

SHAKESPEARE'S OVID

The *Metamorphoses* in the Plays and Poems

EDITED BY

A. B. TAYLOR



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CHAPTER I

*Myths exploited: the metamorphoses of Ovid in
early Elizabethan England*

R. W. Maslen

In the middle of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1592) a mutilated woman chases a terrified schoolboy across the stage. The boy has no idea what her intentions are – she cannot tell him because her tongue has been cut out – but he has horrible suspicions, derived, it seems, from a text he has recently been studying. 'I have read,' he explains afterwards, 'that Hecuba of Troy / Ran mad for sorrow . . . – Which made me down to throw my books and fly, / Causeless perhaps' (4.1.20–6). The boy has presumably read the story of Hecuba's madness in the thirteenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the fear it aroused in him was not unfounded: in her vengeful fury Hecuba tore out the eyes of her son's assassin. He may also have remembered from the same poem a more famous story of female retribution: the tale of Philomela and Procne in which Procne killed her young son Itys in revenge for the rape of her sister. Perhaps he imagines that he has been chosen as sacrificial victim in the kind of perverse re-enactment of Procne's vengeance which does in fact take place – but with other victims – in the last act of Shakespeare's play.

But the schoolboy's reading of the woman's intentions is wrong. By chasing him she seeks only to gain access to one of his books, and as it turns out, this is the same book – the *Metamorphoses* – which gave rise to his 'causeless' fears regarding her sanity. She wishes to use the poem as a substitute for the tapestry in the Philomela story: as a means, that is, of communicating what has happened to her. Philomela wove a tapestry and sent it to Procne to inform her that she had been raped and her tongue cut out by Tereus, Procne's husband. Shakespeare's tongueless woman, Lavinia, who is 'deeper read and better skilled' than the boy she chases (4.1.33), seeks to make the men in her family decipher a

mystery underlying Ovid's text: the hitherto unsolved mystery of her own rape and mutilation.

Her choice of Ovid as a means of communicating what is hidden would have seemed quite natural to an Elizabethan audience. From their schooldays they had been encouraged to decipher mysteries from the tales in the *Metamorphoses*: to dig beneath its layers of fiction in an effort to recover the most precious secrets of the ancient world, whether moral, philosophical, historical, or scientific.¹ The Elizabethans would also have understood the boy's misreading of Lavinia's intentions in the light of Ovid's poem. The process of decipherment was a tricky one, and could go drastically astray, especially when practised by rash or inexperienced readers. Tudor translations of Ovid are invariably accompanied by the sixteenth-century equivalent of government health warnings, like that of Arthur Golding in the preface to his translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1567), who expresses the anxiety that 'Some naughtie persone seeing vyce shewd lyvely in his hew' might 'take occasion by and by like vices too ensew' (*Preface* 143-4), and who confesses that certain readers might wish his text 'too be burned with fyre for lewd example sake' (148). Golding's fears about the potential misuse of the poem he has translated would seem to be devastatingly borne out in *Titus Andronicus*. Young Lucius' misreading of Lavinia as an Ovidian female avenger merely throws him into a panic, but the men who raped her have subjected Ovid's text to a far more damaging exegesis. They have used it, in fact, as a kind of rapists' instruction manual. Lavinia's father assumes that they chose the location of the rape for its resemblance to the place described in the sixth book of Ovid's poem, where Philomela was raped by Tereus. Her uncle believes that they chopped off Lavinia's hands as well as her tongue in order to show themselves 'craftier' than Tereus, who left Philomela capable of weaving her story (2.4.41). The reading skills these rapists bring to the *Metamorphoses* are of a very different order from those for which Titus Andronicus compliments Lavinia.

In the sixteenth century, then, the reading of Ovid was a highly dangerous matter. On the one hand the *Metamorphoses* could be read as a powerful incitement to follow Reason and abstain from Lust. As Golding sees it, the poem is designed to teach one supreme lesson: 'That men . . . should not let their lewd affections have the head' (*Epistle* 563ff.). On the other hand, the same poem

could be exploited as an incitement to sexual depravity, violence, even tyranny. *Titus Andronicus* demonstrates Shakespeare's acute sensitivity to the political implications of the different ways of reading a classical text – a text which occupied a central place in the humanist school curriculum. This essay aims to show that Shakespeare's Elizabethan predecessors shared his sensitivity to the duplicitous nature of Ovid's poem, and to the political ramifications of the various ways it could be read.

