

**Preface from the Paul Dry Books edition of *Ovid's Metamorphoses*,  
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"Shakespeare's Ovid"

by Jonathan Bate

Ovid was Shakespeare's favorite classical poet. The first encounter between the English dramatist and the Roman poet probably occurred in the classroom of the grammar school at Stratford-upon-Avon. The boy William would have been drilled in extracts from Ovid's works in their original Latin – first brief passages in textbooks for the teaching of grammar and rhetoric, then more substantial sections of the poems themselves.

Ovid's love lyrics, the *Amores*, are among the key precedents for Shakespeare's sonnets: each poetic sequence is a set of variations on the moods of love, in which the narrative voice shifts rapidly between different poses and tones. His *Fasti*, which linked major events in Roman history and mythology to the calendrical year, was the principal source for Shakespeare's second narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*. Though Shakespeare could have read the *Amores* in a translation by Christopher Marlowe, the *Fasti* were only available in Latin. This goes to show that when Ben Jonson wrote of Shakespeare's "small Latin" he was measuring with the yardstick of his own prodigious learning – by our modern standards, Shakespeare had perfectly adequate Latin.

One of the most popular texts in the Elizabethan classroom was the *Heroides*, Ovid's verse-epistles written from the point of view of women in mythology who are deserted by their lovers (Ariadne on Naxos, Dido after the departure of Aeneas from Carthage, and so on). A frequent exercise was to imitate them – "write a letter in the style of X or from the point of view of someone who has suffered Y" – and in this sense they would have helped the student Shakespeare to take his first steps in the art of dramatic impersonation. John Lyly and Christopher Marlowe, the two dramatists who most influenced him when he began writing plays himself, both made extensive use of the *Heroides* as models for the art of a character's self-examination at moments of emotional crisis, the art, that is to say, of soliloquy.

But the influence of all these works pales beside that of Ovid's magnum opus, the *Metamorphoses*. Scholars have calculated that about ninety per cent of Shakespeare's allusions to classical mythology refer to stories included in this epic compendium of tales. We know that Shakespeare knew the book in both the original Latin and Arthur Golding's translation. We can demonstrate this by considering his most sustained passage of Ovidian imitation, Prospero's renunciation of his rough magic near the end of *The Tempest* (5.1.33-57). That Shakespeare borrowed in detail from the *Metamorphoses* so late in his career shows that his Ovidianism was no mere young man's affectation, as is sometimes supposed.

J. F. Nims touches on the *Tempest* passage in his introduction to this edition of Golding's translation. Ovid's enchantress Medea begins "auraeque et venti montesque amnesque lacusque, / dique omnes nemorum, dique omnes noctis adeste," of which a literal translation might be "ye breezes and winds and mountains and rivers and lakes, and all ye gods of groves and of night, draw near." Golding translated this as "Ye Ayres and windes: ye Elves of Hilles, of Brookes, of Woods alone, / Of standing Lakes, and of the Night approche ye everychone." Shakespeare's Prospero begins his speech, "Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves." Shakespeare surely got from Golding the notion of including those very English elves at this point (in Ovid they are "gods" and are not associated with the hills), and he also followed the translator in amplifying "lacus" into "*standing* lakes." But later in the speech, where Ovid had "convulsaque robores" ("and rooted up oaks"), Golding did not specify the kind of tree ("and trees doe drawe"), so Shakespeare must have gone to the Latin for his "and rifted Jove's stout oak." Again, Golding lacks an equivalent for the ghosts actually coming out of their tombs: Prospero's "Graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth" is a version of Ovid's "manesque exire sepulcris." Medea in Ovid says that she has made the sun go pale by means of her "song;" Golding has "Our Sorcerie dimmes the Morning faire;" Shakespeare neatly combines the song and the sorcery with Prospero's "By my so potent art," the art being that of both sorcerer and poet-singer. That the black arts of Medea are the source for Prospero's seemingly white magic reminds us of the complexity of the Shakespearean vision, the difficulty of assuming easy distinctions between good and evil in the world of his plays. Like Ovid, Shakespeare is interested in the mingled yarn of our human fabric. Both are writers who probe our humanity with great rigor, but ultimately do so in a spirit of sympathy for our frailties and indulgences, rather than stern judgement upon our faults. Prospero is a little too much the schoolmaster to be an exact analogue for his own creator.

