CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

CHAPTER ONE

Mutatas dicere formas

The transformation of tragedy

At the climax of Seneca's *Medea*, the protagonist-heroine does something surprising – not for a Medea, perhaps, but surprising in comparison with her Euripidean counterpart, whom the Senecan audience would have remembered. Euripides' Medea appears atop the *skēnē*, her sons already slain within, their corpses stowed aboard the chariot of Helios (1317–22). Seneca's Medea, however, kills one child in front of her house, bears the corpse to the roof, kills the other child, and finally hurls the bodies to the stage, from where Jason has been watching (967–1027).[1]

The actions of both Medeas, so starkly different in their presentation of violence, illustrate how far the genre of tragedy had come over the course of nearly 500 years. Nevertheless, the road from Euripides to Seneca is an extremely lacunary one: from the death of the former to the *floruit* of the latter, no Greek or Latin tragedies have survived intact (with the lone and notable exception of the *Rhesus*). The extant fragments and *testimonia* are of course invaluable, but they cannot by themselves bridge the gap between fifth-century BCE Athens and first-century CE Rome.

Enter Publius Ovidius Naso. An admirer and author of tragedy, Ovid occupies a vital, if underappreciated, place in the history of the genre. *Tragedy in Ovid* offers an assessment of the poet's contributions to tragedy in the context of prior dramaturgical tradition, his own times and career, and the later principate. The premise is plain enough. However, those who consider Ovid a specialist in elegy or epic might well ask why he should be considered a tragedian, let alone an influential one, with only a single play to his name. In a sense, this question is the inverse of one that critics have asked about the career of Shakespeare, namely whether he should be considered a poet in addition to a dramatist. Nevertheless, the "Shakespearean question" implies a dichotomy between the literary and the professional – between the laureate and the "jobbing playwright" – that would have been

[1] On the logistics of staging of this scene see Hine 2000, 41–2.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

rather alien to poets of Ovid's era, who were accustomed to compose in different genres.[2] To call Ovid a tragedian is both to call him a poet and to highlight an aspect of his poetic career often overlooked in the predominant elegist–epicist–elegist arc. In view of this, my first chapter introduces strategies for reading Ovid as a tragic poet.[3]

1 Theater and metatheater

Ovid, elegist and epicist, is a relatively recent invention. Patrick Cheney rightly notes that Renaissance scholars of the twentieth century have privileged this invention over that of Ovid, tragedian.[4] Yet Ovid the tragic poet has fared only marginally better among nineteenth- and twentieth-century classicists, primarily for lack of evidence. His tragedy, *Medea* (*c.* 13 BCE), and its meager remains are standard features of the Ovidian biography, and discussions of the lost play occupy a small but enduring niche in classical scholarship. All the same, the bulk of attention has been paid, understandably, to the poet's surviving epic and elegies. Lack of evidence, however, did not deter Renaissance-era scholars and authors from inventing an Ovid fully invested in dramaturgy. The fact that the *Medea* had once existed was enough to establish a stable elegist–tragedian–epicist arc for Ovid's career, which became a model for the careers of Shakespeare and Marlowe.[5] Furthermore, the reputation of the play, already favorable in antiquity, garnered further acclaim and amplified its author's own reputation. Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (1612) draws much more on Ovid in explaining the ancient theater than on Horace or Seneca.[6] That Ovid should have greater authority as a dramatist than Seneca is especially striking: not only was the former's *Medea* considered (no doubt correctly) a model for the latter's, the Senecan tragedy was actually deemed by some to be the Ovidian original.[7]

[2] Jobbing playwright: the term of Cheney 2010, 160, describing the professional Shakespeare often contrasted with the literary Shakespeare. Cheney 2004 is concerned to show the dichotomy as exaggerated, if not false. Farrell 2002 illustrates the diversity of genres in Roman poetic careers, which he distinguishes from Roman political careers; see Chapter 2, pp. 30–1.

[3] I would like to take this opportunity now, more than in any other chapter, to thank Reader "A" for his or her comments. Particularly helpful were comments on Ovid's approach to genre, which saved me much prevarication and circumlocution.

[4] Cheney 2004, 56. Cheney's first two chapters have influenced both this paragraph and the preceding one.

[5] Ovid and Marlowe: Cheney 1997.

