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Alessandro Barchiesi , E. J. Kenney , Joseph D. Reed
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Introduction to Books 7–9

E. J. Kenney

> Northcote asked, what I thought of the Vicar of Wakefield? And I answered, what every body else did. He said there was that mixture of the ludicrous and the pathetic running through it, which particularly delighted him: it gave a stronger resemblance to nature. He thought this justified Shakespeare in mingling up farce and tragedy together: life itself was a tragi-comedy. Instead of being pure, every thing was chequered. If you went to an execution, you would perhaps see an apple-woman in the greatest distress, because her stall was overturned, at which you could not help smiling.
>
> W. Hazlitt, *Conversations of James Northcote. Esq., R. A.* (1830)

> A story is a nice neat little thing with what is called a 'working up' and a climax, and life is a clumsy ungraspable thing, very incomplete in its periods, and with a poor sense of climax. In fact, death – which is a very uncertain quantity – is the only definite note it strikes, and even death has an uncomfortable way of setting other things in motion.
>
> Stacy Aumonier, 'Them Others', in *Ups and Downs* (1929)

I

Books 7 to 9 of the *Metamorphoses* occupy the central position in the 15-book structure of the poem. That might perhaps be expected to confer a special status on book 8 in particular.[1] However, the various attempts to detect and to assess the literary significance of an overall structure in the *Metamorphoses* have on the whole not been enlightening, and have indeed tended to stultify each other.[2] Such academic analysis, conducted at leisure through repeated perusals, is adept at constructing neatly symmetrical complexes of contrasting or complementary stories which in

[1] Moritz (1968); Crabbe (1981).
[2] Cf. the pertinent reservations of Glei (2001) 16 on similar attempts to schematise the *Argonautica*.

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turn can be built up into larger complexes which eventually engross the entire poem. These look impressive on the printed page, but such static patterns bear little relation to the experience of continuous reading. This is a *perpetuum carmen* in the most obvious sense, carrying its audience effortlessly along on a current of narrative which is now rapid, now leisurely, which from time to time will divagate into a placid pool or a picturesque backwater, only to debouch abruptly into the mainstream, sweeping on to new scenes and fresh demands on the reader's emotional and intellectual responses. The *Metamorphoses* is, among many other things (for this is not the last essay at a definition that will be offered in these remarks), an epic of surprise.[3] Ovid is rarely predictable: over and over again an apparently hackneyed idea will turn out to have been given an ironical or subversive twist, as when the duplication of an Apollonian simile, so far from intensifying the impression of terror created by Aeson's famous bulls, slyly suggests that they are more noisy than noxious (7.105–8, 110–14nn.).

II

Both in the grand design and in the detail of his epic Ovid rarely passes up an opportunity to remind us who is in charge. This pervasive characteristic of the poem, the omnipresence of the poet, could be exemplified from any book or sequence of books in it. It happens that these three central books offer what seems to me particularly rich and entertaining material for the exploration of Ovid's masterful way with his art. In his own words, *materiam superabat opus*:[4] the mythological landscape, its inhabitants, human and divine, the chronology of their doings, and what his predecessors in the field had made of their own materials, all this is subdued to his purposes by the hand of the master craftsman.

The conception of the poet's role as one of domination and control had been signalled in the very first lines of Ovid that have come down to us, the *Epigramma* to the collected edition of the *Amores*:

Qui modo Nasonis fueramus quinque libelli,
tres sumus; hoc illi praetulit auctor opus.
ut iam nulla tibi nos sit legisse uoluptas,
at leuior demptis poena duobus erit.

[3] Cf. Tissol (1997), index s.v. 'narrative, disruption of'.
[4] Words which will reoccur in a different context: see below, § IX.

