

Introduction

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Territories of Grace, Theatres of Calamity

The gods, as we all know, used to be (or not be) everywhere. The environment of the Mediterranean area was filled with promises and dangers. Its geography is completely segmented. Everywhere there are niches, broken pieces and views enclosed or constrained by obstacles: rocks, mountains, trees, crags, promontories, ravines, grottoes, gulfs, thickets, rivulets, springs and lagoons. The landscape itself appears in episodes.

Individual landscapes offer what have been defined as ‘territories of grace’¹ which are also theatres of misadventure: the gods protect the very areas in which they inflict punishment. The sacred inhabits these enclosures and may reveal itself at any time: at first (as we continue to say with irremediable anachronism), everything was pagan. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* invites us to imagine an invisible and disturbing force in these landscapes – one that is prone to show itself capable, in extreme situations, of transfiguring human bodies.²

In truth, the Greeks and the Romans were well aware that poetry did not coincide with religious cults or even with the imagination of the sacred. It is not by chance that heroic poetry is usually concerned with periods of the world in which encounters between the human and the divine were frequent and easier. The stories Ovid takes up and transforms are in large part shared, and at times have the social relevance typical of Greek myth, but they are not really binding. They are not objects of faith or orthodoxy and do not foster religious practice in any direct way: rather, they border upon it. The poem comprehensively illustrates the paradox that what we inherit from the past is not so much experience but

¹ In the ecological history of Purcell and Hordern 2000: 403–12.

² In the primitivistic view of Jacob Burckhardt, so important for European historicism, metamorphosis is a stage that precedes the religious history of the Greeks (Burckhardt 1971: 7–19; his *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* appeared posthumously in 1898–1902).

a sort of 'unlived reality', an imaginary time and place that no one has truly lived through.

Through a series of historical events that Ovid could not have predicted, his work became a major gateway – at times the only one – to the 'mythological' as a state of mind and a physical space accessible to the artist's eye,³ as well as the vehicle for what we might in general call the aestheticising of myth.⁴ His epic opus is a fundamental contribution to the modern European invention of the classical as a 'second identity' or 'alternative identity'. (This is not, however, the only possible interpretation. It is easy for us to overlook the fact that in the late Middle Ages the poem was considered an instrument of the 'science' of nature, a collection of stories that guaranteed access to the phenomena of the physical universe.) For Western readers who cultivate their own classical heritage, the *Metamorphoses* has a double advantage. It has the dimensions of an *opera-mondo*, an artificial universe in which it is possible to lose one's way; and it also converts the whole physical space of the Mediterranean world (not just the city of Rome with its population of statues and ruins) into a territory of grace and a theatre of misadventure.

Today it is not easy to distinguish the contributions of various historical contexts and different sensibilities. In the minds of modern readers, Ovid is to some extent defined by Titian, Rubens, Poussin and Bernini, as well as by Picasso and Francis Bacon, and by certain avant-garde artists.⁵ However, we should also be aware of what kind of world – both imaginary and real – existed prior to the publication of Ovid's text. We shall see that the transformation of 'myth' into 'art' is also an essential part of the *Metamorphoses*, even though for Ovid neither myth nor art had exactly the same meaning that they would have for European artists in the modern and contemporary age.

We might even ask ourselves whether the present-day category of myth *could have existed* without Ovid.⁶ Looking at the most useful introductions to Greek myth available today leads to the impression of a substantial continuity with the forms of systematic narration of myth as it developed in Greece, from Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* down to the *Library* of Apollodorus. Contemporary works like *The Marriage of*

³ See Segal 1991: 9, who refers to Barkan 1986, and to his own important discussion of landscape as a central aspect of the poem in Segal 1969a.

⁴ Cf. e.g. Knoespel 1983.

⁵ See, for example (but this is a vast topic), the work on Ovid initiated in the early twenty-first century by Chris Ofili, first in dialogue with Titian, later involving an appropriation of *Metamorphoses* in a Caribbean, postcolonial setting. See Gioni 2014.

