

OVERVIEW OF THEMES

*Changes of shape, new forms, are the theme which my spirit
impels me
now to recite. Inspire me, O gods (it is you who have even
transformed my art), and spin me a thread from the world's
beginning
down to my own lifetime, in one continuous poem.*

*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.*

Ovid, Metamorphoses 1.1–4

So many themes are interwoven through the tapestry of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that a detailed overview might run to the same length as the epic itself. Across its fifteen books the poem examines (among many, *many*, other motifs) war and peace, birth and death, love and loss, gender and sexuality, anger and desire, creation and destruction, poetry and politics, art and nature, violence and vegetarianism, morality and monstrosity – changing many of its human characters into animal, vegetable, and mineral form along the way. In the short prologue to his epic, however, Ovid himself outlines for us the shape and scope of his poem, providing his own brief overview of its most central themes. An appreciation of the nuances of this prologue is key, then, to appreciating and understanding the rest of the poem and each of the 250 or so stories of transformation that it narrates.¹

CHANGES OF SHAPE, NEW FORMS ARE THE THEME . . .

Transformations, changes of shape, new forms: this, Ovid tells us, is the mercurial subject of his new poem, which he himself

calls '*mutata*' or *Metamorphoses* (*Tristia* 1.1.119). His epic opens with the Latin words '*in nova*', a clear statement from the outset that here we are about to enter into something entirely new and original – both for Ovid and for the classical world (although such a claim is itself hardly novel). Originality, novelty, innovation, and new things (*nova*), then, are the watchwords for this new epic undertaking, significantly described by Ovid in his prologue as a *coeptis* – that is, *a work in progress*, a project as unfixed and uncertain as its metamorphic theme.²

Ovid's own metamorphosis from elegiac love poet to Augustan epic poet is both the first innovation and the first transformation that we witness in this poem. In fact, that transformation visibly takes place within and across the opening lines of his prologue – its effects enhanced by the syntax of the original Latin, in which the reader or listener must wait for the end of a complete sentence to fully grasp its meaning. So, Ovid begins with the half line phrase: *in nova fert animus . . .* (literally '*my spirit impels me to new things*'). And we understand that this will be a new project for the poet famous for his elegiac love poetry. But as the second half of the hexameter line reveals the specific nature of this new project we discover that the Latin *nova* is not a substantive adjective but a qualifier for the Latin *corpora* (*mutatas dicere formas / corpora . . .* – literally '*my spirit impels me to speak of forms changed into new bodies*'). This is a radical departure from the erotic and elegiac subjects for which Ovid had become famous as he sets out now to transform and translate Greek stories of metamorphosis into Latin. But the end of the second line reveals the poet's first change of form: the second line is the same length as the first. This is not elegiac verse (comprising a couplet of one long hexameter line followed by a short pentameter line): this is epic. Ovid, the *tenerorum lusor amorum* or 'playful poet of tender love' has been transformed and the elegiac poem we were anticipating has metamorphosed before our eyes.³

But Ovid's claim to speak of *forms changed into new bodies* (rather than bodies changed to new forms) hints that, although both he and his familiar form of poetry may have changed physically (his elegiac couplets have mutated into epic verse) and so look and sound differently, this transformation has changed only the external shape of his poetry and the essential elegiac

character of his *corpus* remains unaltered. It should not surprise the readers who knew the old elegiac Ovid, then, that love and sex, and the relationships between men and women, will still form the focus of so many of the stories that make up his elegiacally epic *Metamorphoses*. Traces of his former playful elegiac self – particularly the insights into *amor* and the psychology of passion that he explored in his *Amores* and *Heroides* – will be clearly visible in this new outwardly epic form.

In this ‘continuity through change’, Ovid achieves his second change of form: the character of his own poetry may not have significantly altered, he suggests, but the character and form of epic itself will be radically transformed here. Initially shaped by Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and then given its Roman form by Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the traditional epic genre had been characterized by a number of formal features, essentially comprising a long hexameter narrative focused upon a single hero who, with divine aid and interference, battled against enemies and adversity. With the exception of its length and its meter, Ovid’s epic is nothing like this. Even when he is dealing directly with Homeric or Virgilian material in books 12–14, he playfully subverts the conventions of epic, giving a comic, erotic or elegiac twist to familiar epic narratives – all the while suggesting that these ‘essentially’ comic, erotic and elegiac characteristics were always already there in the originals.