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It can only have been by good luck, given the unregulated conditions of publication in classical antiquity, that Ovid's evident intention to preserve only so much of his early elegies as he thought worthy of him was fulfilled and that no trace of the suppressed poems survives. Wilamowitz, in a brief but characteristically pithy and judicious appraisal, published at a time when Ovid's poetical reputation had not yet emerged from the general cloud of unknowing, unerringly grasped the significance of this short poem as an earnest of what was to follow: 'Darin lag eine starke Selbstüberwindung des jungen Dichters'.[5] The self-discipline evinced in this ruthless culling of his *juvenilia* he now proceeded to impose on the genre with which he had chosen to inaugurate his poetic career.[6] He was not slow to proclaim openly what the *Epigramma* had implied: the defiant apologia incorporated into what was in effect his swansong as an elegist of love[7] concludes with a self-evaluation hardly to be matched in the annals of poetry for confidence:

> tantum se nobis elegi debere fatentur,
> quantum Vergilio nobile debet epos. (*Rem. am.* 395–6)

This, then, was the frame of mind in which he had turned to the genre in which, as his words imply, Virgil had established an agreed pre-eminence. To that pre-eminence, or at least to Virgil's monopoly of it, the *Metamorphoses* proved to be, and was clearly conceived as, a serious challenge. Again, Wilamowitz took the measure of Ovid's achievement in this poem: 'Nur ein unsterbliches episches Gedicht entstand noch unter Augustus, das sich an Kunstwerk mit der Aeneis messen kann und an Wirkung auf die Nachwelt nicht sehr viel unter ihr bleibt, die Metamorphosen Ovids'.[8] It was indeed a commentator on Virgil – one who spent the last thirty years of his life in that pursuit – who paid him one of the most comprehensive and sweeping tributes ever to come his way: 'He was a more natural, more genial, more cordial, more imaginative, more playful poet not only than Dryden, but than our author [i.e.

[5] Wilamowitz (1924) I, 239 n.1.
[6] Cf. Bretzigheimer (2001) 11–12.
[7] This is not the place to grapple seriously with the thorny problem of the chronology of the elegiac works; of the various sequences proposed that which places the *Remedia amoris* last seems to me on balance the most probable.
[8] Wilamowitz (1924) I, 241. This assessment of Ovid's later influence, however, seems to me to understate the case. See Martindale (1988) *passim*. It was not only Shakespeare to whom he appealed more than Virgil (Martindale (1988) 18–20); he has always been the poets' poet, an inspiration for the poets of courtly love and the darling of the Renaissance. I would also guess that artists have resorted for their subjects far more often to the *Metamorphoses* than to the *Aeneid*.

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Virgil], or any other Latin poet'.[9] Where, however, Henry had seen 'clear simplicity and artlessness',[10] later critics attuned to a sharper perception of Alexandrian modes recognise an art that could scarcely be less artless: 'The *Metamorphoses* could have been written for the delectation of modern connoisseurs of the self-reflexive text and of the *mise-en-abyme*'.[11]

III

It might perhaps have been predicted that a certain eminent Oxford scholar should have been unwilling to 'agree that the *Metamorphoses* is more universal than the *Aeneid*'.[12] In one obvious respect it certainly is, its scope in time and space. Whereas Virgil had taken the mythological universe as he found it and had adapted it to accommodate a scenario in which the destiny of Rome and the achievement of Aeneas as founder of her future greatness took centre stage, Ovid recreated his universe *ab initio* to suit his own purposes, and peopled it at will. The Muse had told Virgil what to say (*Aen.* 1.1–11); for Ovid the prime mover of his enterprise was himself, his own *animus*, urging him to assert his mastery over hitherto unexplored and unconquered poetic territory. Just so, at the beginning of the *Ars amatoria*, while welcoming Venus' support in his enterprise of taming and educating her wayward son, he makes it clear that he draws his inspiration, not from Apollo and the Muses, but from his own hard-won experience.[13] In the concluding elegy of the *Amores* he had taken leave of love and love elegy at the call of a stronger power, imaged as Bacchus, to embark on an *area maior* which implicitly embraced, not only tragedy, but also aetiological elegy and epic.[14] Now, at