⁶ Cf. D. C. Feeney's introduction to the poem (Feeney 2004: xxix).

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Cadmus and Harmony by Roberto Calasso or Timothy Gantz's *Early Greek Myth* effectively mimic – to the advantage of the modern reader – a total immersion in the Greek tradition. They make no allusion to the life of the myths in the Roman or Romanised worlds, except when Gantz concludes his impressive work by describing the sole descendant of the immortals with decisive political importance for the Romans: Ascanius, the son of Aeneas, from whom Augustus and Rome are descended (in contrast, the compendium of the *Library* concluded with Telegonus, the last son of Odysseus and a hero who, unlike Aeneas, has neither divine parents nor Roman descendants). What these texts do not say is that the classical myth that survives in our collective imagination is a Graeco-Roman myth: transnational, transposed and at times simplified or vulgarised, often out of context. It is a myth enjoyed as a spectacle or an aesthetic phenomenon, a myth that descends as much from the world of Roman villas as from Greek traditions. Ovid's poem is essential for understanding how Greek myth was reinvented long before Western culture was ready to emerge.

Traditions and Models

The poem's unitary form,⁷ fifteen books of continuous narrative in hexameter, makes it the longest Latin epic preserved (with the exception of the much less frequently read Silius Italicus). It encompasses about 250 stories, a number that varies depending on how we distinguish them. Each one is, either wholly or in part, an episode of transformation that crosses the boundaries between well-defined areas of the natural cosmos (stone, plant, animal, human, god) but also between works of art (such as statues) and real life: they can be the result of transformations, or even be animated and so come alive. It is immediately apparent that no one figure, no matter how privileged, can ensure continuity of action in a poem of this type: not even Jupiter, the supreme god, who appears in several episodes, and is also the first and last to serve as narrator, is present at the beginning and the very end of the narrative in books 1 and 15. In its lack of a figure with a dominant position, the *Metamorphoses* differs significantly from the epics of Homer, Apollonius and Virgil, who were fundamental points of reference for Ovid. None of these poets was bound to any 'unity of action' centred on a single hero, yet in practice

⁷ On the programmatic value of the ideas about continuity, cf. the notes on the proemium of book 1.

their poems were often imagined as the exploits, or even 'lives', of Achilles, Odysseus, Jason and Aeneas.

There were, however, some poems in the Greek narrative tradition that could be defined as 'collective' or universal, or catalogue, poems.⁸ Historically, the most important of these was Hesiod's *Theogony*, a collection of stories on the origins and genealogy of the gods, which contains various autonomous episodes unified by a continuing attention to the power of Zeus over the divine world and over the cosmos. In Ovid's time there was a tradition (historically an arbitrary one, but functional in teaching and in the memorialisation of the Greek past) of reading this poem as the first in a large saga, which continued with the so-called *Catalogue of Women*, a collective poem centred on the genealogies of Greek heroes and their origins, often resulting from sexual encounters between gods and women of ancient times. In its turn the *Catalogue*, which may have been read as a narrative development of the *Theogony*, concluded with a sort of epilogue that sounded like a prologue to the Trojan War, the traumatic event that put an end to the coexistence of gods and men and concluded the heroic age. This paved the way to what is known as the Trojan cycle, which gave exceptional prestige to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Ovid was not only familiar with 'monographic' poems like the texts of Homer and Virgil and the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes, but also larger constructions of plural and multiple poems. Some of them were in fact catalogues of brief episodes: they were still narrative works, but disjointed ones. The *Metamorphoses* occupies an ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* these two traditions. It certainly inhabits a space closer to the *Theogony* and the *Catalogue* than to the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid*, but it is also true that Ovid is more concerned (sometimes to paradoxical effect) with connections between the various stories: a sense of continuity, even a chronological one,⁹ is fundamental to the poem.¹⁰ In addition, the texts of Homer and Virgil – much more than the others – were considered canonical, obligatory references, and were therefore essential for Ovid as he embarked on his attempt to write a new epic. The other great Latin

⁸ It is not easy to take a systematic view of the various transformations: Tronchet 1998 is a useful reference. The poet clearly presupposes the existence of mythological repertoires in prose (see below), and in fact readers of the *Metamorphoses* have always had recourse to this type of aid. Among the current works of reference, Gantz 1993 and the excellent edition of the *Library of Apollodorus* by Scarpi 1996 are especially noteworthy.

