

CHAPTER 20

OVID'S METAMORPHOSES: THE RETELLING OF GREEK MYTHS

MAIN POINTS

1. Something in Ovid's writings offended Augustus, who banished him from Rome; perhaps he found that Ovid's cynical depictions of gods and humans undermined the official image of sober Roman citizens.

2. Ovid's theme in *Metamorphoses* is "bodies changed."

3. Narrative links allow one tale to grow into another, reflecting the theme of transformation in the structure of the poem itself.

4. Beginning with creation, Ovid's universe moves from chaos to order, where chaos is viewed as an intolerable condition; god, or nature, subdivides all creation and makes out boundaries, similar to the subdivisions of Rome.

5. Ovid is poking fun at Augustus, equating him with Jupiter, satirizing his attempt at imposing moral restraint on the elite patrician class.

6. Throughout much of the work, Ovid uses parody, mocking the gods and perhaps Augustus himself.

7. In the story of Echo and Narcissus, the comic overtones of this odd couple soon give way to a bleaker perspective. For both Echo and Narcissus, Eros, denied an external object, turns inward, with devastating results. Unable to express herself, Echo becomes a disembodied voice, while Narcissus, in love with his own image, is turned into a flower.

8. The myth of the Golden Age is in part an expression of nostalgia for a less complex and perhaps less frightening time.

9. Behind the witty surface lurks a bitter indictment; Ovid's section on the Ages of Man includes Rome as an example of the Iron Age, characterized by greed and violence.

10. Romans were caught between the terror of anarchy and the threat of law; for Ovid, the role of the government in the Iron Age is to use force to impose order.

11. Many of Ovid's tales portray a world of vice, characterized by lust, rape, betrayal, and revenge, perhaps a comment on the cruelty of those in power. The only escape is to be transformed into something less than human: trees, rocks, or constellations.

12. "The Story of Perseus" shows the compulsion toward immobility: Perseus turns all of Andromeda's suitors to stone at once by showing them the Gorgon's head. Literally, this is a Roman petrification of Greek myth.

13. The gods' sensual desires remain unfulfilled, as their human objects turn into inanimate things, such as Daphne turning into a laurel tree fleeing Apollo. The only escape for her is to be dehumanized.

14. In the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, the musician-hero, Orpheus, descends to the Underworld to retrieve his dead wife, Eurydice: he acknowledges her mortality; he just wants her death to be delayed. His wish is granted on one condition: he must not look back while ascending to the upper world.

15. His trip to the Underworld, an attempt to reverse time itself, fails. Despite instructions to the contrary, he looks back, and Eurydice is lost forever. Even seemingly perfect love does not last in Ovid's world. For humans, death is the final metamorphosis.

16. Spurning the love of women, Orpheus turns to homosexual love instead. As he wanders, playing his lyre, trees appear. Orpheus thus combines some qualities of Apollo, god of music, and Dionysus, in his capacity as a god of agriculture.

17. Angered at being rejected, Orpheus's Maenads (female followers like those of Dionysus) perform the sparagmos ritual, tearing Orpheus limb from limb. Apollo rescues his head and turns

it to stone, carrying out the theme of immobilization evident in the story of Perseus and other Ovidian tales.

18. Bacchus (Dionysus), mourning Orpheus, punishes the Maenads by turning them, as Apollo turned Daphne, to trees. Orpheus is rejoined with Eurydice in the Underworld, where he can make music forever. As in the Aeneid, for Ovid, in this world only sorrow lasts; only in the hereafter do the endless metamorphoses achieve their final form.

19. The Metamorphoses ends with the deification of Caesar, a fairly serious section; however, Ovid implies in the “Epilogue” that his own fame will rise higher than Caesar’s.

20. Even though Rome fell, Ovid remained one of the most important influences on Western culture.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Ovid, Metamorphoses

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Jupiter

Apollo

Lycaeon, an Arcadian tyrant turned into a sheep

Deucalion and Pyrrha, survivors of the Flood

Themis

Daphne, the nymph pursued by Apollo

Peneus, her father, a river god

Perseus

Andromeda, the Ethiopian princess he saves

The Gorgon, Medusa

Narcissus, a young man who fell in love with his own reflected image

Echo, the nymph who loved Narcissus

Orpheus, a musician who followed his dead wife to the Underworld to try to bring her back

Eurydice, Orpheus’s wife

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Ovid, Roman poet (43 B.C.–A.D. 17)