What readings of Ovid, then, were made available to English schoolboys when Shakespeare was growing up? It is well known that the *Metamorphoses* was widely used as a means of introducing boys to Latin versification in the upper forms of grammar schools through a rigorous process of translation and imitation. But a good schoolmaster would also have explained what made Ovid worth imitating. And it was chiefly as a fabulist – a composer of fictional narratives incorporating lessons in moral philosophy – that the Roman poet was revered among Elizabethan pedagogues.

Grammar-school boys were taught to moralize fables from their first introduction to the Latin tongue. Quite early they learned to explain the moral lessons taught by Aesop. But the most elaborate method of moralizing a fable would have been practised by boys in the Upper School when they came to compose their 'themes': essays or orations on various topics intended as a preparation for the full-blown study of rhetoric.² The textbook which supplied them with models for their themes was Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata* ('preparatory exercises'); translated from Greek into Latin by Rodolphus Agricola and Johannes Maria Cataneus, it was adapted for an English readership by Richard Rainolde in 1563.³ Shakespeare seems to have recalled parts of the *Progymnasmata* in adulthood;⁴ and he would not have needed to get very far with Aphthonius at school before becoming acquainted with the extraordinary inventiveness of Elizabethan reading practices.

The first of the model orations provided by Aphthonius and Rainolde is 'An Oracion made by a fable'.⁵ Rainolde defines a fable as 'a forged tale, containing in it by the colour of a lie, a matter of truthe' (fol. 2^v), and adds that Ovid as well as Aesop 'entreated of divers fables, wherein he giveth admonicion, and godly counsaile' (fol. 3^r). As an example he chooses a fable told by Demosthenes to dissuade the Athenians from giving him up to

their enemy Philip of Macedonia. Rainolde puts this fable through an astonishing range of transformations in order to demonstrate its efficacy as a vehicle for political 'admonicion'. His exemplary fabular oration takes up at least six pages of his treatise, of which less than half a page is given to the fable itself. The rest is devoted to a rigorous analysis of the narrative, divided into the seven 'places' or parts of a classical oration. The analysis leads him ('in the fowerth place') into an extended discussion of man's body as an emblem of the well-run state, which he illustrates by reference to Menenius Agrippa's fable of the belly and the hands, and 'in the fifte place' into a retelling of Ovid's myth of Lycaon, moralized as an illustration of the ease with which men may take on the properties of wolves. In this way a single fable proliferates to become several fables as its meanings are unpacked by the clever orator. Each successive fable could presumably be subjected to the same process of rigorous analysis as the first. Readings generate further readings in a seemingly endless sequence, and the bewildered schoolboy might well have been tempted to ask at what point his exegesis was supposed to stop.

In their themes, then, schoolboys were taught to deploy all their imaginative resources to transform the simplest of narratives into sophisticated moral and political disquisitions. Schoolmasters may also have taught their pupils that fables were of particular value as a covert means of saying what could not be said openly. Rainolde cites two instances of fables told by Englishmen to hostile listeners in order to articulate their political opinions without fear of prosecution (fols. 3^v–4^r). Thomas Wilson in *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), makes it clear that Ovid's fables could be read as disguised commentaries on controversial topics. 'The Poetes', he writes, 'were wise men, and wished in harte the redresse of thinges, the whiche when for feare they durst not openly rebuke, thei didde in coloures paynte them oute, and tolde menne by shadowes what they shoulde do in good south', and he proceeds to illustrate the point with stories from the *Metamorphoses*.⁶ Golding, too, hints that Ovid's fables had been cast in fictional guise for the protection of the poet: 'For under feyned names of Goddes it was the Poets guyse, / The vice and faultes of all estates too taunt in covert wyse' (*Preface* 83–4). For Shakespeare's predecessors, well versed in Aphthonian methods, Ovid's status as a political fabulist was clearly as firmly established as his reputation for moral philosophy.

