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Ovid's Metamorphoses

Elaine Fantham

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Fantasy, the Fabulous, and the Miraculous Metamorphoses of Nature

Monsters and Marvels

Ancient myth and modern science fiction have in common their special ingredients of the fabulous, the miraculous, and the monstrous. These three adjectives all have Latin roots and go back to classical ideas about the license of different genres to indulge in fantasy. Roman rhetoric, for example, distinguished true historical narratives and plausible comic narratives from fabulous stories that were neither true nor plausible, citing as an example of the latter Medea's "huge winged dragons yoked to a car" from Ennius's tragedy. But even tragedy could only exploit the miraculous or marvelous as part of the plot, not part of the staged action. When Horace forbids the tragic playwright to show the offensive or the grotesque, his two examples are metamorphoses later used by Ovid: of Procne turning into a bird and of Cadmus into a snake. And metamorphosis itself is clearly monstrous, in both Roman senses: we think of a monster as some hybrid creature not normally found in nature, but for Romans a *monstrum* was primarily a supernatural event, a portent sent by the gods to show (*monstrare*) or warn (*monere*) men against dangerous behavior. So both the half-formed natural creatures found

growing in the Nile mud (1.434–37) and the transformation of Phaethon's sisters into poplars (2.367) are called *monstra*. But so are the dragons and sea monsters defeated by Cadmus and Perseus and the tame dragon of the golden fleece.

In Plato's *Phaedrus,* when Socrates finds himself on the very spot where the winged Boreas supposedly carried off Princess Orithyia (described in *Met.* 6.702–10), he mentions the possibility of "saving" the myth by rationalization (the princess was carried away by a hurricane) but points out that a rationalizer would also have to explain away "centaurs and the chimaera, not to mention a whole host of such creatures, Gorgons and Pegasuses and countless other remarkable monsters of legend" (*Phaedr.* 229de).

In other words, the *Metamorphoses* is a "discourse of wonders," to quote the title of a fine recent study, and derives much of its appeal to our imagination from impossible events and beings that are neither human nor god nor beast. When Glaucus the fisherman transforms himself into a marine creature by eating magic seaweed, the nymph Scylla wonders whether this merman with blue beard and fishy tail is a god or a monster (13.912). Taking a cue from the ancient critics, let us consider the use Ovid makes, first, of some fabulous activities—flying and rejuvenation by witchcraft—and then of some fabulous creatures, the breed of centaurs.

First comes flying. Socrates jibbed at the myth of Boreas's rape of an Athenian princess but does not mention its extension by the birth of the winged twins, to which Ovid adds a pretense of plausibility by claiming that the twins developed wings, like secondary sexual characteristics, only when they reached puberty (6.716–8). We have, of course, accepted winged Olympians since Mercury first appeared, putting on his winged sandals to swoop to earth and taking them off when he disguises himself as a shepherd (1.671–5). In book 2 Ovid expands a vivid account of him looking down on earth and changing course when he sees the beautiful princesses, hovering in the air like a hawk over his prey (2.714–21). Similarly, after Mercury equips Perseus with winged sandals, the poet notes how Perseus is so stunned by the beauty of the half-naked and chained Andromeda that he "almost forgot to fly" (4.676–7), but

then he soars and dives expertly in order to overcome the sea monster (4.712–20). To judge from Homer, all gods can control their flight, but some seem to enjoy special equipment. Thus, Phaethon can attempt to follow the Sun's regular course through the air in the sun chariot, and it is the Sun who lends a serpent-driven chariot to his grandchild Medea in Ovid's narrative, as he does in Greek tragedy.

In Medea's case, Ovid does not invoke her use of the chariot until she has already amazed both the Thessalian spectators and his Roman readers by some extended magical feats. We do not know if earlier writers lingered over her rejuvenation of Jason's aged father (he is long dead in Apollonius), but Ovid makes it the central and longest episode (163–293) in his Medea narrative. With her cousin Circe, Medea is Ovid's best example of someone who practices witchcraft. Begged by Jason to save his ailing father, she waits for the full moon, then makes herself ritually pure before praying to Hecate, listing the miracles of domination over nature that the black powers have enabled her to accomplish. When she begs Hecate for magic juices, the stars twinkle to confirm divine assent, and her sky chariot is suddenly at her side (7.180–217). Pausing to pat the necks of her serpent team, she sets the reins in motion and spends nine days flying across Thessaly to gather herbs. So powerful are the herbs that their proximity rejuvenates her serpents. But she backs up her pharmacopoeia with altars to Hecate and Youth, a sacred bouquet garni, and trenches to catch the blood of the sheep she sacrifices, topped up with libations of wine and milk and an appeal to the infernal rulers not to take the old man's soul (238–50). Medicine follows religion as Medea puts the old man to sleep on the bed of herbs and purifies him with fire, water, and sulfur. The herbs boiling in her cauldron are reinforced with powerful animal parts taken from screech owls and werewolves, and tested when Medea stirs the brew with a dried-up olive branch, which bursts into leaf. Now she is ready to cut Aeson's throat and replace his blood with the potion. The old man loses forty years of decrepitude, recovering the physique of a man in his prime. Even the god Bacchus is amazed at the miracle of so great a portent (7.294), but

