

**From Poetry to History:
Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
and Seventeenth-century Historiography**

While the attention given to Ovidian commentary by art historians has influenced literary scholarship enormously, it has also drawn attention away from Ovid.¹ More recent study, however, urges us not to be swayed by iconographic or allegorical research alone. Today we are learning that we cannot simply decode Ovidian references in poetry with recourse to a spectrum of allegorical possibilities, but that we must also discern ways that Ovid's Latin provides syntactical and narrative models. Notable examples of such work are found in Louis Martz's chapters on Ovid in *Poet of Exile* and Richard DuRocher's recent book on Milton.² What has happened, of course, is that we have moved from a predominantly iconographic approach to Ovid to one that is increasingly rhetorical. Besides affirming the importance of this change, I would emphasize how our study of the *Metamorphoses* needs to consider not only the individual fable but also its larger setting. After looking at the historical design of the *Metamorphoses*, I will make several comments about its association with the study of history in the seventeenth century.

The argument that there is no order in the *Metamorphoses* other than a

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1. Three generations of literary scholars have been influenced by the Warburg Institute and scholars such as Irwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind. Their studies advocate the investigation of sources for painting and the use of Ovid and his commentators as potential guides, but they do not urge the study of the *Metamorphoses* as a poetic text.

2. Louis L. Martz, *Poet of Exile: A Study of Milton's Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 203-246; 305-307; Richard DuRocher, *Milton and Ovid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). See also my *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History* (New York: Garland Press, 1985).

superficial chronology has for the most part been abandoned due in large part to the work of Brooks Otis.³ Although Otis has been criticized, he has without question instigated more serious study of the poem.⁴ Unfortunately much of this study excludes historical consideration of the work. Preliminary study toward historical interpretation, however, has been put forward carefully in a book largely ignored in English-speaking countries. In *Struktur und Einheit der Metamorphosen Ovids*, Walter Ludwig suggests that the chronology of the poem is not superficial but is comparable to ancient models.⁵ Rather than approaching the work through an assessment of themes alone, he shows how the work may be divided into three major periods that correspond to periods used by ancient historians. These periods—cosmological, mythical, and historical—correspond, for example, to divisions found in *De gente populi romani* by Varro.⁶

The value of Ludwig's discussion may be seen if we look more closely at

3. Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970; 2nd rev. ed.). Otis divides the *Metamorphoses* into four sections: I) The Divine Comedy, 1-2; II) The Avenging Gods, 3:1-6:400; III) The Pathos of Love, 6:401-411:795; and IV) Troy and Rome, 12-15. These divisions were anticipated by L. P. Wilkinson in his *Ovid Recalled* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), and Wilkinson's divisions were adopted by G. Karl Galinsky in *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 85.

4. For criticism of Otis's thematic approach to Ovid's major poem, see Robert Coleman's "Structure and Intention in the *Metamorphoses*," *Classical Quarterly*, N.S. 21 (1971), 461-477, and Galinsky.

5. Ludwig, *Struktur und Einheit der Metamorphosen Ovids* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1965). The importance of Ludwig's approach has been suggested by Otto Due Steen: "From our point of view Ludwig's results are important because they are not only based upon analysis of the poem itself but also take into account a literary tradition which would have made it natural for Ovid's readers to recognize universal history as a working principle in the *Metamorphoses*" (*Changing Forms: Studies in the Metamorphoses of Ovid* [Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1974], pp. 135-136).

6. Division of time into cosmological, mythical, and historical periods is found in Varro. Ludwig notes the following: "Varro unterschied drei Epochen der Menschheitsgeschichte: die erste reichte ab hominum principio ad cataclysmum priorem und wurde propter ignorantiam als δόξιον intervallum temporis bezeichnet; die zweite, von der Flut des Ogygus bis zur ersten Olympiade sich erstreckend, hieß, quia in eo multa fabulosa referuntur, μύθικον intervallum temporis; die dritte war das anschließende λογικόν intervallum temporis, quia res in eo gestae veris historicis continentur" (p. 79).

the implications found in the central period, the mythical. Ancient historians agreed that myths went back to a period before recorded history. Some avoided it because they thought it impossible to order. Others found order in this prehistory and sought links between the mythical and historical periods.⁷ What is most important for our consideration of Ovid is that what was difficult for the historian was a challenge for the poet. Exactly because prehistory did not fit into the canon of written history, it permitted freedom to invent order. Greek poets, of course, show how the age of myth could become a special reserve for the poet. Yet for them this domain remains historically separated from their own period. With Ovid, however, the period of prehistory is deliberately connected with the present and viewed as a sphere in which invention may become a means for interpreting history.

