# Reading Ovid

## Stories from the *Metamorphōsēs*

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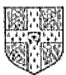

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entertainment value. As can be inferred from the summary above, they do not represent every side of Ovid's vast poem (which is much longer than the *Aeneid*); in other words, there is more to *Metamorphōsēs* than this selection can suggest.

Herewith four caveats, all essential for understanding what this book, which is aimed at post-beginners, is trying and not trying to do:

- This brief introduction is designed to apply only to the contents of this reader. It does not engage with all the problems or issues implicit in a bewilderingly kaleidoscopic work like *Metamorphōsēs*.
- Ovid drew on many different sources for his tales. These are sometimes quoted in the **Study sections**, so that readers can reflect on how and why Ovid's version differed. In general, where I attribute originality to Ovid, please preface my remarks with 'If Ovid is not drawing this detail from his sources . . .'
- Detailed analysis of the various genres of writing of which Ovid was master is inappropriate in a reader designed for those whose experience of Latin is limited. I have restricted comment here to a few aspects of epic as exemplified by Homer and Virgil and some references to Ovid's earlier elegiac love-poetry. I recommend the following epic prose translations in the Penguin Classics series for their accessibility: *Homer: The Iliad*, tr. E. V. Rieu, rev. Peter Jones (Penguin Classics, 2003); *Homer: The Odyssey*, tr. E. V. Rieu, rev. D. C. H. Rieu (Penguin Classics, 2003); *Virgil: The Aeneid*, tr. David West (rev. edn., Penguin Classics, 2003). For Ovid's love-poetry, see, e.g., *Ovid: The Erotic Poems*, tr. Peter Green (Penguin Classics, 1982) and *Ovid: The Love Poems*, tr. A. D. Melville (Oxford World's Classics, 1990).
- Where I attribute beliefs or attitudes to Ovid on the strength of what he writes, please preface my remarks with 'Ovid writes as if he believes that . . .'

## *Ovid's life*

Publius Ovidius Naso ('Nose') was born on 20 March 43 BC in Sulmo (modern Sulmona in the Abruzzi, ninety miles east of Rome over the Apennines). It was the year after Julius Caesar had been assassinated. After another period of civil war, Caesar's heir, Octavian, fought his way to sole power by defeating Mark Antony and his Egyptian lover Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BC (they committed suicide a year later) and in 27 BC became Rome's first emperor, universally known as Augustus. During this period, Ovid's wealthy parents were putting Ovid (he tell us, *Trīstia* 4.10), through a standard rhetorical education in Rome, designed to equip young Romans with the verbal skills

needed to make a public career in prestigious and lucrative areas like politics or law (i.e. where one climbed the ladder by one's ability to communicate persuasively). The elder Seneca tells us that Ovid excelled in the element of rhetorical training called *suāsōria*, an exercise in which the student had to advise a figure from legend or history on the course of action he should take, e.g. what would one say to Agamemnon when he was told that, if the Greek fleet were to sail for Troy, he had first to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia? Such training would stand Ovid in very good stead for all his work (his *Hērōides* (*Heroines*), for example, in which famous mythical women – like Penelope, Medea, Dido, Phaedra – write impassioned letters to their men, and sometimes exchange letters with them). After this, Ovid travelled round Sicily and Greece (still regarded as the cultural hot-bed of the ancient world). Ovid's parents presumably had in mind a career for him in some official capacity in public service, but a brief experience of minor judicial posts turned out not to be to Ovid's taste, and he gave it all up to become a full-time poet. His father, apparently, disapproved.

There was strong competition in Rome at this time – Virgil (b. 70 BC: Ovid had seen him), Horace (b. 65 BC: Ovid had heard him give a reading), Tibullus (b. 55 BC: Ovid knew him), Propertius (b. 50 BC: a close friend of Ovid's). But perhaps as early as the mid-twenties BC Ovid had made his mark with his *Amōrēs*, a selection of elegiac love-poetry in three (originally five) books. It was a stunning debut for one so young. Further slender elegiac volumes poured out, most controversially his light-hearted instruction manual *Ars Amātōria* in three books (how to get your girl/boy), soon to be followed by his *Remedia Amōris* (how to lose your girl/boy). All these books treat the subject-matter lightly, wittily and ironically – Ovid's escapades in love have at times an almost soap-opera element to them – and parody and self-mockery are well to the fore. They also use myth extensively to illustrate the dilemmas of young lovers.