Shakespeare seems to have seen the schoolboy's 'themes' as comically repetitive exercises. In the third act of *Titus Andronicus*, Titus chops off his left hand in the mistaken belief that this will save the lives of his sons, who have been condemned to death for a crime they did not commit. On learning that his sacrifice has been useless, Titus tells his brother, 'O handle not this theme, to talk of hands' – then proceeds to develop the tasteless topic at considerable length himself (3.2.29ff.). Shakespeare's Adonis twice insults Venus by telling her that her courtship resembles a child's inexperienced compositions: 'this idle theme', he calls it (422), and later 'your idle, over-handled theme' (770). But despite Shakespeare's mockery, the theme 'made by a fable' offered the schoolboy a chance to develop his own close readings of familiar stories: readings which he could measure against the readings of earlier commentators which he had been instructed to copy into his commonplace book. It is this opportunity to read old stories in clever new ways that seems to have appealed to the early Elizabethan translators of Ovid's fables.

In the 1560s two poets published versions of individual myths extracted from the *Metamorphoses*. In doing so they established a tradition which reached its zenith in the 1590s with the emergence of the Ovidian erotic narrative poem as a major literary form. They also left important clues as to how the *Metamorphoses* was being read in early Elizabethan England. In both cases the fable is briefly told and the moral commentary long: as long as Rainolde's 'Oracion made by a fable'. In both cases the wit as well as the wisdom of Ovid's text is clumsily but cleverly mimicked. And in both cases the myth in question is read as a dire warning for undisciplined young men who fail to respond to the instructions of their elders. In other words, both texts anticipate the preoccupation of writers in the following decade with the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son: the rebellious young man whose high opinion of his own abilities (as the Elizabethans took it) led him to spurn the advice of his father and throw himself into a life of pleasure, only to lose all his possessions and repent of his folly.⁷ Evidently the Prodigal Son was alive and well at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, and was closely connected in the Elizabethan imagination with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The first Elizabethan version of an Ovidian myth was an anonymous poem, *The fable of Ovid treting of Narcissus* (1560). The poem

opens with a translation of Ovid's fable into English verse; but the translation occupies only five pages, while the 'moral' takes up twenty-five, and could easily be broken down into the component parts of an Aphthonian oration. The writer is disarmingly honest about his own youth and 'umbleness' (sig. Br^r), but he has clearly done some careful research into different readings of the fable. As alternatives to his own reading he offers interpretations by more eminent writers: by Boccaccio, whose *De Genealogia Deorum* was widely used in schools as a key to allegorizing Ovid's myths; by Thomas Waleys, the supposed author of a moralized version of the *Metamorphoses* which was also popular in schools; by Marcilio Ficino; and by an unnamed Italian, possibly Giovanni dei Buonsignori.⁸ If the young poet was retrieving these interpretations from his school commonplace book, he had been given access to an impressive range of texts as the basis for his 'themes'.

The poet's own opinion is that Ovid's tale is meant to illustrate the misconduct

Of soundrye folke, whome natuer gyftes hath lente,
 In dyvers wyse to use, wyth good in tente
 And howe the bownty torneth to theyr payne
 That lacke the knowledge, of so good a gayne.

(sig. Br^r)

But his commentary is as much concerned with the risks involved in the incautious application of knowledge as with its 'lacke'. In his view, Tiresias (the seer who predicted Narcissus' fate at the beginning of Ovid's fable) illustrates the dangers courted by those who 'wyl not seke the ryche foulke to please' (sig. B2^v): he was blinded by the goddess Juno for siding with her husband in a domestic dispute. As compensation for his punishment Jupiter presented Tiresias with the gift of prophecy, but thereafter his 'foreredyngs' were couched in such 'doughtefull wordes' that they were dismissed out of hand by those they most concerned (such as Narcissus) (sig. B3^r). The moral therefore opens with a warning against misreading obscure texts – whether prophecies or poems – either by dismissing them altogether or by presuming 'of dowtfull speche to make / A certayne sence'. It hints, too, at the best possible reason for making a text obscure: that is, to protect a writer from the anger of the powerful.