From this vantage point the *Metamorphoses* is not only a mythological handbook or a collection of stories but also a unique attempt to write a continuous universal history using *fabulae*. One purpose of this universal history would have been to create, through interlocking fables, an account of Roman evolution from the beginning of time. Further study of the poem may well show that these stories do not exist simply as separate vignettes or panels but as part of a larger account of the cyclical evolution of Greek city-states up to the emergence of Rome.⁸

7. Ludwig surveys the problems that the *spatium mythicum* posed for ancient historians. Some, like Herodotus, Thucydides, and Ephorus, regarded the historical interpretation of mythical material with reserve. Others, like Hellanicus, Soilus of Amphipolis, and Anaximenes of Lampsakas, did compose universal histories that traced the evolution of the world from its creation. According to Ludwig, interest in encyclopedic histories intensified in the first century B.C. The histories of Castor of Rhodes and Diodorus are indications of this interest (p. 78). Arnaldo Momigliano suggests the principle that permitted ancient historians to coordinate the mythical and historical periods. "Chronographers and historians collaborated in the production of synchronisms. Synchronisms had long been known to the historians of Mesopotamia and Israel, but they played a special part in Greek historiography. The wide range of interests and explanations of the Greek historians would never have been possible without synchronisms. They represented the bridges between the stories of different cities, nations and civilizations" ("Time in Ancient Historiography," in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* [Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1977], pp. 179-204; 192).

8. Ovid himself suggests that the rise and fall of cities may lie behind his conception. In Book XV we find the following: "So we see times changing, and some nations putting on new strength

Ovid's addition of Echo and Narcissus to Theban genealogy illustrates how manipulation of structure could emphasize historical pattern. Ovid's story is not found in traditional accounts of Thebes' past such as that by Apollodorus.⁹ By grafting Narcissus to the traditional account of Bacchus' birth and the madness he brings to his aunts, uncles, and cousins, Ovid highlights the problematic nature of speech and the human senses in Theban society. Throughout Book III, figures who threaten the gods are tricked by language or plagued by impediments to their speech. Speech, which is often the cause for the gods' revenge, is also the very faculty disrupted by retribution. Actaeon loses his speech because Diana fears her nakedness will be revealed by his speaking of her. Semele is tricked by Juno's speech because Semele has placed excessive faith in her beauty. Pentheus, who refuses to listen to the warning of Tiresias and has no patience for Acoestes' parable, soon cannot make himself heard. By setting Narcissus within such a setting, Ovid draws further attention to the ways in which order and disorder in history can be paralleled to speech.¹⁰

When one looks at English historiography during the seventeenth century, one sees that the early mythical period would not go away. From William Warner's *Albion's England* (1586) to Milton's *History of Britain* (1670) and Newton's manuscript, *The Original of Monarchies* (1692?), one finds the

and other falling into weakness. So was Troy great in wealth and men, and for ten years was able to give so freely of her blood; but now humbled to earth she has naught to show but ancient ruins, no wealth but ancestral tombs. Sparta was at one time a famous city; great Mycenae flourished, and Cecrops' and Amphion's citadels. Sparta is now a worthless countryside, proud Mycenae has fallen; and what is the Thebes of Oedipus except a name? What is left of Pandion's Athens but a name? And now fame has it that Dardanian Rome is rising, and laying deep and strong foundations by the stream of Tiber sprung from the Apennines. She therefore is changing her form by growth, and some day shall be the capital of the boundless world" (15:420-435); all references are to *Metamorphoses*, 2 vols., tr. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977).

9. Apollodorus, *The Library*, 2 vols., trans. James G. Frazer, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921); see esp. the genealogy of Cadmus, 3.4-3.5; vol. I, pp. 312-335.

