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Transforming Ovid's Metamorphoses: Classical Literature Contextualized

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**Transforming Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Classical
Literature Contextualized**

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In the conclusion of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid speaks of achieving immortality—figuratively, if not literally (441). This literary immortality is owed in large part to his sophisticated exploration of psychology and his colorful and moving representations and embellishments of Homeric Greek mythology. His retellings, now classics themselves, have been passed down for centuries; and it can be argued that the *Metamorphoses* is as sophisticated and multifaceted as any postmodern work of literature. For example, interwoven with the well-known mythological/etiological reading of his fantastic tales, one can find a philosophical reading in which the poet considers such universalities as love and the due rewards of right behavior. There is,

however, one level of meaning, which seems to have been largely overlooked by critics and commentators. Peering through numerous curious omissions and connections between the text and his historical and literary context, one finds a pattern of sociopolitical commentary that often supports Ovid's description of himself as having a certain "disregard for normal limits" (Tarrant 17).

Perhaps most striking is the audacity of Ovid's allegorical commentary on Augustus, the first true emperor of Rome, who had already banished the poet from the city he loved so dearly. Even something as innocuous as the arrangement of stories relative to one another can serve to transform their overall meaning and reveal their hidden political implications. Perhaps the best example is the story of Cipus, in which a Roman praetor of the Republic receives a fateful decree that, should he enter the city, he would surely become its ruler. In response, Cipus warns the Senate of the danger he poses, saying to himself, "I'd rather be an exiled prince of men than ruler of the city where I lived" (Ovid 432). Indeed, Cipus, who indirectly advises the Senate to kill him if he should threaten Roman liberty, seems to be cast as the quintessential Republican. Harmless and even romantically patriotic as this seems in itself, one must note that the tale of Cipus is located very near to that of Caesar, in which Gaius Julius and Augustus are both adulated literally to the point of deification (437-41). This seems typical of Ovid's "strategy [...] to take the heroism out of the heroic while professing to write in the heroic mode" (Mack 126) since in contrast to the loyally Republic-loving Cipus, such

praise of those who gladly took on a functional kingship over Rome rings hollow and verges on the sarcastic.

The theme of Caesarean deification itself becomes a weapon in the poet's hands. Following Virgil's lead in presenting the Julian line as linear descendants of the goddess Venus through Aeneas of Troy, one finds that it is Venus who ultimately incites the rape of Proserpina by Pluto, all because she finds the idea of wielding power over merely two-thirds of the world intolerable (Ovid 150). The allegorical implication of imperial avarice for conquest and a lack of interest in the resulting collateral damage—a quality common to Caesar and Augustus both—is clear. Augustus' kinship to Venus has a more amusing side, as well—in Ovid's own *Metamorphoses*, the goddess is made famous for her betrayal of her husband (116). Venus, often appearing to be more a deity of lust than of love, seems to be by nature a being of promiscuity, and there are indications that Augustus was as well. Despite his extensive "family values" campaign, for example, it was known "[t]hat the emperor was not a continent man," and rumors circulated that he had "seduced the wife of his closest friend" (Thibault 72) and he had a "taste for young boys and young virgins" (Mack 37).

Separating the deified, monarchial Caesars from the ideal Roman Republican is the story of "Aescapulus." Therein, the son of a respected god travels to Rome in the form of a serpent, meaning to cure a Roman plague. The importance of the historical context is that, at the time of Caesar's death, Augustus was indeed in Greece—at Apollonia, specifically, named for Apollo, the father of

Aescapulus (Ovid 433)—and he had a sincere interest in cleansing the plague of decades of civil war (Earl 21). This represents one of many examples of the serpent as an analogy for the emperor in the *Metamorphoses*: a serpent adorned, in this case, “with a gold crown that glittered round his head” (Ovid 434). He arrives, of course, just between the end of the fiercely anti-tyrannical Republican ideals of “Cipus” and their replacement with the Roman imperial monarchy of “Caesar.” That which immediately announces the arrival of the serpent/emperor in the city of Rome is a “sacrifice in sparkling blood” (437). Although a cunning politician who knew well the value of properly applied lenience, Augustus was by no means afraid of employing outright bloodshed when it suited his purposes, and he was eager to destroy his posthumously adoptive father’s murderers. Even the mention that “the ship had nearly floundered with [Aescapulus’] weight” (435), which appears at first to be a “throwaway” line, may actually be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Augustus’ repeated naval failures during conflicts with Marcus Antonius and Sextus Pompeius (Earl 40; 49).