When it came to love, Ovid did not feel he had to stir his soul to its depths with a pole, as Tibullus and Propertius rather tended to. To give an example: in *Amōrēs* 3.2, Ovid imagines himself at the chariot-races with a woman he wants to sleep with. After admitting he couldn't care less about the races but it's a great place to be with the woman he's after (various *doubles entendres* on 'riding'), he presses up close to her ('one advantage of the narrow seating'), picks up her dress ('it's trailing on the ground') to admire her legs (just like Atalanta's or Diana's, he comments) and admits he's feeling 'hot' ('let me fan you – unless it's just *me*'). Look! Some dust on your dress! Let me brush it off. Then the race starts. Ovid urges on his girl's favourite, the crowd goes wild ('hide your head in my cloak in case your hair gets spoiled'), the right chariot wins and

Her prayers are fulfilled, but mine aren't.
That charioteer won the prize: I still have mine to win.
She laughed. Her eyes sparkled, and she promised – something.
That'll do for me here. Do the rest for me . . . somewhere else.

Ovid's sexy, witty and indiscreet elegiacs, which made *pleasure* the purpose of love and poetry, were quite unique. No Roman had ever written love-poetry like this, nor ever would again: the genre died out with Ovid. But around about AD 1, Ovid struck out in a new direction and started on *Fastī* ('Calendar'), a twelve-book account of the origins of and reasons for Rome's festivals and cults (only six have come down to us), and *Metamorphōsēs*, a vast 'epic' in hexameters, the metre used by Homer and Virgil. These were quite different in concept, but still used myth and legend extensively. Ovid had just about finished but not revised *Metamorphōsēs* (as he tells us in *Trīstia* 1.7) and was half-way through *Fastī* when, in AD 8, Augustus suddenly exiled him to Tomis on the Black Sea (modern Romania). Augustus' decision was connected, Ovid tells us, with the *Ars Amātōria* and some *error* about which Ovid never comes clean but was clearly not prosecutable. Since Augustus had a moralistic streak to him, it may be that he regarded Rome's leading poet as a bad influence, and took the opportunity presented by Ovid's *error* (perhaps a sexual scandal of some sort) to justify banishing him. Ovid died in Tomis in AD 17, still writing poems asking for a recall (*Trīstia* and *Epistulae ex Pontō*) to which Augustus remained as hostile as his successor, Tiberius (AD 14–37). The whole episode makes one wonder what Rome would have been like had Mark Antony, and not Octavian-Augustus, won the battle of Actium in 31 BC and become first Roman emperor. Life, one feels, would have been rather more fun, and Ovid, surely, would never have been exiled.

In all this it is apparent that, in strong contrast with today, the Roman ruling classes took poetry seriously as a *potential* political force. In such a milieu, a widely acclaimed poet like Ovid, making his living out of witty elegiac poetry, fascinated by sex, indifferent to, even defiant of, political projects, but composing at a time of imperial legislation regulating morals and family life, was not likely to come to heel merely to suit his masters. Least of all was he about to produce an epic like Virgil's *Aeneid*, with its dignified Jupiter, strong sense of destiny and vision of Roman history reaching its climax with the Great Leader himself. Ovid talks about his own priorities at *Ars Amātōria* 3.121–8, where he says other people can get their pleasures from the past, but he is thrilled to be have been born now, not so much because of Rome's material and politicial domination, *sed quia cultus adest* 'but because this is a sophisticated/refined/elegant/cultured age'.

## *Some features of this selection*

Ovid is an entertainer, the performing flea of Roman poetry, but that should not be taken to mean that he is lightweight. Far from it. One of the many things he does in his *Metamorphōsēs* is to take the fantasies of myth and, using them as a way of talking about human experience, ask 'What if these stories involved real people? How might they work in real life? What would the characters be like and what would they do and say?' He then applies all his ingenuity to humanise them and bring them vividly to life in a way his readership would enjoy. Having a more powerful and inventive imagination than perhaps any other ancient poet, he is able to find the contemporary human angle in even the most fantastic of ancient myths. This selection concentrates on stories of this sort.