Medea merely exploits the fame of her supernatural achievement to commit the entirely natural murder of Jason's old enemy Pelias. The chariot that she used for leisured herb gathering she now needs to escape from the scenes of her crimes, first to Corinth, then from Corinth to Athens (392, 398). Her last escape from Athens and from retaliation for her attempt to poison Theseus comes when (like her cousin Circe) she employs spells to generate a protective mist; the chariot, though unmentioned, is probably on hand for her getaway.

Having exploited the mystery of supernatural flight, Ovid adopts a very different tone for his last major flight narrative, the story of Daedalus and Icarus. He had already told their story in the second book of his *Art of Love.* Daedalus is the model of human ingenuity, an engineer who can construct a model cow to enable Pasiphae to mate with the bull she lusts after, and an inextricable labyrinth to contain her monstrous hybrid offspring, the bull-man Minotaur (8.159–68; also see ch. 4). To escape his imprisonment, Daedalus constructs feathered wings for himself and his little son, chooses his altitude, and reaches his destination. It is Icarus who soars too high and drops helpless into the sea when the sun's heat melts the wax that binds his wings (8.188–235). The onlookers may believe they have seen gods flying overhead, but in this context of human pathos the poet avoids any note of fantasy and keeps close to the plausible.

Now consider in turn how Ovid exploits the mythical tradition of monsters and hybrid creatures. We saw in chapter 7 how the whole Perseus saga is full of supernatural creatures—first Medusa, with her power to petrify, and her offspring, the winged horse Pegasus and the monster Chrysaor, then the sea monster—followed by protracted demonstrations of Medusa's posthumous powers as Perseus's fatal weapon. So let us take a cue from Socrates and look at Ovid's centaurs. In Greek mythology the centaurs were of doubly unnatural origin, since their human ancestor, Ixion, begot Centaurus on a cloud, and Centaurus mated with a series of mares. But one centaur, Chiron, child of the nymph Phillyra and Saturn in the form of a stallion, was of a higher nature: he was immortal, wise, and benevolent and acted as teacher of music and medicine to Achilles and Jason. We meet him briefly in *Met.* 2 when Apollo gives Chi-

ron his motherless child Aesculapius to rear, and Chiron's prophetic daughter Ocyroe begins to prophesy Aesculapius's illicit resurrection. Here, Ovid uses Chiron's nature only to play on the divine metamorphosis of his human daughter into a mare and on his frustrated desire for mortality and death.

Ovid treats the notorious drunken brawl of the centaurs with the Lapiths at the wedding of Peirithous and Hippodame in a more farcical mode. In Nestor's account, one centaur, Eurytion, was inflamed with wine and laid lecherous hands on the bride, leading to a general uproar. The wedding is set in a mountain cave, and for more than a hundred lines Ovid draws his humor from the improvised weapons (goblets, lampstands, altars, torches, even whole oak trees) hurled by the combatants, without differentiating the human from the half-animal brawlers. He delays exploiting the centaurs' physique for comic effect, limiting himself to four moments in the continuing battle, before and after the sentimental tale of the centaurs Cyllarus and Hylonome. At line 345 a Lapith leaps onto the back of the centaur Bianor, unaccustomed to any rider except himself (i.e., his own human torso); the Lapith rides by kneeing the centaur and grasping his hair as he smashes him across the face. In the melée another centaur rears up and tramples his enemy with his hooves.