O GODS (IT IS YOU WHO HAVE EVEN TRANSFORMED MY ART) . . .

It is the gods who are given the credit (or perhaps, the blame) for inspiring Ovid’s personal metamorphosis from elegiac to epic poet and thus his *Metamorphoses* – offering us a sneak preview of Ovid’s general attitude towards and treatment of the gods in his poem. Ovid’s gods outwardly look like the familiar epic gods of Homer and Virgil – the anthropomorphic, omnipotent and interfering ‘divine machinery’ that we expect to find in epic – but their behaviour in the world of the *Metamorphoses* reveals a darker side to the Olympians.⁴ Here the gods lack the moral authority given them by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, behaving towards mortals – and each other – with callous and casual self-interest. The gods are directly responsible for inflicting numerous metamorphoses upon their mortal victims, sometimes in answer

OVID'S METAMORPHOSES

to a prayer or in reward for a good deed, occasionally as a punishment, but most often through anger, jealousy, or lust. The story of Callisto (2.401–530) offers an extreme example of this divine cruelty: first Jupiter, disguised as the virgin huntress Diana, rapes her; then Diana, discovering Callisto's pregnancy, angrily banishes her from her band of virgin followers; and Juno, learning that Callisto has given birth to a baby boy, jealously transforms her into a bear. But Callisto's suffering does not end there: a selfish Jupiter then transforms Callisto and her grown-up son into stars to prevent an unwitting matricide; and a petulant Juno further sees to it that the constellation of Callisto the Great Bear can never wash away the pollution of her 'crime' by setting into the ocean.

In episodes such as these, we witness the unremitting and unjust cruelty of the gods, as Ovid details the potential for great harm that comes with great power. But Ovid also shows us a lighter side to his gods, frequently representing them as comedic figures of fun – particularly when their divine majesty is robbed of dignity by *amor* and sex. So, the same Jupiter who treats Callisto so cruelly is shown disguised as a prancing bull, giving slobbery cow-kisses to Europa (2.833–75); Juno is repeatedly presented as the ill-tempered 'hen-pecking' wife of a philandering husband (1.607f, 2.476–85, 2.530, 3.256–315, 3.316–38, 4.416–562); and both Diana and her bad temper are comically exposed when the nymphs who attempt to protect her modesty and her nudity from Actaeon's eyes, prove to be too short to cover-up more than the lower half of her naked body (3.178–255). Indeed, the shifting tone that Ovid adopts in the representation of his gods – now serious, now humorous – is characteristic of the way in which he treats all of his subjects in the world of the *Metamorphoses*, where the tone and mood of the poem are constantly changing and where *pathos* is readily transformed into *bathos*, tragedy into comedy.

FROM THE WORLD'S BEGINNING DOWN TO MY OWN LIFETIME . . .

The scope of Ovid's poem is unlike anything ever attempted in the epic genre before: rather than following a single hero through a series of adventures, he promises to tell the history of the world from its first creation (*primumque ab origine mundi*) right up to the

OVERVIEW OF THEMES

present day (*ad mea tempora*) – or, at least, from creation right up until the death and apotheosis of Julius Caesar in 44 BC and Augustus' accession to power. This chronology appears to lend the poem an obvious narrative framework – a timeline along which Ovid can string his tales of transformation in order of occurrence, from pre-history through to the Augustan Age. But in practice this timeline offers only a rough guide to the sequence of events as they are narrated in the poem, and there are numerous flashbacks (*analepses*), flashforwards (*prolepses*), and chronological slippages, allowing – even encouraging – each one of the 250 individual stories narrated in the *Metamorphoses* to be read as an independent unit.⁵