Since Ovid is particularly fascinated by relationships between men and women, he revels in myths in which he can explore such relationships, especially ones where powerful emotions and great passions – often amounting to abnormal psychological mind-sets (e.g. passage 8, Narcissus, and passage 15, Byblis) – are involved. He does this not only through what he makes the characters do and say (their actions regularly signal their emotional state of mind), but in the way in which he interprets their interior thought-processes. There is an issue here: it is often difficult to determine whether an Ovidian comment on a situation is supposed to be taken *as* an authorial comment, or rather as an insight into the thought-processes of the character concerned.

Ovid is a master of pathos: he sees into the human heart, understands it all too well and can write sympathetically about the sufferings to which it is all too prone (although sometimes his exploitation of those sufferings can seem rather cold). He is able to see the funny side of human frailties, but is equally unflinching in his depiction of the catastrophic ruin that obsessive feelings (e.g. passage 15, Byblis) can bring. Being Ovid, he is also able to depict what we would call loving married relationships (passage 1, between Deucalion and Pyrrha, and passage 14, between Baucis and Philemon). Ovid was himself married three times, his last marriage apparently a devoted one.

The transformations in Ovid serve a purpose. They can provide an escape-route for a character (e.g. Daphne being turned into a tree to escape Apollo), or a reward (Baucis and Philemon being joined in death as they were in life), or a punishment (e.g. Arachne being turned into a spider); sometimes they are central to the story (e.g. passage 17, Pygmalion, where the metamorphosis is the whole point); and sometimes they are simply a means of bringing it to an end (e.g. Adonis being turned into an anemone). Sometimes one can see a psychological point, the characters turning into a form appropriate to them (though obviously not in Adonis' case; and e.g. Io may be transformed into a cow, but she seems

quite relieved to reassume her original human shape. In a story not in this selection, the mighty Ajax, craggy defensive rock of the Greek army at Troy, is turned into a hyacinth. If one has no sense of humour, *Metamorphōsēs* is perhaps best avoided). Most interesting of all, Ovid loves trying to make poetic *sense* of the absurdities apparent in e.g. a stone turning into a human, or a woman into a spider. What would it really be like? How might it actually work? To these situations (as to everything else) he brings all his glorious imagination, ingenuity and sense of humour, the supreme poet of 'What if?' and 'Why not?'

But Ovid is not just a brilliant story-teller who grapples with trying to understand how humans in extreme situations might react and to persuade us this is how it *must* have been. He is a connoisseur of the literary world too. He knows how to compose in any style, from comedy (e.g. passage 14, Baucis and Philemon) to tragedy (e.g. passage 12, Cephalus and Procris), from the pastoral songs of rustic shepherds tootling away on their pipes (e.g. passage 3, Io and Syrinx) to romantics bemoaning their love (e.g. passage 9, Pyramus and Thisbe) and obsessives in the grip of uncontrollable passions (e.g. passage 15, Byblis); and he happily switches from one style to another within the same story. He makes constant references to earlier Greek and Roman literature (this reader will concentrate on Ovid's references to Homeric epic in particular). He constantly revisits and reworks his own poetry (e.g. passage 13, Daedalus and Icarus, differs in many interesting ways from his version in *Ars Amātōria*). He makes little jokes about the act of writing (see notes on, e.g., 11.549, 551). Above all, he is a master of rhetoric, witty (juxtaposing unlikely ideas to amusing effect, e.g. when Deucalion says to Pyrrha that the two of them are the earth's sole remaining *turba* ['mob, crowd'], 1.355); brilliant at snappy, balanced expressions (should the deer-Actaeon return home, or hide? *pudor hoc, timor impedit illud* 'shame inhibits the one course, fear the other', 3.205); adept at intense word-games (e.g. passage 8, Echo and Narcissus); and able to soar into passionate registers with powerful emotional speeches in the high style which he promptly proceeds to undercut with a moment of low bathos (e.g. passage 9, 4.121–4). This facility did not meet with the approval of Roman literary critics, who wanted epic to be didactic, setting a good, wholesome example. They felt that Ovid was treating the epic genre flippantly, without an appropriate sense of seriousness or decorum: 'too much in love with his own inventiveness', pouts Quintilian (*Institutes* 10.1.88); 'doesn't know how to leave well alone' moans the elder Seneca (*Contrōuersiae* 9.5.17), and 'he was well aware of his faults – and adored them' (2.2.12). Given Ovid's reputation, those 'faults' never troubled his readers – let alone him. Ovid knew exactly what he was doing in taking a tradition and seeing what *he* could make of it, whatever anyone else thought.