For this young English commentator, Tiresias is a figure for Ovid himself:

Here lykewise may we se the poette, bende
 To byd us loke his meaninge here within
 Supposing that, ther wittes be verye thin
 That will beholde the scabard of the blade
 And not the knife wherfore the shethe
 was made. (sig. Br^v)

The interpretation of Ovidian fable – the unsheathing of the knife – is both a necessary process and a perilous one, since it involves exposing the ‘truths’ for which Tiresias was blinded. Undaunted, however, the poet goes on with his commentary. Narcissus, he tells us, is a man who possesses all the gifts desired by the powerful – wealth, strength, beauty, and above all a ‘passinge witte’ (sig. B3^v) – and who finds that all these gifts are worthless. The worthlessness of the first three gifts he illustrates with a series of classical and biblical examples; but he leaves his treatment of the fourth gift, ‘witte’, until after he has dealt with Echo.

Echo is the most complex of the characters he struggles to allegorize. Some readers, we learn, have read her as the opposite of Tiresias: as the ‘flattringe folke’ who parrot the words of the rich in hope of gain (sig. C1^r). Boccaccio reads her as ‘fame’, who is foolishly neglected by seekers after ‘Lycorous luste’ (sig. C1^v). But the Englishman’s reading of her is more ingenious. He sees her as ‘good advice’, a model schoolmaster whose repetition of the *ends* of Narcissus’ sentences is designed ‘To make him marke and well regarde the *ende* / Of everye thinge that he dothe once intende’ (sig. C2^v, italics mine). Narcissus at this point becomes a figure for the ‘wandering witte’ whose ‘Unbrydelyd will’ draws him to ‘luste and pleasure’ (sigs. C3^r–C3^v). ‘Witte’, in the sense of native, unsupervised intelligence which refuses to recognize any authority as higher than its own, was to emerge as a dominant theme of the daring young writers of the following decade, from John Lyly to Sir Philip Sidney.⁹ Already, then, in the early 1560s wit’s attractiveness and its tendency to prodigal self-destruction have been encapsulated in an Ovidian fable. And the author of *The fable of . . . Narcissus* shows himself to be fully conscious of both aspects of this duplicitous intellectual quality.

Narcissus, he claims, is seduced above all by the allure of the well of ‘praise’ (sig. C3^v). This well inspires the English poet to a dazzling display of interlocking paradoxes modelled on Ovid’s celebrated line *quod cupio mecum est: inopem me copia fecit* (*Met.* iii. 466; ‘What I desire I have. My very plenty makes me poor’):

For in this well to[o] well he vewes the forme
 Of every gyfte, and grace that nature gave
 To hym for that he chefelye shoulde perfourme
 With good, moche good, his good therby to save;
 Yet [by] his good, as sure is evel to have,
 He gaynis the losse that other never fele
 Which have not wone suche welthe by
 fortunes whele. (sig. C4^r)

The clumsiness of the verse should not blind us to its ingenuity. It puns on two senses of ‘well’, three (perhaps) of ‘good’, imitates Ovid’s play on the notion of simultaneous possession and lack, and ends with a pun on two senses of ‘whele’: the wheel of Fortune and the transitory ‘weal’ or wealth she brings. This stanza, and others like it, mark out their author as a youth who aspires, however hopelessly, to emulate the ‘witte’ of Ovid. Misused, such wit could spell disaster for its possessor: and the poet is particularly eager to point this out. At one point in his commentary he tells the fable of Marsyas, also from the *Metamorphoses*, whose excessive pride in his musical ‘conning’ leads to an appalling punishment at the hands of Apollo – he is flayed alive (sigs. D2^r–D3^r). In other words, according to this commentator the very intelligence he exercises in reading and imitating Ovid’s text can bring destruction on its practitioners – especially when it becomes disengaged from the pedagogic and political authorities who claim dominion over it. His own repeated use of the ‘modesty topos’ offers an anxious guarantee that his wit remains at the service of his academic and social superiors: he repeatedly professes himself ‘Full glade to learne, what wiser folke parceave’ (sig. D3^r). It is the poet’s willingness to be taught that distinguishes him from Narcissus and Marsyas. Unlike these two he claims to have transferred the obedience he owed his schoolmaster to other, more powerful masters. But the prodigal wit is the theme on which he has exercised his exegetic skills, and this was to remain a favourite topic with later Elizabethan imitators of Ovid.

