, Louise-Athanaïse appears to have been as hard as Niobe transformed to stone.

And also like Niobe, Claudel initiated the destruction of her own creations, but in a far more direct and physical way, each year taking a hammer to her works. Asselin's description of her studio as a necropolis, together with Claudel's curious habit of having the remains of her destroyed works carted off and buried in the ground like human beings (Schauder 2008: 31), conveys her confused state of mind, mourning the death of her art and creativity. While it is common for a work of art to be personified as the child of the creator, in Claudel's case the confusion went far beyond this, as she physically damaged and destroyed her work; actions which endowed her poignant decision to depict the Niobide with terrible significance, underlined by the fact that it was her final completed work.

As Claudel's mental and financial condition deteriorated, her isolation increased. Her mother and sister wanted to have nothing to do with her as they felt that she had damaged the family's reputation. On 2 March 1913, her beloved father and ally, Louis-Prosper died. Camille was not informed and did not attend the funeral. A week or so later, on 8 March, her mother signed the papers which were to confine Claudel to an asylum for the rest of her life. On 20 June 1929 Louise-Athanaïse died without ever once visiting her daughter in the intervening years.

With *Niobide blessée*, Camille Claudel had returned to myth for one final time (Fayard 2008: 86). Ovid too, revisits the myth of Niobe in his poems of exile (Ovid, *Tristia* V. i. 57-58, V.xii. 8, *Ex Ponto* I. ii.29-30) making her an emblem of his enduring sadness, 'a prototype of human suffering but also a victim of the god Apollo, Augustus' patron deity' (Claassen 2008: 169). Claudel may have felt that she had a share in Ovid's victimhood, casting Rodin (whom she perceived as the architect of her downfall) in the role of her nemesis. In one of the many accusatory letters that she wrote, she describes Rodin as fearing no-one, believing himself to be all-powerful (Rivière & Gaudichon 2006: 197).[24]

Once Niobe is transformed to stone, she is swept back to her homeland, destined to weep forever (Ovid *Metamorphoses* VI.311-312). Niobe remains isolated, like Claudel who was alone in the asylum. In the years after her committal she wrote many letters pleading to be liberated, all of which were ignored. Her mother gave express instructions that only letters addressed to Paul or herself should be allowed out of the asylum. Refusing to entertain thoughts of Camille's release, she wrote:

> It pains me as much as possible to see her so unhappy, but I can do no more for her, because if she were to be released it would result in suffering for the whole family rather than for just one person.[25]

During her thirty year confinement, Claudel was obdurate in her refusal to engage with sculpture of any kind:

> Her refusal to sculpt when she was in the asylum spoke for itself. She blamed her destruction on her work, having dedicated herself completely to it, sacrificing body and soul in order to sculpt. Hardened in her refusal to sculpt, in turn, she was turning to stone like a statue. (Fayard 2008: 88)

On his death in 1917, Rodin received a funeral befitting a hero, with large numbers in attendance, and his grave is marked by a monumental cast of *Le Penseur*.

In contrast, when Claudel died, she was buried in the cemetery of Montfavet, in the area reserved for the hospital of Montdevergues. At the time of her death, she had no personal effects of any value, 'thus nothing remains of Camille Claudel but her art' (Allilaire 2000: 299). Ten years after her death, the land was reclaimed by the Cemetery Department, and her remains 'were transferred to a communal grave, where they were mixed with the bones of the most destitute' (Ayral-Clause 2002: 253). She was buried 'sine honore sepulcri |indeploratum' (Ovid, *Tristia.*III.iii.36-46).

It was a sad and desolate end for one of France's great artists. However, Claudel's artistic legacy endures and she can join with Ovid when he proclaims: 'perque omnia saecula fama [...] vivam' [*through all the ages shall I live in fame*] (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.878-879).

(Fig.1) Auguste Rodin, *La Pensée, portrait de Camille Claudel* (1864-1943), c. 1895. practicien: Victor Peter RF4065;LUX155 Claudel Camille (1864-1943).