⁹ We will return to the problem of chronology later.

¹⁰ On the importance of this dimension for Ovid, see esp. von Albrecht 2000: 302–3; he recalls the notion of 'macro-architecture' as an analogy taken specifically from Roman urban culture.

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epic besides Virgil's, the *Annales*, had already been overshadowed by the *Aeneid* when Ovid began to write epic poetry, and Ennius' style was already largely out of fashion. Yet the importance of Ennius to Ovid should not be disregarded, though it often is.¹¹ Like Ennius, Ovid creates a vast narrative structure that moves from the origins – here, of the natural world, rather than of Rome – to his own time. It begins with a robust naturalistic and cosmological treatment that he takes up again (we do not know whether there was an Ennian precedent) in book 15 (Pythagoras' discourse), accentuating the theme of reincarnation that we know was important in the prologue of the *Annales*. The very number of books in the *Metamorphoses*, unusual in the epic-heroic tradition (normally characterised by four or multiples of four), may have been influenced by the fifteen books of the first edition of the *Annales*. Above all, we must admit that while our knowledge of Ennius is insufficient to prove structural similarities, we cannot exclude them either. If we think of the *Annales* as a chronicle of Rome in verse, year by year, battle by battle, parallels are not immediately evident; but it is probably a great mistake to view Ennius in this way. We use Livy and similar historical texts to place the fragments of the *Annales* in a temporal *continuum*, but this does not mean that the poem had the regular and systematic pace of a historical work.¹² If we compare the episodes that are preserved for us with a hypothetical but reasonable estimate of the total number of lines in the *Annales*, we understand that entire generations must have been passed over in a few words to concentrate on significant moments, or to become lost in digressions of a scientific, theological or philological nature. Ovid's poem does not share this aesthetic, but the two works have at least one common trait that is not found in Homer or Virgil: like Ovid, Ennius combined a collective and totalising project with a series of idiosyncratic and at times openly personal choices. Homer and Virgil tell 'great' stories, but these are also well-defined and of a limited compass; they reveal a global and cosmic ambition chiefly because of the mythopoetic and symbolic power unleashed by the narrative. In contrast, Ennius and Ovid each created a global, cyclic and collective work, and then inserted a pervasive and ambitious individualism.

The relationship with Homer and Virgil is important but ambivalent. Like all other epic poets that follow in the Roman tradition, Ovid could not avoid these models, which were welded in a sort of imitative matrix,

¹¹ The best analysis is Hardie 1995.

¹² Elliott 2013 now demonstrates the need for this revisionist approach.

at once individual and generic.¹³ Ovid's response is subtle:¹⁴ he incorporates the mythological plots of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* into the narrative of his own poem, and they take up a clearly defined space within its vast structure – a long section of books 13 and 14. (Naturally, however, imitations of Homer and Virgil are present and recognisable in the rest of the work, both because these models were incorporated into epic style by Ovid's time and because Ovid practices extensive contamination of models, instead of following the 'official' model for a single episode. The poet never allows a topic or character to restrict and preselect his intertexts: for instance, Euripides' *Medea* is not present exclusively in the Ovidian story dedicated to the figure of Medea, and Catullus 64 is not an intertext that comes into play only when Ariadne is the subject of the narrative.) Rather than dissimulating and watering down his relationship with Homer and Virgil, Ovid constructs a sort of meta-*Odyssey* and his own toy *Aeneid*, creating a new relationship with these epic texts. The reader can now use Ovid to 'access' Homer and Virgil, but in doing so must accept Ovid's imperialism over all of the earlier tradition.