Thomas Peend, who published *The Pleasant Fable of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis* in 1565, seems to have been familiar with the 1560 Narcissus. Like the unknown poet, Peend interprets his fable as an allegory of education neglected. Hermaphroditus represents ‘such Youthes as yet be greene . . . Even such as newly have cast of / a boy, and entred in / A yonge mans age. Such one as dothe / to

know hym selfe begin' (sig. B1^r) – the final phrase links him with Narcissus.¹⁰ Caria, where he meets the nymph Salmacis, represents 'the worlde / where all temptations be', and Salmacis herself the 'pleasaunt shape of vyce', which tempts the newly independent young man to 'drowne hym selfe in fylthy sinne' (sig. B1^v). Not surprisingly, the fable turns out to be another variation on the Prodigal Son story as Elizabethans read it: an account of the competition between reason and desire, between the lessons imparted by schoolbooks and the more alluring courses of study offered by lascivious women. For Peend, women's bodies need to be as carefully scrutinized as the Ovidian text: outwardly feeble, they conceal immense reserves of strength capable of overwhelming unguarded adolescent males, and he illustrates the point by expanding on Ovid's fable. After Hermaphroditus has entered Salmacis' pool a violent chase ensues, filled with metaphors of bestial flight and pursuit which owe little to Ovid, and once Salmacis has Hermaphroditus in her grasp Peend breaks off to comment on the cunning she has used to entrap him:

And yet some women say, that they / be innocentes, god wot.
 Thys nycy Nymphe doth now dysplay / whether it be true or
 not.
 In goodnes symple sure they be, / Els subtle ynoughe I
 warrant ye... (sig. A7^v)

The passage is akin to the many solemnly misogynistic diatribes composed by humanist pedagogues: but it is also self-consciously witty. Peend is as eager to display his wit as the *Narcissus* poet was, and he reserves his wittiest verse for the last part of his moral, which is a catalogue of stories illustrating the 'shuttle wyttes' (a pun is surely intended) and 'mad desyres' of fictional women (sig. B3^r). Many of the Ovidian examples he chooses – Helen, Biblis, Scylla, Pasiphae – are standard references in the Tudor anti-feminist tradition.¹¹ But mixed in with these are non-Ovidian stories of a more romantic cast: the tale of Adelasie who gave up everything to follow her lover Aloran, and the tragedy of Romeus and Juliet, which had been versified by Arthur Brooke in 1562. The moral ends with an extended discussion of the sexual career of Venus, culminating in a question – why did she marry Vulcan rather than one of her other lovers? – which Peend refuses to answer: 'I dare not sure dissolve thys doubt. I feare to judge on

thys' (sig. B6^r). Peend's 'feare' stems from his recollection of the story of Tiresias and his blinding by Juno – recalled no doubt from the 1560 *Narcissus* – but while he cites this as an instance of 'the price / Of telling trueth' (sig. B6^r), he also refuses to expose the secrets of the goddess because 'Dame Venus love I wyll not lose' (sig. B6^v). The motivation for Venus' marriage he leaves to be disclosed by more daring readers who consider themselves 'exempt from Venus might'.

Peend therefore closes his moral with a playful acknowledgment of his own subjection to the 'fancies fonde' he ostensibly condemns. In this he, like the *Narcissus* poet, anticipates responses to Ovid in the 1570s: especially George Pettie's story-collection *A Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure* (1576). Pettie directs the 'morals' of his stories – nearly all of them derived from classical texts central to the Elizabethan school curriculum – to two distinct groups of readers. His version of the tale of Minos and Scylla, for instance, which expands Ovid's version with additional dialogue on the model of the popular fiction of Bandello and Belleforest, offers itself to one group of readers – the older members of its readership – as an example of the fate in store for young people who disobey their parents.¹² The second moral, however, archly supposes that the older generation have left the room in which the story is being told, and urges their offspring to imitate the example of Scylla, who would let nothing stand in the way of her sexual fulfilment. Both Peend and Pettie, then, exploit the multiple readings of the fable encouraged by the Elizabethan school system as a means of signalling their subscription to two distinct but related uses of the Ovidian text: as a source of learning which prepares its recipient to assume a position of responsibility in Elizabethan public life, and as a rich repository of erotic rhetoric, whose wittily titillating narratives prime the young male reader for the sexual encounters that await him once he leaves the school building. From Peend onwards, Elizabethan narratives which concentrate on the figure of the boy seduced, either by his own wit or by the wit of women, barely conceal their authors' participation both in the process and the effects of seduction.