The use of the serpent as an emblem of the emperor is also evident in the tale of Cadmus, who sows the teeth of a serpent in the ground, from which brethren-soldiers grow and kill one another in a clear suggestion of how monarchical ambition can be the fundamental cause of, in Ovid’s own words, “civil war” (Ovid 88). The city created by Cadmus with the aid of that war’s survivors is Pentheus’ Thebes, won away from him by Bacchus. The lowly serpent

that strikes at the entirely defenseless, disembodied head of Orpheus seems once again to represent Augustus—and yet, it also does more than this. Recalling the Python, the Sun-god’s great traditional enemy slain at the beginning of “Apollo and Daphne,” as well as the parallels between Augustus and the serpentine Aescapulus, Ovid may implicate the emperor—and perhaps monarchs in general—as the ultimate nemesis, so to speak, of all poets.

However, there is a more personal aspect to this last connection, as the story of “The Death of Orpheus” may well relate to Ovid’s own exile—or “relegatio,” technically, for he was not deprived of his possessions (Thibault 11). In that story, a great poet’s words are drowned out by the mad clamor of a jealous, barbaric crowd, and he is brought low. Finally, cast out to sea and deprived of the faculties of action but retaining those of speech and song, the poet is washed up on a foreign shore, where he is protected by the divine patron of the arts from a dastardly attempt (by a serpent) to silence him. Given the text’s propensity to use serpents as symbols of the emperor, this summary describes both “The Death of Orpheus” and Ovid’s own banishment. Hermann Fränkel notices the same connection in relation to “Hippolytus”—the story of a youth wrongly exiled but saved by the god of medicine and allowed to rest in Italy in the form of an old man—and cites Ovid’s banishment from Rome as a kind of dismemberment (Fränkel 227). Whereas Orpheus is severed from his body, his means of physical agency, yet remains vocal on a foreign shore, Ovid is “detached [...] physically by exile from the centres of political and cultural life”

(Hardie 34) and banished to the Black Sea where he remains vocal nonetheless, writing a number of volumes while under “relegatio.”

Ovid may also have laid hints within his stories as to the *cause* of his exile although there is too little concrete information to do more than speculate. In the tale of innocent Actaeon (Thibault 26; 131), the protagonist quite accidentally witnesses the virginal goddess Diana in a state of indecency, and is transformed into a deer. The patently non-virginal behavior of the emperor’s granddaughter Julia “with Junius Silanus in the same year” as Ovid’s exile (Fränkel 113) lends some support to Ovid’s claim that his “error” (Thibault 29), in his words, was merely that of witnessing another’s misdeed (Fränkel 112). Although the comparison of the emperor’s saucy granddaughter with the virginal Diana seems rather fitting in light of the poet’s habitual sarcasm, it is notable that elsewhere, Julia may instead be represented by Circe, the sorceress he calls “ready to make love at any hour” (Ovid 383) and who wields—as Julia seems to have wielded, if only figuratively—the power to turn men into pigs. Further, after his transformation, the ill-fated Actaeon is devoured by his own prized hounds. What makes this interesting is that Ovid had commented on his shock at learning that, while he was banished from Rome, a number “of his servants and friends” made attempts to despoil him (Thibault 13). Perhaps Ovid, like Actaeon, after his punishment for seeing what he was not meant to see, was faced with the fact that those he had prized as allies

turned on him and sought, if only metaphorically, to devour him.

