Metamorphoses Study Guide

Metamorphoses by Ovid

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Contents

Introduction

Ovid is, after Homer, the single most important source for classical mythology. The *Metamorphoses*, which he wrote over the six-year period leading up to his exile from Rome in 8 a.d. , is the primary source for over two hundred classical legends that survived to the twenty-first century. Many of the most familiar classical myths, including the stories of Apollo and Daphne and Pyramus and Thisbe, come directly from Ovid.

The *Metamorphoses* is a twelve-thousand-line poem, written in dactylic hexameters and arranged loosely in chronological order from the beginning of the universe's creation to the Augustan Rome of Ovid's own time. The major theme of the *Metamorphoses*, as the title suggests, is metamorphosis, or change. Throughout the fifteen books making up the *Metamorphoses*, the idea of change is pervasive. Gods are continually transforming their own selves and shapes, as well as the shapes and beings of humans. The theme of power is also ever-present in Ovid's work. The gods as depicted by the Roman poets are wrathful, vengeful, capricious creatures who are forever turning their powers against weaker mortals and half-mortals, especially females. Ovid's own situation as a poet who was exiled because of Augustus's capriciousness is thought by many to be reflected in his depictions of the relationships between the gods and humans.

It can be argued with a great deal of justification that the *Metamorphoses* is Western literature and art's most influential work. Ovid was hugely popular during his lifetime, and the influence of his work continued to grow immediately after his death. Writers as diverse as Dante, Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ted Hughes have drawn on the *Metamorphoses* for inspiration. Artists throughout the centuries have depicted scenes from Ovid's work in their own paintings. The list of writers, poets, artists, musicians, and performers who have been directly influenced by the *Metamorphoses* is extensive and covers virtually every era since Ovid's death in 17 a.d. Many English translations of the work, in both prose and verse, exist, giving further evidence of the poem's lasting significance.

The discussion in the Plot Summary, Themes, and Style sections below focuses on Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses*.

Author Biography

Publius Ovidius Naso, known as Ovid, was born on March 20, 43 b.c. in Sulmo, Italy, and died at the age of sixty-one in exile in the Black Sea port of Tomi, known today as Constantsa, Romania. Considered to be one of the most influential poets in Western literary tradition, Ovid wrote several important works, including *Heroines* and *The Art of Love*. His most famous and revered work, and considered alongside the works of Homer and Virgil as among the world's masterpieces, is *Metamorphoses*, which he finished around 8 a.d.

Of the details of Ovid's life, historians know very little. He was born into an upper-middle-class family. To prepare for a professional career, he was sent to Rome to study rhetoric, the standard core of study for Roman education at the time. Upon completion of his studies in Rome, Ovid spent a year in Athens studying philosophy, following which it was presumed by his family that he would return to his home to begin his career. Ovid did return home to spend a year as a public official; however, poetry soon became his passion, and, rather than choosing the life of a professional careerist, he began to work on his first book, *Loves*, or *Amores*, when he was twenty years old.

Loves was followed by *Heroines*, a collection of fictional letters from mythical heroines to their absent lovers. Soon thereafter came *The Art of Love*, and in a six-year period between 2 and 8 a.d. Ovid penned *Metamorphoses*. Between the publications of *Amores* and *Metamorphoses*, Ovid was married three times and fathered a daughter.

The fact about Ovid's life that came to define him was his banishment in 8 a.d. to Tomi by the Roman Emperor Augustus. Tried personally by Augustus himself, Ovid was found guilty of a crime that remains unclear. Although Ovid wrote about banishment in the poem *Tristia*, or *Sorrows*, the reasons for the exile remain uncertain. "Two offenses, a poem and a mistake, have destroyed me," was all that Ovid wrote in *Tristia*.

Ovid's final years would be spent in Tomi writing long letters and poems of appeal to Augustus to allow him to return to Rome. The pleas were useless, and Ovid remained in exile until his death in 17 a.d.

Plot Summary

Book 1: Lines 1—162

The major theme of the *Metamorphoses* is introduced in the poem's first sentence: "I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms." The theme of metamorphosis, or change, is the unifying and distinguishing feature of Ovid's work. In lines 1—162 of Book 1, Ovid describes the creation of the world, how the chaos that ruled the universe metamorphosed into the Earth as people know it. Ovid opens with his version of the cosmogony, or the origins of the universe, and follows that with a description of the evolution of the myth of ages and his version of the gigantomachy, or the battle of the giants for control of the universe.

