

# 4. Ovid's Theban Narrative

While some themes can be encountered virtually anywhere in the *Metamorphoses*, others cluster in certain parts and generate a distinctive narrative ethos. The first two books, for instance, have attracted the label 'Divine Comedy': they feature various sexual adventures of the Olympian gods — mostly rapes of mortal women. All cry out for a feminist critique, even if — or, better, because — the narrative tone remains fairly light throughout. With the beginning of Book 3, Ovid's literary universe takes on a darker complexion. The first protagonist of the book is the Phoenician prince Cadmus, whose appearance is a carry-over from the concluding rape/abduction tale of the previous book. At the behest of his father Agenor, Cadmus attempts to track down his sister Europa, whom Jupiter had carried off at the end of Book 2 — a veritable mission impossible. Unsuccessful in his search and forbidden by his father to return home empty-handed, Cadmus heads into voluntary exile. His wanderings bring him to Boeotia where he founds Thebes, a city in which tragic and ultimately hellish energies are unleashed.[40]

Considered from the perspective of the ancient literary tradition, it is hardly coincidental that Ovid's epic takes a 'tragic' turn as it turns to Theban myth. For in Attic drama, as Froma Zeitlin has demonstrated in a seminal essay, 'Thebes consistently supplies the radical tragic terrain where there can be no escape from the tragic in the resolution of conflict or in the institutional provision of a civic future beyond the world of the play'.[41] The city indeed epitomizes what Greek tragedy is all about. Judging from the surviving scripts of Athenian playwrights, daily life in ancient Thebes featured incessant civil strife, repeated

40 See Comm. on 513–14 for a fuller account of these preliminaries.
41 Zeitlin (1990) 131.

autochthonous disaster, miscellaneous forms of sexual perversion (rape, sodomy, incest), and even the occasional human dismemberment (*sparagmos*) — in short, the entire range of transgressions that upset the normal order of things. To quote Zeitlin again: 'Thebes, we might say, is the quintessential "other scene", as Oedipus is the paradigm of tragic man and Dionysus is the god of the theatre. There Athens acts out questions crucial to the polis, the self, the family, and society, but there they are displaced upon a city that is imagined as the mirror opposite of Athens'.[42] Ovid's version of Thebes fully lives up to the anticipation of calamity evoked by the city's longstanding tragic associations. As the fates of Cadmus and Harmonia, Actaeon, Semele, Narcissus, Pentheus, and Ino and Athamas show, the myths that Ovid here incorporates into his epic world have lost none of the sinister and fateful character that they had acquired on the tragic stage. These *dramatis personae* embark once more on a literary destiny within a tragic dystopia that inexorably leads them to their doom.

There is, indeed, a striking coherence to *Met.* 3.1–4.603, the narrative stretch that begins with Cadmus' exile and ends with his and his wife Harmonia's transformation into snakes (stories concerning the city's founder and his offspring are in *italics*):

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|---|---|
| 3.1–137 | *Foundation: Cadmus, his companions, the dragon of Mars, the Spartoi* |
| 3.138–252 | *Actaeon, son of Autonoe* |
| 3.253–315 | *Semele (birth of Bacchus)* |
| 3.316–38 | Teiresias (and his sex-changes) |
| 3.339–510 | Echo and Narcissus |
| 3.511–733 | *Pentheus, son of Agave* (including the inset tale of *Bacchus* and the Tyrrhenian sailors) |
| 4.1–415 | The daughters of Minyas and *Bacchus* |
| 4.55–388 | Tales of the Minyeides: |
| | 4.55–166 Pyramus and Thisbe |
| | 4.169–270 The Love Affairs of the Sun |
| | 4.276–388 Salmacis and Hermaphroditus |

42 Zeitlin (1990) 144.

4.416–562 *Ino and Athamas with Learchus and Melicertes*
4.563–603 *Cadmus & Harmonia: exile and transformation into snakes*

*Met*. 3.1–4.603 has been termed Ovid's *Thebaid*, insofar as it is the city of Thebes (and its environs) that provides a unifying thematic and topographical focus. Even when the narrative veers off — as in the case of Tiresias, Echo and Narcissus, and the daughters of Minyas (the 'Minyeides') — Thebes remains an important point of reference. So, for example, the Minyeides, who reside in the near-by city of Orchomenos, while in many ways forming a self-contained narrative unit within Ovid's *Thebaid*, are unable to escape the tragic forces that emanate from Thebes. Not unlike Pentheus, they fall victim to the powers of Bacchus, whom they unwisely choose to disregard.

