

Chapter Title: Ovid's Literary Progression: Elegy to Epic

Book Title: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.511-733

Book Subtitle: Latin Text with Introduction, Commentary, Glossary of Terms, Vocabulary Aid and Study Questions

Book Author(s): Ingo Gildenhard and Andrew Zissos

Published by: Open Book Publishers

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1fzhh5b.6>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Open Book Publishers is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ovid, Metamorphoses, 3.511-733*

JSTOR

2. Ovid's Literary Progression: Elegy to Epic

When the first edition of the *Metamorphoses* hit the shelves in the bookshops of Rome, Ovid had already made a name for himself in the literary circles of the city.⁶ His official debut, the *Amores* ('Love Affairs') lured his tickled readers into a freewheeling world of elegiac love, slaphappy hedonism, and (more or less) adept adultery.⁷ His subsequent *Heroides* ('Letters written by Heroines to their absent Hero-Lovers') were also designed to appeal to connoisseurs of elegiac poetry, who could here share vicariously in stirring emotional turmoil with abandoned women of history and myth: Ovid, well attuned to female plight, provided the traditional heroes' other (better?) halves with a literary forum for voicing feelings of loss and deprivation and expressing resentment for the epic way of life. Of more practical application for the Roman lady of the world were his verses on toiletry, the *Medicamina Faciei* ('Ointments of the Face, or, How to Apply Make-up'). Once Ovid had discovered his talent for didactic exposition, he blithely continued in that vein. In perusing the urbane and sophisticated lessons on love which the self-proclaimed *erotodidaskalos* ('teacher of love') presented in his *Ars Amatoria* ('A – Z of Love') his male (and female) audience could hone their own amatory skills, while at the same time experiencing true 'jouissance' (the French term for orgasmic bliss, for the sophisticates

6 The following is adapted from Gildenhard and Zissos (2000b).

7 You can read the first book of the *Amores* on-line in another OBP edition. See <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/348>

among you) in the act of reading a work, which is, as one critic put it, ‘a poem about poetry, and sex, and poetry as sex’.⁸

After these extensive sessions in poetic philandering, Ovid’s ancient readers, by then all hopeless and desperate *eros*-addicts, surely welcomed the thoughtful antidote he offers in the form of the therapeutic *Remedia Amoris* (‘Cures for Love’), a poem written with the expressed purpose of freeing the wretched lover from the baneful shackles of Cupid. To cut a long story short: by the time the *Metamorphoses* were published, Ovid’s devotees had had ample opportunity to revel in the variety of his literary output about the workings of Eros, and each time, the so-called elegiac distich provided the metrical form. Publius Ovidius Naso had become, apart from a brief flirtation with the genre of tragedy (the lost *Medea*, written in Latin iambic trimeters), a virtual synonym for the composition of erotic-elegiac verse. But picking up and un-scrolling any one of the fifteen books that contained the *Metamorphoses*, a reader familiar with Ovid’s literary career is in for a shock. Here are the first four lines of the work, which make up its proem:

In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas
 corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illa)
 adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi
 ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen.
 (*Met.* 1.1–4)

My mind compels me to sing of shapes changed into new bodies: gods, on my endeavours (for you have changed them too) breathe your inspiration, and from the very beginning of the world to my own times bring down this continuous song.

A mere glance at the layout (no indentations in alternate lines!) suffices to confirm that Ovid has definitively changed poetic metiers (as the ‘change’ of verse between *formas* and *corpora* makes a ‘new’ syntactical role for the opening phrase *In nova*).⁹ In his newest work the foreshortened

8 Sharrock (1994) vii.

9 Initially, the reader might be inclined to take the first four words (*In nova fert animus*: ‘my mind carries me on to new things’, with the adjective *nova* used as a noun) as a self-standing syntactical unit; only after reaching the opening of line 2 do we realise that *nova* in fact modifies *corpora* and the phrase goes with the participle *mutatas* (‘forms changed into new bodies’).

pentameters, which until now had been a defining characteristic of his poetry, have disappeared. Instead, row upon steady row of sturdy and well-proportioned hexameters confront the incredulous reader. Ovid, the celebrated master of the distich, the notorious *tenerorum lusor amorum* ('the playboy of light-hearted love-poetry' as he calls himself), the unrivalled champion of erotic-elegiac poetry, has produced a work written in 'heroic verse' — as the epic metre is portentously called.

But once the initial shock has worn off, readers familiar with Ovid's earlier output are bound to experience a sense of *déjà vu* (as the French say of what they have seen before). Ovid, while devoting his previous career to versifying things erotic, had always shown an inclination towards epic poetry. Already in the introductory elegy to the first book of the *Amores*, the neophyte announced that he was writing elegies merely by default. His true ambition lay elsewhere; he had actually meant to write an epic:

Arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabam
 edere, materia conveniente modis.
 par erat inferior versus — risisse Cupido
 dicitur atque unum surripuisse pedem.

(*Am.* 1.1.1–4)

About arms and violent wars I was getting ready to compose in the weighty hexameter. The material matched the metrical form: the second verse was of equal length to the first — but Cupid (they say) smiled and snatched away one of the feet.¹⁰

As can be gathered from pointed allusions to the *Aeneid* (which begins *Arma virumque cano*: 'I sing of arms and the man') at the opening, the poem Ovid set out to write before Cupid intervened would have been no routine piece of work, but rather an epic of such martial grandeur as to challenge Virgil's masterpiece. Ovid's choice of the hexameter for the *Metamorphoses* signals that he has finally realized his long-standing ambition to compose an epic. But already the witty features of the proem (starting with its minuscule length: four meagre lines for a work of fifteen

10 By removing one of the feet from the second verse, Cupid in effect changed the genre of the poem Ovid was composing from epic (in which all verses are hexametric — i.e. contain six feet) to elegy (in which every second verse contains five feet).

books!) indicate that his embrace of the genre is to be distinctly double-edged. And, indeed, his take on epic is as unconventional as his efforts in elegiac and didactic poetry had been. Just as the *Amores* spoofed the more serious output of his elegiac predecessors Propertius and Tibullus and his string of didactic works (the *Ars Amatoria*, the *Remedia Amoris*, the *Medicamina Faciei*) spoofed more serious ventures in the genre such as Virgil's *Georgics* (a poem on farming), so the *Metamorphoses* has mischievous fun with, while at the same time also outperforming, the Greco-Roman epic tradition from Homer to Virgil. It is arguably the most unusual epic to have come down to us from antiquity — as well as one of the most influential.