In the beginning was Chaos, a lifeless, warring mass. The great Creator of the universe separates Earth from sky, and from the Earth, Prometheus molds man. What distinguishes man from other living creatures is that man stands upright, can hold his head erect, and is able to raise his eyes to the stars and the heavens. As man evolves, he passes through four distinct stages, each one worse than the previous. Under Saturn, the Golden Age exists, in which man lives in harmony with nature, and the Earth provides man with everything he needs. War is not yet known to the world, and all humans are faithful to the gods and to one another. When Saturn is overthrown by his son Jupiter, the Silver Age begins, and along with it come the four seasons, which force man to work hard for food and shelter. The Bronze Age introduces war to humankind, and with the Iron Age trickery, greed, and deceit are introduced. It is during the Iron Age that the gods convene to discuss the future of mankind.

During the Iron Age, not only is life on Earth violent and strife-ridden, so too is life among the gods. In their bottomless desire for power, giants attempt to reach Mount Olympus, the domain of the gods, in order to take control. In revenge, Jove strikes them down with his lightning and destroys them, but the blood of the giants drenches the Earth, and out of the blood arise mortals full of evil intent.

Book 1: Lines 163—415

Jove becomes so disgusted and irate over the state of mankind that he calls a council of the gods on Mount Olympus. Jove tells the gods how he has tried to do everything to purge humankind of its wickedness but to no avail, and it is now time to destroy the human race. He relates the story of how he disguised himself as a traveler and entered the palace of Lycaon, the king of Arcadia, a land known for its race of men with cannibalistic traditions. Even after making his immortal presence known to the king, Lycaon still tried to feed the god with human flesh. In return, Jove destroyed his palace and turned him into a wolf.

With the assistance of his brother Neptune, Jove destroys the human race with a flood. He first fills the Earth with rain so relentless that all of mankind's crops are destroyed. Humans themselves, however, survive, so Jove turns to Neptune, the god of the seas, who unleashes the fierce powers of the oceans. The only survivors of the god's wrath are Deucalion and his wife and cousin, Pyrrha, who land on Mt. Parnassus and seek out the prophetess Themis who gives them instructions of how to repopulate the Earth through an oracle that they must interpret. "Leave the temple and with veiled heads and loosened clothes throw behind you the bones of your great mother," Themis tells the couple. Deucalion and Pyrrha are confused at first, but when they realize that the Earth is their "great mother," they decide that the Earth's stones are her "bones." The stones that Pyrrha throws behind her spring up into women, and the stones that Deucalion throws metamorphose into men, and thus a new race of humans is brought to life.

Book 1: Lines 416—451

As the Earth continues to warm, life forms of all natures spring forth. Soon the Earth is abundant with animals as well as humans. With the new life arrives a creature not yet seen by man: the giant python who crawls across entire mountain ranges and strikes fear into the hearts of mankind. Apollo, the archer god, destroys the python with his arrows and thus gives rise to the sacred Pythian games.

Book 1: Lines 452—779

The capricious nature of the gods and their unquenchable lusts are brought to full light in this last section of Book 1. After successfully killing the python, Apollo notices Cupid with his own arrows, and the mighty god mocks the blind, winged boy. In revenge, Cupid strikes Apollo through the heart with an arrow designed to induce love in the god, and he similarly strikes an arrow into the beautiful Daphne, the daughter of the river-god Peneus, with an arrow that repels love. When Apollo eyes the beautiful virgin, he is overcome with desire and sets out to chase her through the forests. Daphne, under the influence of Cupid's bow, runs away with great speed. Despite Apollo's incessant pleas, Daphne continues to run, and just as the god is about to overtake her, she calls out to her father to destroy her beauty. Peneus answers his daughter's pleas and transforms her into a laurel tree. Apollo continues to love her, however, and he proclaims the laurel as the decoration for Rome's emperor and for all conquering generals.

With the story of Io, the theme of female revenge is introduced into the *Metamorphoses*. Io, the daughter of Inachus, is returning from her father one day when Jove catches sight of her and rapes her. In order to hide his passions from his jealous wife Juno, Jove hides the Earth under a cloud cover. Juno grows suspicious, and she clears away the clouds. Jove quickly turns Io into a white heifer in order to hide his affair. Juno, distrustful of her husband, asks for the animal as a gift, a request the god cannot deny. Juno gives the heifer to Argus, a creature with one hundred eyes, for safekeeping. Meanwhile, Io's family is looking for the young girl. Eventually they realize that she has been transformed into the heifer. Argus separates her from the family, and Io becomes a

heartbroken slave. Jove has pity for Io and sends Mercury to Earth, disguised as a shepherd, to kill Argus. He eventually lulls Argus to sleep with his music and storytelling and cuts off his head. Juno, who is furious, places the eyes of Argus into the tail of the peacock, and she places a spell on Io that forces her to circle the Earth in terror. Jove eventually promises Juno that he will never be unfaithful to her and, in return, Juno changes the heifer back to human form. Io becomes a goddess who, with Jove's seed, gives birth to Epaphus.