It is natural to wonder whether more specific precedents may have been linked to the theme of 'metamorphosis'. Scholars today know that collections on a similar topic were already circulating in Greek literature before Ovid. We only have indirect or fragmentary information about Hellenistic poets who composed catalogues of mythological metamorphosis. Specifically, we know the names of Nicander¹⁵ (*Heteroioumena*), Boio or Boios (*Ornithogonia*) and Parthenius (*Metamorphoses*).¹⁶ There are

¹³ On the difference between individual and generic aspects of literary models, see Barchiesi 2015.

¹⁴ Here there is a vast bibliography, but for an overview see Baldo 1995; Hinds 1998: 104–22 (with further bibliography).

¹⁵ Our information on Nicander depends in good part on a rather controversial reference: the so-called *manchettes*, indications of sources entered by different hands found in the manuscript that preserves the mythological treatise of Antoninus Liberalis (see the edition of M. Papathomopoulos, Paris 1968). It now seems there is a good possibility that the indications are reliable (up-to-date discussion in Lightfoot 1999).

¹⁶ The text of Boio(s) is thought to have influenced Aemilius Macer's poem dedicated to ornithological metamorphoses. At issue is a Latin author whom Ovid knew personally and presumably recalls. Parthenius was a Greek grammarian and poet who worked in Rome during the generation of the Neoterics and the early Augustan era, and who had demonstrable influence on Catullus, Cornelius Gallus and Virgil. Unfortunately, though, the title *Metamorphoses* is not accompanied by certain fragments (but see below). Lightfoot 1999 is essential reading on Parthenius; see also Francese 2001. Today there is in general a growing interest in the Greek poetry of the second and first centuries BCE, as shown especially in the final chapter of Fantuzzi and Hunter 2004, which gives hope for a better understanding of the transition that links the great Alexandrian authors, Apollonius and Callimachus, to the Hellenistic cultural context of Ovid's generation in Rome.

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remarkable thematic coincidences with Nicander, although the question of possible compositional and structural similarities remains unresolved. An important difference seems to be Ovid's reduction of the aetiological aspect, or of the localisation of the myth in relation to specific local traces, an element that must have been central for Nicander and would have represented a link of continuity with Callimachus' *Aitia*.¹⁷ As we shall see, Ovid's minimisation and transformation of aetiology can be interpreted as a sort of aggressive Romanisation or de-Hellenisation. As for the mysterious Boios or (fem.) Boio (neither the name nor the gender is certain), we can deduce that s/he had a specific interest in ornithomancy, was less aetiological than Nicander,¹⁸ and seemed less interested in locations (understandably, considering his/her avian poetics).¹⁹ We know even less of Parthenius, who worked in Rome and directly influenced Catullus and Virgil: the metre of his *Metamorphoses* is not certain, nor is it clear that it was, strictly speaking, a poem. The question was reopened with the publication of a surprising fragment of an elegiac papyrus (*P.Oxy.* 69) that preserved mythological stories with recurring themes of metamorphosis. The attribution to Parthenius suggested by the first editor seems destined to be a controversial one,²⁰ yet the discovery makes us realise once again how large a textual repertory, for us inaccessible, was present in Ovid's library. In any case, all of these Greek poetic works from the second and first centuries BCE are a continuation, in various forms, of the great tradition (somewhat ignored by modern scholars) that opens with the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* and runs without much interruption down to the Augustan era, parallel to the heroic epic and never completely sidelined by the latter's canonisation. Ovid might have had recourse to this tradition as an alternative to the triumphant model of the military epic. It suffices to note the constant importance of women in his narrative (in an almost pre-Ariostan perspective) to show that Ovid needed an alternative tradition to the 'masculine' epic.²¹ It is also clear

¹⁷ Forbes Irving 1990: 29–30.

