

OXFORD APPROACHES TO
CLASSICAL LITERATURE

OVID'S
Metamorphoses



ELAINE FANTHAM

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CLASSICAL LITERATURE

SERIES EDITORS

Kathleen Coleman and Richard Rutherford

OVID'S *Metamorphoses*

ELAINE FANTHAM

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Editors' Foreword

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen a massive expansion in courses dealing with ancient civilization and, in particular, the culture and literature of the Greek and Roman world. Never has there been such a flood of good translations available: Oxford's own World Classics, the Penguin Classics, the Hackett Library, and other series offer the English-speaking reader access to the masterpieces of classical literature from Homer to Augustine. The reader may, however, need more guidance in the interpretation and understanding of these works than can usually be provided in the relatively short introduction that prefaces a work in translation. There is a need for studies of individual works that will provide a clear, lively, and reliable account based on the most up-to-date scholarship without dwelling on minutiae that are likely to distract or confuse the reader.

It is to meet this need that the present series has been devised. The title *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* deliberately puts the emphasis on the literary works themselves. The volumes in this series will each be concerned with a single work (with the exception of cases where a "book" or larger collection of poems is treated as one work). These are neither biographies nor accounts of literary

movements or schools. Nor are they books devoted to the total oeuvre of one author: our first volumes consider Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plato's *Symposium*, not the works of Ovid or Plato as a whole. This is, however, a question of emphasis, and not a straitjacket: biographical issues, literary and cultural background, and related works by the same author are discussed where they are obviously relevant. The series' authors have also been encouraged to consider the influence and legacy of the works in question.

As the editors of this series, we intend these volumes to be accessible to the reader who is encountering the relevant work for the first time; but we also intend that each volume should do more than simply provide the basic facts, dates, and summaries that handbooks generally supply. We would like these books to be essays in criticism and interpretation that will do justice to the subtlety and complexity of the works under discussion. With this in mind, we have invited leading scholars to offer personal assessments and appreciation of their chosen work, anchored within the mainstream of classical scholarship. We have thought it particularly important that our authors be allowed to set their own agendas and speak in their own voices rather than repeating the *idées reçues* of conventional wisdom in neutral tones.

The title *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* has been chosen simply because the series is published by Oxford University Press, USA; it in no way implies a party line, either Oxonian or any other. We believe that different approaches are suited to different texts, and we expect each volume to have its own distinctive character. Advanced critical theory is neither compulsory nor excluded: what matters is whether it can be made to illuminate the text in question. The authors have been encouraged to avoid obscurity and jargon, bearing in mind the needs of the general reader; but, when important critical or narratological issues arise, they are presented to the reader as lucidly as possible.

This series was originally conceived by Professor Charles Segal, an inspiring scholar and teacher whose intellectual energy and range of interests were matched by a corresponding humility and generosity of spirit. Although he was involved in the commissioning of

a number of volumes, he did not—alas—live to see any of them published. The series is intended to convey something of the excitement and pleasure to be derived from reading the extraordinarily rich and varied literature of Greco-Roman antiquity. We hope that these volumes will form a worthy monument to a dedicated classical scholar who was committed to enabling the ancient texts to speak to the widest possible audience in the contemporary world.

Kathleen Coleman, Harvard University

Richard Rutherford, Christ Church, Oxford

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Preface

The *Metamorphoses* is too brilliant and marvelous (it is literally full of marvels) for anyone to do it justice in either a big book (“A big book is a big bore,” as Callimachus said) or a small one. This short introductory study is supposed to serve as an appetizer, sending readers who do not yet have their own text to go and buy a version either in their own language or, better still, in Ovid’s sparkling Latin. I have written it so that a reader can move through these chapters as he or she moves through Ovid’s universal poetic history from creation to his own times. The main theme of chapter 1 is the “prehistory” of poems of transformation. Chapter 2 concerns *Metamorphoses*, books 1–2. Chapter 3 concentrates on Ovid’s Theban cycle in books 3–4. Chapter 4 is devoted to artists in books 5 and 6, with an excursion forward into book 10. Only with chapters 5 (on women’s lives) and 6 (on love, too short a fraction of both men’s and women’s lives) does the book move into the second half of the poem. From chapter 7 on we will be looking at all fifteen books, and chapter 10 will attempt to leap four tall buildings at a time with a scattered sampling of how Ovid’s poem and its vernacular translations have influenced painting, poetry, fiction, and music over the last two millennia.