Though Prospero's speech valuably demonstrates Shakespeare's continuing interest in the minutiae of Ovid's language even to the end of his career, it is exceptional in the detail of its borrowing. Shakespeare's more habitual use of the *Metamorphoses* was less specific. He would refer to the stories there as parallels, or paradigms, for the emotional turmoil of the characters in his plays. Where Ovid told of bodily metamorphoses wrought by extremes of passion, Shakespeare translated these into psychological transformations and vivid metaphors. In particular, he found in Ovid a great store of examples of female feeling – something that was notably lacking in many of his other models, such as the plays of Marlowe and the history books of Plutarch and Holinshed. What mattered to him most was Ovid's storytelling, and for that the Latin text was not necessary – in rereading Ovid for pleasure after he left school, Shakespeare seems mostly to have relied on Golding's English version.

Nims suggests that the Elizabethan translator turned "the sophisticated Roman into a ruddy country gentleman with tremendous gusto, a sharp eye on the life around him, an ear for racy speech, and a gift for energetic doggerel." The doggerel apart, is Golding's cumbersome "fourteener" being parodied in the lumbering verse of "Pyramus and Thisbe"? – Shakespeare took pleasure in this process of "Englishing." After all, he himself was a countryman with a vivid eye for the running hare and the flower-filled meadow. Like Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, he was a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles: from Golding he filched such linguistic jewels as the bristles on the boar in *Venus and Adonis* and the "babbling" of the nymph Echo to whom Viola compares herself in *Twelfth Night*.

Shakespeare was most Ovidian at the beginning and at the end of his career. Both his narrative poems, written during the period in 1593-4 when the theaters were closed due to plague, are based on Ovidian sources. They are calling cards which announce his poetic sophistication, perhaps in response to Robert Greene's jibe about Shake-scene, the upstart crow, the jack-of-all-trades from the country. *Venus and Adonis* takes a one hundred line story from the third book of the *Metamorphoses* and expands it into more than a thousand lines of elegant artifice. Ovid provided the narrative framework: the comic idea of the lovely young Adonis's resistance to love, the dark twist of his boar-speared death, and the final release of floral transformation. Shakespeare wove into this structure elaborate arguments for and against the "use" of beauty. These were opportunities for him to show off his rhetorical skill, while also engaging with an issue much debated in Elizabethan times, namely, the relative value of courtly accomplishments and military ones. The successful courtier would have been equally adept in the arts of praise and chivalry. Shakespeare gives the chivalric skills to the hunter Adonis, then inverts the norm of man-praising-woman by having a woman – and not just any woman, but Venus the Queen of Love herself – praise a young man. For this, he pulled together different parts of Ovid: the witty persuasions to love are in the manner of the *Amores* and the *Ars Amatoria*, while the figure of the vain youth has something of Narcissus and that of the froward woman more than a little of Salmacis, who in book four of the *Metamorphoses* seduces another gorgeous but self-absorbed boy, Hermaphroditus.

If *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* are poetic explorations of, respectively, the light and dark sides of desire, then *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6?) and *Titus Andronicus* (written or revised in 1594) are their dramatic equivalents. *Titus* is explicitly patterned on the story of the rape of Philomel in book seven of the *Metamorphoses* (the force of this horrid tale's influence upon Shakespeare is demonstrable from the fact that some fifteen years after *Titus*, he returned to it in *Cymbeline*, where Iachimo notices in Imogen's bedchamber that, "She hath been reading late / The tale of Tereus; here the leaf's turned down / Where Philomel gave up.") In perhaps the most self-consciously literary moment in all Shakespeare, a copy of Ovid's book is actually brought on stage in act four of