Clearly, then, *Thebaid* is an appropriate label for *Met*. 3.1–4.603; no less appropriate, though, would be *Cadmeid* ('an epic poem about Cadmus and his offspring'), inasmuch as Ovid chronicles the fates of Cadmus and Harmonia, along with their four daughters and five grandsons:

| **Cadmus and Harmonia** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Daughters** | Autonoe | Semele | Agave | Ino |
| **Grandsons** | Actaeon | Bacchus (father: Jupiter) | Pentheus (father: Echion) | Learchus and Melicertes (father: Athamas) |

Twice Cadmus himself comes into focus: his heroics get the Theban narrative going at the beginning of Book 3; and his despairing exit from the city together with his wife and the transformation of the couple into snakes brings this particular narrative unit to a close. This 'frame' is worth a more detailed look since it defines the thematic terms for the episodes it encloses, including the set text.

The opening sequence treats events up to the foundation of the city: Cadmus' arrival in Boeotia, the slaughter of his companions by the dragon of Mars, Cadmus' revenge-killing of the beast, his sowing of its teeth at the behest of a divine voice, the rise of the Spartoi and their mutual slaughter, which leaves only a handful of survivors — Thebes'

citizen population.[43] Ovid skips over the actual foundation (and the wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia), restricting himself to what amounts to a tragic prologue for the subsequent narrative:

> Iam stabant Thebae, poteras iam, Cadme, videri
> exilio felix: soceri tibi Marsque Venusque
> contigerant; huc adde genus de coniuge tanta,
> tot natos natasque et, pignora cara, nepotes,
> hos quoque iam iuvenes; sed scilicet ultima semper
> exspectanda dies hominis, dicique beatus
> ante obitum nemo supremaque funera debet.
> Prima nepos inter tot res tibi, Cadme, secundas
> causa fuit luctus …
> (*Met*. 3.131–39)

> And now Thebes stood; now you could seem, Cadmus, a happy man even in exile. Mars and Venus had become your parents-in-law; add to this children of so distinguished a wife, so many sons and daughters and, pledges of your love, grandchildren, these too now at the brink of manhood. But of course man's last day must ever be awaited and no-one ought to be called happy before his death and funeral rites. Among such favourable circumstances, Cadmus, the first cause of grief was one of your grandsons …

After recounting the wretched fates of Cadmus' children and grandchildren, Ovid returns to the royal couple: his Theban history ends with Cadmus and Harmonia heading off into self-imposed exile and eventually transforming into snakes (*Met*. 4.563–603). Cadmus himself prays for this metamorphosis as he recalls how it all began, thus bringing the narrative full circle:

> Nescit Agenorides natam parvumque nepotem
> aequoris esse deos; luctu serieque malorum
> victus et ostentis, quae plurima viderat, exit
> conditor urbe sua, tamquam fortuna locorum,
> non sua se premeret, longisque erroribus actus
> contigit Illyricos profuga cum coniuge fines.
> iamque malis annisque graves dum prima retractant

43 For details of these developments, see Comm. on 513–14.

fata domus releguntque suos sermone labores,
'num sacer ille mea traiectus cuspide serpens'
Cadmus ait 'fuerat, tum cum Sidone profectus
vipereos sparsi per humum, nova semina, dentes?
quem si cura deum tam certa vindicat ira,
ipse precor serpens in longam porrigar alvum'.
dixit, et ut serpens in longam tenditur alvum.
(*Met*. 4.563–76)

Cadmus was unaware that his daughter (Ino) and little grandson (Melicertes) had been changed to gods of the sea. Overcome with grief and the sequence of calamities and because of the many portents he had seen, the founding father left his city, as if the fortune of the site rather than his own were oppressing him. Driven on through long wanderings, at last the exile and his wife reached the borders of Illyria. At that point, heavy with woes and years, while they went over the early calamities of their house and their own troubles in conversation, Cadmus said: 'Was that a sacred serpent which my spear transfixed back when, recently departed from Sidon, I scattered his teeth, a novel type of seed, on to the earth? If the care of the gods is avenging him with such unerring wrath, I pray that I, too be stretched into snaky form as a serpent'. And as he spoke he was stretched into a snaky form as a serpent …

A nexus of verbal correspondences correlates the beginning and end of Ovid's *Cadmeid*. At 3.131–42, Cadmus' apparent good fortune is quantified via his abundant progeny: he might seem enviable, the poet portentously observes, in view of his numerous daughters (*natas*), sons (*natos*), and grandchildren (*nepotes*). This initial plurality contrasts sharply with the singulars of the phrase *natam parvumque nepotem* at 4.563. The words refer to Cadmus' daughter Ino and grandson Melicertes, the only members of his family not yet visited by catastrophe — though Cadmus believes himself to have just witnessed their hellish destruction as well. For him they are the final link in the long chain of misfortunes which began with the gruesome demise of Actaeon (*prima … causa fuit luctus*, 3.138–39), continued through Book 3 (including Pentheus) and came to its bitter end with the lethal madness of Ino and her husband, recounted at 4.481–542. It is precisely this long sequence of dreadful calamities (*luctu serieque malorum*, 4.564) which drives Cadmus from the city that he himself founded (*exit | conditor urbe sua*, 4.565–66).

