

**Rebecca RESINSKI**

**QUEERING AND UNQUEERING MYRRHA IN FRANK BIDART'S *DESIRE***

The story of Myrrha takes pride of place in *Desire*, an award-winning volume of poetry published by Frank Bidart in 1997. In "The Second Hour of the Night," the longest of the poems in *Desire*, Bidart retells Ovid's tale of Myrrha and her disastrous love for her father, Cinyras. Myrrha's love and her fate become for Bidart a meditation on the power of desire. But some readers see Myrrha's incestuous love as more particularly emblematic of gay desire (e.g., Greenwell, *In Posse Review* 11): one forbidden love stands in for another. Although the object of Myrrha's desire is not a member of the same sex, he is a member of the same family; Myrrha's love is made problematic because of a similarity between subject and object. With familial homogeneity substituted for sexual homogeneity, Myrrha becomes an avatar of a same-sex lover.

Although Bidart's text certainly allows for such queering, a reading of Myrrha's predicament solely as an exploration of gay desire would be incomplete. For Bidart challenges an audience to see the underlying similarity of all desire--gay, straight, and otherwise. Bidart's desire is a force that lays all low: whether one's desire focuses on an object allowed or disallowed by society is largely a matter of luck. In Bidart's terms, everyone is Myrrha or potentially Myrrha. If we believe Bidart, we all could be queer. Queer Myrrha is not that queer at all.

At the close of his rendition of Myrrha's story, Bidart offers Myrrha as a mirror into which readers are invited to look and see themselves. To allow readers to view Myrrha compassionately and even empathetically, Bidart must decriminalize her: in the final analysis, she and her actions cannot be heinous. In this respect, Bidart must depart somewhat from his Ovidian touchstone, in which we can find a markedly ambivalent presentation of Myrrha. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's subordinate narrator, Orpheus, sings the story of Myrrha, and at the beginning of his song Orpheus warns listeners away from the contaminating content of the tale (*Met.* 10.300). But by the end of the story Ovid's more sympathetic voice seems to rise over Orpheus', and Myrrha attains some moral stature. Ovid thus licenses his readers to side either with or against the impious Myrrha. Bidart aims to defuse the negative pole of Ovid's ambivalence. He uses the opening portion of "The Second Hour of the Night" to present desire as a kind of fate, and this allows a reader to see Myrrha from the outset as a victim rather than offender. Bidart's Myrrha is further victimized by her nurse, Hippolyta, who rescues her from death but then uses her to take revenge on Cinyras (who had previously caused the death of Hippolyta's father and brother). Myrrha gains moral force as she unwittingly plays into Hippolyta's dark machinations and faces her own inexplicable desire. In making sure that Myrrha is not monstrous, Bidart decriminalizes desire.