## *Ovid's gods*

The West has inherited a Judaeo-Christian tradition which holds that there is one God, and He is good. But pre-Christian pagans acknowledged a multiplicity of gods, for whom 'goodness' was usually irrelevant, and epic took full advantage of them. In the *Iliad* of Homer (epic's founding father in the Western tradition c. 700 BC), the gods loom large, constantly squabbling among themselves to support their human favourites and establishing the tradition that, morally and ethically, there need be little to distinguish the human from the divine, if the poet so wished. So in epic, men and gods interact in whatever way the poet requires. For Virgil in his *Aeneid*, Jupiter, the king of the gods, is a figure of some gravity: he has a serious plan in mind – the founding of the Roman race – and he ensures it happens. Ovid will have none of this. He provides no consistently intelligible account of divine activity, let alone any theory of divine morality, justice or vision. The gods act precisely as he wants them to, which, in this selection, often means (for males) pursuing beautiful women through woods and (for females) taking revenge for perceived slights to their honour. Yet while the gods can be selfish, petty and cruel, they can occasionally act with dignity as upholders of the moral order. In other words, Ovid manipulates these gods as earlier epic poets had done – for his own literary purposes.

## *Women and woods*

There is a reason for the predominantly wooded locations of Ovid's stories. Myths do not take place in cities: they take place (for the most part) in the Great Outdoors, especially in places where men hunted. Hunting was the sport of kings and their aristocratic followers, which is what characters in myth tended to be. It was physically hard, requiring fitness, muscle, speed, endurance and courage. It was not, in other words, a sport for aristocratic women, whose priorities were expected to lie elsewhere. But the deity of hunting was, interestingly, a goddess, Artemis/Diana; and there was something else odd about her too – she was a virgin, rejecting all male advances. The ancients put two and two together: a woman keen on this most manly of sports could not be a woman with 'normal' female appetites.

For Ovid, therefore, a woman without interest in men is signalled by her enthusiasm for the sport of hunting. Further, if a woman goes off men, she immediately takes up hunting to prove it (see, e.g., Procris in passage 12, 7.744–6). The 'rule' is proved by the exception: when Aphrodite, the goddess of sex, is fired with *amor* for the youthful hunter Adonis, she immediately takes up

hunting to be with him all the time. Naturally, it absolutely exhausts her, and she is only too keen to lie down at every opportunity and have a rest with her young lover in her arms (passage 18, 10.544–9).

By the same token, however keenly a woman races about in the forest chasing things, she is still a woman, and therefore, in the woods and fields, far from the protection of home and family (where she 'should' be), vulnerable. Add in the sort of clothing any hunter or huntress will wear – as little as possible – and the dangers are immediately apparent. The huntress in her innocence will not recognise any of this; but any god strolling about the forest will not fail to see an opportunity. The irony of the situation is that the place where a woman goes to show that she is not interested in men turns into exactly the place where she will be most accessible to them.