I deeply appreciated the compliment of being invited by Kathleen Coleman and the late Charles Segal to write this introduction. Charlie Segal, author of *Landscape in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, one of the most exciting books on the *Metamorphoses* to appear in the sixties, was also immensely kind in providing photocopies of many of his articles on Ovid. During and beyond my visits to Cambridge University, I have accumulated a great debt of gratitude to Ted Kenney and Philip Hardie for answering my questions and letting me see much of their work in advance of publication: I am more grateful than I may have been able to express. Indeed, since this is such a short book, there are far too many other scholars and critics whose ideas I have not been able to footnote. Let me thank here for the stimulus of their ideas Alessandro Barchiesi, Denis Feeney, Andrew Feldherr, Stephen Hinds, Alison Keith, John Miller, Sara Myers, Carole Newlands, Jim O'Hara, Gianpiero Rosati, Joe Solodow, Garth Tissol, and Stephen Wheeler, whose studies of the *Metamorphoses*, together with the work of Roy Gibson, Jim McKeown, and Katharina Volk on Ovidian elegy, have added so much to our understanding of Ovid in the last two decades. But others will recognize their ideas gathered like flowers in my mixed bouquet, and I can only ask their indulgence if they are not named and honored on this page. I have gratefully used A. D. Melville's elegant verse translation for many excerpts. Translations from *Metamorphoses* and other texts quoted without an acknowledgment are my own.

For their valuable guidance on my manuscript, I owe special thanks to Kathleen Coleman and her coeditor Richard Rutherford: both series editors have been models of patience and support, but Kathleen in particular has answered my every query and anticipated my difficulties. Any remaining lapses are, alas, entirely my own fault.

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• 1 •

Transforming Bodies, Transforming Epic

Prologue

We cannot date exactly the publication—that is, the circulation in manuscript form—of Ovid’s great epic of transformation. Our earliest report comes from the poet himself, but from a chastened Ovid, exiled to the northern edge of empire, to Tomis on the Romanian Black Sea coast, by the decree of Augustus. For almost thirty years Ovid had enjoyed popularity and fame as a poet of love, first with five books of poems in narrative or dramatic form illustrating his own love affairs (reduced to three books in a second edition), then with his *Letters from Heroines*, which presented, in character, the messages of Homeric and tragic heroines, even Virgil’s Dido, to the husbands and lovers who had left them, then more elaborately with books of instruction in the art of love (two for men and one for girls—but not respectable women), and finally with a book of cures for love. There was an appetite in fashionable Rome for love affairs and poetry about such flirtations. But the women of the leader’s family are expected to have higher standards. When first the daughter and then the granddaughter of First Citizen Augustus had been caught in flagrant adultery, Augustus exiled the poet,

whether for his bad influence or for some more conspiratorial involvement with the princesses' circles.

Now, in 8 C.E., Ovid writes from Tomis about the fifteen volumes of his "Changing Forms," which he had let into the hands of readers, although they lacked the finishing touch. In a second reference he urges the owners of these volumes to insert six lines of explanation or excuse before his text:

There are also the Changed Shapes, thrice five rolls of them, verses snatched from the funeral of their master. . . . so now accept these six verses as well, if you think them fit to be prefixed to the book's first sheet:

"All you who touch these volumes orphaned of their poetic father, at least grant them a place in your city. To win your favor, they have not been made public by the poet himself, but, as it were, have been snatched from their master's pyre. Whatever faults this rough poem may have, he would have corrected, if he had been allowed to." (*Tristia* [Poems of Sadness] 1.7.12, 33–40)

But in a world where oral recitation normally preceded circulation in written form, Ovid must have read installments of his poem to chosen friends: a poem of such great length and complexity would have taken even the brilliant Ovid many years to compose. Why is his ambitious enterprise never mentioned until it is complete? And how would his friends have come to know the poem? We have to imagine that first recital for ourselves. Even the first four lines break with tradition and offer hidden challenges. Shall we listen?

In nova fert animus . . .

My fancy sweeps me to new themes . . .

(No: that's not what Ovid is saying.)

mutatas dicere formas

Corpora . . .

My fancy bids me sing of shapes transformed
into new bodies . . .

(But isn't it the other way round? Bodies are transformed into new shapes: it is the shapes that change.)

*di, coeptis, nam vos mutastis et illa
adspirare meis.*

Gods, inspire my task [or "work-in progress"]
for you transformed that too.

In the second half of his second line Ovid springs a surprise—at least a surprise for his many enthusiastic fans, who were expecting the short end-stopped second line of the elegiac couplet. This isn't elegy after all. The second line is another regular epic hexameter. This really is something new from Ovid!

*primaque ab origine mundi
ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen*

Spin out this song
Unbroken from creation to my times.