[6] Cheney 2004, 29.

[7] Cheney 2004, 56, citing the introductory "Life of Ovid" in George Sandys' monumental translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1626).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

Modern readers continue to mine Ovid's poetry for insights into the *Medea*, tragedy, and Augustan theatrical culture.[8] Nevertheless, an important development in the tragic reception of Ovid has been to appreciate the theatrical qualities of the poems themselves. This development is as much a dramatic enterprise as a scholarly one, originating with Seneca's reception of Ovid's poetry and continuing on to Shakespeare and into the present.[9] In 1687 a viewbook of 150 scenes from the *Metamorphoses*, illustrated by Johann Wilhelm Baur, was published in Nuremberg under the title *Bellissimum Ovidii Theatrum* (*Ovid's Most Delightful Theater*).[10] *Theatrum* derives from the Greek *theatron* (viewing place), in which tragedies and other dramatic works were put on public display. Its usage in the title of the Baur edition, although typical of illustrated books from this period,[11] speaks directly to the theatricality of the *Metamorphoses* – as if to appreciate Ovid's transformations is to view them as episodes on a stage. Dramatists of the twentieth century have put this principle into action. No one who has seen a production of Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* (1997) or Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* (1996–8) can doubt the inherent theatricality and performability of Ovid's unorthodox epic.[12]

Recognizing the theatricality of the *Metamorphoses* (before 8 CE) involves reading the poem as a series of spectacles, especially where supernatural change and violence are concerned. The notion of the reader as spectator is somewhat contradictory, since the *Metamorphoses* is technically a work of words, intended for the page instead of the stage. Nevertheless, the narration entails an unmistakable visuality that verges on the theatrical, such that actions become staged for the reader. Moreover, the poem appeals

[8] E.g., Wiseman 2002; also Jouteur (ed.) 2009: "Mais qu'Ovide ait été spectateur de mimes, qu'il ait assisté à des représentations des pièces du répertoire classique, et qu'il les connaisse parfaitement, le présent volume en apporte la confirmation irréfutable" (16).

[9] On Ovid and Seneca see Chapter 7, section 2. The topic of Ovid's influence on Shakespeare's dramatic and non-dramatic works is too large to address here. In addition to the studies already noted, at minimum Bate 1993 and, more generally, Martindale and Taylor 2004 deserve mention.

[10] The title page of the 1687 edition and the illustrations (the engravings of Abraham Aubry based on Baur's original etchings: Henkel 1929, 131) may be viewed online at www.uvm.edu/~hag/ovid (accessed November 28, 2012). The cover illustration of this book is from Plate 65 (Special Collections, University of Vermont).

[11] E.g., Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570); Besson's *Theatrum Instrumentorum et Machinarum* (1571–2); Valvasor's *Theatrum Mortis Humanae Tripartitum* (1682).

[12] Some noteworthy productions: The Royal Shakespeare Company staged a version of Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* in London during its summer 2000 season; Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* ran off-Broadway from September to December 2001, and on Broadway from March 2002 to February 2003. Both Hughes's and Zimmerman's works continue in repertory. The performability of Ovid's epic is of scholarly interest, e.g., Cahoon 1998; S. A. Brown 1999, ch. 12; Gildenhard and Zissos 2007, 4–5.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

to the auditory as well as the visual. Stephen Wheeler makes a compelling case for the *Metamorphoses* as a continuous *viva voce* performance at its outermost level.[13] Within this overarching oral structure are numerous dialogues and internal speeches, most notably the monologues of characters in turmoil. The poem's visual and aural tendencies trope the act of reading as acts of seeing and hearing, the traditional sensory pathways for experiencing drama.[14]

This book privileges the *Metamorphoses* not only as a theatrical work, but also as a tragic one. "Tragic" does not merely invoke the modern vernacular sense of sad, unfortunate, or pitiful[15] – although some of Ovid's tales have these characteristics. Rather, the term refers first and foremost to tragedy as a poetic genre, which is fundamental to the interpretation and appreciation of the poem. Like epic, tragedy was a poetic enterprise appropriate to the Augustan principate, whose empire prompted reflection in grand genres. Unlike epic, however, tragedy was in need of professional poets. Rome under Augustus had no Pacuvius or Accius producing play after play. Apparently Ovid had intended to fill this void after writing the *Amores*, but he returned to elegy after writing the *Medea*. The poet nevertheless continued to harbor interest in tragedy, and when he finally turned to epic and the *Metamorphoses*, he used many stories from Greek and Roman tragedy and told them in ways that pay homage to the genre. Vergil, whose own epic was deeply rooted in tragedy, was an important antecedent for Ovid in this regard. But Ovid's deployment of the genre outstrips the *Aeneid* in both scale and scope, such that the *Metamorphoses* at times reads like a single-handed revival of Greco-Roman tragedy.[16]