Then, changing tone, the poet introduces a love story with an apostrophe to the doomed hero: "alas, Cyllarus, your beauty did not rescue you in battle—that is, if we admit beauty in such an animal nature." As if in a wedding song Ovid describes his manly golden beard and locks, his fine shoulders comparable to noble statues, and every human aspect of his body, "nor was the appearance of the horse flawed, or unworthy of the man. Complete him with a horse's neck and head and he would have been a fit mount for Castor, with firm back and lofty muscled breast, glossy black body, and white legs and tail. But though many females of his tribe desired him, only Hylonome won his love" (12.398–405). With equal humor Ovid describes the fine grooming (*cultus*) of his beloved, her well-combed hair, her use of floral perfume and twice-daily baths, and her selection of the most becoming animal skins for her cloth-

ing. In an idyll of mutual love the couple rove the mountains together, and together enter battle. But they are no sooner described than they perish, as Cyllarus is wounded in the breast by an arrow, and Hylonome, lamenting, catches his dying breath. After this *Liebestod,* like Thisbe, she snatches the weapon that killed him and falls upon it, embracing her husband at the last. The charm of the tale lies in its closeness to human romance.

But Nestor's reminiscences return instantly from pathos to mayhem, with two more plays on the horse-men, as Phaeocomes advances, wearing six lion-skins to cover both man and horse, and the four-footed Echeclus is speared by the Lapith Ampyx. Even so, Ovid seems to have thought the transgendered Caeneus, with whom Nestor begins and ends his reminiscences, more remarkable than the cloud-begotten hybrids of man and horse. In both the flight sequences and the tales of imaginary creatures, the poet decides for himself when he wants to take a fantastic element for granted, and when he will create humor or pathos by drawing out its implications.

Another Aspect of the Nonhuman: Allegorical Personages

Before Ovid, epic might offer a brief picture of abstractions like "Strife," which Homer depicts reaching from earth to heaven as she strides in battle attending on Ares in *Iliad* 4, or the "Prayers" and "Sinful Madness" of *Iliad* 9.502–6. To persuade Achilles to accept Agamemnon's petition, Phoenix offers a moral allegory, describing Prayers as "daughters of mighty Zeus, wrinkled, lame, and squint-eyed, who take pains to follow Madness. But Madness is strong and swift, so that she runs ahead of them all and causes harm to men worldwide. Then they put things right in her wake." In the allegory a man is rewarded or punished according to the respect that he shows to these daughters of the god of justice.

Punishment and vengeance were likely to be personified as ugly and vicious spirits equipped with instruments of torture, as are Bios

and Kratos (Violence and Strength) in *Prometheus Bound.* This is how Virgil describes the monstrous fury Allecto, summoned by Juno (7.324–40), but Ovid goes beyond him in sending Juno down to Hades for the fury Tisiphone and describing the Fury's dress and escort. Similarly, he constructs complex descriptions of abstract concepts, providing them with an appropriate retinue and dwelling place. (Such set-pieces are called *ekphrasis.*) The first two instances, Jealousy and Hunger, are embodiments of psychological misery that somewhat resemble each other. Thus, the house of Jealousy is filthy with black decay, set in a sunless valley, unrefreshed by any breeze, and chilly for lack of fire; in other words, Jealousy is shown as lacking in all natural comfort (2.760–4). Minerva wants to punish the guilty Aglauros for betraying her secret, but she cannot enter the house of Jealousy, and so she strikes the door open and sees its inmate feeding on vipers' flesh. True to her character Jealousy groans and sighs at the sight of the goddess's health and beauty. Ovid has postponed her portrait until now: she is pallid and skinny, with shifty eyes and discolored teeth; her breast is green with gall and her tongue steeped in venom. Sleepless from discontent at others' success, she is simultaneously her own torment, gnawing with criticism as she is gnawed with envy (775–82). At Minerva's command Jealousy clutches her thorny stick and follows, muttering. She tramples the fields and blights the crops wherever she treads until she reaches the bedchamber of Aglauros; then, like Virgil's demon Allecto, she attacks the sleeping girl, filling her breast with brambles and poison and pitch, and besets her mind with images of her sister's good fortune in being courted by Mercury until she smolders with a slow and flameless fire, like thorny weeds. So we see the vicious passion, first in isolation, then embodied in its human victim.

The poet uses a similar technique to introduce Hunger, summoned by Ceres through one of her nymphs to punish the blasphemous Erysichthon (8.780–95). Like Minerva, Ceres cannot risk the contamination of approaching the negative spirit of Hunger, so she describes to the nymph where to find her, in an icy barren region of Scythia, along with other evil beings, "Chill" and "Pallor" and "Shivering." Her instructions are that Hunger should enter the

evil man and torment him. The nymph (who incidentally borrows Ceres' flying-serpent chariot) finds Hunger grubbing up roots with her bare nails and teeth, hollow-eyed and so thin that her bones and joints all protrude and she has a hole where there should be a stomach. So infectious is her aura that the messenger nymph begins to feel hungry and turns her snakes right around in retreat to Thessaly. Hunger obediently seizes hold of the sleeping Erysichthon and fills him with manic and ruinous greed (8.816–42).