Or as A. D. Melville translates in more seemly and harmonious verse:

Of bodies changed to other forms I tell;
You Gods, who have yourselves wrought every change,
Inspire my enterprise and lead my lay
In one continuous song from nature's first
Remote beginnings to our modern times.

How would Roman connoisseurs of poetry and poetic criticism react to this? Wouldn't they recall that Horace warned budding poets against beginning their epics too far back in time and narrating the Trojan War from the egg which hatched fair Helen? Isn't Ovid going over the top? And what sort of epic is this going to be: scientific didactic, like Lucretius's account of the universe, or mythological and legendary, like Virgil's *Aeneid*, or (gods forbid) a sort of updated Ennian celebration of imperial triumphs? Shouldn't he invoke the Great Leader's blessing, as Virgil did in his proem to the *Georgics*? Or at least Apollo or the Muses? Only when he has thoroughly bemused his readers (without help from any muse!) is Ovid ready to begin—at the beginning of it all.

Transforming Epic

So does Ovid makes his first foray in the meter of epic verse. But this narrative has no precedent. Traditional epic was unified by a single hero or people, whose fortunes it followed. It could be a simple versified chronicle of national history, which in turn could be defined by a historical event, like the *Punic War* of Naevius (though he seems to have included a retrospective narrative of the flight of Aeneas from Troy). Ennius, his successor, seems to have preferred an open-ended chronicle. His *Annals* originally followed national history from Romulus to the contemporary fighting against the Aetolians, but then Ennius extended their fifteen books to eighteen to include additional wars. Virgil had set Roman poets a new example for formal narrative. He modeled the early adventures of Aeneas on Homer's Odysseus and in some respects on Apollonius's saga of the Argonauts; the later books of his *Aeneid* were a counterpart to the *Iliad*, narrating the conflicts of Aeneas in Italy as he fulfilled his mission to ensure the foundation of Rome. Unified by its single hero, the epic was integrated by complex cross-reference and a climactic closure.

Another existing Roman model for narrative poetry was the miniature epic (often referred to as *epyllion*), which was constructed around a legendary romance and often incorporated another tale as a foil. This artful Hellenistic form had been adopted by Catullus for the wedding narrative of Peleus and Thetis, framing the abandonment and rescue of Ariadne. Two of his friends even used epic verse to tell stories of metamorphoses to which Ovid would return: in their poems, now lost, Calvus had composed the tale of Io's rape, transformation and wanderings, while Cinna had described Myrrha's illicit passion for her own father.

The Hellenistic poet and critic Callimachus offered another poetic model: the collecting of short, allusive, self-contained poems into a carefully arranged volume that played on internal balance and contrast. He proclaimed new critical standards, by which a poem should be highly refined, evoking more than it said, and he rejected

the long narrative form as tedious. Callimachus had expressly praised the finespun and denounced the continuous unbroken poem. Here was Ovid declaring that he would write a long and totally comprehensive poem that was also finespun and refined. And the title implied that the poem would be a composite of many transformation tales. How could such a poem have an artistic form? It will be better to return to this and other aesthetic questions when we have become more familiar with the tales that Ovid told, and how he told them.

There are transformations in nature, from the obvious changes from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly, to the more gradual changes in human growth and decay. But the transformations that made men wonder and stirred their fantasy were those that seemed contrary to nature, the marvels and miracles of folktale, myth, and legend. Greek literature, from Homer on, had shown a measure of restraint in its use of the motif of metamorphosis: there are, for instance, very few transformation tales in Homer, each of them distanced in some way from the world of his main narrative.

One occurs in the *Iliad*, where it is reported by Odysseus (not known for his love of truth) in his urgent appeal against abandoning the Greek siege of Troy. He recalls the time when the expedition was waiting to set out from Aulis, and the gods had sent a portent: a snake attacked and devoured a mother bird and her nine nestlings. But then, according to Odysseus, “the god Zeus, son of cunning Kronos, who had made the serpent appear, made him into a stone, and we all were amazed as we stood there” (*Il.* 2.318–21). Odysseus wants to remind the Greeks of Calchas’s optimistic interpretation of the “great sign,” and the serpent, like its victims, is removed from reality by its symbolic function.

This was the act of a god, to warn men and affect their future actions. So too the god Poseidon, with the authorization of Zeus, turns into stone the Phaeacian ship which has transported his enemy Odysseus safely to Ithaca (*Od.* 13.125–64). He has asked Zeus to punish the Phaeacians for disobeying his prohibition on carrying foreigners by destroying their ship in midvoyage and rearing up a mountain to isolate their city. Zeus permits him only to make the