In such woods it is common to come across a *locus amoenus*, 'idyllic spot', one of literature's favourite locations. It is characterised by its trees, shade, running water, breezes, grassy banks/meadows, caves, flowers etc. (wall-paintings from Pompeii offer a number of luscious examples). In the innocent 'golden age', when men lived at ease and free from labour, and in the fields of the blessed in Elysium, one cannot move for *locī amoenī*; nor in Ovid, where its appearance is usually marked by an opening like *est locus* . . . or *fōns erat* . . . Hunters and huntresses, sweating from the day's work, are drawn to it like a magnet. But there is an ironic Ovidian sting in the tail. In *Metamorphōsēs*, its attractiveness is nearly always deceitful. Gods are everywhere, and the more peaceful and secret the location, the greater the hidden danger of stumbling across a deity unawares, and paying the price.

## Amor *and rape in Ovid*

*Amor*, wholesome or obsessive, is at the centre of eight of the stories in this selection (Semele, Echo and Narcissus, Pyramus and Thisbe, Cephalus and Procris, Byblis, Orpheus, Pygmalion, and Venus and Adonis). Rape or attempted rape, defined in *our* terms, which occurs about fifty times in the fifteen books of *Metamorphōsēs*, occurs in three of the stories (Apollo and Daphne, Io, Arethusa). While the topic of relationships between the sexes (or should that be genders?) is as much a modern preoccupation as it was an ancient one, rape in particular makes for uncomfortable reading in today's world, and raises a number of serious issues. It may, for example, be worth considering whether Ovid is offering any significant critique of rape or whether he simply endorses it as a fact of mythical life. Before engaging with that particular question, however, it is worth taking the following points into account:

- First, Ovid is not *inventing* the rapes contained in the myths he relates: they are built into the stories, which go back hundreds of years.
- Second, since many Romans regarded gods as slaves to their passions, amoral if not immoral, and happy to take their pleasure where they found it, they would not have been surprised by divine proclivities.
- Third, Ovid lived in a world where absence of female consent was not a *necessary* defining feature of rape (it is *the* defining feature in our world).
- Fourth, the audience for myth may have considered insemination by a god, whether by force or not, a great honour for a mere mortal, since it brought with it the prospect of semi-divine offspring.

It is also worth checking carefully on the context in which *rapiō*, usually translated 'rape', occurs, since its basic meaning is 'carry off, abduct, take'. The latter meaning is clearly more appropriate in e.g. passage 12, where the hunter Cephalus is *raptus* by Aurora, goddess of the Dawn (7.704, 725, 732). Then again, when Cephalus says that his beloved wife Procris was sister of the *rapta* Oreithyia, he comments that Procris was more *digna rapī* (7.697) – surely not that she would have made a better *rape* victim? In passage 13, Theseus escapes with his lover, who is called the *rapta* Ariadne – scarcely 'raped' if they were lovers (8.174). To complicate matters further, in passage 10 (5.576), Arethusa, who is about to describe how Alpheus tried to rape her, says she will tell the story of Alpheus' *amōrēs*. Likewise, in the story of Apollo and Daphne, Apollo feels *amor* for Daphne (passage 2, 1.452, 474) and immediately attempts to – 'rape' her?

*Amor* only rarely appears in relationships which might seem to us driven by 'love' in our broadest sense, possibly because in Ovid it usually has such strong sexual overtones (I emphasise here that I am concentrating on Ovid's usage in this selection and not taking into account other writers' views of *amor*). For example, it never occurs in passage 1, between Deucalion and Pyrrha (who seem old), and passage 14, between Baucis and Philemon (who are old). Cephalus uses *amor* of his relationship with his beloved wife Procris, but qualifies it as *amor sociālis* (passage 12, 7.800) and glosses it with *mūtua cūra*, and in the next line uses *amor*, unqualified, in its sexual sense (7.801). Orpheus talks of the divinity *Amor* existing among the gods, but again in the sexual sense, if that is how *rapīnae* (passage 16, 10.28) should be understood. If it is fair to say that *amor* in passage 2 (Apollo and Daphne), passage 3 (Io), passage 8 (Narcissus) and passage 15 (Byblis) is predominantly sexual, its use to describe the 'first love' of Pyramus and Thisbe (passage 9) and Pygmalion (passage 17) may be more innocent, but may not – after all, the innocent Atalanta feels *amor* for the first time at 10.637 (passage 18), but *sociāre cubīlia* and *cupīdō* (635–6) indicate what she actually has

in mind; and Hippomenes falls for Atalanta when he sees her naked (10.578–82). For Ovid in these passages, then, sexual desire is at the root of *amor*, however *sociālis* it might subsequently become. It is a psychology which is not entirely unfamiliar in the third millennium.