[9] Henry (1873–89) I, 618. See on this remarkable man Williams (1973), Richmond (1976).
[10] Henry (1873–89) I, 133.
[11] Hardie, Barchiesi and Hinds (1999) 10.
[12] Nisbet (1983) 175. Cf. Otis (1970) xv: 'Virgil is not Ovid and Oxford is not Cambridge. But it would perhaps be wrong to suggest that the one university is more Virgilian or Ovidian than the other. And yet it seems to me peculiarly fitting that *Virgil* should have an Oxonian, *Ovid* a Cantabrigian imprint. Who, at any rate, would want to deny that Cambridge is an eminently Ovidian place?' In the interests of accuracy it should perhaps be added that the remark to which Professor Nisbet demurred read, '*In certain respects* it can be suggested that the *Metamorphoses* … is the more universal poem of the two' (*CHCL* II 440 = *The Age of Augustus* 144; my emphasis).
[13] A nice point of editorial technique arises at *Ars amatoria* 1.29 *usus opus mouet hoc* – or *Vsus*? Cf. Afran. *ap*. Gell. 13.8.3. Is Ovid in effect here deifying one of his own qualifications?
[14] His farewell to Elegy picks up the words of Tragedy from his previous encounter with the two: *Am.* 3.15.15–18 ~ 3.1.23–6. The *facta uirorum* which she had ordered him to celebrate encompass the whole field of heroic activity, and her injunction *incipe maius opus*, with its echo of Virgil's *maius opus moueo* (*Aen.* 7.45) points specifically to epic. Cf. McKeown ad loc.; Prop. 2.10.1–2. Ovid was later to use the term of the *Metamorphoses* (*Tr.* 2.63). An actual foretaste of the *Fasti* had been

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the outset of the *Metamorphoses*, though the gods are asked to provide general assistance to his undertaking, as they had done once before,[15] their role is clearly represented as subsidiary to the poet's own. It is his genius which has inspired him to launch into this new and unexampled venture:

> In noua fert animus mutatas dicere formas
> corpora; di, coeptis (nam uos mutastis et illa)
> adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi
> ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen. (*Met*. 1.1–4)[16]

The gods are not invoked again to assist or inspire,[17] and indeed the coda to the poem expressly denies the power of even the supreme god over its fate and the fate of its creator, identified with it:

> Iamque opus exegi, quod nec Iouis ira nec ignis
> nec poterit ferrum nec edax abolere uetustas.
> cum uolet, illa dies, quae nil nisi corporis huius
> ius habet, incerti spatium mihi finiat aeui;
> parte tamen meliore mei super alta perennis
> astra ferar, nomenque erit indelebile nostrum;
> quaque patet domitis Romana potentia terris
> ore legar populi, perque omnia saecula fama
> (si quid habent ueri uatum praesagia) uiuam. (*Met*. 15.871–9)[18]

offered in *Am*. 3.13; the reference in the first verse to Ovid's wife unambiguously signals that this is not a love elegy.

[15] Reading *illa* at 1.2. The reference can only be to Cupid's intervention at the beginning of the *Amores*, where the poet is discovered embarking on a Gigantomachy. That Ovid can ever have seriously contemplated any such undertaking seems extremely improbable. Cupid's epiphany, in which conventional programmatic motifs are stood on their heads, reflects the subversive character of what follows, for it turns out that what Ovid has all along intended is not to open up fresh possibilities in his chosen genre, but to administer to it the *coup de grâce*.

[16] The result, as critics have shown, is to be a literary paradox, a poem that is both a *perpetuum* and a *deductum carmen*. However, it is possible that *deducite* may carry yet another nuance, the suggestion that the gods are to provide it with a ceremonial and honorific escort (*OLD* s.v. 8b) to its conclusion – the poet's apotheosis. On the calculated ambiguity which allows the words *in noua fert animus* to be read as an autonomous phrase and on their possible significance as a syntactical figuration of the reader's expectations, see Wheeler (1999) 8–13.

[17] It is appropriate that Orpheus, referred to as *uates*, should invoke the Muses (10.148–9); why Ovid himself should suddenly do so to introduce the story of Aesculapius (15.622–5) continues to puzzle critics (Bömer ad loc.).

[18] Cf. *Tr*. 1.7.11–12 *carmina maior imago sunt mea*. In view of the repeated identification of Augustus with Jupiter in the *Tristia* (some thirty instances), often in association with the image of the thunderbolt, it is tempting to wonder if the coda was added, or retouched, at Tomis; cf. esp. *Tr*. 3.7.47–8 *ingenio tamen ipse meo comitorque fruorque*: | *Caesar in hoc potuit iuris habere nihil*. For a bibliography of the question, see Bömer ad loc.; cf. Galinsky (1975) 254–5.