In contrast, Ovid offers a far more appealing introduction to Sleep in the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone: embarrassed by Alcyone's prayers for her dead husband, Juno sends Iris to ask Sleep for a dream in which a shape-shifter disguised as the drowned Ceyx will explain his death to his wife. It is always a god or his representative who contacts the abstraction, but this time the abstraction proliferates itself. First comes the description of Sleep's deep cave near the legendary Cimmerians, where the sun never penetrates but mists exude from the ground in a dim twilight. There is no sound or movement except the flowing of Lethe, and there is a carpet of soporific plants which Night gathers to sprinkle over the earth. Inside the cave, Sleep rests under dusky coverlets on a deep-feathered ebony couch, surrounded by innumerable dreams (11.592–615). Pushing the dreams aside like bats or cobwebs, Iris casts an unaccustomed light, and the god with difficulty rouses himself, shaking himself (i.e., sleep) from his eyes. His visitor addresses Sleep with almost hymnic respect, delivers her message, and departs. Now Ovid lets his imagination rip, as he describes the dream impersonator Morpheus ("The shaper") commissioned by Sleep who can walk the walk and talk the talk of each man; not content, Ovid mentions other dream artists: one who can imitate bird or beast or snake, whom the gods call Icelos (Greek *eikelos*, the Likener) but mortals call Phobetor (Nightmare), and another, Phantasos, who specializes in imitating the inanimate; but the latter, we are told, only appears to high-class dreamers, while others visit the common people. Once Sleep has summoned Morpheus, he sinks back and buries his head in his bedclothes. We have already seen in chapter 6 how consummately Morpheus carries out his assignment with Alcyone.

Is it coincidence that Ovid does not openly compete with Virgil until he reaches the last of his extended personifications? Virgil had prefaced the collapse of Aeneas's relationship with Dido in *Aeneid* with a vivid portrait of Rumor, "swiftest of all evils, who thrives in action and gains strength as she goes, starting quite small, then soaring into the sky, and burying her head in the clouds as she treads on the ground." Virgil makes her the last child of an enraged Earth; she is "a huge loathsome monster with as many eyes and tongues and mouths and ears as she has feathers: this monster flies by night betwixt heaven and earth, never shutting her eyes in sleep; by day she crouches on a rooftop or high towers and terrifies mighty cities, as obsessed with distorted lies as she is a messenger of truth" (4.174–88). Rumor seems to be related to the screech owls, which Romans identified with witches, but she is also a two-way transmitter, listening for gossip as well as spreading it by mouth.

Ovid reserves his elaboration of this famous portrait for the opening of the Trojan War after the Greek fleet gathers at Aulis. Unlike his other personifications, Rumor (*fama*) is not activated by any divine superior. Instead, she is at the center of the earth listening in on and scrutinizing whatever happens. Her home is a citadel with a thousand open entrances; the whole building is made of echoing bronze, which repeats and echoes whatever it hears; inside there is no silence or repose but a constant murmuring like a distant sea or storm. Like a Roman senator's mansion, Rumor's halls are filled with a crowd that comes and goes, mixing with the truth thousands of fictitious tales that spread confusion. And, like the tales of Virgil's Fama, Rumor's lies are incessantly repeated, increasing the scale of falsehood, by her retinue of Credulity, rash Confusion, hollow Joy, panicked Terrors, fresh Disloyalty, and suspect Whispers. At the center of them all, she sees whatever happens in heaven and earth and sea and carries her investigations over the whole world (12.39–63).

But—anticlimactically—all Rumor achieves is to alert the Trojans to the actual approach of the Greek expedition. No rumor was needed, for the intent of the Greeks was well heralded across the Aegean. Where Virgil's Rumor brought catastrophe upon Dido and

turned Aeneas back to his destiny, it would be hard to accept that Fama had prevented a Greek surprise victory. Soon after, when Cycnus, son of Neptune, tells Achilles that he knows him from Fama (12.86) and is himself immune to weapons, this too does not affect the outcome, either by giving Cycnus helpful knowledge (for instance, of Achilles' heel) or by saving him from death by suffocation. Where Jealousy, Hunger, and Sleep offered vivid food for the imagination and prepared the way for retribution or release from grief, the world information service of Rumor serves no narrative purpose.