On issues like slavery, killing, poverty, war, child-labour, the treatment of animals (and rape), the difference between our world and the ancient world is very great indeed. This raises a historical issue (is it possible to understand the ancients if we do not do so on their terms?) and a literary one (is literature best judged by its capacity to appeal to the reader's conscience, so that moral edification is the main index of aesthetic and cultural merit? Is literature 'the handmaid of ethics'?). To put it bluntly, can we understand and enjoy the ancient world only if we personally *approve* of the way they did things? Finally, if Ovid's account of rape challenges us, did it challenge the Romans? Was it Ovid's purpose so to do? Is it relevant that only one of the rapes in *Metamorphōsēs* is carried out by a human?

## *Ovid and epic*

Gravity and high seriousness are not Ovid's priorities. So his *Metamorphōsēs*, though technically an epic, often lacks what we might think of as epic grandeur. Certainly the poem does not lack for emotion, pathos and human feeling, but the vast range of disparate myths Ovid includes and the tension between the setting of the stories in far-off times and places and the contemporary angle Ovid gives to his characters seem designed to generate amusing incongruity, as does the picture of gods behaving exactly like mortals, especially in affairs of the heart; and jokes keep breaking in anyway. The explanation might lie in the prevalence of Ovid's favourite subject, *amor*, and his 'neoteric' way of handling poetry.

Greeks and Romans were highly suspicious of 'love/lust/sex' because it tended to make one look such a fool. But most people are subject to it, some throughout much of their lives, and (as we have seen) Ovid had put it and its usually disastrous consequences at the centre of his early work. By also putting it at the centre of his *Metamorphōsēs*, he signals that this is going to be an epic with a difference – an epic where the 'moving toyshop of the heart' (Pope), in all its folly and feeling, is one of the main ingredients.

'Neoteric' is the term applied to Roman poetry influenced by Hellenistic Greek poets ('Hellenistic' means 'Greek-like', 'Greek-style', and refers to the Greek world from 323 to 331 BC when Alexander had spread Greek culture far and wide). It derives from the Greek *hoi neōteroi* 'the younger/modern/fashionable [poets]', a term used by Cicero of trendy poets in Rome in the first century BC. Broadly,

neoteric poetry is characterised by its sophistication, elegance, cleverness, miniaturism, contrived literary self-consciousness and allusiveness to other poetry. At the beginning of the Apollo and Daphne story, for example, Ovid consciously refers back to his *Amōrēs* (see **Comment** on 1.452–62); in his Narcissus story, Narcissus takes on all the characteristics of the 'haughty lover' of Ovid's early poetry (see **Comment** on 10.351–61). In other words, grand, sonorous, noble Roman epic has, in Ovid's hands, become transformed in terms of style, form and content.

All this raises questions about the sense in which *Metamorphōsēs* can be said to be an epic at all. It *looks* epic in size, metre (hexameter is the traditional epic form) and some of its reflexes (e.g. the interventions of the gods, similes, speeches, catalogues, and so on). But if 'epic' is 'great heroes fighting it out on the battlefield while the greatest of them all battles with his inner demons' (like the *Iliad*), or 'a great hero overcoming obstacles to return home' (like the *Odyssey*), or 'a great hero on a mission to found a nation with the help of the gods' (like the *Aeneid*), *Metamorphōsēs* is automatically defined out of the equation (a constant problem with definitions of any sort). For example, *Metamorphōsēs* does not have a central hero on a mission of any sort (and the serious fighting tends to take place at weddings). The great hero Theseus simply sits down and listens to stories. Highly articulate and sexually charged women ruthlessly pursue their own desires (e.g. Byblis). The poem is highly episodic, one myth loosely strung together with the next, rather like an anthology (indeed, *Metamorphōsēs* has its basic origins in collections of myths made by earlier Greek poets). There is no sense of narrative direction. More than one-third of the poem is told through the mouth of someone other than the narrator Ovid. The often trivial or downright demeaning loves/lust of men and gods are a major feature: the sort of fun Ovid had with people-in-love in his earlier elegiac work keeps on breaking through. But nor is it exactly mock-epic: Ovid is not obviously *laughing* at the genre, but doing something quite different, and very Ovidian, with it. It is as if he wants to show that he can do 'epic' too, but that there is no point in doing a 'Homer' or 'Virgil'. They had already been done. So he does an 'Ovid' instead, producing something quite unique in the process, characterised by an unmatched multiplicity and diversity of genres, subject-matter and styles.