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This is indeed 'an unequalled expression of confidence in the inherent immortality of creative literature'.[19] Lines 875–6, with their echo in the words *parte … meliore mei* of the apotheosis of Hercules (9.269 *parte sui meliore uiget*), hint at an apotheosis even more exalted: Hercules lives on as a constellation, Ovid will soar above him in the firmament.

Neither here nor at the recurrence of the motif of lines 878–9 in his *apologia pro uita sua* in almost identical terms (*Tr.* 4.10.129–30) do the commentators essay to identify the 'bards' or 'prophets' on whose authority Ovid rests his conviction that his soul, his *melior pars*, will live on forever. That doctrine, however, had been the text, indeed the real *raison d'être*, of the great speech of Pythagoras earlier in book 15, which presents him as both prophet and poet.[20] Pythagoras, himself an inhabitant of the constantly changing world of the *Metamorphoses*, proclaims that, though everything else is subject to change, one thing and one thing alone never loses its identity, the soul:

> errat et illinc
> huc uenit, hinc illuc et quoslibet occupat artus
> spiritus eque feris humana in corpora transit
> inque feras noster nec tempore deperit ullo.
> utque nouis facilis signatur cera figuris
> nec manet ut fueret nec formas seruat easdem,
> sed tamen ipsa eadem est, animam sic semper eandem
> esse sed in uarias doceo migrare figuras. (*Met.* 15.165–72)

The presence of Pythagoras in the *Metamorphoses* has occasioned a good deal of discussion and some adverse criticism. Ovid introduces him via an association with Numa which violated real historical chronology, a fact of which he cannot have been unaware, since this traditional synchronism had long been the subject of controversy and was still exercising the learned, including his contemporary Livy.[21] In doing so, however, he declines, as often, to take any responsibility for what he reports:

> talibus atque aliis instructum pectora dictis
> in patriam remeasse ferunt ultroque petitum
> accepisse Numam populi Latialis habenas. (*Met.* 15.479–81)

The word *ferunt*, 'they say', gives the game away: this is one of the numerous variants of the Alexandrianising poet's coded shorthand for

[19] Galinsky (1975) 255.
[20] *Met.* 15.143 *et quoniam deus ora mouet* eqs. and Bömer ad loc.
[21] Livy 1.18.2; see Ogilvie (1965) 89–91 and Bömer (1986) 252–3.

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'This is what our sources (or some of them) tell us; I leave it to the reader to make up his own mind'.[22] What is clear is that Pythagoras' intervention is designed as organic to the structure of the poem.[23] On the formal plane, it provided a further enrichment of the poem's multigeneric make-up by the inclusion of a substantial episode in Lucretian didactic vein which also set up a thematic link with book 1.[24] It also allowed Ovid to expatiate, as it were by deputy and in a manner that imparted philosophical weight to the message, on the declared premiss of the whole undertaking: change as the distinguishing characteristic of the human environment. Precedents on a modest scale for the incorporation of such a philosophical excursus in an epic were to hand in the lays of Orpheus and Iopas in Apollonius and Virgil.[25] Pythagoras' speech is in a different class from these. It is – of course – a technical *tour de force* of outstanding brilliance, which some readers, including Dryden and Charles James Fox, have thought one of the finest parts of the poem and which has bored or irritated others. I would suggest that the essential clue to its presence in the poem is to be sought in the emphasis on the unique status of the soul as the one imperishable thing in a world in which everything else is fated to undergo the ultimate form of change: destruction of what it has been.[26] This takes up and provides philosophical authority for the concept of apotheosis. That theme had received elaborate treatment in the Hercules episode, where it functions as a prefiguration of the sequence of Roman apotheoses – Aeneas, Romulus, Caesar and, as yet in the future, Augustus – that is to culminate in the one that by implication trumps them all, that of Ovid himself.[27]

In its concluding lines the poem has come full circle. At its outset the poet's *animus* had carried him into 'new things' which proved to be a whole new world called into being by his genius. Now his *anima*,[28]

[22] See on the 'Alexandrian footnote' 7.63n. The same equivocation at *Pont*. 3.3.44 *Pythagorae … ferunt non nocuisse Numam*; cf. *Fast*. 3.153 *siue hoc a Samio doctus* eqs. That Ovid was thinking of Ennius is possible but perhaps unlikely. Cf. Skutsch (1985) 263–4.