Book 1 closes with the introduction of Phaethon, the friend of Epaphus who believes that Apollo is his father and sets outs to the palace of the sun in Ethiopia to find proof. Book 2 of the *Metamorphoses* opens with Apollo granting the boy any wish he desires as proof of his devotion to him. Phaethon wants to drive his father's chariot across the sky. Apollo fears for the boy's life but keeps his vow, and Phaethon takes the reins of the sun god's powerful chariot. However, he quickly loses control and flies too close to the Earth, scorching Ethiopia, turning the skin of its people black and creating the Sahara desert. When the pain becomes unbearable, Mother Earth calls out for help, and Jove is forced to kill Phaethon with a bolt of lightning in order to extinguish the fire.

Themes

Creation

A large portion of the first book centers on the theme of the creation of the universe, the Earth, and humankind. Ovid describes the nothingness of Chaos as the *Metamorphoses* opens and how Prometheus formed man from the ground. After Jove and Neptune nearly destroy all humanity with the great floods, Deucalion and Pyrrha are able to save it with the help of the prophetess Themis. Beyond the literal acts of creation, many of the stories in the *Metamorphoses* explain how certain living beings and traditions came to be. For instance, in Book 1, Ovid explains the origin of the design of the peacock feathers in the story of Io, and in the story of Daphne he explains how laurel wreaths came to represent victory.

Metamorphosis

The major theme of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is metamorphosis itself. "I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms," the poet declares in the first sentence of the poem. Throughout the twelve thousand lines of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes how change continually occurs in the universe; how the gods, out of revenge or capricious desires, endlessly exert their transformative powers on the world. Metamorphosis is the recurring theme throughout all the stories in the *Metamorphoses*, and it is the theme that artists and writers have drawn from Ovid over the centuries.

Power

When read in the light of Ovid's own banishment from Rome, much of the *Metamorphoses* can be interpreted as an allegory about the capricious nature of power. Like Augustus who at his own discretion had the power to exile Ovid, the gods as portrayed in the *Metamorphoses* have absolute power over life and death in the world. Although humans are sometimes able to trick the gods for a short time, mortals are essentially powerless to respond to the gods' capricious acts.

Rape

In Book 1, Daphne is the first female to experience the lustful urges of the gods. When Cupid pierces Apollo with an arrow, Apollo falls uncontrollably in love with the young virgin and tries to rape her. Her speed and quick wits save her from the god, but the price she pays is her youthful beauty. Io similarly experiences the sexual powers of the gods when Jove finds her and rapes her. Throughout the *Metamorphoses*, women, especially young virgins, are subject to the urges of and violent rapes by the male gods.

Revenge

Revenge takes at least two forms in the *Metamorphoses*. The first is the revenge the gods take upon humankind for humanity's perceived indiscretions, and the second is the revenge the gods take upon each other, especially the revenge goddesses out of jealous anger take upon the gods. Early in Book 1, Jove tries to destroy the world when greed and wickedness take over it. When he is caught by his wife Juno having an affair with Io, Juno exacts her revenge by turning the object of the god's desire into a heifer. In relation to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the gods of the *Metamorphoses* are very much like the God of the Old Testament: their anger is profound, and they do not hesitate to take revenge upon humankind as a means of teaching lessons never to be forgotten.

Theogony

From the Greek *theogonia* combining "god" and "to be born of," a theogony is an account of the origin of the gods. The *Metamorphoses*, especially Book 1, provides an account of the age of the Roman gods. Ovid used and in some cases corrected Hesiod, whose *Theogony*, written around 700 b.c., is the most thorough account of the gods. Much of Ovid's work in the *Metamorphoses* focuses on explaining the births and lineage of the gods.

Violence

Violence, especially violent change, permeates the universe of the *Metamorphoses*. From the earliest battle of the giants that results in drenching the world with blood to Jove's shooting down of Apollo's son Phaethon with a lightning bolt, Book 1 is, if nothing else, one story after another of violent transformation.

Style

Dactylic Hexameters

Dactylic hexameter is the meter that traditionally was used in Greek and Latin epic poetry. From the Greek meaning "finger," a dactyl is a metrical arrangement that consists of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. Hexameter literally means "six metra." The term dactylic hexameter is a metrical pattern that per line consists of six successive dactyls. Virgil's *Aenid* is an example of an epic written in dactylic hexameters. Beginning with the second line of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid employs dactylic hexameter for his epic.

Epic

An epic is a long poem that deals with mythical, legendary, or historical events, or a combination of the three. Homer is considered to be the first, and arguably greatest, epic poet. Although the stories that make up the *Metamorphoses* do not form a single narrative whole□that is, while the stories may be linked thematically, they are not connected sequentially in terms of plot□the *Metamorphoses* is an epic because it is long and because it takes as its main subject the origins of the created universe and the history of humankind up to the Roman era.