Beyond its inherent visual and verbal staginess, the *Metamorphoses* deploys tragedy as an organizing principle. The genre itself, quite apart from any one play or author, furnishes layers of meaning unavailable in other generic perspectives. In particular, an awareness of how tragedies function – how, for example, they demarcate offstage and onstage action or foster comparison of character archetypes – creates new opportunities for reading the *Metamorphoses* within and across narratives. Reading tragically can even explain certain incongruities in the text, which now find resolution without conjuring a careless or cavalier poet. The transformation of

[13] Wheeler 1999.
[14] That the poetry of Ovid's era was dramatic by virtue of being read aloud for elite audiences is foundational for Jouteur (ed.) 2009: see especially p. 5 of the volume's preface.
[15] On this usage see Most 2000, 20.
[16] Compare Barchiesi 2005, cxlv: "Nel momento in cui il teatro romano affronta una complessa transizione, l'epos di Ovidio si offre come sbocco a tutta la tradizione della tragedia greca e latina."

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

tragedy into epic, therefore, involves a hierarchy of models, from individual plays to their unwritten rules, all of which we might collectively label "the tragic."

Tragedy also provides an organizing principle for Ovid's career, since his work in the genre was not limited to his play or to his epic. No study of Ovid as a tragedian would be complete without due consideration of the *Heroides*. Begun not long after the *Medea*, the "single" epistles (1–15, *c.* 10 BCE or later) pursued tragedy under the aegis of elegy and garnered a sequel in the "double" epistles (16–21, *c.* 1 CE). This pursuit consisted not only of borrowing characters from the tragic stage, but also of developing the epistolary mode, which resembles tragedy in constructing a space for heroines and heroes to display their suffering. The *Heroides* paved the way for the *Metamorphoses*, initiating generic and intertextual negotiations to be continued within the more expansive epic.

The transformation of tragedy into other genres is metatheatrical as well as theatrical. The term *metatheater* refers to the effect created when a drama calls attention to its own theatricality, whether through a play-within-a-play, through characters who realize they are dramatic characters, or through other related devices.[17] I use the term in this sense throughout the book, particularly when discussing Ovid's theater of epic or his theater of elegy.[18] Yet metatheater is also meant as shorthand for the poet's overall approach to transforming tragedy: the prefix *meta-* is to be construed both in its radical sense ("change"[19]) and as an allusion to the ***Meta****morphoses*, where much of the transformation occurs. This shorthand application of the term overlaps with its primary meaning in one respect. The success of any metatheatrical gesture rests with the audience, without whose participation the so-called "fourth wall" cannot be broken. Ovid's transformations require similar participation from the reader.

Even in the last decade of the twentieth century, it was still something of an oxymoron to use the words "Ovid" and "tragedy" in the same sentence, with three exceptions: his lost play; his relegation to the Black Sea in 8 CE; and his adaptations of Greek and Roman dramas – although studies of these tended to pit their ostensibly un-tragic tenor against their tragic models. The mid 1990s and beyond, however, saw increasing interest in commingling "Ovid" and "tragedy" more productively, especially in studies of the *Metamorphoses*. Alison Keith, for example, focuses on how the

[17] *OED* s.v. metatheater.
[18] Theater of epic: not to be conflated with Brechtian "epic theater," though Laird 2003 reads the *Aeneid* as a precursor to this movement.
[19] LSJ *s.v.* μετά G.VIII.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