[23] For a comprehensive discussion, see Myers (1994) 133–66.

[24] See e.g. 15.153–5; cf. Coleman (1971) 463.

[25] Ap. Rhod. *Argon*. 1.496–511; Verg. *Aen*. 1.740–6. Cf. Anchises' speech on the nature of the soul, *Aen*. 6.724–51, and Austin ad loc.

[26] *Met*. 15.255–7 ~ Lucr. 1.670–1.

[27] Cf. Otis (1970) 199, 280; Myers (1994) 166. How seriously, if the Jupiter with whom Augustus is implicitly identified is the Jupiter whose behaviour is anatomised in the poem, are we in fact supposed to take Augustus' apotheosis? Cf. Coleman (1971) 476.

[28] Ovid is likely to have imbibed his notions of the soul from Lucretius, for whom the *animus* was part of the *anima*; cf. Bailey on Lucr. 3.136–60, 143; Rist (1972) 79–80. On the *animus* as the soul as distinguished from the body, see *OLD* s.v. 1a, c.

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identified with his creation,[29] will be carried into regions far above that world to live on as long as that creation endures. The antepenultimate line of the poem, *quaque patet domitis Romana potentia terris*, recalls the expectation of Horace and Virgil before him that they will be read as long as the power of Rome shall endure (*Carm*. 3.30.6–9; *Aen*. 9.446–9). Pythagoras, however, had said in his pronouncement that all material things must ultimately perish, including by implication Rome itself, which figures in his prophecy as the last of a series of great powers that had all in turn declined and fallen (15.418–35). What Ovid foretells is that he will be read wherever the dominion of Rome now extends, which according to the Augustan legend that he is ostensibly propagating, means the whole world over; he was contemporaneously proclaiming in the *Fasti* that *Romanae spatium est Vrbis et orbis idem* (2.684). That is an unobtrusive but significant extension of the claim made by Horace and Virgil: they had mentioned time, Ovid is talking about space.[30] These, then, are grand pretensions; what does Ovid have to offer readers in the twenty-first century that can be fairly considered to measure up to them?

IV

That the *Metamorphoses* is a delight to read may seem too obvious to need stating, though at times the fact seems to be lost sight of in the pursuit of critical significance. Still, there is a question which may properly be asked of any book: does it make us think? In the words of Persius' shaggy centurion, *cur quis non prandeat hoc est*?, or, as Samuel Johnson might have put it, Is this a poem to *invite* a man to? Is the pleasure of reading it something to be enjoyed purely for its own sake (assuming for the sake of argument that such a thing is possible) or does it serve to convey a meaning? Is it the honey on a cup that may leave an astringent aftertaste? In a superficial sense the *Metamorphoses* might be labelled 'escapist'.[31] The reader is transported into what (in current terminology) might be called a 'virtual' world: a beautiful parallel universe, marvellous but menacing, in which the uncertainties of life on earth are enormously compounded and intensified. It is a world in which nothing is constant

[29] Wheeler (1999) 37 writes: 'the figurative association of the poet with his own work takes on a new meaning in the context of the *Metamorphoses*, for it represents the last of a series of transformations, outdoing even the future apotheosis of Augustus'.

[30] Cf. Solodow (1988) 221–2.

[31] In any case an unsatisfactory and question-begging label: all art offers at least a temporary escape from the prison of everyday existence.