Ovid’s somewhat unorthodox telling of the story of Jason and Medea conceals fascinating political commentary, as well. As he often does, Ovid begins with a lengthy, touching, and psychologically penetrating exploration of the process of struggling to retain a reasonable state of mind in the face of falling suddenly and irrationally in love (Ovid 187-190). Cupid’s final victory, in this case, results in Medea’s aiding Jason in completing the deadly ordeals assigned by her father in order to win the Golden Fleece; but after her last “good deed” upon returning to Greece, the rejuvenation of Jason’s father Aeson (195), Medea becomes a completely flat villainess over the course of a half dozen lines (196). Ovid’s earlier touching details are jarringly absent as she tricks an unnamed old man’s daughters into murdering him (197), kills Jason’s new wife, and attempts to assassinate the Greek hero Theseus (199), all allegedly “[t]o keep her evil wits sharp” (196). However, the astute reader, -- one acquainted with the traditional version of the story, Ovid’s past explorations of Medea’s character in the *Heroides* (Mack 18), and a well-received tragedy (21) -- will recognize that he was plainly omitting crucial details of motivation. Pelias, the old man whose death Medea arranges, is the very uncle who had sent Jason in search of the Golden Fleece with the hope that the youth would be killed, leaving Pelias to inherit the country. Medea’s plan to make his daughters kill him, then, is not simple wickedness but poetic justice for his attempt to murder his own nephew.

Although it must be obvious why she wished to destroy the woman for whom Jason betrayed her devotion, Ovid only hints at her reason for trying to poison Theseus: by his description of Jason's house in Corinth as looking out on "two seas" even a reader with the barest knowledge of Greek geography can identify that it must sit upon the Peloponnesian isthmus, and within a few lines, the poet speaks of how Theseus "had forced peace on that strip of land" (Ovid 199). Clearly, then, Medea's attempted murder is not a random act of evil perpetrated "[t]o keep her evil wits as sharp as ever" (196) as Ovid facetiously suggests but an effort to destroy the man who had brought military strength to bear against Jason, whom she seeks to protect even after his great betrayal.

Even after one acknowledges that Ovid makes many striking omissions in this version of the Medea story, the question remains why he did so. The most obvious connection between Medea's legend and the events of Ovid's day seems to be Cleopatra. Like Medea, Cleopatra was a dauntingly powerful woman from the mysterious Near East, who falls madly in love with a bold hero from across the sea and who takes measures to protect him from the dangers he faces. Further, Ovid's reshaping of Medea into a flat, wholly unsympathetic villainess may be a play upon the Augustinian policy of vilifying Cleopatra, whom the emperor used as an excuse for his war against Marcus Antonius (Earl 51-3). In this reading, Marcus Antonius must be the analog to Jason. Antonius' struggles with Augustus were supported by Cleopatra—just as Medea aided Jason in defeating, notably,

yet another deadly serpent (Ovid 191)—and he could be said to have betrayed her in a sense by his refusal to strengthen Egypt and weaken Rome by granting her authority over Herod's Judea (Earl 52). Similarly, through the renewal of Jason's father, Ovid may be suggesting that the Roman-Egyptian partnership brought about a rejuvenation of Roman culture by injecting new, foreign elements such as the Mystery Cults. The wicked uncle Pelias can only be Pompeius Magnus, the great benefactor-turned-rival of Julius Caesar. As Caesar's colleague as consul and protégé in the public eye (Earl 20), Marcus Antonius seems indeed to be something akin to Pompeius Magnus' nephew in politics, and that 'uncle' was eventually captured and killed by Egyptian magistrates. Finally, the man who took Caesar's city and claimed it from its rightful heir (in Cleopatra's eyes, at least) must have been Augustus himself. The new emperor of Rome was surely concerned as well by the fact that Caesar—to whom he was only an adopted son—had a true blood-heir by the Ptolemaic queen. With this final point in mind, it becomes especially interesting that the *Metamorphoses* completely omits what may be Medea's most famous act: the murder of her own children.