## *Irony and paradox*

One especial feature of life and language appeals to Ovid: its paradoxes. His characters constantly embark on courses of action designed to bring them happiness

but doomed only to bring them misery. Sometimes it is their fault; sometimes they are led into it by the gods. *amor* is one obvious example, bringing with it both intense pleasure and intense pain. The irony of these situations is that both gods and humans *think* they are acting in their own interests when Ovid makes it transparent to the reader that they are not: by acting in certain ways, they lay themselves open to being acted upon (often reflexively, i.e. by themselves) in ways they did not, or could not, expect. Passage 8, Narcissus, offers the most obvious example. Ovid's language constantly points up the paradoxes and ironies inherent in such situations.

## *Style*

Ovid is a highly rhetorical poet. This simply means: (i) that he takes extraordinary care over every single word – words are there to be *enjoyed*; (ii) that he composes in a language rich in figures of speech that particularly favours repetition, balance, contrast and climax (see the **Glossary of technical literary terms** for some of the most common); and (iii) that he is looking to invent plausible ways of arousing his readers' emotions, especially by making his characters act and speak in ways that will persuasively reproduce (in his readers' eyes, he hopes) their states of mind. In other words, Ovid sees a connection between painting persuasive characters and touching his readers' hearts. The technical rhetorical term for 'thinking up ways of making the action and characters sound as plausible as possible' is *inuentio*. The word is most obviously applicable to pleading cases at law, but Ovid is its literary master.

Whereas Virgil dwells on his subject, repeating ideas in different forms in the same line, Ovid gets on with it. The story is what counts; what people say or do next is his main interest. The result is that, to generalise, there is a *consistent* emotional profundity to Virgil that one does not find in Ovid.

By the same token, there is a speed in Ovid one does not regularly find in Virgil (see e.g. **Study section** to passage 16). Comparisons between the two show that Ovid's grammar is simpler; metrically he uses more dactyls and fewer elisions; and sense-breaks tend to recur at the main caesuras (see on **Metre** (12) below). In this sense, Ovid's surface style is more 'Homeric' than Virgil's.

There is another very Homeric feature of Ovid's work: the simile. Homer started this trend; there are about three hundred similes in the *Iliad*, about eighty in the *Odyssey*. In *Metamorphōsēs*, about the same length as the *Odyssey* and one-fifth shorter than the *Iliad*, there are over two hundred and fifty. For an example of how Ovid uses similes, see **Comment** on 1.490–503.

## *Some assessments*

Because it is almost impossible to pin Ovid down, it may be helpful to offer some general assessments made of *Metamorphōsēs* and various features of it by scholars of the past fifty years.

L. P. Wilkinson (1955, 155) suggests we:

approach the *Metamorphoses* with no preconception about what we are to get out of it, taking each episode as we find it, letting the 'most capricious poet', as Touchstone called him, lead us through romance, burlesque, splendour, horror, pathos, macabre, rhetoric, genre-painting, debate, landscape-painting, antiquarian interest, patriotic pride – wherever his own fancy leads him.