10. The relation of speech and history depicted by Ovid is not unusual. Speech, as Cicero and others showed, could draw men together or bring chaos to their cities. See especially Cicero, *De inventione*, I.1-3, in *De inventione. De optimo genere oratorum. Topica*, trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949).

mythic period addressed.¹¹ There are good reasons for this. In part it is a question of models. Even though the new histories of Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Bodin encouraged an analytical if not outright skeptical attitude toward these early undocumented periods, their views were balanced by the publication and study of ancient histories (Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Varro, Strabo) that urged readers to approach the early periods seriously.¹² The remarkable interest in origin and genealogy—the matter of Arthur, Stonehenge, Hadrian's Wall—also urged the maintenance of the early periods because they permitted the creation of narratives that might explain both figures and artifacts. History was a vehicle for anthropology, archeology, and (if one went back far enough) physics.¹³

The single most important way the new analytical history could be challenged came from religious tradition, which assumed the presence of divine patterning in history.¹⁴ By asserting that persons configure a movement away from and toward God, the Old Testament provided not only a history of the Hebrew people but also a vehicle for interpreting all events. The ability to accommodate the cyclical patterns described in ancient universal histories to providential views of history helps explain the tenacity of counter-analytical views of history in the Renaissance. From each vantage point the assumption of order in history obscured the differences between myth and history for the simple reason that in such a scheme the patterns, not the documented events, are most important.

The tripartite division of history into cosmological, mythical, and historical

11. For background see F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1967); and Herschel Baker, *The Race of Time* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967). For Newton see esp. Frank E. Manuel, *Isaac Newton Historian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

12. Piero Vettori's translation of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1581) and Isaac Casaubon's commentary on Strabo (1587) are examples. See Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship from 1300-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 120-121, 135-136.

13. The place of natural history in English historiography at the time is stressed by Barbara J. Shapiro's chapter on "History" in her book *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 119-162.

14. My consideration of providential views of history owes much to C. A. Patrides, *The Grand Design of God: The Literary Form of the Christian View of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

periods operated well into the seventeenth century and accompanied the study of the *Metamorphoses*. George Sandys approaches the poem this way and advertises the order he has brought to the mythical period through synoptic references to Old Testament history.¹⁵

I have also endeavored to cleare the Historicall part, by tracing the almost worn-out steps of Antiquitie; wherein the sacred stories afford the clearest direction. For the first Period from the Creation to the Flood, which the Ethnickes called the *Obscure*, some the *Emptie times*; and the Ages next following which were stil'd the *Heroycall*, because the after deified Heroes then flourished; as also the *Fabulous*, in that those stories conveyed by Tradition in loose and broken Fragments, were by the Poets interwoven with instructing Mythologies, are most obscurely and perplexedly delivered by all, but the supernaturally inspired Moses.

The reference to "Obscure" or "Emptie times" points not only to the problem confronted by scholars faced with "loose and broken Fragments." It also identifies the euhemeristic or historical method used to explain the apparently "deified Heroes." (Euhemerism seeks to translate mythic figures into historical persons; it is an early form of demythologizing.)

Even though the *Metamorphoses* posed problems, it provided a model and a source of information. Michael Drayton's use of Ovid is an example.¹⁶ In *England's Heroicall Epistles* (1597) he translates the form of the *Heroides* into periods of known English history. Interestingly this suggests that Drayton also regards the figures in Ovid's poems as historical. In *Poly-Olbion* (1612, 1613, 1622) the poet who was called "England's Ovid" draws on the *Metamorphoses*. What is noteworthy, however, is not that Drayton uses detail from Ovid's poem, but rather that he follows Ovid by rewriting history and chorography

15. George Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologized and Represented in Figures*, ed. Karl K. Hulley and Stanley T. Vandersall (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 8-9; emphasis added.

16. My work with Drayton is indebted to *The Works of Michael Drayton*, 5 vols., ed. J. William Hebel (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1931-1941), and in particular to the notes in the final volume. See especially the consideration of *Poly-Olbion*, vol. 5, pp. 230-264.

in verse. Although today we think of Drayton's versification of Camden's *Britannia* (1586) as a curiosity, our amusement must always be tempered by remembering John Selden's participation in the project. Like the *Metamorphoses*, *Poly-Olbion* was regarded at the time as a reservoir of scholarship.