It is not only Augustus' propaganda, however, that Ovid targets. By no means was the poet shy of questioning the legitimacy of the emperor's cultivated (and false) image as an inoffensive protector of the Republic. The tales of Bacchus, for example, seem, on the surface, to clearly present a rightful young god appearing and facing the challenge of punishing those who are too blasphemous

to accept his divinity (Ovid 104-5). Yet, this respect paid repeatedly to Bacchus, like that heaped upon the Caesars (437-41), has a thick vein of sarcasm running through it. When Bacchus wins great praise, it is most often from the readily swayed, emotional masses as “crowds from the cities [whirl] in to the meadows [and ... riot] in common celebration” (Ovid 101). Afterwards, even more turn to him out of fear—fear, that is, of the fate of those who fail to honor him as a true god, for “if disobeyed [... he] would mount up in rage, nor would he show them pity” (Ovid 111). Those who are destroyed are those who refuse to acknowledge him as divine, such as Pentheus (Ovid 100-7). The dubious quality of the respect paid to the young, nascent god is particularly interesting in light of the fact that “Ovid exempted himself from the public poetry associated with the rise of Augustus Caesar” (James 343). This most clearly parallels the ascendancy of Octavian through a cunning blend of public propaganda and the suppression or destruction of those he deemed threatening to his rise to power. Further, in the preamble to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, the young god’s overawed followers “began to call God Bacchus by his many names [...] many, many names” (Ovid 111). What makes this particular reference so interesting is the long list of names taken by Octavian, from “imperator” to “princeps civitatis” to “augustus” to “pater patriae.” The description of the god as “a sleepy, effeminate boy” (110) may also be a play upon Augustus’ famous ill health and questionable virility (Earl 50).

The purpose of this Augustus-Bacchus comparison, although it may imply something about just how closely held the emperor’s famed morals were, serves mainly to discreetly peel away the façade of that harmless-yet-dignified image. Consider, for example, the story “Pomona and Vertumnus,” in which Vertumnus, a variant of Bacchus, approaches the maiden Pomona much as Augustus approaches Rome: he begins with gentle diplomacy, the disguise of a beneficent grandparent figure (Ovid 403-4), followed by seemingly wise advice by way of a parable. However, when such cunning and finesse fail him, he reverts to violent, crass methods without hesitation. Pomona herself is “dazzled by his godlike figure” and she “[takes] mutual warmth [...] in his arms.” When the god finds that “advice [is] not the kind of speech that [moves]” her, he plans to have his way “with or without consent” (407). In the same way, Rome—likewise courted by the entire world but possessed by none before—ultimately receives Augustus willingly.

This agrees with Tacitus’ assertion that to achieve peace, Rome willingly accepted the “princeps” and surrendered its long tradition of Republican freedom. As another example, shortly after Bacchus comes to power, Pentheus—son of a founder of Thebes, a city incidentally created in the blood of civil war waged by men grown from the teeth of a serpent—flatly denies the young god’s divinity, and is even so brash as to march himself to the bacchanal, where Pentheus’ own mother tears off his head under Bacchus’ influence. Indeed, by reading Pentheus as Marcus

Antonius, Bacchus as Augustus, and the unfortunate man's mother as Marcus Antonius' figurative mother—that is to say, Rome—one reveals a striking parallel as the powerful citizen challenges the would-be god and suffers destruction at the hands of his homeland in one of the last great Roman civil wars. Further, upon the young god's first appearance, Pentheus objects vociferously that “Thebe's [*sic*] taken by a child, a boy who does not care to know the arts of war” (Ovid 102). This presents another clear reference to Augustus' naval failures—especially from the perspective of Marcus Antonius—and to certain rumors that the son of Caesar was incompetent as a leader and even lacking in the appropriate valor (Earl 50).

Of course, it is ultimately not only Bacchus to whom this critical perspective may be applied. Perhaps the most outstanding and ubiquitous aspect of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the recurring abuse of mortals by the gods—abuse which appears variously throughout the whole book, in more than half the stories, from Arachne to Niobe to Actaeon, as well as anything involving Jove's characteristic terrestrial affairs. Most obviously, when taken together as a group, these outline one essential moral for the entire work: do not trifle with the gods.

Yet, just as Ovid portrays the gods as being capable of staggering acts of arbitrariness, vindictiveness, and even sheer heartlessness, his deification of Caesar and Augustus loses its flattering quality and brings with it the implication of an almost inhuman capacity for pettiness and self-interest, just like the existing gods—gods who run the gamut from

adulterers to rapists and murderers. The message “do not trifle with the gods” does indeed ring true; but the dangerous, petty, criminal “gods” of whom he warns represent those entities on whose elimination Rome was first founded and whom the Roman Republicans of old, such as Cippus, hated above all others: kings.

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