The Miracles of Natural Change

Critics have expressed contrary views of the extraordinary lecture (or sermon) attributed to Pythagoras, yet its length and its position in the first half of the final book guarantee that Ovid saw it as an important part of the meaning of his poem. Of course, he knew, as every Roman did since Cicero, that Rome's second king, Numa, died long before Pythagoras was born; he also knew that the teachings which he crowded into this diatribe came from many different poetic and philosophical sources, not least the Sicilian Empedocles. But with it he accomplished two goals: to show that, far from being abnormal, metamorphosis was an essential process in the continued operation of the world and its inhabitants, and to reinforce the pattern of culture traveling west from Greece (or north from Magna Graecia) to Rome. One can add a third function: the recapitulation of themes from throughout the poem, especially its opening books.

"Pythagoras" opens by preaching abstention from animal flesh, arguing from the innocent nourishment of milk and honey and plants supplied by nature (cf. 1.112–3), from the vegetarian diet of domestic animals, and the fruits enjoyed by the golden age (15.97, cf. 1.104–6). An evil deity, whoever it might have been (the wording of 15.104 recalls the good deity of 1.32), taught men animal sacrifice, so that they behaved like wolves or Cyclopes, filling their

flesh with the flesh of others (15.87–92). Like Lucretius, the prophet opens his denunciation of false religion by stressing the cruelty of sacrifice, the suffering of the victim, and the dishonesty of claiming this is pleasing to the gods.

In the next phase, Pythagoras claims inspiration by Apollo and echoes both Lucretius (1.926–30) and Virgil (*Georgics* 3.291–3) in his joy in knowledge, as he envisions soaring above men with pity for their folly and fear of death (15.143–52). In giving him this joyful pride, Ovid is signaling the self-consciously didactic nature of Pythagoras's teaching (Volk 2002: 64–7). But his message contradicts that of Lucretius: the soul is immortal and always moves from one body to another, just as he himself once lived as a Greek warrior at Troy. It is immune to death, and though all things change, nothing perishes, as the spirit flows from man to beast.

> As yielding wax is stamped with new designs
> And changes shape and seems not still the same,
> Yet is indeed the same, even so our souls
> Are still the same for ever, but adopt
> In their migrations ever varying forms. (15.169–72,
> tr. Melville)

This protreptic section of Pythagoras's teaching ends as it began, with a prayer to refrain from the evil killing of souls which are our own kin. Does Ovid himself believe this? Or does he simply admire its idealism?

In the third section (176–236) the philosopher turns from ethics to cosmology. Nothing in the whole world abides, but everything flows (here Ovid echoes Heracleitus). Time itself glides like a river as day succeeds night, and dawn hands over the sky to Phoebus (189–92 might recall Phaethon, but now the sun is represented as a shield); the moon too waxes and wanes, and the seasons follow each other, imitating the ages of man. So spring is like a sucking baby, and summer a sturdy youth; autumn is a mature man, while aging winter comes with trembling step and balding gray hair (199–213). Human development, which has just served as a comparison, becomes the next focus, as Pythagoras traces the stages of our life from

conception through growth to decay, and on to death. Though the soul survives, our body and human identity perish (214–36).

The elements too do not stay fixed, and Ovid recalls a number of these transformations from his cosmogony: their differential weight (15.242, cf. 1.30), the soaring of fire at first creation (15.248 ~.26) and the resolution of the elements as they re-form, fire thickening into air, air into earth, and earth into a ball of water (15.251 ~1.35). As he approaches the midpoint in the lecture, Pythagoras again couches natural change and renewal in the thematic language of metamorphosis:

> Nothing retains its form; new shapes from old
> Nature the great inventor ceaselessly
> Contrives. In all creation, be assured,
> There is no death—no death, but only change
> And innovation; what we men call birth
> Is but a different new beginning; death
> Is but to cease to be the same. (252–6, tr. Melville)

Pythagoras is moving from the abstractions of physics to the particulars of geology: seashells and anchors found inland, even on mountains, the ebb and flow of flood (recalling 1.281–92, 343–7), and shifting natural features. From now on, Ovid enriches the lecture with a mass of marvels known to us from other Greek and Roman writings. Tales of disappearing rivers (quoted by Seneca in his *Natural Questions*) and the drowned Peloponnesian cities Helice and Buris (already cited by Polybius and Strabo, recurring five times in Seneca, and in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*) introduce strange accounts of the harmful properties of waters (a distinct topic in Pliny: although Seneca credits his ideas to Empedocles, he actually cites this speech four times as his authority). There are strategic echoes of earlier books: on the centaurs and Hercules (283–5, cf. 9.191); on the winds (298–303, recalling 1.56–8); and on the strange power of the spring Salmacis (319, cf. 4.285–7). Floating Delos and the clashing Symplegades (337–8) recall the adventures of Leto (6.333–6) and the Argonauts (7.1–7), while Etna evokes shipwrecked Achaemenides and his tale of the Cyclops (340–55; cf. 14.167–97).