A variety of universal histories published in England during the first half of the seventeenth century show that the *Metamorphoses* itself was regarded as a universal history. In the works I have consulted the poem is not simply a model for poetry but an historical text as well.¹⁷ The psychological and euhemeristic methods used in these works demonstrate how exegetical techniques applied to poetry or history could be the same. The rationalization of mythical figures already noticed in Sandys is demonstrated graphically by Isaacson's *Saturni ephemerides* (1633). As the title hints, this is not really a written history at all but a large, synoptic collection of figures placed along a time line. The work is actually an enormous table or chart of universal history (an elephant folio of some 483 pages dedicated to Charles I). Here at a glance the reader has a synchronic view of world history and its relation to Biblical chronology. The use of Ovid's work as a source is specifically acknowledged in the lists of cited authorities which head the organizing columns. The lists make strikingly evident the range of texts which were regarded as suitable sources for historical documentation. The authorities on the history of Argos include Pausanias, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Polybius, Apollodorus, Boccaccio, and Ovid. Matter concerning the Aborigines is drawn from Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Plutarch, Virgil, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Vives.

The rows of columns in Isaacson's work are not all filled, and their large empty spaces invite one to wonder how a seventeenth-century reader would have responded. On one level the empty columns may be regarded as a visual acknowledgment of what was not known. These are the "Emptie times." On another level the empty columns allow one to see the room the seventeenth-century historian and poet had for invention. In a recent article Haydon White refers to the blank spaces in late-medieval chronicles and the ways that more

17. The following books were consulted at The Newberry Library: Lodowick Lloyd, *The Content of Time* (1590), John More, *A Table from the Beginning of the World* (1593), William Perkins, *Specimen digesti* (1598), Anthony Munday, *Briefe Chronicle of the Successes of Times from Creation* (1611), and Henry Isaacson, *Saturni ephemerides* (1633).

developed historical forms were used to fill them in.¹⁸ It is not difficult to understand how such tables could invite emendation and expansion. In *A Table from the Beginning of the World* (1593), John More reveals that the year 2513 was significant not only because the law was then given to Moses on Mount Sinai but also because this was the year that Phaeton burned. In *A Briefe Chronicle of the Success of Times from Creation* (1611), Anthony Munday notes that the same year Joshua became the leader of the Jews, 2465, "Cadmus brought the Characters of letters into Greece" (p. 9). The fact that the dates just cited do not correspond points to the range of combinations possible. The notes and computation in secretary-hand which fill the empty boxes and margins in the Huntington copy of John More's *Table* are probably samples of the revision and expansion such a form invited. This amplification was encouraged by euhemerism, for once the assumption is made that all fabulous events can be placed in known time, it is possible to seek relationships through narrative. Euhemerism invites narration.

Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614) permits us to return to the attraction of psychological interpretation mentioned above in regard to Theban history. As in other universal histories, Raleigh places fables in a historical continuum that proceeds from the world's creation. Of special interest is Raleigh's use of psychology. Surveying the variety of transformations displayed in the early periods, Raleigh urges the reader to consider man's range in the universe. In a declaration which has an affinity with Pico della Mirandola's affirmation of a human being's capacity for self-alteration, Raleigh finds that, like Proteus, man can change his shape as often as he pleases:

To the same end were all those celebrated *metamorphoses* among the Pythagoreans, and ancient poets, wherein it was feigned, that men were transformed into divers shapes of beasts, thereby to shew the change of men's conditions; from reason to brutality, from virtue to vice, from meekness to cruelty, and from justice to oppression.¹⁹

18. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), 5-27.

19. Raleigh, *The History of the World*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1971), p. 130 (L.II.6).

Raleigh is doing more than moralizing in a traditional manner. By emphasizing the idea of change itself, he is identifying the place of psychology in history. At the same time the fables may be accommodated to Christian moral pattern and fit into a framework of Christian history, they help Raleigh comprehend the play of individual fancy in time.