Mythology

The themes of change and power are presented in the first twelve books of the *Metamorphoses* through mythic stories. Many of the stories in Ovid's work were orally transmitted over the centuries and formed the basis of pagan belief systems. Ovid may also have been influenced by several earlier Latin and Greek poets, including Nicander, Boios, and Parthenius of Nicaea, but most of their works have not have survived.

Translation

With the demise of classical education in the twentieth century, most readers who study Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the early 2000s must rely on a translation. Unfortunately, the quality and the style of translations vary widely, and, while the basic content can be found in a competent translation, many of the nuances of Ovid's original style, including his use of meter, metaphor, and wordplay, are lost. While translations bring the ancient worlds to the English reader, they cannot convey the true artistry of the original and in many ways must be treated as a separate works of art in their own right.

Historical Context

About the time of Ovid's birth in 43 b.c., Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Octavianus, the grandnephew of Julius Caesar and more commonly known as Augustus, came to Rome as a young man to assert control over the estate his granduncle had bequeathed to him. For the next twenty years, Augustus methodically gained power over his adversaries, and, by the time Ovid began writing poetry at the age of twenty, Augustus was firmly established as the emperor of Rome and had long since set about to exact measures to purify Rome of its immoral influences.

Although far from being considered a prude himself, Augustus nevertheless saw sexual licentiousness as a lifestyle that could undermine the power and efficacy of the state. The Roman Empire itself had experienced decades of upheaval. Roman civil wars alone had killed some 200,000 Italians, and the empire's outposts were continually on guard against invasions. Augustus's great achievement was to end the wars and work to establish a sense of stability throughout the empire. In large part, he was highly successful, and in many ways history views him as the greatest of all the emperors.

Part of his successful strategy was to give Romans a sense of the morally upright state. If Romans were to love anything at all, Augustus reasoned, they ought to love the state. Thus, he set out to pass laws regulating such activities as premarital sex and enforced economic measures that penalized individuals for avoiding marriage and children. However much he tried to control sexual expression in his domain, his efforts only succeeded to a certain degree. His only daughter, Julia the Elder, was caught in an affair with Marc Anthony, one of the emperor's mortal enemies, and she was banished to the island of Pandateria. Bereft of the opportunity to have a direct heir, Augustus was irrevocably affected, and when his granddaughter, Julia the Younger, was similarly caught with a man in suspect circumstances, she was also banished.

While the details are unclear, it seems unlikely that Ovid was somehow involved with the indiscretion connected to Julia the Younger. Although Ovid had been playfully critical, especially in his book *Loves*, of the emperor's attempts at legislating sexual morality, Ovid was not known to have had a contentious relationship with Augustus. However, in return for what he calls a "mistake," Ovid was tried by Augustus personally. In the same year that Augustus banished his granddaughter from Rome, he sent Ovid to live out his years in the distant outpost of Tomi on the Black Sea.

In the context of his relationship to the capricious and powerful Augustus, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* can be read. Certainly, with his early elegies on love, Ovid had contributed to the liberalization of sexual mores in the empire, effectively setting himself against the leadership in Rome.

With respect to the mythological themes of the *Metamorphoses*, it should be remembered that Rome was still several centuries away from adopting Christianity. In fact, Christianity as such did not yet exist, and so-called pagan belief systems continued to be widely accepted and practiced for the next three centuries. Augustus, in fact,

believed that a part of the moral breakdown of Rome was due to laxness regarding traditional religious rites and customs. During his reign, he moved to restore major temples to the gods.

Critical Overview

The influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on Western art, music, drama, poetry, and literature cannot be overstated. If emulation is the greatest form of flattery, as it has been said, then there is perhaps no more complimented writer in the Western canon than Ovid.

Ovid's impact is distinguished among the classical writers in that his fame grew during his own lifetime and continued to grow unabated after his death. Archeologists have found Ovidian graffiti dating to Ovid's lifetime on the walls of Pompeii. According to Peter Knox, writing in his biographical essay on Ovid for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Seneca said in reference to Ovid's oratorical skills, "He had a neat, seemly and attractive talent. Even in those days his speech could be regarded as simply poetry put into prose." However, Knox also quotes the Spanish rhetorician, Quintilian (35—96 a.d.), who criticized Ovid's transitions in the *Metamorphoses* as examples of "feeble and childish affectation" that Ovid uses "without restraint."

Ovid's influences remained strong after his death. The twelfth century, for instance, was called the Ovidian Age because so many poets wrote imitations of Ovidian hexameters and used themes introduced in the *Metamorphoses*. Dante acknowledged his debt to Ovid by placing the poet alongside Homer, Horace, and Lucan in Limbo in *The Divine Comedy*.