Pentheus narrative (book 3) engages with the *Bacchae* of Euripides and the lost *Pentheus* of Pacuvius.[20] Ovid, even as he derives his plot from these Dionysiac plays, also borrows their attendant themes and motifs, which he puts to work in the subsequent Pyramus and Thisbe episode (book 4), a story never dramatized on any stage. Ingo Gildenhard and Andrew Zissos likewise examine how tragic themes and motifs cohere in the disembodied figure of Oedipus and are reincorporated throughout book 3, particularly in the "narcissism" of Narcissus.[21] In a separate study Gildenhard and Zissos demonstrate that the dismemberment of tragic characters, especially ephebes such as Actaeon (*Met.* 3) and Hippolytus (15), is articulated in self-consciously theatrical ways.[22] Most expansively, Isabelle Jouteur has edited a volume devoted to theatricality – tragic, comic, and otherwise – across the Ovidian corpus.[23]

These works challenge Ovid's readers to interrogate the idea of genre. What does it mean for an epic poem to exhibit both tragic material and, more important, tragic modalities? The same question applies to Ovid's elegiac letters, which also draw upon the material and modes of the stage. The new formalist "movement" in Latin literary studies, current from the 1980s and beyond, actively seeks answers to questions such as these.[24] Sara H. Lindheim broadly defines new formalism as having "twin concerns with questions of genre and intertextuality," which are for Ovid "a corrective and far more productive method of reading."[25] Gildenhard and Zissos offer a more elaborate definition of new formalist concerns in relation to Ovid: "[T]he search for meaning in form, close attention to [his] sophisticated handling of generic demarcations, and a heightened interest in how he accessed, assimilated, and altered the poetic modalities and semantic patterns of his literary sources."[26] Note the emphasis placed on interpretation, which suggests that the "genre question" is less about arriving at an ultimate definition of a work's kind, and more about engaging in

[20] Keith 2002.
[21] Gildenhard and Zissos 2000.
[22] Gildenhard and Zissos 1999. See also Gildenhard and Zissos 2007, an analysis of the Tereus–Procne–Philomela episode of *Met.* 6.
[23] Jouteur (ed.) 2009.
[24] For the *Metamorphoses* the foundational new formalist analysis is Hinds 1987b, which focuses on negotiations of elegy. For the *Heroides* see Barchiesi 1993, although Kennedy 1984 is an early entry in this putative movement.
[25] Lindheim 2003.
[26] Gildenhard and Zissos 1999, 163 n. 4, brackets mine. Further reflections on the new formalist agenda in Gildenhard and Zissos 2007, 13: the "movement … revolutionized conceptions of Ovid's literary artistry by exploring his sophisticated handling of, above all, genre, allusion, and narrative technique."

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

the process of defining. New formalism is demonstrably a reader-oriented strategy. The author, or at least the concept of an "intention-bearing authorial voice,"[27] is not dead, nor are his (or her) intentions irrelevant. But the search for meaning, though begun by the author, ends with the reader.

By the standards of new formalism, career criticism, and even source criticism, the study of Ovid and tragedy requires further attention. The contributions of Gildenhard and Zissos, Keith, and others provide insightful individual studies, but a full and systematic examination is in order. *Tragedy in Ovid* attempts to address this need, and it borrows many tools from the critical kits mentioned above. Nevertheless, as the *Cambridge Companion to Ovid* has shown, interest in literary discourse – allusion, genre-formation, and intertextuality – can and should take stock of cultural discourse in its many forms: social, political, ideological, historical, and material.[28] Philip Hardie, the *Companion*'s editor, points in his introduction to the erosion of the "sharp division between text and history" by new historicist and cultural materialist criticism, and sets the tone both for the volume and for future Ovidians by declaring that the poet "cannot escape from the discursive universe out of which emerges the 'reality' of the Augustan order."[29] I have tried to keep this reality in view, even during the closest of tragic readings.

2 Sources and genres

To judge solely on the basis of both extant and well-known fragmentary tragedies, Ovid's poetry is indebted to the material of the genre. The *Heroides* present the letters of women famous from the tragic stage: Phaedra (*Her*. 4), Deianira (9), and Medea (12), to name only three. The *Metamorphoses*, in turn, features a panoply of tragic heroes and heroines, sometimes devoting almost entire books to their exploits: Phaëthon

[27] Hinds 1998, 49.