Everyone of whome we reade and heare, and among those that are, whom we see and converse with; every one hath received a severall picture of face, and everie one a diverse picture of minde; every one a forme apart, every one a fancy and cogitation differing: there being nothing wherein Nature so much triumpheth, as in dissimilitude. From whence it commeth, that there is found so great diversity of opinions; so strong a contrariety of inclinations, so many naturall and unnaturall, wise, foolish, manly, and childish affections, and passions in Mortall Men.

(Preface, p. 47)

Because the observation emerges from the previous reference to mythology, we see that for Raleigh there is an affinity between the mythical period and psychological interpretation. More remarkably we discover how the mythical period helps the politically troubled Raleigh to suggest psychological sources for change in history.²⁰

20. The ways the *Metamorphoses* contributes to such an idea of change needs further attention. Rather than simply accommodating Ovidian fables to a system of Christian morality (and thereby history), seventeenth-century writers realize how fables may also identify the force that erratic human behavior has in shaping time. The objective interpretation of fables based on religious tradition begins to move toward greater subjectivity, and in certain cases such subjectivity leads to increased scepticism. It is within this setting that I would place Donne's "Metempsychosis." Janel Mueller has also emphasized the scepticism of Donne's poem but from a more theological direction; our positions are complementary (see Janel Mueller, "Donne's Epic Venture in the Metempsychosis," *Modern Philology* 70 [1972], 109-137). In other cases such subjectivity remains controlled by faith in God's purpose in time. Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" is an example of the subjective application of fable which remains guided by belief in God's presence in history. The *Metamorphoses* provides means for the discovery of personal history. For further discussion of the ways Ovid's text contributes to the exploration of psychology, especially in the Middle Ages, see my *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History*, pp. 59-110.

With these brief remarks about euhemeristic and psychological interpretation in mind, I would return to the fable mentioned in our earlier remarks about Theban history. When we look at Renaissance commentaries on Narcissus, we find more than warnings about the frailty of the senses and the dangers of self-love. Such moral interpretations are usually accompanied by the euhemeristic reading of the story found in Pausanias.²¹ In his account Narcissus drowns while seeking his dead twin sister along a river bank. The inclusion of such interpretation in Ovidian commentaries complements what we have found in histories. The rational interpretation of Narcissus does something else as well. By noting the extraordinary and implausible nature of Narcissus' death, the euhemeristic approach gives greater autonomy to psychological phenomena. The fable, in other words, invites rational explanation or narrative and in turn justifies a rational psychological account. The fable is simultaneously placed in history and psychology.

This may be demonstrated by reminding ourselves of the place the Narcissus fable has in the Renaissance epic. In the epics by Boiardo, Tasso, Spenser, and Milton, Ovid's story is not used as a simple ornament to warn against pride.²² Rather it provides psychological matter that affirms the importance of entering history. At the same time the fable signals self-deception and isolation, it admonishes self-affirmation and commitment to civil action. At times we stress too much the fable's psychological sophistication and miss its historical setting. Britomart's worry that she has behaved like Narcissus when she actually perceives an image of her place in history is a good example of the paradoxical directions marked by the fable.

Ovid's story also permits us to see why the mythic period becomes increasingly problematic. While euhemerism might explain individual fables, it could not account for their relationships with one another. What started as a principle of rational explanation tended either to progress toward a policy of outright invention or to leave the fable as an isolated entity. Narcissus becomes

21. Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6 vols., trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), IV, 311 (10.31.8-9).

22. For particular discussion of Milton's textual adaptation of Ovid's Narcissus see my "The Limits of Allegory: Textual Expansion of Narcissus in *Paradise Lost*," forthcoming in *Milton Studies*.

less an account of a specific person and more a collection of phenomena that can be adapted in the representation of character. What begins as euhemeristic interpretation moves toward psychological history. Increasingly Ovid becomes a model not for external but for internal history. Milton suggests this at the beginning of his *History of Britain*, where he observes that fables contain "many footsteps, and reliques of something true" and are included "in favour of our English Poets, and Rhetoricians, who by thir Art will know, how to use them judiciously."²³ At the same time that historians sought to establish relations between periods of fabulous and recorded history, poets used fables to invent narratives that could account for histories of a more internal nature. The *Metamorphoses* offers us rich terrain in which to follow footsteps that negotiate the space between history and poetry.

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23. John Milton, *The History of Britain in The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. V (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 3.