Brooks Otis (1966, 323) summarises as follows:

Virgil is an author who enters into his readers' and characters' feelings in order to enhance the majesty of his epic and Roman theme, to suggest the symbolic relevance of even the most incredible scenes. Ovid, instead, exhibits all the incongruities and absurdities, all the unpalatable truth behind the epic décor, all the scandal of myth, in order to shock, amuse or, sometimes, even enrage. Ovid's approach to epic was thus subject to very severe limitations: wherever he could treat epic or heroic material in a light, satiric or humorous way, he was almost uniformly successful in realizing his essentially comic or critical aims . . . But when he tried to treat heroic themes in a serious or a Virgilian way, he met an absolute check, and fell into the worst sort of bathos. His misfortune was that his epic plan and purpose could not be made to fit his peculiar abilities and deficiencies. His poem is thus a combination of true comedy, real pathos and false heroics, of intentional and unintentional humour, of conscious and unconscious grotesquerie, of brilliant design and disastrous mistake. No wonder it has been so often, so usually misunderstood!

O. S. Due (1974, 164–5) argues:

*Metamorphoses* are not really an epic poem. They are a descriptive poem. And what is described is the innumerable aspects of man, and not least of woman, and of their behaviour as individuals in this fantastic world. Ovid's gods reveal nothing about religion, and his Kings nothing about the state. Ovid's animals are not zoological but psychological phenomena. This vast gallery of virgins, mothers, wives, young men, fathers, and husbands, heroes, nymphs, gods, monsters, and plain people, with their different human characters, good and bad or both, and their strange experiences, happy or more often unhappy, in their imaginary world broaden the reader's human knowledge as they pass before his eyes. Ovid does not point a moral. Any moral would narrow the import of the description: life may be just, but is far from always just, it is often comic or pathetic or stark or cruel or grotesque and macabre. It is always fascinating and interesting – as interesting and

fascinating as our own lives and that of our neighbour when looked upon with fresh eyes . . . *Man* is what all revolves around, his shortcomings, his passions, his aggressions, his pretensions, and his love, a mixture of heroism, tragedy, comedy, romance and elegy, true as only life itself.

Philip Hardie (2002a, 4–8, *passim*) summarises modern approaches, which seem to concentrate on finding in Ovid support for various literary and linguistic theories:

What formerly was seen as superficial wit and an irredeemable lack of seriousness has been reassessed in the light of a postmodernist flight from realism and presence towards textuality and anti-foundationalism. 'Parody', a term often used in dismissive acknowledgement of Ovid's entertainment value, has moved to the theoretical centre of studies of allusion and inter-textuality. Ovid exults in the fictiveness of his poetry, that written in the first person singular quite as much as self-evidently tall tales like that of the beautiful girl Scylla changed into a hideous sea-monster (*Met.* 13.732–4). At the heart of the *Metamorphoses* we come across a debate on the truth or fiction of stories of metamorphosis, conducted by fictional characters at the dinner-table of a river-god, himself a shape-shifter (*Met.* 8.611–19).

The later twentieth-century novel saw a significant shift from the prevailing nineteenth-century realist tradition that concealed its own devices, back towards the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century self-conscious novel, defined by Robert Alter as 'a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality'. The line of Cervantes, Sterne, and Diderot may be traced back directly to the ancient prose novel, but also to Ovid . . .

Ovid has often been accused of mocking and trivializing love, and in effect bringing about the death of love elegy. This might seem strange for a poet described by Chaucer as 'Venus' clerk' (*House of Fame* 1487). Recent theorizations of desire offer opportunities to move beyond the stereotype of Ovid the cynical realist. The teasing revelation that the elegist's object of desire, Corinna (Ovid's girl-friend in *Amōrēs*), may be no more than an effect of the text confronts us with an awareness of our own investment of desire in the process of reading. 'Reading about desire provokes the desire to read.' Ovid complains that he has prostituted his girl-friend to the reader in his poems (*Am.* 3.12.5–8). In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid offers virtuoso experiences of a Barthesian 'plaisir du texte'. An episode like the story of Mercury's enchantment of Argus (*Met.* 1.668–723) thematizes the model of reading as seduction.

Peter Brooks puts Freudian theories of desire to work in analyses of the workings of texts, both in the dynamic of desire and repetition that structures narrative plots, and in the inscription of meaning on desired bodies within such narratives, the 'semioticization of desire'. Ovidian narrative repetition lends itself readily to the former kind of analysis; with regard to the latter a body like that of Daphne, in the