Ovid was easily the most influential of the classical poets during the Renaissance, with painters, sculptors, poets, and dramatists drawing freely upon his influences. Edmund Spenser and John Milton alluded frequently to Ovid's work, and, starting with *Titus Andronicus*, William Shakespeare returned to Ovid repeatedly for inspiration. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, relies on the legend of Pyramus and Thisbe, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Romeo and Juliet* contain references to the tragic story of Phaethon.

E. J. Kenney, in his introduction to the Oxford's World Classics edition of the *Metamorphoses*, quotes Edward Gibbon (1737—1794), author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, who claimed to have "derived more pleasure" from the *Metamorphoses* than from Virgil's *Aeneid*. In 1873, Virgil scholar James Henry, according to Kenney, described Ovid as "a more natural, more genial, more cordial, more imaginative, more playful poet. . . than [Virgil] or any other Latin poet." In the twentieth century, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* continued the Ovidian legacy.

The list of painters who have drawn on Ovid's stories is also extensive: for example, Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Pieter Brueghel, Peter Paul Rubens, Marc Chagall, and Pablo Picasso. Painters throughout the centuries have been inspired by the Roman poet, as well as sculptors.

In the performing arts, Ovid's influence can be seen in the American Ballet Theater's 1958 production *Ovid's Metamorphoses* and in the 2002 Broadway production by Mary Zimmerman of *Metamorphoses: A Play*. In film, Jean Cocteau drew upon the story of Orpheus and Eurydice for his 1949 film *Orpheus*. In 1958, Marcel Camus made *Black Orpheus*, a version that sets the two star-crossed lovers in Brazil and stars an all-black cast and includes a jazz soundtrack that went on to sell a million copies. *Black Orpheus* won the 1959 Cannes Film Festival Grand Prize and the Oscar's Best Foreign Film award.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

White is the publisher of the Seattle-based press Scala House Press. In this essay, White argues that the themes of the gods' vengeance and caprice were drawn from the poet's experience in Augustan Rome.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is arguably the most influential literary work in the Western canon. For two millennia writers and artists of every genre have turned to the Roman epic for inspiration, more so than to any other single book, with perhaps the exceptions of the Bible or Homer's *Odyssey*. The major theme the poem addresses□and the theme that the vast majority of its influences repeatedly use□is, as the title suggests, metamorphosis, or change. Two equally important themes emerge from the poem: revenge and the gods' capricious use of power. Time and time again Ovid describes otherwise innocent beings transformed beyond recognition, either to save themselves from the caprices of the gods or because of the gods' wrathful vengeance itself.

While it is unclear how autobiographical or allegorical Ovid originally intended his masterpiece to be, the parallels between his life in Augustan Rome and the lives of his creations are undeniable. The history of the Roman Empire in total, and in particular the forty-year reign of Augustus, Rome's first emperor, provided ample character studies for Ovid as he set out to create his vengeful and capricious gods. And at the height of his powers and popularity as a poet, Ovid had to look no further than himself for a real-life example of a victim of the emperor's caprices. The exiling of Ovid to the distant Black Sea outpost of Tomi can be viewed in much the same way as any number of transformations in the *Metamorphoses*: with a dramatic swipe of the hand and for questionable reasons at best. Ovid, the well-known poet of love, was thus transformed over night to a potentially soon forgotten writer of whining letters and tedious verses.

"I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms," Ovid proclaims, announcing the major theme to the *Metamorphoses* in the poem's first line. For the rest of the epic, Ovid would do just that, describing some of literature's most poignant stories of metamorphoses: Daphne turning into a laurel; Io being transformed into a heifer; the young virgin Callisto being turned into a bear and then into a constellation; the beautiful young Adonis being metamorphosed at his death into the anemone. The list is extensive, and the idea of change, of metamorphosis, is what links these otherwise disparate stories.

The poem's very next lines□"You, gods, since you are the ones who alter these, and all other things, inspire my attempt, and spin out a continuous thread of words, from the world's first origins to my own time"□turn the attention from metamorphosis to the source of all change, the gods themselves. Viewed in the context of Ovid's life in Augustus's Rome, these secondary lines□the lines that are normally viewed as the subtext to Ovid's masterpiece□take on a primary significance.

Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Octavianus□or Augustus, as he came to be known□came to power in Rome around 23 b.c., around the same time that Ovid was

abandoning a career in law in favor of poetry. Augustus, which is Latin for "majestic" or "venerable," set out to consolidate his power and return Rome to what was called the *mos maiorum*, or the customs of the ancestors, as a strategy for bringing Rome to the state of grandeur for which it would ultimately be remembered. In an early undertaking, Augustus rebuilt many temples to the gods that had fallen into disrepair from disuse and neglect, and his restoration of the Secular Games in 17 b.c. was a symbolic gesture of his desire to restore the ancient religious traditions. Eventually, Augustus turned to issues of sexual mores, making adultery a criminal offense and encouraging the building of nuclear families by offering economic incentives to couples with more than three children.