For Peend and the *Narcissus* poet, commenting on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* offers an ideal opportunity to consider the problems of reading and writing in an oppressively hierarchical culture. The same problems are the topic of the most important Ovidian poem

of the 1570s, George Gascoigne's celebrated satire *The Steele Glas* (1576). Gascoigne's text opens with an application of the story of Philomela to the censorship of poetry: a kind of censorship with which he was all too familiar, since his first and second collections of poetry had been withdrawn from circulation by the ecclesiastical High Commission.¹³ Gascoigne complains about the effects of these two acts of censorship in the dedication to *The Steele Glas*. 'Alas my lord,' he tells his dedicatee, the Lord Gray of Wilton, 'I am not onely enforced stil to carie on my shoulders the crosse of my carelesnesse, but therewithall I am also put to the plunge, too provide newe weapons wherewith I maye defende all heavy frownes, deepe suspects, and dangerous detractions.'¹⁴ He enacts this difficult process of self-defence in the reworking of the tale of Philomela, or Philomene as he calls her, which opens the satire.

In this allegorized version of the story, Procne is Poetry, King Tereus 'Vain Delight', and Philomene stands both for the female genre of Satire and for the male satirist, Gascoigne himself. Gascoigne's presentation of himself as a curious hybrid, part-male, part-female, places him in the position of a latter-day Tiresias, whose expertise in sexual matters renders all his utterances vulnerable to misinterpretation:

I am not he whom slaunderous tongues have tolde,
 (False tongues in dede, and craftie subtile braines)
 To be the man, which ment a common spoyle
 Of loving dames, whose eares wold heare my words
 Or trust the tales devised by my pen.
 I n'am a man, as some do thinke I am,
 (Laugh not good Lord) I am in dede a dame,
 Or at the least, a right Hermaphrodite . . . (p. 144)

Gascoigne's characterization of the poet as rape-victim – whether male or female, dame or hermaphrodite – suggests that his poems have been subjected to a shocking act of violence on the part of his enemies, systematically 'forced' in an effort to make them accommodate slanderous meanings. The Tereus figure Vain Delight chooses to 'ravish' Philomene-Satire-Gascoigne as a censor could be said to have 'ravished' Gascoigne's two collections, by forcibly imposing his own sexual obsessions on an innocent or 'simple' text. The process began, Gascoigne claims, as an elaborate attempt on the part of his enemies to gain control of Gascoigne-Philomene's body: that is, to prevent him from exposing the sexual trans-

gressions of the 'Court' (where Vain Delight dwells) by seducing him into taking pleasure in the same transgressions. The failure of this initial attempt at seduction provoked the ravishers to violence: 'this traytor vaine Delight, / Cut out my tong, with Raysor of Restraynte, / Least I should wraye, this bloody deede of his' (p. 146). But as with Lavinia, the Philomela figure in *Titus Andronicus*, the mutilation of Gascoigne fails to restrain him from speaking out against the crimes of his aggressors. He continues 'with the stumps of my reproved tong' to 'reprove' the deeds of his 'Reprovers' by singing verse which is designed 'to make them see themselves'. These verses are the 'substance' of his satire, *The Steele Glas*, whose theme is the damage caused by the narcissistic self-indulgence of the aristocratic, mercantile and professional classes in Elizabethan England. But the reference to the reproving of Satire's reprovers implies that the ecclesiastical censors, too, are being satirized in this poem, under the protection of Gascoigne's powerful dedicatee. The wielders of the 'Raysor of Restraynte' have been caught red-handed, so to speak, trying to silence the man who told the truth about them, and the maimed poet accuses them of finding their own reflection in the poems they accused of ravishing their youthful readers.