[28] Thus Lindheim 2003, 136, though the tentative list of cultural discourses is mine. In fairness to Gildenhard and Zissos, their 1999 essay by no means attempts to read Ovid in a literary vacuum; see, e.g., 181: "Ovid contrasts the cultural ideologies of Greece and Rome that traverse the tragic body in pain." Also Gildenhard and Zissos 2007, 14: "[A]n episode can be laced with programmatic, intertextual, or generic gestures and still offer a meditation on human experience." The work of Keith is likewise broadly engaged: her book, *Engendering Rome* (2000), places the construction of Roman epic in dialogue with (to borrow, for the purposes of making this point, the assessment of Hinds 2000, 235) "the construction of elite male education and homosocial discourse." Feldherr 2010 offers a most conscientious reading of the *Metamorphoses* in terms of literary and cultural discursiveness, with due emphasis on spectacle in its many forms – including, at times, the tragic.

[29] Hardie (ed.) 2002, 9.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

(book 2); the Theban History (3–4, including Actaeon and Pentheus); Niobe and Tereus–Procne–Philomela (6); Medea (7); Meleager (8); Deianira–Hercules (9); Iphigenia (12); the Contest of the Arms, Ajax, the Trojan Women, Polyxena, Hecabe (13); Phaedra–Hippolytus (15). And this is just scratching the surface.

Whoever would make a comprehensive study of Ovid and tragedy has two choices: to address all texts with tragic subject matter, or to select from them in a more illustrative manner. Faced with the daunting task of the former, critics have opted for the latter. Strategies for selection vary, but a typical one for the *Metamorphoses* is to choose thematic clusters – hence the ample coverage of the Theban narratives in the scholarship, for example.[30] My strategy is to focus on four characters and the texts in which they appear: Hecabe, Medea, Deianira, and Hercules. Although others, such as Phaedra, Polyxena, and Laodamia, will enter the picture, these four will generate most of my case studies. The selection is narrow enough to foster cohesion, yet broad enough to span the poet's career: Hecabe appears in the *Metamorphoses* alone, but both Deianira and Medea appear there as well as in the *Heroides*, and Medea was also the subject of the lost tragedy;[31] Hercules also appears in the epic and, as Deianira's husband, is the ideal reader of her epistle. Recurring characters will demonstrate how Ovid continued to play the tragedian long after the *Medea*, even within different works and genres.

Another criterion for selecting these characters is that all of them appear in at least one surviving Greek tragedy: Medea in Euripides' *Medea*; Hecabe, Euripides' *Hecabe*; Deianira and Hercules (or Heracles), Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. Whereas studies of Ovidian tragic characters from fragmentary plays must necessarily be conditional and speculative, my study (however speculative in other areas) at least has the luxury of making comparisons with extant sources. Naturally, I do not imply that the plays listed above are the only extant models, tragic or otherwise. Nor do I mean to neglect lost plays, particularly on the Roman side, where we would expect to find considerable influence on Ovid. I do, however, assert the canonicity of the *Medea*, the *Hecabe*, and the *Women of Trachis* in Ovid's poems. The Athenian stage was an incubator for lasting transformations of myth, and the tragedies under discussion are outstanding examples of poetic innovation. The *Women of Trachis* is both the only known play to treat Heracles' death and, it seems, the earliest instance of Deianira's misguided desire.[32] The *Hecabe* originally combined the deaths

[30] Hardie 1990. Gildenhard and Zissos 2000. Keith 2002. Janan 2009.
[31] Arcellaschi 1990, 231–47, discusses "le personnage gigantesque" of Medea in Ovid's works and life.
[32] March 1987, 48–77; see Chapter 6, pp. 203–6.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

of Polydorus and Polyxena,[33] while the *Medea*, if not the first tragedy to cast the heroine as the murderer of her children, was doubtless the best known.[34] Though Ovid invokes other texts in adapting these plays, the prospect of his transforming the transformers is intuitively right.

The most self-conscious poet of his generation, Ovid constantly encourages his readers to weigh his work against the literary tradition. This is especially true for the *Metamorphoses*, which is concerned as much with transformation stories as with the transformation *of* stories. A metamorphosis, especially the "metamorphosis of literature,"[35] involves a comparison of the past and the present. If something or someone passes from one state to another, the current state cannot be appreciated without reference to the old. This principle informs every transformation in the poem, especially that of the tyrant Lycaon, the first human character to be given new shape:

> territus ipse fugit nactusque silentia ruris
> exululat frustraque loqui conatur. ab ipso
> colligit os rabiem solitaeque cupidine caedis
> vertitur in pecudes et nunc quoque sanguine gaudet. 235
> in villos abeunt vestes, in crura lacerti:
> fit lupus et veteris servat vestigia formae.
> canities eadem est, eadem violentia vultus,
> idem oculi lucent, eadem feritatis imago est.

