

Background for the Teacher

The Metamorphoses of Ovid

The Poem: Structure and Significance

The Metamorphoses transcends its mythic narratives. Beyond the accounts of the adventures of gods and goddesses and their interactions with humankind, the unifying motif woven throughout the tales is the universal nature of change. In over 250 narratives across fifteen books that comprise *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid also examines a number of minor themes, including art, poetry, politics, identity, immortality, love, violence, and morality.

This work continues to defy categorization and pose challenges for literary critics. To this day, scholars debate the true nature of *The Metamorphoses* and into what genre(s) it falls. Is it an epic, a mock-epic, an anti-epic, lyric, elegy, tragedy, pastoral poetry, or some combination of all these literary forms? Then there's the question of Ovid's tone. Where is he coming from? There appears to be a great deal of humor in the work. While it is clear he uses comic relief to ease tension in the stories and counter the negative experience of transformation, one is not entirely sure just how much is tongue in cheek and how much is sincere. Humor helps lift the tone and mood of the work, whereby tragedies become comedies. In this way, humor takes some of the edge off the menacing forces of change that rule everyone—even the divinities!

Likewise, the structure of the work has been continually debated by critics through the ages and cannot be pinned down definitively. On the surface, *The Metamorphoses* appears to be chronologically organized with its comprehensive recounting of the ages of man from the creation of the world to the death of Julius Caesar; however Ovid overlays the mythic events with flashbacks, relics of earlier stories and other idiosyncrasies. One scholar, G. Karl Ginsky, expressed it best: "There is no rigid formal scheme...everything is in flux and the ever-changing structure of the poem...reflect metamorphosis, and metaphorically speaking *is* metamorphosis."

The Metamorphoses was written for the society of the late Augustan age (ca. 47 BCE to 14 CE), a time of relative peace, and it does not focus primarily on war or glory. However, it was a time of cultural crisis and many ideas were being questioned. Ovid's work offers many observations of the nature of politics and power structures in Roman society. Through his descriptions of the gods, especially male gods, Ovid holds up a mirror to inequitable class distinctions and exposes the hypocrisies inherent in Augustan society. Augustus himself is not spared, as Ovid includes biting allusions to the Emperor and, some think, to his efforts to reform society.

The Influence of Greece

Where did these mythological stories retold in *The Metamorphoses* originate? In the early stages of Roman history, gods were mostly deities connected with various places, including the home. They lacked distinct personalities and histories. But as the Roman reach expanded throughout the Mediterranean world, Romans learned about the mythologies of other regions and began to adopt some of their gods. By far the greatest percentage of these acquisitions came from Greece, which had a rich and highly-developed mythological life. In some cases, the names of the gods, such as Apollo, were

Ovid's Metamorphoses: A Common Core Exemplar

retained. Others changed names: Aphrodite became Venus; Poseidon was called Neptune; Zeus ruled as Jupiter; Artemis became the Roman huntress Diana, and so on. As Greek slaves and freemen became tutors to Roman youths, the stories became embedded more and more in Roman culture. And after 44 BCE, the Roman Pantheon expanded further to include the deified Roman emperors.

Not only were Greek mythological figures transformed into Latin deities, but Greek literary genres were adapted into new forms. Greek plays were at first translated into Latin, and then Roman playwrights like Plautus and Terence adapted Greek dramas freely, adding their own touches and styles of theatrical presentation. After the Greek epic *The Odyssey* was translated into Latin, the Roman epicist Virgil penned the *Aeneid*, his unique version of the story of the Trojan refugee Aeneas who became the founder of Rome.

The great Greek epics attributed to Homer were written in the meter known as dactylic hexameter—six poetic feet to a line, each consisting of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. Like Virgil, Ovid chose this meter for *The Metamorphoses*. Although you are probably teaching from a verse translation with a different meter or from a prose translation, you should make sure your students are aware of the skill with which Ovid employed this difficult meter in his long (12,000 lines in fifteen books) masterwork