While Augustus was in many ways widely regarded as Rome's greatest and most just emperor, his efforts to regulate the morals of society may have been seen as intrusive to Ovid, whose book *The Art of Love* (or *Ars Amatoria*), a collection of poems that parodied contemporary love verse and poked fun at Roman society, was a hit among the more liberal classes, much to the chagrin of Augustus. Not that Augustus was a prude himself; rather, Augustus saw in his return to *mos maiorum* a great symbolic vehicle for uniting his empire in line with his grander political ambitions. Ovid's writing was probably seen by the emperor as having more of a gadfly effect than being a legitimate threat to his power, but enough of a gadfly to take heed of. In this context Ovid is the perfect explanation of why Plato called for the expulsion of poets in his *Republic*; poets, choosing the dictates of their muses over that of their leaders, are by and large not reliable citizens of the state.

Although no one knew for certain why Augustus, in 8. a.d., personally tried and prosecuted Ovid, *The Art of Love*, which was published seven years earlier, was probably a factor, though certainly not the direct one. Instead, speculation centered on the indiscretions of Augustus's daughter, Julia the Elder, and his granddaughter, Julia the Younger, as the more direct reasons.

Julia the Elder, like many in her circle, was reputed to be a fan of Ovid's work and was known widely for her licentious ways. Rumors of her sexual abandonment circulated throughout the empire. After being caught in an affair with her father's enemy, Marc Antony, she was banished to the distant island of Pandateria where she eventually died of malnutrition. Her daughter Julia, similarly grew to be fond of Ovid's writing. Not more than eight years after her mother's forced exile, she was also banished. The fact that Julia the Younger and Ovid were banished months apart from one another added fuel to the historical speculation that Ovid was somehow involved, however indirectly, with one of her affairs. While there could be some political justification for the banishment of Augustus's daughter, there was little doubt among historians that the motives behind the emperor's exile of his granddaughter had no political source whatsoever. Although the exiles of Julia the Younger and Ovid certainly had political and social implications, the motives behind them were primarily personal. Augustus, at the age of 71, bereft of an heir once he banished his only child, was fed up with what he perceived as the immorality of his own family members when the larger issue of the public morality of the entire empire was at stake. Rather than give in to the loosening of control within his own family, he chose to rid himself and Rome of the problems once and for all.

Of his banishment, Ovid is quoted only as saying that it was the result of "a poem and a mistake." The poem was most likely *The Art of Love*, and as for the mistake, history may never know what that was. Regardless, Ovid was exiled to Tomi, in what became in the twentieth-century Romania. With his greatest works already written, he spent his remaining years there, writing letters to Rome bidding for his return and crafting poems that made up his *Tristia*, or *Sorrows*verses critics generally looked upon with disfavor. In exile, Ovid was clearly transformed into a second-rate poet.

The themes of caprice and vengeance, then, that can be seen emerging from Ovid's interactions with Augustus, are prevalent throughout the *Metamorphoses*. In the story of Lycaon, Jupiter disguises himself as a traveler and enters the King of Arcadia's lands where he finds that the rumors of wickedness that preceded his arrival were "even milder than the truth." When the god realizes that Lycaon intends to murder him, he turns the king into a wolf. Now, if the story had concluded with that (arguably) understandable response, one could attribute some moral justification to his actions. However, upon returning to Olympus, Jupiter lobbies his colleagues to retaliate by wiping out the entire human race. This action may be compared to Augustus taking vengeance on Ovid for the perceived moral indiscretions of his daughter. Jupiter exerts his wrath on the entire human race for the issues he has with Lycaon. "One house has fallen, but others deserve to also." Jupiter concludes his rallying cry on Olympus, a cry that could have easily been uttered by Augustus at Ovid's trial. "Wherever the Earth extends the avenging furies rule. You would think men were sworn to crime! Let them all pay the penalty they deserve, and quickly. That is my intent."

This excess of vengeance, although it recurs frequently in the *Metamorphoses*, is not the prevailing way the gods exert their power over the world. Rather, the stories of Daphne, Io and Argus, and Pan and Syrinx set the tone and the style for the gods' preferred method of control. In each of these instances, an otherwise beautiful and innocent (virginal) girl (or nymph) is minding her own business in the woods when suddenly she is chased by a lustful, monomaniacal god who can only be sated by physically consummating his sexual desire. In the cases of Syrinx and Daphne, rape is avoided at the last instant when they are metamorphosed into inanimate objects□a reed in Syrinx's case and a laurel tree in Daphne's. In both cases, however, their original beauty is replaced by vegetation. Io, on the other hand, is both raped by Jupiter and transformed into a heifer by Juno, his jealous spouse. Her humiliation is twice that of Daphne's and Syrinx's, though her beauty is eventually restored, and she gives birth to Jupiter's child.