> He runs away in terror and when he reaches the quiet of the country he howls, his efforts to speak all in vain. His mouth foaming, he turns his usual lust for killing against the flocks, and delights again in spilling blood. His clothes vanish in place of fur, his arms in place of legs. He becomes a wolf, and yet bears traces of his prior form. There is the same gray hair, the same violent looks, the same glimmering eyes, the same savage appearance. (*Met.* 1.232–9)

Critics have rightly warned against deriving universal theories of metamorphosis from a "deceptive paradigm" like Lycaon.[36] Nevertheless, a

[33] Collard 1991, 32–4; see Chapter 4, p. 102.

[34] On Euripides' putative debt to Neophron regarding the murder of Medea's children see Michelini 1989 – although Boedeker 1997 argues for the canonical status of Euripides' heroine regardless of the infanticide's origins.

[35] Kirby 1989, 237: "Ovid … truly conjures with the very forms of literature themselves, turning them inside-out and back-to-front … The *Metamorphoses* represents nothing less than the metamorphosis of literature."

[36] Deceptive paradigm: from the title of Anderson 1989. Both Anderson and Feldherr 2002, 171–2, demonstrate that Lycaon's transformation is far less tidy than it would seem. Feldherr 2010, in a thorough rehearsal of contemporary scholarship on Ovidian metamorphosis (26–37), asserts that

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-00953-0 — Tragedy in Ovid
Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre
Dan Curley
Excerpt
More Information

quantifiable transformation occurs at the very least: clothes turn into fur, arms into legs, man into wolf. Yet the wolf retains traces of his former self (*veteris servat vestigia formae*, 237), such as his grizzled mane and gleaming eyes. Nor are these traces limited to his physical form. Although he victimizes sheep instead of people, he has retained his bloodthirsty nature (*nunc quoque sanguine gaudet*, 235).

This passage implies much about literary Ovid's program, even a program of transforming tragedy. Taking Lycaon's metamorphosis as analogous to the adaptation of a play, we have at least two avenues of appreciation and interpretation at our disposal. One is to interrogate the details. Of what do Lycaon's eyes remind us? Was his appearance always so savage? Such inquiries are similar to ones we might make when reading Ovid's tragic texts. Why does Deianira send Hercules a poisoned robe? Did Euripides' Medea ever write a letter to Jason? Questions like these are the essence of source criticism or *Quellenforschung*. In terms of tragedy, this approach manifests itself in cataloguing model plays and detecting references to them in any given text. All well and good, though the net effect is often to reduce Ovid to a set of influences. Just as a transformation from man into wolf invites further consideration, *Quellenforschung* is not the end of reading tragically, but rather the point from which reading must proceed.

A second avenue of interpretation leverages details toward interrogating purpose. Why do Lycaon's eyes gleam in wolf form? Why is Polyxena's death so visceral? These are questions of a different order, reflecting concerns not only with Ovid's program, but also with the very forms of his poetry. The notion of an element continuing from form to form or genre to genre is much more dynamic and unsettled than it might seem. In the case of Lycaon's eyes, perhaps their gleam is distinctly human, a holdover from his original shape. Yet the metamorphosis might also have clarified that they were lupine from the start.[37] Similarly, Polyxena's sacrifice, when "staged" within epic, provides a semblance of tragic theatricality appropriate to her original genre. Furthermore, her death in Euripides' *Hecabe* occurs offstage, reported after the fact by a messenger. Because messenger speeches uphold the traditions of epic narrative and because Ovid, too, is narrating, Polyxena's demise is much as it always was. Lycaon suggests by

the process is fundamentally ambiguous: "[T]he poem offers no clear prescription for understanding the phenomenon of metamorphosis" (35).

[37] On metamorphosis as clarification and continuation in general see Solodow 1988, 174–88. Feldherr 2002 subscribes to such a reading of Lycaon: his "metamorphosis is above all a clarification of who he really is" (170).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org