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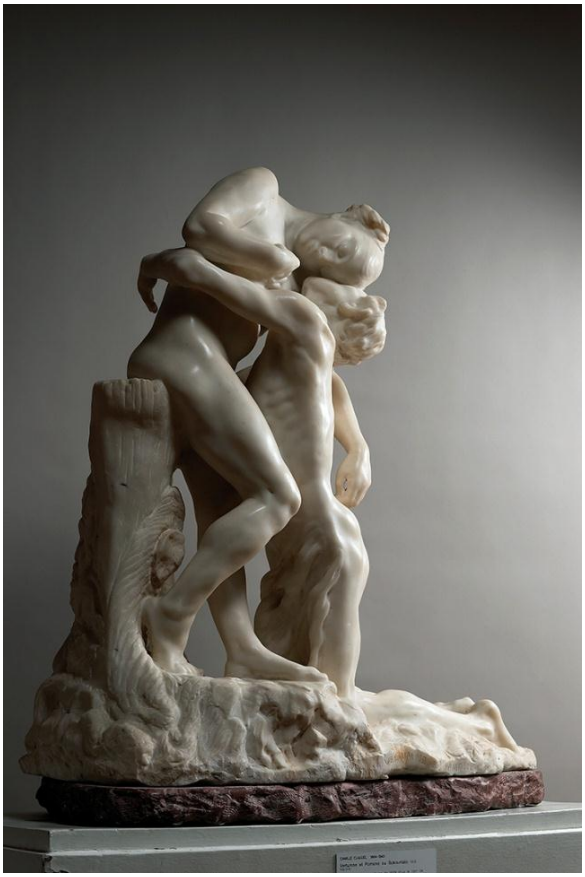
(Fig.2) Auguste Rodin, *Pygmalion et Galatée* (1889) S. 1120, bronze: (42,1 x 27 x 31 cm), photograph: Christian Baraja, musée Rodin, Paris.

Reproduced by kind permission of musée Rodin, Paris.



(Fig.3) Camille Claudel, *Vertumne et Pomone* (1886-1905) S. 1293: marble (86 x 80 x 42 cm) photograph : Christian Baraja
musée Rodin, Paris.

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(Fig.4) William Elborne, Camille Claudel working on Sakountala in her atelier c.1886:
Ph 1773: gelatin-silver print, (15,2 x 9,8 cm)
musée Rodin, Paris.

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(Fig.5) Camille Claudel, *Persée et la Gorgone* (1898-1899)
S. 1015: marble (52,3 x 20 x 32 cm)
photograph : Christian Baraja
provenance : musée Rodin, Paris.

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(Fig.6) Camille Claudel, *Âge mûr*, (2nd version)1898
S. 1380:bronze (121 x 180 x 73 cm)
photograph : Christian Baraja
musée Rodin, Paris

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[1] When Rodin donated his works to the state on the suggestion on Mathais Morhardt, he requested that space be reserved for the works of Claudel in the future musée Rodin to be housed in the hôtel Biron.

[2] All quotations (both Latin and English) from the *Metamorphoses* are from the translation by Frank Justus Miller for the Loeb Classical Library.

[3] All translations from French are mine.

[4] Claudine Mitchell 'sets out to question the trivialising elision between art and biography which so frequently operates in accounts of women's art, and to suggest instead that for Claudel, as for others, it is appropriate to consider the woman artist as an intellectual in her own right.' (Mitchell 1989:419)

[5] See von Albrecht. von Albrecht M. 1988. 'Metamorphose in Raum und Zeit. Vergleichende untersuchungen zu Rodin und Ovid' in *Rom: Speigle Europas.* Tübingen:Stauffenburg: 517-68

[6] Quotations from *Tristia Ex Ponto* are from Arthur Leslie Wheeler's version for Heinemann.

[7] Cassar (1997:392), citing Armand Drayot. See also correspondence from Le sous-secrétaire d'État des Beaux-Arts à Camille Claudel dated 18 February 1892 in Rivière & Gaudichon (2008:79-80).

[8] Although Eisenwerth, p.26, considers that 'the significance of this has been exaggerated'.