*Titus* and used as a plot device for the revelation of the nature of the crime which has been committed. By pointing to the story of Philomel, raped in the secluded woods by her brother-in-law Tereus, Lavinia indicates that she too has been violated. Shakespeare then compounds the allusion by deploying one of his sophisticated interweavings of different sources: in Ovid, Tereus cuts out Philomel's tongue so that she cannot reveal his name, but she gets round her disability by sewing a sampler portraying her fate. The rapists in *Titus* forestall this course of action by cutting off Lavinia's hands as well as removing her tongue. She outwits them – and in so doing Shakespeare proves his wit – by going to another part of the *Metamorphoses*, namely the story of Io, in which a girl who has been transformed into a cow writes her name by scraping her hoof in the sand. So Lavinia writes her rapists' names upon the ground, holding a staff in her mouth, guiding it with her stumps. Titus then acts out his revenge in deliberate homage to that of Procne, Philomel's sister: "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter," he says to the murderers Chiron and Demetrius, "So worse than Procne I will be revenged" – Procne tricked Tereus into eating his own son, whereas Titus goes one better and bakes both Tamora's sons in a pie, which he takes pleasure in serving on-stage to her and her husband.

The wood outside Athens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a place of benign transformations in comparison with those of the Roman hunting grounds in *Titus*. But the comedy and the charm of the *Dream* depend on a certain fragility. Good comedy is tragedy narrowly averted, while fairy charm is only safe from sentimentality if attached to some potential for grotesquerie. Of course we laugh when Bottom wears the head of an ass and makes love to a queen, but the image deliberately courts the suggestion of bestiality. In Ovid, people are driven by bestial desires and are rewarded by being transformed into animals. In Shakespeare, the ass's head is worn in play – significantly, it is assumed during the rehearsal of a dramatic performance – but it remains the closest thing in the drama of the age to an actual animal metamorphosis on stage. As for the idea of near-tragedy, that is evoked by the staging on the part of Bottom and his friends of a comically bad dramatization of one of Ovid's most tragic stories of doomed love, the tale in book four of the ill-timed misadventures of Pyramus and Thisbe. Ovid's great theme is transformation, the inevitability of change. Book fifteen of the *Metamorphoses* offers a philosophical discourse on the subject, mediated via the philosophy of Pythagoras. From here Shakespeare got many of those images of transience that roll through the sonnets, but in the *Dream* he celebrates how something positive and potentially enduring may grow from change:

But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy's images,  
And grows to something of great constancy;  
But, howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.1.23-7)

Though no subsequent comedy has transformation woven so fully into its texture as this, Ovid was of continued importance in Shakespeare's later assays in the genre. At the climax of *The Merchant of Venice* (1597?), Lorenzo and Jessica duet upon a sequence of Ovidian characters – Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido, Medea. All the lovers alluded to are associated with the night. Shakespeare thus establishes the final act of the play as a night of love. But the night-deeds evoked are dark and bloody, another gesture towards the ease with which comedy can tumble over the precipice into tragedy (something that Jessica's father Shylock maybe knows all too well). Comedy can be as cruel as it is funny. Sometimes it goes a little too far, as with the gulling of Malvolio into near-madness. Ovid provided Shakespeare with many a reminder that sexual desire can lead men not only to foolishness, but to outright destruction. Most famously, there was Actaeon, transformed into a hart and torn to pieces by his own hounds as punishment for his lascivious gaze upon the naked goddess Diana as she bathed in a pool. The horns of Herne, the Hunter, which Falstaff is made to wear at the end of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1598?) render him a heavyweight but light-hearted Actaeon; Malvolio, cursing the pack of knaves who have undone him, is a little closer to the real thing. His undoing ensures that the end of *Twelfth Night* (1601?) is not all celebration. Malvolio takes to an extreme the tendency of nearly all the natives of Illyria to overindulge their passions – a motif suggested by the langorous Orsino's allusion to Actaeon in the very first scene of the play:

That instant was I turned into a hart,  
And my desires like fell and cruel hounds  
Ere since pursue me. (1.1.20-22)

To interpret Actaeon's hounds as an image of his own desires is to "moralize" Ovid in the exact manner of Golding's epistle prefacing his translation.