At first glance, parallels between the situations experienced by Ovid and the characters of his *Metamorphoses* may not be significant, but a closer look reveals similar patterns. Ovid was presumably exiled as a result of his liberal sexual attitudes and perhaps his practices. The victims of the gods' caprices in the *Metamorphoses* are mostly virgins who suffer from the "liberal" sexuality of the gods. Both the victims and Ovid lack control in matters thought important by the state, especially sexuality. Although this may seem a minor point, Augustus did not ban his daughter and granddaughter or Ovid because they were sexual per se; he exiled them because they stepped outside the sexual boundaries that he, as supreme leader of Rome, prescribed. For Augustus, the

issue of control was of absolute importance; when he perceived losing that control, he fought back capriciously with his decrees of exile, much as Jupiter exacted his wrath upon the world with floodwaters when he lost his hold on the world and much like Juno exacted her revenge upon Io for drawing Jupiter's attention. For both Ovid the Roman citizen and his characters, ultimately their freedom extended only so far; if the emperor or Jupiter wanted to reduce their vassals, doing so was their prerogative.

It is not clear that Ovid set out to write a personal, or even a political, allegory with his *Metamorphoses*. Far too little of his life outside his poetics is known to make any concrete deduction in this direction. But what is known is that the universe he created in the *Metamorphoses* is a universe ruled by capricious and vengeful gods, and the physical world he inhabited was one ruled by a capricious and vengeful emperor. Like his creations who would be remembered both for the wrath that they suffered and the new forms they ultimately took, Ovid has gained permanent place in Western civilization for the forms he created. "Wherever Rome's influence extends, over the lands it has civilised," Ovid concludes the *Metamorphoses* with words more prophetic than even he could have believed, "I will be spoken, on people's lips: and, famous through all the ages, if there is truth in poet's prophecies, *vivam*□I shall live."

Source: Mark White, Critical Essay on *Metamorphoses*, in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

The Ovid Project: Metamorphosing the "Metamorphoses," http://www.uvm.edu/~hag/ovid/ is the University of Vermont's online, digitized collection of illustrations from the 1640 edition of the *Metamorphoses* by George Sandys and the 1703 edition from seventeenth-century German artist Johann Wilhelm Bauer. The illustrations are taken from the university's private rare book collection and offer a rare glimpse into some of the English translations' early artistic depictions of the classical tales.

The University of Virginia's *Electronic Text Center* at http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/ hosts an extensive database of *Metamorphoses* resources, including the original Latin text, five English translations, and many related links.

While the breadth of movie adaptations of Ovid's tales is extensive, one notable example is the 1959 Cannes Film Festival Prize—winner and that year's Academy Award—winner for Best Foreign Film, *Black Orpheus*. Set in Brazil with an all-black cast and a jazz soundtrack that went on to sell over a million copies, the movie is an adaptation of the Orpheus and Eurydice legend and is available widely on video.

Perhaps the most famous of all adaptations of an Ovid story is George Bernard's play *Pygmalion*, which was based on the story told by Orpheus in Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses* and which in 1964 was made into the hugely successful movie *My Fair Lady*, starring Audrey Hepburn.

While not specifically about Ovid, the thirteen-part British Broadcasting Company production of *I, Claudius* covers the years of Augustus's rule, from the days when Ovid was launching his poetry career through the years of his exile. The series stars Derek Jacobi as Claudius and is widely available on video and DVD.

Metamorphoses: A Play, by Mary Zimmerman (a playwright and teacher of drama at Northwestern University), was launched on Broadway and toured extensively across the United States to positive reviews.

Perhaps the most Ovidian of Shakespeare's plays, *Titus Andronicus* draws heavily on the tales of Actaeon and Philomela. Although not specifically based on the *Metamorphoses*, Julie Taymor's 1999 film adaptation of the play, *Titus*, starring Anthony Hopkins, reveals the extent of Ovid's influence on Shakespeare and is widely available in video and DVD formats.

Topics for Further Study

The story of Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha is often referred to as an "archetypal" flood story. What is meant by that term? What is an archetype? Find flood stories in other traditions and compare them to the flood story in *Metamorphoses*.

Epic poems usually tell historical and mythical tales of war or conquest, yet *Metamorphoses* is considered an epic poem. Research the characteristics of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *The Aeneid* and compare them to the characteristics of *Metamorphoses*. What are the major similarities and differences between the works? Do you think the *Metamorphoses* should be referred to as an epic poem? If not, how should it be labeled?

A portion of Book 1 in the *Metamorphoses* is devoted to the theogony, or the heredity of the gods. Ovid drew much of his information from Hesiod's *Theogony*. Research Hesiod's work, and list significant differences in his account from Ovid's.