Gascoigne could have found the figure of Vain Delight in the 1560 *Narcissus*, in an account of the debilitating effect of sexual desire on the 'rashe mans minde' (sig. D3^v). Appropriately enough for Gascoigne's purposes, sexual desire is here characterized as a loss of discrimination, a kind of blindness: 'vayne delight / Whose rashe regarde discerns not blacke from whyte' (sig. D4^r). Elsewhere in the same text he could have found an allusion to the well of praise, where Narcissus sees his reflection, as a 'flatringe glas' (sig. C4^v) whose representation of him pleases him so much 'That care to be, so good as he appeares / He quite forsaketh' (sig. D1^r). In *The Steele Glas* England becomes a nation of Narcissi, who have abandoned the humanist quest for self-knowledge in favour of a relentless pursuit of self-interest and mutual flattery. Gascoigne articulates this national transformation in terms the *Narcissus* poet would have recognized at once. The ruling classes of England have discarded the old-fashioned mirror made of steel – the steel glass of the poem's title – which 'shewd al things, even as they were in deede' (p. 147), and replaced it with complex new forms of representation:

In steade whereof, our curious yeares can finde
The christal glas, which glimseth brave and bright,
And shewes the thing, much better than it is,
Beguyld with foyles, of sundry subtil sights,
So that they seeme, and covet not to be. (p. 148)

The transformation of English culture from the 'simple' to the 'curious' has its corollary in the response of hostile aristocratic readers to Gascoigne's poetry. Finding themselves erotically stimulated by his verse, and fearful lest their willingness to be aroused might find itself reflected in his blunt accounts of contemporary affairs, these readers have unloaded their guilt on to the relatively guiltless poet and criminalized him by sexualizing his every text, regardless of its content. Gascoigne is perfectly willing to concede that he, like Thomas Peend, was a devoted follower of Venus in his youth. What he objects to is the continued attempt to read the texts of his 'reformation' as if they were incitements to depravity, and to the fact that his reprovers are themselves the most depraved members of English society. The authorities have abused their power, and Gascoigne turns to Ovid as a means of articulating this abuse.

Building on foundations laid by its Elizabethan precursors, *The Steele Glas* introduces us to a world where the *Metamorphoses* has subtly changed its status since the days of the early humanists. It is no longer a text to be read and commented on in an effort to recover its perennial moral secrets. Instead it serves as a tool whereby the secrets of contemporary culture – and especially the ruling classes – may be subjected to close reading and critical commentary by the knowing poet. This is the use to which John Lyly puts the *Metamorphoses* in the 1580s, when his 'court comedies' daringly scrutinize the sexual politics of Elizabeth and her courtiers in the dazzling hall of mirrors provided by Ovid's celebrated fables.¹⁵ It is also the use to which William Warner puts them in his popular epic *Albions England*, whose first four books appeared in 1586. For Warner, the history of Britain constitutes a second *Metamorphoses*: indeed, in the first four books of his poem he traces the lineal descent of British kings and queens from the gods and goddesses whose misadventures Ovid records. Each crisis in the island's history is accompanied with a commentary in the form of an Ovidian fable, which mockingly exposes the anarchic sexual forces that have driven the struggle between rival aristocratic dynasties

through the ages. In 1597 Warner published the ninth book of his epic, which reads the reign of Elizabeth in terms familiar to Gascoigne's readers. Elizabethan England, he contends, is governed by self-serving narcissists, who are themselves governed by the ghosts of Narcissus and Echo – allegorized as Pride and Flattery – sent to plague humanity by the vindictive gods of the nether regions.¹⁶ Gascoigne said in *The Complaynt of Phylomene*, published alongside *The Steele Glas*, that the descendants of Procne were still to be found in the modern world, seeking opportunities to avenge themselves on tyrannical sex-offenders (p. 205). Warner announces that the entire Ovidian pantheon is vigorously pursuing its seedy business among the upper echelons of Elizabethan society.