¹⁸ Forbes Irving 1990: 33–6.

¹⁹ Of all the kinds of metamorphosis tales, human-into-bird stories are the ones that usually show less interest in local traces or tokens of the transformation: the core aetiology is typically about a new bird species, or a certain behaviour, and the 'first time' element is normally the first sighting of a new bird.

²⁰ Henry 2005; see the discussions by Hutchinson 2006; Bernsdorff 2007.

²¹ This generalisation is only provisional, and would soon need to be limited in two ways. On the one hand, Homer and Virgil are models of the 'masculine' epic only if the texts are simplified in a rather tendentious way (something that Ovid has a certain interest in doing). On the other hand, as we shall see, the 'functional' role of women in Ovid's poem is rather different from that assigned

that the catalogue and aetiological poems of the Hellenistic era are a reference that only a very sophisticated public would have been able to appreciate, and Ovid certainly wished to avoid presenting himself as a sort of 'new Nicander' or Nicander *redivivus*. His own epic thus openly renounces the role of offering a 'response' to an individual Greek model endowed with perennial and indisputable authority.

Regarding Metamorphosis

It is more difficult to speak in general of metamorphosis 'in the Greek manner', but the attempt to contrast Ovid with an overall image of what metamorphosis represented for Greek poets uncovers two important innovations.²² The first is an increase of interest in the relationship between transformation and language, and the second the emphasis on a moral problem, either explicitly highlighted or hinted at through an exploration of the boundaries between life and death, and divine punishment and protection.²³

Paradoxically, Ovid's poetics combines an oblique, Alexandrian Hellenistic²⁴ approach and the ambition of an *opera-mondo*, a modern epic that nonetheless does not seek to be a handbook on mythography. The interest in passions and perversions is typical of Neoteric poetry, but here it is wedded to a cosmic approach: fostered by natural observation (with recurring use of Lucretius and Empedocles) and comparable in its grandiosity to Virgil's *Aeneid* but also the *Georgics*. This explains how the poem has enjoyed great success even though its complex cultural mix has lost some direct efficacy. In some historical periods, it served primarily to recover an encyclopaedia of myth; in others it was a way of rediscovering the classical 'body'.²⁵

It has, understandably, proved very difficult to define the unifying factor or cypher of the *Metamorphoses*.²⁶ A synthetic definition might be

them in the *Catalogue of Women*. Recent readings of the Ovidian poem from the perspective of gender studies have shifted attention from the construction of an image of women to the construction of masculinity (here reflecting the constructivism of authors like Judith Butler). The most mature study in this direction is Keith 2000. On gender and vision in Ovid's epic see also Salzman-Mitchell 2005.

²² Cf. Barchiesi 2014 and 2020. Other recent bibliography on metamorphosis includes the groundbreaking Forbes Irving 1990; Frontisi-Ducroux 2003; Hutchinson 2006; Buxton 2009.

²³ Forbes Irving 1990: 37.

²⁴ On the Alexandrian influence, see Murray 2004; van Tress 2004.

²⁵ Barkan 1986 eloquently illustrates this evolution.

²⁶ The alternative is to consider metamorphosis as an external narrative stratagem (as Galinsky 1975 does, but this approach has no traction in more recent scholarship).