Golding and his predecessors in the mediaeval tradition of "Ovide moralisé" have often been explicitly or implicitly condemned for infidelity to the style and temperament of their original. Was not Ovid the supreme exemplar of style for style's sake, the great opposite of the moral Horace and the imperial Virgil? Was he not the original poetic *immoralist*, who suffered exile to the icy shores of the Black Sea for the very reason that he penned a seducer's charter in the form of the *Ars Amatoria*? This might be the impression given by a play such as Ben Jonson's *Poetaster*, in which Ovid, Virgil, and Horace are rival characters on stage, but this impression greatly simplifies the truth of the matter. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid answers Virgil's *Aeneid* with his own version of Rome's mythical birth from the survivors of Troy. When the time is ripe, he knows how to flatter a Caesar. For all his reiterations of the precept that the only constant is change, he does establish – in the opening book of the poem – an image of the stable good life from which the bad times of the shifting present have declined. That image is the "Golden Age" before the scars of property ownership, legal codes and empire building have sullied the

pristine earth. Shakespeare and his contemporaries were haunted by this idea of a golden age of natural plenty in which man lived in harmony with fellow-man and with nature under the rule of Astraea, goddess of Justice. Late-Elizabethan poets in pursuit of royal patronage often proclaimed the return of the Golden Age, sometimes by flattering Elizabeth herself with the analogy that she was Astraea returned to earth, on other occasions by celebrating the newfound colonies of the Americas as places of natural plenty which would offer both literal and metaphorical gold.

It is to Ovid's Golden Age that the lifestyle of the exiled courtiers in *As You Like It* (1599) is compared. Gonzalo, in *The Tempest* (1611), sums up the characteristics of that age in a speech in which Ovid is fused with a passage by another of Shakespeare's most-loved authors, Michel de Montaigne:

All things in common nature should produce  
Without sweat or endeavour. Treason, felony,  
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,  
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,  
Of its own kind all foison, all abundance,  
To feed my innocent people. (2.1.165-70)

Ovid, Montaigne and Shakespeare are all committed to the claims of nature above those of empire. The sinister high politics of Shakespeare's mature tragedies – the treasons and felonies of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear* – belong to Ovid's Age of Iron. In the final plays, the so-called romances of the period from about 1608 to his retirement around 1612, Shakespeare returns repeatedly to nature, working his plots towards the restoration of Golden Age wonders.

In both *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* (1608-9) the action moves from destructive, corrupt courts to places where nature exercises its healing force. *Pericles* works within the ancient romance tradition – a narrative form well known to Ovid – where a storm purifies old woes into new life. In *Cymbeline*, wholeness is restored in the fresh outdoor world of the Welsh mountains. Romance is the literary genre in which lost children are found and wonder is made familiar. Ovid presents an archetypal romance in book five, where he tells the story of Proserpina, daughter of Ceres, goddess of the harvest. Whilst out gathering flowers, she is abducted by Pluto (or Dis), god of the underworld, where she is forced to reside for half each year. Her departure below the earth signifies the onset of winter, her recovery the return of spring. Another young woman, flowers in hand, compares herself to Proserpina in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Her name, Perdita, "the lost one," evokes the mythic romance structure whereby we know that what is lost will eventually be found in a glad reunion. So, too, the play's title surely indicates that the drama will eventually move from Leontes' winter court, ruled by intrigue and jealousy, to the sunnier clime of the pastoral world, where a prince disguises himself in order to woo a shepherdess (who, it turns out, is really a princess herself). Florizel compares his

mock-transformation of dress and rank to the disguises of the gods in the *Metamorphoses*:

The gods themselves,  
Humbling their deities to love, have taken  
The shapes of beasts upon them. Jupiter  
Became a bull, and bellowed; the green Neptune  
A ram, and bleated; and the fire-robed god,  
Golden Apollo, a poor humble swain,  
As I seem now. (4.4.25-31)

The play's move from dark indoor court to the restorative air of the country follows the path of Shakespeare's principal source, Robert Greene's novella *Pandosto*. But in the source, the wronged queen does not return to life. The reanimation of what Leontes takes to be Hermione's statue is Shakespeare's invention. The wonder-filled final scene puts a seemingly life-giving art into the hands of Paulina. That art dramatizes the magical power of theater itself, so that we in the audience, like the characters on stage, awaken our faith. The many-layered quality of the illusion – a boy-actor pretending to be a female character, Hermione, who is herself pretending to be a statue – takes Shakespeare's art to an extreme level of self-consciousness. Fittingly, then, the scene is also an allusion to Ovid, the most self-conscious artist among Shakespeare's models.

In Book Ten of the *Metamorphoses*, the artist Pygmalion carves an ivory statue so realistic that it seems to be a real girl, so beautiful that he falls in love with it. He desperately wants to believe it is real, and there are moments when the perfection of the art is such that the statue does seem to be struggling into life. With a little assistance from the goddess Venus, a kiss then animates the statue in a striking reversal of the usual Ovidian metamorphic pattern in which people turn into things or animals. As Golding has it, "Shee felt the kisse, and blusht therat: and lifting fearefully / Hir eyelidds up, hir Lover and the light at once did spye." At a profound level, Pygmalion is a figure of Ovid himself: the artist who transforms mere words into living forms.

Shakespeare learned from Ovid's Pygmalion both an idea and a style. If you want something badly enough and you believe in it hard enough, you will eventually get it: though tragedy denies this possibility, comedy affirms it. This is the illusion that theater can foster. Ovid showed Shakespeare that the way to evoke this leap of faith is through pinpricks of sensation. The progression in the animation of Pygmalion's statue is both precise and sensuous: blood pulses through the veins, the lips respond, the ivory face flushes. Correspondingly, Leontes contrasts the warm life his queen once had with the coldness of the statue, but then he seems to see blood in the veins and warmth upon the lips. And when she descends and embraces him, she *is* warm.

Throughout his career Shakespeare metamorphosed Ovid's mythical metamorphoses into verbal and visual metaphors: Malvolio speaks and dresses like a Narcissus without actually becoming a flower; it is Othello's language and actions, not his body, that are reduced to bestiality; Lear's metaphor, "O, you are men of stones," replaces the literal metamorphosis of Niobe into stone. Now near the end of his career, Shakespeare reverses the process in *The Winter's Tale*, something he had previously done only in comedy (Bottom as ass, Falstaff as Actaeon). In Act One, Leontes freezes Hermione out of his life. Her body-contact with Polixenes is, he says, "Too hot, too hot!" – he wants her to be frigidly chaste (even though she is pregnant!) His jealous look is like that of the basilisk or the gorgon Medusa: he turns his wife to stone. In the final act, this metaphor becomes a metamorphosis as Paulina conjures up the illusion of Hermione's depetrification. The transformation is triumphantly realized on stage both linguistically and visually. "Does not the stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?" asks Leontes, when confronted with the statue. The hardened image of his wife forces him to turn his gaze inward upon his own hard heart. The play ends with the melting of that heart and the rekindling of love, with its concordant release of Hermione back into softness, warmth and life.

We know in our heads that we are not really watching a statue coming to life. Yet in a good production, at the moment of awakening we feel in our hearts that we are. The magic of the drama occurs in a strange but deeply satisfying space between the two poles of reality and illusion. Metamorphosis is a kind of translation which occurs in the passage from one state to another. Ovid's world shuttles between human passions and natural phenomena. Shakespeare, with the assistance of Arthur Golding, carried the magic of that world across into the medium of theater, where everything is illusion, but somehow – as he put it in the alternative title of another of his last plays, *Henry VIII* – "All is True."