We thus start and end with Cadmus in exile; but the two exiles could hardly be more different. At the beginning of Book 3 Cadmus is in his prime, about to perform the deeds which brought him heroic renown, i.e. the killing of the dragon of Mars and the founding of Thebes. In Book 4, by contrast, we encounter a man broken down by age and suffering who is desperately trying to come to terms with the series of misfortunes that has plagued his family. Ovid underscores the bleak transformation of Cadmus from the active protagonist of Book 3 into the despairing and gloomy figure we meet in Book 4 through pointed verbal play. Most strikingly, in assuming the shape of his erstwhile victim Cadmus fulfils the prophecy uttered immediately after his triumphant slaying of Mars' serpent:

> Dum spatium victor victi considerat hostis,
> vox subito audita est; neque erat cognoscere promptum,
> unde, sed audita est: 'quid, Agenore nate, peremptum
> serpentem spectas? et tu spectabere serpens'.
> (*Met*. 3.95–98)

> While the victor surveys the size of his vanquished foe, suddenly a voice is heard; it was impossible to recognize from where, but it was heard: 'Why, son of Agenor, do you gaze upon the serpent you killed? You too will be gazed upon as serpent'.

Through its startling prediction, the unattributed voice implicitly proclaims the dreadful law that in a tragic universe each source of good fortune contains the seeds of its own undoing. Like the serpent in this early scene, at 4.565 Cadmus is described as defeated (*victus*). In the later passage, moreover, Cadmus has, through bitter experience, come to understand the typically Theban proximity of victory and disaster at which Ovid already signalled, both overtly through the prophecy of Cadmus' ultimate transformation into the very shape of his conquered enemy, and more subtly through the collocation of *victor* and *victi* at 3.95. Cadmus' final realization that he killed a sacred beast closes down Ovid's Theban narrative by returning it to the point at which it all began. In a traumatic reversal, the very objects that once promised a prosperous future for Thebes, the teeth of the dragon — compare 3.103 *vipereos dentes*, *populi incrementa futuri* with 4.571–73, where Cadmus ponders the possibility that the *vipereos dentes* he used come from a

sacred beast — in hindsight turn out to bear within them the burden of a curse that was bound to blight developments from the outset. Cadmus' wish to be transformed into a serpent arises from the painful realization that only a metamorphic 'return' to the origin of his city will put an end to his agony: it is a culminating illustration of the fact that Thebes is ever unable to differentiate itself from its troubled beginnings.[44]

In the course of the narrative arch that Ovid traces in his Theban history, we thus get a tragic conflation of human and beast and an equally tragic inversion of *victor* ('conqueror') and *victus* ('conquered') as Cadmus rises from a condition of exile to become king of his own city, and progenitor of a prosperous family, before being reduced again to his original status as a childless outcast. Yet the transformation of Cadmus into a snake might also elicit the cleansing laughter of a Satyr play after a day of tragic performances.[45] In this respect also it might be seen as a fitting Ovidian conclusion to the Theban saga. As Cadmus' wish to assume the shape of a dragon is incrementally realized, his horrified wife bemoans his vanishing human features and, more importantly, the unbearable zoomorphic divide that now sunders the couple (*Met*. 4.576–94). No sooner said than remedied: she promptly undergoes the same metamorphosis and joins her husband on the ground. While at the end of Euripides' *Bacchae*, the prophetic anticipation of Cadmus' transformation into a dragon sets up new horrors since he is to lead a foreign army against the Greeks (*Bacch.* 1330–43), Ovid's snakified Cadmus and Harmonia are truly peaceful creatures (cf. 4.602–03). In the *Metamorphoses* at least, the tragic energy of Thebes is spent.[46]

44 See again Zeitlin (1990) *passim*.

45 See Bömer (1976), 183 for the possibility that Ovid constructed the scene with actual Satyr plays in mind.

46 Cadmus' grandson Bacchus, however, provides the jumping-off point for the next mythic nucleus, centred on Perseus (4.604–10); and neither Bacchus nor 'Cadmean' Thebes will ever wholly recede from the background: they are on the map, permanent stock, and Ovid revisits Theban myths elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses*, notably in Book 6 (with the tale of Niobe and her sons and daughters), Book 9 (the Hercules saga) and in Book 13 with the daughter of Anius and the Theban cup that travels on to Rome. As John Henderson puts it, 'on the overarching grand scale, the *Metamorphoses* diagrams the formulaic triangulation of (tragically self-obliterating) Thebes vs. (tragically re-generating) Troy vs. (redemptively renaissant and self-perpetuating) ROME'.