In Genesis, man is said to be formed "from the dust of the ground." In the creation story of Deucalion and Pyrrha, humans are similarly created from the ground when the oracle calls on Pyrrha to toss the "bones of her mother" behind her. When was Genesis written? Would Ovid, or any of his contemporaries, have had widespread access to the stories in Genesis? If not, what do you think accounts for the similarities between the stories?

In many ways Ovid's *Metamorphoses* can be read as a study of power relationships. Analyze how power is used between the sexes in the *Metamorphoses*. Do male figures always hold power over females? If not, how do females exert their power? Based on your analysis, how would you characterize Ovid's view of sexual relationships?

Compare and Contrast

8 A.D.: Christianity does not yet exist. Romans continue to pray to their gods, and Augustus moves to restore ancient temples for prayer.

Today: The Vatican, which is located in Rome, is the home of the pope, the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church. Italy itself is overwhelmingly Catholic, and the ancient Roman religion, in later centuries called paganism, no longer exists as an institutional religious force.

8 A.D.: Rome is the mightiest empire in the West. Its reign extends across the known world, made up of all of the Mediterranean basin and extending through much of Europe. Augustus is the most powerful leader in the West.

Today: Italy is a relatively small democratic nation. Although it is an advanced Western society, it is no longer considered a military or political power.

8 A.D.: Ovid's place of exile, the port of Tomi, on the Black Sea, is a distant outpost of the Roman Empire.

Today: Tomi is known as Constantsa, Romania, and is a shipping port and resort on the Black Sea coast.

8 A.D.: Slavery plays a large role in Roman society. Nearly three million of the empire's eleven million inhabitants are slaves.

Today: Slavery has long been prohibited in Italy.

8 A.D.: Exile is a common form of punishment for men and women who are classified as enemies of the state.

Today: So-called enemies of the state are no longer sent into exile. Instead, punishment takes the form of imprisonment.

What Do I Read Next?

In 1988, German novelist Christopher Ransmayr published *The Last World* to widespread critical acclaim. Ransmayr's novel is set in Tomi shortly after the death of Ovid and tells of a Roman admirer of the poet who is in search of a lost manuscript of the *Metamorphoses*.

Tristia is Ovid's personal account of his banishment. Although he never reveals the reason for his exile in the book, he expresses his most personal and deep-seated feelings about his exile.

Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* (1997) tells the story of a dying elderly South African woman during apartheid. The war between blacks and whites is at its fiercest, and the letters the woman writes to her daughter who is in voluntary exile in America make up the narrative of the novel. Although not directly related to Ovid, Coetzee's work is a prime example of how the *Metamorphoses* has been used as a model for writers of all genres and styles through the years.

After Ovid: New Metamorphoses (1995), edited by Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, is an anthology of poetry that includes the works of forty-two poets from around the world whom the editors commissioned to "translate, reinterpret, reflect on, or completely reimagine" Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The poets include Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Amy Clampitt, and Charles Simic among others.

I, Claudius and *Claudius the God*, by Robert Graves, are the fictional accounts, written in the form of autobiographical memoirs, of Claudius, the Roman emperor who was famous for his stutter and his ability to survive the many intrigues and scandals of Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula.

Further Study

Brown, Sarah Annes, *The Metamorphosis of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Brown shows the complexity of Ovid's influences and how his work has provided inspiration for six centuries of writers, poets, composers, and painters.

Martindale, Charles, ed., *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

With an emphasis on the influence that Ovid has had on literature (although there are some writings on the influence Ovid has had on art), this collection covers the period from the twelfth century through the twentieth century and includes the poet's influence on Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and T. S. Eliot.

Sharrock, Alison, and Rhiannon Ash, eds., *Fifty Key Classical Authors*, Routledge, 2002.

With essays on fifty of the major classical authors, including Ovid, Sappho, Homer, and Cicero, this book sets out to tell the story of how classical literature flourished and changed throughout the years. Each of the essays is prefaced by a substantial introduction to the author's background.

Southern, Pat, *Augustus*, Routledge, 2001.

Southern's biography of the Roman emperor was the first to appear in more than seventy-five years. Concentrating on Augustus himself rather than the politics of the time, Southern covers the emperor's life from his family's heritage to his deathbed.

Taylor, A. B., ed., *Shakespeare's Ovid: The "Metamorphoses" in the Plays and Poems*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Ovid's work was a source of lifelong inspiration to Shakespeare. Taylor brings together Shakespeare scholars and covers all of the playwright's major plays that show Ovidian influence and includes twentieth-century criticism on the subject.

Zimmerman, Mary, and David R. Slavitt, *Metamorphoses: A Play*, Northwestern University Press, 2002.

Set in or around a large pool of water in the center of the stage, this play opened on Broadway in March 2002 after first being performed by students at Northwestern University, where Zimmerman teaches. The book includes the script, a production history, and photographs from several productions.

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Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by A. S. Kline, http://www.tkline.freeserve.co.uk/.