The forty-seventh chapter of Warner's ninth book ends with a satire of the contemporary social hierarchy which closely resembles Gascoigne's satirical mirror. The satire anticipates in the ungainly vigour of its language the verse of John Marston, who devoted the final satire in his pamphlet *The Metamorphosis of Pygmalions Image* (1598) to a biting comparison between the sexual mores of the ruling classes and the activities of Ovid's libidinous deities. Marston's pamphlet was publicly burned by the High Commission in 1599. But Warner shows little fear of reprisal at the hands of the censors for his own saucy scrutiny of the English aristocracy. Indeed, in the sixth book of *Albions England* he takes up the challenge thrown down by Thomas Peend in 1565 and discloses the reasons behind Venus' decision to marry Vulcan rather than one of her other lovers. The story of Venus' marriage to Vulcan is told, oddly enough, by Elizabeth's ancestor Owen Tudor to his future wife.¹⁷ For a time at least, it seems, English poets felt they could exploit the philosophical gravitas accorded to Ovid's witty fables, both by the humanists and by the educational system they founded, as a means of meddling with impunity in the affairs of the rich and powerful.

The aim of this essay has been to show that readings and imitations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* before Shakespeare were very much more sophisticated – and more politically engaged – than scholars have often been willing to concede. I have also suggested that readings and imitations of Ovid in English tend to show an awareness of each other: Peend and Gascoigne respond to the *Narcissus* poet, Warner responds to Gascoigne and Peend. It seems to me not unreasonable to suppose that Shakespeare, too, would

have been interested in a good many other Ovidian poets besides Golding when he first began to write. Two of his most frankly Ovidian productions, *Venus and Adonis* and *Titus Andronicus*, make ingenious use of fables which had been central to the Elizabethan literary scene from the 1560s onwards: Narcissus, Hermaphroditus, and Philomela. *Titus Andronicus* in particular explores the question of how different readings of Ovid reflect and intensify the conflicts between opposing factions in a fragmented Roman society familiar to, and in many respects closely bound up with, Elizabethan England. Whether *Titus Andronicus* is in part a response to *The Steele Glas* must remain a matter for conjecture. That it is a response to the many sophisticated contemporary responses to Ovid is, on the other hand, very likely. It is time we began to read the pre-Shakespearean readers of Ovid with the care and respect they deserve.

NOTES

1. For accounts of how Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was read in Elizabethan schools, see T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols. (Urbana, Ill. 1944), vol. II, chapter 42, and Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford 1993), chapter 1.
2. On 'themes', see Baldwin, *Shakspeare's Small Latine*, vol. II, chapter 39.
3. Rainolde's adaptation of Aphthonius was *A Booke called the Foundation of Rhetorike* (1563). For further discussion of Aphthonius see Wilbur Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700* (Princeton 1956), pp. 138-45.
4. See Baldwin, *Shakspeare's Small Latine*, vol. II, pp. 310-15.
5. See Rainolde, *Foundation of Rhetorike*, fol. 4r ff.
6. *The Arte of Rhetorique*, ed. Thomas J. Derrick (New York 1982), pp. 388ff.
7. See Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley, Cal. 1976).
8. See Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (Minneapolis 1932), p. 49.
9. See William G. Crane, *Wit and Rhetoric in the Renaissance: The Formal Basis of Elizabethan Prose Style* (New York 1937).
10. Tiresias predicted that Narcissus would live long 'yf the knowledge of hym selfe, procuryd not the contrary' (*Narcissus*, sig. A2^r).
11. For an account of the tradition see Francis Lee Utley, *The Crooked Rib: An Analytical Index of the Argument about Women in English and Scots Literature to the End of the Year 1568* (Columbus, Ohio 1944).
12. See *A Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure*, ed. Herbert Hartman (London 1938), pp. 164-5. For a discussion of Pettie's collection see my *Eliza-*

- bethan Fictions: Espionage, Counter-espionage and the Duplicity of Fiction in Early Elizabethan Prose Narratives* (Oxford 1997), chapter 4.
13. On the censorship of Gascoigne's two collections, see C. T. Prouty, *George Gascoigne: Elizabethan Courtier, Soldier, and Poet* (New York 1942), pp. 78–9.
 14. Reference is to *The Glasse of Governement and Other Works*, ed. John W. Cunliffe (Cambridge 1910), p. 136.
 15. For Lyly's use of the *Metamorphoses* in his plays, see Michael Pincombe, *The Plays of John Lyly: Eros and Eliza* (Manchester 1996).
 16. See *Albions England* (London, 1612), pp. 214–17.
 17. See Book six, chapter 30.