[9] Rodin told Truman Bartlett that he liked Michelangelo's 'works because they are living and I could find in them what I wanted' (Bartlett 1965: 31). Moreover he admired Carpeaux's nude group *La Danse* (1869) remarking that: 'Carpeaux avait commis ce crime, impardonnable alors, de donner la vie à la pierre par la vibration de la chair; il modelait avec souplesse, avec passion, les autres modelaient d'une main mort. Ils se vengeaient en criant à l'indécence.' (Dujardin-Beaumetz 1913: 102)

[10] Rosenfeld (1981: 81) remarks: 'Like the mythical sculptor [...] Rodin, caressing this antique marble could almost feel "the pulse-beat stirring where he moved his hand" as though the sculpture had just come to life'.

[11] Curiously, one of her first independent works *La Jeune fille à la gerbe,* modelled while she was working in his studio, bears a significant resemblance to his *Galatée*, the name which is traditionally associated with Pygmalion's statue.

[12] Mme Claudel à Camille Claudel, thought to be dated 1927.

[13]See also Lampert p.93.

[14] Elsen & Jamison (2003: 331) states that Rodin's depiction of Orpheus was based on Ovid's account of the myth in his *Metamorphoses*, and notes that several copies of Ovid's works can still be seen in the sculptor's library in the musée Rodin, while Daniel Rosenfeld describes the work as follows:

> In this story taken from Ovid, Rodin uses the rough-cut stone surrounding the figure to evoke the consequences of Orpheus's ill-timed glance, which sent his beloved Eurydice sinking back into the underworld. [...] Eurydice, like the *Danaid* [sic] appears to be absorbed by the block rather than bursting from it. [...] [Rodin] intended the group to be seen in natural light, where the effect of the stony mass upon the play of shadow would be most pronounced. In this light the modeling of Eurydice seems amorphous by comparison to Orpheus' taut, muscular feature, and whereas Eurydice seems to dissolve within the recesses of the stone like an incorporeal vision, Orpheus seems inextricably bound by the laws of gravity. (Rosenfeld 1981: 97-98)

[15] Another title for the work was *l'Abandon* which may have been chosen as a reproach to Rodin.

[16] Fiona Cox suggests an alternative reading whereby the blankness of the woman's face may indicate the catatonia of her madness.

[17] Mitchell remarks that Claudel's allegorical mode is difficult to read as 'there is no agreed cultural convention as to how the narrative order, the personifications or the connotations should be related to one another' (p.428). This, I argue, overlooks Claudel's Ovidian engagement.

[18] Mitchell supports this view (pp.426-8).

[19] I consider that Griselda Pollock's comment that *La vieille Helène* reminded her of a 'modern Helen, Marilyn Monroe' to be an allusion to Helen of Troy. Pollock (2003: 191-3) 'The Grace of Time: narrative, sexuality and a visual encounter in the Virtual Feminist Museum' in *Art History*, 26 (2003) 174-273 (pp.191-3).

[20] Should the title of *La vieille Hélène* actually refer to Helen of Troy as mentioned in Pythagoras' discourse, it would demonstrate how, from an early age Claudel was already fusing classical and mythical receptions with contemporary events and surroundings, endowing real individuals with characteristics drawn from her extensive readings, a point underscored by her depiction of her brother, Paul, two years later as a young Roman.

[21] Camille Claudel to the secretary of state des Beaux Arts, 16 October, 1906, Rivière & Gaudichon (2008:225).

[22] Bonnet p.47, citing Marie-Magdeleine Lessana, 'L'exil de Camille, Imploration à la mère' in *Entre mère et fille: un rivage* (Paris: Pauver, 2000).

[23] For a detailed history of Louise Athanaïse and her relationship with Claudel see Bocci-Crechriou (2004:101-116 (pp.102-104) and also Eisenwerth (1999: 13).

[24] Camille Claudel to Henri Lerolle, Spring 1905, Rivière & Gaudichon (2008:197).

[25] Undated letter from Louise–Athanaïse cited in Cassar (1987:185)