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but change, in which no identity is secure. The arbitrary character of whatever inscrutable and unaccountable power ultimately has charge over it is reflected in the caprice of the gods and the erratic operation of the justice which they administer; often they themselves are victims of that power. This is not a benign environment. Happy endings are the exception rather than the rule, and when they do occur the reader is never allowed time to dwell on them. The idyllic image of piety, marital devotion and tranquil fulfilment presented in the story of Baucis and Philemon is immediately succeeded and effaced by scenes of madness, sacrilege and autophagy in that of Erysichthon. The radiant picture of wedded bliss on which the story of Iphis (an interlude of piety rewarded sandwiched between two shocking examples of its opposite) fades out dissolves over the page into that of Hymen winging his way to another wedding, one pregnant with evil omen incontinently realised. Pygmalion's charming fantasy of wish fulfilment modulates without a pause into a tale of incestuous lust and the birth of a child doomed to early and tragic death (10.293 ff.). Examples could be multiplied. Yet somehow Ovid manages to transmute what ought on the face of it to be a profoundly depressing view of the human condition into something like a cosmic comedy of manners. To read the *Metamorphoses* is to be perpetually reminded of Horace Walpole's favourite saying, that life is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.

That possibly somewhat superficial reaction invites reflection. Though in the field of drama it has been tragedy, from Aristotle onwards, that has claimed the lion's share of critical attention and has been generally accounted as offering a nobler and more uplifting experience than comedy, it is arguable that this is not the actual perception of most ordinary people. In the day-to-day battle of life a sense of humour is at least as valuable as whatever response the contemplation of tragedy is supposed by critics to evoke. The humour and irony that is never far beneath the surface of even the most pathetic or grotesque episodes of the *Metamorphoses* is the index of what the poem is essentially about: the invincibility of the human spirit.

That is indeed what all comedy, high or low, from *Candide* to the Marx brothers,[32] is about. Art is what men make out of what they are called on to experience and suffer. In this sense the *Metamorphoses* is an

[32] See the classic essay of George Orwell, 'The Art of Donald McGill', in his *Critical Essays* (1946): 'Whatever is funny is subversive, every joke is ultimately a custard pie' (97). Humour is above all the last resort of the underdog, *ultima ratio subiectorum*.

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epic of pathos.[33] Though its announced subject is metamorphosis, that is merely the material setting, the premiss of the action of the epic on the spiritual plane. Ovid's vision of the universe as he presents it in this larger-than-life travesty is Lucretian: *tanta stat praedita culpa* – which may be freely rendered by what is known in the Anglo-Saxon world as Murphy's (or Sod's) Law: 'If it *can* go wrong, it will'. In such a world it is generally useless to look to the gods for help or to Providence or to any superhuman agency. The *Metamorphoses* is predicated on the view that the most realistic attitude to life is a spirit of ironical resignation to whatever it may throw at one.[34] Man is on his own in this environment, and ultimately all that he can rely on to sustain him in it is his own soul. An attentive reader of the concluding lines of the poem might recollect that the divine origin of the human soul had been explicitly proclaimed at its outset.[35] Now, at its close, that creation implicitly bids defiance to the power that gave it birth. If yet one more definition of the *Metamorphoses* may be ventured, one could do worse than 'epic of the *anima*'.

V

seruetur ad imum
qualis ab incepto processerit et sibi constet. (Hor. *Ars P.* 126–7)

Ovid did indeed meet Horace's requirement as to consistency. His relationship with the girl who is to provide, at the bidding of Cupid – code, as we have seen, for 'This is the genre I have chosen to take in hand and on which I shall leave an enduring (in fact fatal) impression' – the inspiration for his poetry is figured as that of the master craftsman to his material, which is indeed literally how she is described:

te mihi materiem felicem in carmina praebe:
prouenient causa carmina digna sua. (*Am.* 1.3.19–20)

Though his interpreters have sometimes detected in Ovid a greater sympathy with women than is evident in the other male elegists, his literary exploitation of the sex is ruthlessly thorough and unsentimental. Nowhere in his work is this more strikingly exemplified than in his treatment of the heroines of *Met.* 7–9. Many will have felt with Coleman that

[33] Kenney (1968) 58; Kenney (1973) 117 = (2002).
[34] Very much the same might be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of a great modern writer who for more than one reason invites comparison with Ovid, P. G. Wodehouse.
[35] In both the alternative explanations of the Origin of Man, *Met.* 1.76–84.

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