A more significant aspect of Ovid's claim to bring his material 'up to date', perhaps, is the way in which he provocatively draws parallels between mythic and modern characters and events. Early in book 1 he sketches such a parallel between the gods of Olympus and the Roman Senate, establishing an unambiguous correspondence between Jupiter and Augustus in a direct address to the Emperor himself (1.199–205). The effect of such 'anachronism' is deliberately unsettling for Ovid's readers, as Jupiter's behaviour in the *Metamorphoses* (his sexual behaviour and violent authoritarianism, in particular) reflects an especially unflattering light upon his Augustan counterpart.⁶ Indeed, critical opinion diverges widely upon whether or not Ovid and his epic are to be read as 'anti' or 'pro' Augustus, and upon the extent to which the mythical world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* caricatures or comments upon life in the contemporary world of Augustus' Rome. We can only speculate upon the nature of Ovid's 'Augustanism', given the contradictory character of his treatment both of Augustan motifs and of Augustus himself who is sometimes the subject of (ironic?) praise and at others the object of (ironic?) blame. It is frequently difficult to distinguish satire from sincerity, compliment from criticism, and perhaps too easy to suggest that such political ambiguity and ideological changeability is exactly what we should expect from a protean poem such as the *Metamorphoses*.⁷ Yet, it is worth bearing in mind that the *Metamorphoses* does not straightforwardly relate to the Age of Augustus but to Ovid's own distinctly personal vision and version of that Age: the poem, after all, leads us into 'my own lifetime' (*mea tempora*).⁸

ONE CONTINUOUS POEM . . .

Throughout most of its life the *Metamorphoses* has been viewed as something akin to an anthology or encyclopaedia of myths, a more or less random collection of discrete stories to be read and enjoyed individually. But Ovid's prologue actually promises that his epic will be arranged as one long 'continuous poem' – a *carmen perpetuum* – with a unifying thread connecting all of his myths of transformation. This promise reveals much about the poem – both about its structure and organization and about the literary influences shaping its form. When Ovid tells his readers that he intends to 'spin . . . a thread (*deducite*) . . . in one continuous poem', he evokes two competing literary traditions: he suggests that his poem will be at once a lengthy unified epic like those of his predecessors in the genre, Homer and Virgil, and one that is also 'finely spun', in accordance with the sort of refined literary aesthetic defined by the Greek poet Callimachus in his *Aetia* or *Causes* (Fr. 1.3) and more usually associated with the elegiac writing of the Roman love poets.⁹ The *Metamorphoses*, it seems, will incorporate characteristics of both genres and both traditions in an entirely new narrative form – an elegiac epic, a Callimachean *carmen perpetuum*.¹⁰

We have already seen that chronology offers a superficial appearance of continuity and unity to the poem, as Ovid begins with the creation of the cosmos out of chaos and then progresses up until his own day and the dawn of the Augustan Age. It is also obvious that metamorphosis provides a unifying theme for the poem: all of Ovid's stories involve transformation in some way, even if – as in the tale of Phaethon where metamorphosis seems only an afterthought, or in the tale of Icarus where it is unclear what kind of metamorphosis has actually taken place – transformation is sometimes only incidental to the narrative. Indeed, the full range of Ovid's 'metamorphoses' includes not only mythological transformations but changes of mind, of name, of tradition, of meaning. It seems that Ovid's theme of transformation, and of 'continuity through change', provides him with an organizational scheme that is itself subject to change and mutation in the course of the poem.

In this respect, any attempt to map a rigidly fixed organizational structure or framework onto the *Metamorphoses* is liable to fail – although this has not deterred numerous efforts to do so.

OVERVIEW OF THEMES

In the 1960s, Brooks Otis' influential analysis of the poem divided the text into four principal sections based on the common themes of 'Divine Amor' (1.5–2.875), 'Vengeance' (3.1–6.400), 'Amatory Pathos' (6.401–11.795), and 'Troy and Rome' (12.1–15.870) – inexplicably locating the stories of chaos, creation, flood and fire as part of a section on 'Divine Amor', and squeezing Ovid's stories into an uncomfortable straitjacket.¹¹ Otis' contemporary Walter Ludwig identified 'Time' as the unifying principle for his own structural analysis of the poem, dividing the narrative into chronologically ordered sections located in prehistory (1.5–1.451), mythical time (1.452–11.193), and historical time (11.194–15.870) – revealing a somewhat uneven structure in which 11 of the poem's 15 books are contained in just one section.¹²

A more useful map of Ovid's shape-shifting poem divides the *Metamorphoses* broadly into thirds, each section containing roughly five books – the map of the poem that is followed in this Reader's Guide.¹³ This organizational pattern follows the chronological ordering of the poem that Ovid promises his readers, moving through the Ages of gods, of heroes, and finally of men, to reach a climactic conclusion in the Age of Augustus – who is (of course) both man, hero *and* god. What is more, this tripartite arrangement coincidentally echoes Ovid's own description of the *Metamorphoses* in the *Tristia* (1.1.117–120) as comprising three times five books. But it is important to remember that, in a poem concerned with continuity alongside transformation and change, structural divisions and thematic distinctions are easily blurred.