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that it is a universal mythological history narrated from the perspective of change.²⁷ However, there is then the challenge of defining these changes in the eyes of the reader. It is possible to read the poem as an explanation of the origins of the reality in which we live, but a systematic approach immediately appears excessive.²⁸ There is indeed a lot of aetiology,²⁹ but this seems different from the interpretations that are given by authors such as Euripides, Callimachus and Virgil. The narrator's authority can captivate, but it does not establish a permanent, causative relationship between the transformations and the 'real' world of the reader; the result is rather that of proclaiming the natural world to be magical and the magical world to be natural.³⁰ However, the selection of stories does respond to a recognisable project: the poet is interested above all in situations in which human existence is pushed to its limits and one must live *in extremis*, driven by passion, violence or suffering. The rhetorical and narrative technique that meets these specific conditions is one that the ancients called *inuentio*:³¹ the capacity for 'finding' (finding in a repertory, not creating by innovation) and attributing feelings and words to characters that are adequate for the 'demanding' narrative scenarios, which require reliable and characteristic choices. Given that many of the characters belong to a consolidated mythological tradition, each choice of 'invention' is a competitive act that relates to other versions or scenarios, traditional or potential, of the same myth. (Today this type of work calls to mind script adapters in the film industry – who convert material already available in narrative form, preparing the way for an actual screenplay – rather than resembling the poetics of fiction in realistic European novels). Ovid is the master of ancient narrators when it comes to the selection of material and the *inuentio*, given the difficult rules that he has established. His artistic tendencies suggest a close meditation on models like Euripides,³² in his attention to the development of feelings and desires, and Callimachus, in his ability to combine the epic tradition with the constant awareness of a narrator who controls the unfolding of the narrative.³³

²⁷ So Schmitzer 2001: 92. For an attempt to define the poem as an 'anthropological' project, see also Schmidt 1991.

²⁸ Such as Holzberg 2002: 119 proposes.

²⁹ Cf. the important discussion of Myers 1994: a systematic study of aetiology in the Graeco-Roman world in cognitive terms would be very useful.

³⁰ See Barkan 1986: 19.

³¹ As Kenney 1986: xxiii explains.

³² For a full discussion of the importance of tragedy as a model in Ovid, see Curley 2013.

³³ For some examples of the narrator's presence in the narrative, see Kenney 1986: xxvii–xxviii; Wheeler 1999; Barchiesi 2002b: 181–6; Rosati 2002. All provide examples for the extension of this

The Narrative

The stories all exist on the same plane: none is privileged over the others, even if some are lengthier and more developed, or more memorable. Since there is no hierarchical structure that informs the reader how to organise their perceptions of the relationships between the parts and the whole, each reading of the poem becomes a new exercise in association.³⁴

The narrative structure, which requires the poet to engage in an ongoing exercise in narrative 'authority' but absolves him of moral and political 'responsibility',³⁵ entails a profound reform of the *status* of the characters. Given that the prevalent references in the poem, in terms of style and imagery, point towards Homeric and Virgilian epic, the divergences with regard to heroic figures and their actions become more conspicuous. The figures are more passive than active, and their actions tend not to be finalised. Their destinies provoke limited involvement on the part of the reader, and their objectives never coincide with a tension or a teleology that the narrator imposes on the story: we are thus at the antipodes of Achilles, Odysseus and Aeneas.³⁶ Actions often culminate in a catastrophe that has a random cause, and diverges from the point of interest of a single story: a hunter loses his way in the woods, a girl decides to pick a flower, a stranger appears at a door, a dog invites a strange curiosity. Not only does it become clear that each single story can wear itself out suddenly, but also that individual identities can be erased with the stroke of a pen. This contrasts with the epic tradition, in which the epic singer wishes to achieve the hero's eternal identity and fame. Traditionally, the singer self-referentially sees his own poetic success in the construction of the hero's lasting fame, and the hero in turn aspires to a *performance* that will itself fulfil a poetic celebration; but in the *Metamorphoses* no one character (with the possible exception of the emperor Augustus) can aspire to a similar privilege. The moments that truly express the poet's ambitions are those, impossible and paradoxical, of metamorphosis, in which the poet is not engaged with an individual or an action that he can render immortal. Instead, he self-reflexively indulges in his own artificial ability to uncover the hybrid, the paradoxical

principle to secondary, intradiegetic narrators. One of the best studies dedicated to the poem's style, von Albrecht 1964, is rich in linguistic observations documenting the active presence of the narrative voice in the poem.

³⁴ Hopkins 2000: 9.

³⁵ Cf. Barchiesi 1999: 113.

³⁶ Segal 1991: 23–5, 62–3.