At 356 the geographical catalogue yields to zoology: to the regeneration of bees (*bougonia,* 364–7, recalling Virgil's *Georgics* 4), chrysalises and tadpoles half-formed in mud (375–6 = 1.403–10, 428–9), and the she-bear's role in licking her newborn cubs into shape. The philosopher seems to stray from his argument to include delight in marvels like the peacock's tail (385, cf. 1.722–3) and the mythical self-renewing phoenix, which builds its own pyre, from which the newborn bird arises to carry its nest to the temple of the sun. Certainly, the miscellaneous notices of the sex-changing hyena and jewel-excreting lynx have wandered far from context.

Ovid has saved up the most important illustration of eternal change: the rise and fall of cities. In the second century B.C.E., both Greek and Near Eastern traditions (e.g., the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel and the Hebrew-inspired fourth book of Sibylline oracles) knew the sequence of four empires—Assyria, Media, Persia, and Macedon—that had risen and declined, and were now adding to them the new rise of Rome. Did Ovid know Polybius's story (38.22) that Scipio Aemilianus looked on the ruins of conquered Carthage and quoted the lament of Hector for Troy in *Iliad* 6.448–9, foreseeing Rome's position in this sequence of empires? Given Pythagoras's date before the rise and fall of Persia and Macedon, Ovid substitutes a retrospect and prophecy based on Greek epic tradition. As Troy was once great in wealth and manpower, as Sparta and Mycenae flourished, and the Thebes of Oedipus and the Athens of Pandion, so Pythagoras heralds the rise of Rome by the waters of the Tiber and claims to recall the prophecy of Helenus to Aeneas—one that Helenus did not utter when they met in *Aeneid* 3. This is surely the climax of Pythagoras's diatribe, since it hails the future growth of Rome and the universal rule that a descendant of Iulus will confer upon it before he is taken to heaven (444–9). It might seem to follow from the whole extended argument that this too shall pass away, and Rome's empire will not be eternal, but no hint is given.

After his prophet's guarantee of the divinity of Caesar (or Augustus) and imperial Rome, the poet cuts away to his original message of metempsychosis and its moral implications. If human souls

can pass into living creatures, and domestic animals are our benefactors, let us not hunt or eat animal flesh. If we must kill predatory creatures, let us be content to kill them and limit our mouths to innocent nourishment.

So this was Numa's education! It has been suggested that we are supposed to find this lecture absurd, but there is no mockery of Numa here or in other Augustan authors. He was the model king who instructed Rome in religion and the arts of peace. Might I suggest instead that Ovid has colored with academic eccentricity a fundamentally well-conceived lecture, that the anecdotal marvels of 273–417 are just a display of learning out of control? Perhaps one answer is that the peculiar tales of cities swallowed up by nature and of animal regeneration complement and offset what might otherwise be too solemn and moralizing a concentration on humanity and in particular on Rome and her destiny. As it is, Rome is only the last of many cities named, and man is just one creature among insects, birds, and beasts. As stimulus to the imagination this lecture offers a dazzling tour, reviving the miraculous aspect of the everyday while exciting the fancy with other, more fantastic wonders of the world.

Further Reading

On natural wonders, see K. S. Myers, *Ovid's Causes: Cosmology and Aetiology in the Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor, 1994); Stephen M. Wheeler, *A Discourse of Wonders: Audience and Performance in Ovid's "Metamorphoses"* (Philadelphia, 1999). On the Roman tradition of didactic poetry reflected in the speech of Pythagoras, see K. Volk, *The Poetics of Latin Didactic: Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, Manilius* (Oxford, 2002), 64–7; and two important articles: P. R. Hardie, "The Speech of Pythagoras in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 15: Empedoclean Epos," *Classical Quarterly* 45 (1995): 204–14; and G. K. Galinsky, "The Speech of Pythagoras at Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.75–478," *Papers of the Leeds Latin Seminar* 10 (1998): 313–36.