Ovid's *carmen perpetuum* achieves its (illusion of) unity and continuity across its fifteen books and its 250 myths using a variety of ingenious techniques, including the frequent employment of internal narrators and audiences – where characters within a story being told by Ovid become storytellers themselves.¹⁴ Perhaps most visibly, his telling of a myth often continues across the 'break' between one book and the next: so, the tale of Phaethon entering the palace of the Sun leads the reader across the threshold between books 1 and 2; disguised as a bull, Jupiter carries both the reader and the abducted Europa across the gulf between books 2 and 3; and the narrative of the river-god Achelous flows smoothly between books 8 and 9. In the case of Europa, Ovid

even signals a direct correlation between the narrated events of the story that he is interrupting and the physical event of their reading. So, the bull's horns or *cornua* to which Europa holds on as she is carried away to sea may also refer to the horn book-rods – also known as *cornua* – around which books were rolled in antiquity and which the reader would hold in her own hands as she read.¹⁵ In other book divisions, Ovid bridges the narrative and physical breaks imposed by a book's ending and beginning by following the adventures of a key character – such as Orpheus, Perseus, or Aeneas – across the divide, thereby producing an appearance of unbroken continuity that allows the narrative to metamorphose easily from one story into another.

The poem's transitional links between its individual stories are even more ingenious, as Ovid varies a range of stock techniques to move on (more or less) seamlessly from one tale to the next. The bridging techniques he employs in book 1 establish a pattern that he subsequently adapts for the rest of the poem and are worth looking at in some detail. Here, Ovid segues from the story of Daphne's metamorphosis into a tree into the story of Io's metamorphosis into a cow almost as a cinematographer might move between scenes, using a single long tracking shot (1.566–85): he tracks up and away from the final image of Daphne as a laurel tree, waving her newly-formed branches, to offer us an aerial shot of the trees that cover the ravine of Tempe; moving down from the spray that a waterfall throws up into the treetops, he takes us into the depths of the ravine and follows the river until it flows into a rocky cave where the river god Peneus himself lives; without breaking his shot, he then moves in to focus more closely upon Peneus (father of Daphne) surrounded by the gods of all the local rivers who have come to console and congratulate him on his daughter's strange fate; only the river god Inachus, father of Io, Ovid tells us, is not there – he is at home mourning the loss of his own daughter Io; and only at this point does Ovid finally cut his long tracking narrative to tell us what has happened to Io in a flashback sequence.

Here then, we see several of Ovid's most creative transitional devices used to great effect: (1) the cinematic segue and (2) the flashback connected by (3) the notable absence (or absent presence) of a character. A further linking device used in this story is

OVERVIEW OF THEMES

(4) the inset narrative, an intricate feature of the epyllion or mini-epic, of the type for which Callimachus and his followers were renowned. For, set within the tale of Io is a second story: Mercury puts Io's watchful guard Argus to sleep (for good) by becoming an internal story-teller within Ovid's main narrative and relating the tale of Syrinx and Pan. What is more, the story of Syrinx's attempted rape and transformation into a marsh reed, followed by her appropriation by the god Pan to form his emblematic 'pan-pipes', mirrors the story of Daphne and Apollo, and so continues (5) the thematic connection between the 'gods in love' – or 'gods in lust' – that unifies this section of the poem. Finally, in Ovid's transitional link from the end of Io's story to the beginning of the next, we witness another characteristic device, as he (6) subtly shifts his focus from a minor character, Epaphus (the son of Io), to an impulsive young friend named Phaethon – and so to the start of an entirely new story and a new twist in the fine-spun thread of Ovid's *carmen perpetuum*.

This *Reader's Guide* will follow the intricate twists and turns of this unbroken thread through all fifteen books of Ovid's 'continuous poem', commenting upon each episode in turn. Influenced by Ovid's own emphasis upon storytelling (in both proem and poem) no less than by recent narratological studies of the *Metamorphoses*, particular emphasis will be placed upon the narrative structure of the poem and the ingenious ways in which Ovid spins his tales of transformation. As we will see.