

CHAPTER 4

Poets in the Arena

One of Ovid's most sophisticated devices for explicitly positioning his prestige as author within the Roman economy of political power comes through his interweaving of poetry with public ritual and spectacle. In his great appeal to Augustus from exile, the poet gives his participation in public festivals of thanksgiving as material proof of his personal loyalty to the emperor (*Trist.* 2.57–60). But beyond contrasting such sure and tangible signs of Ovid's place in the Roman community with an *animus* and *mens* that are invisible and thus, like the products of his genius, subject to misinterpretation (cf. 2.77–80), Ovid takes over for his poetry the language of public festival. His *Metamorphoses* becomes the most functional and least prestigious of public utterances—the voice of the crier proclaiming the name of Caesar (*vestri praeconia nominis*, 2.65), and so too offers proofs of his own mind even as it seems to speak nothing but “Caesar.” From the literal incense that Ovid offered as a small “part” of the crowd, his reports of Caesar's deeds become metaphorical incense; his greater work (*maius opus*, 2.63) becomes the smallest offering (*minimo honore*, 2.76) by which even great gods are won over. At the same time that Ovid seems to place festival performance in a different epistemological category from poetic composition, he reminds the reader that the transformative power of words can make poetry into a kind of worship.

Another measuring of the capacities of poetry and spectacle adds new dimensions to this paradox and at the same time offers a strikingly new venue for seeing *Metamorphoses* in action. The first poem of the fourth book of *Tristia* traces one kind of reception, as Ovid invokes the favor and protection of Rome for his written work, which makes the return that he cannot. The second makes the poet the recipient of an oral report of Tiberius's triumph in the capital, from which the poet's exile physically separates him, but to which he gives an impressively verisimilar substance in the opening verses. A transformation similar to the one we saw in *Tristia* 2 happens again as the poet looking at Rome positions himself at both ends of the telescope: when he was physically at Rome, he was once again small, a *parva pars* of the rejoicing crowd (*Trist.* 4.2.16 ~ *Trist.* 2.58). Now, though, only a small report (*fama* ... *non nisi parva*, 4.2.18) of the great procession gets as far as Tomi. And if his physical presence as a small part of the crowd becomes politically symbolic of his

subordination to Caesar, who can view him and judge his sincerity, now it is the insubstantial report whose accuracy Ovid must scrutinize and embellish lest it deceive him (*fallunt*, 4.2.17—both “escape” and “deceive”). Indeed, Ovid's accomplishment in lending reality to *fama* is all the more striking here because the report did deceive him: the triumph never really took place.

In the center of this Wonderland of shifting sizes comes a subtle reminder of the poetic products through which Ovid's own *fama* tries to maintain some objective stability: as the people gaze on the captives in Tiberius's triumph, they will meet with two kinds of faces, some changed according to the circumstances (*et cernet vultus aliis pro tempore versos*, 4.2.23), others still fierce and with no perception of their actual status (*terribiles aliis inmemoresque sui*, 4.2. 24). The first of these lines recalls both of Ovid's greatest works. In the midst of the similar festival described in *Tristia* 2, the *Metamorphoses* was described as *corpora* ... *versa* (2.64), and here the same adjective applies to the faces of the captives (indeed, *vultus* often in the *Metamorphoses* itself describes the appearance altered by transformation). The primary meaning of *versos* here is not “transformed” but “turned away,” in a gesture of shame befitting the Germans' captive state. But this averting of the gaze itself becomes another transformation of appearance, especially because it generates a physical difference between some of the captives and those who retain their initial ferocity. In fact the faces that are turned away are perhaps not “changed” at all, because such a gesture shows a pride in self inappropriate to one who has truly been brought low by conquest. Between the different versions of these faces comes “time” (*tempore*), whose plural was the first word of, and thus a shorthand designation for, the *Fasti*.¹

But if what the populace sees when they look at Tiberius's triumph is nothing other than Ovid's poetry, what does that mean for the poem? At the most obvious level, it turns imperial victory into another battleground for pitting poet against prince, reality against textuality. After all, Tiberius's victory at the moment of reading coexists with Ovid's word picture of it—and conversely, as the poem reveals, the triumph itself relies on reading as the audience is confronted by a series of written inscriptions identifying the depicted scenes.² But beyond this further explora-

¹ Here the word seems simply to mean “circumstances,” but precisely the same surface meaning concealed a pretty transparent allusion to the literary work just at the end of the previous poem (4.1.105). When Ovid there asks Rome's aid for a song “no better than my circumstances” (*non melius quam sunt mea tempora carmen*), he is also describing the *Tristia* in relation to his *Fasti*.

² See Hardie 2002c.309, and for another complementary interpretation of the poem, Oliensis 2004.

tion of the political dynamics of representation, in this chapter I reflect the metaphor of “poem as spectacle” back on the *Metamorphoses* itself to show how the problems of recognition posed by metamorphosis resemble those at the center of crucial civic spectacles like sacrificial ritual, dramatic performance, and, as here, the triumph. The “visual” aspect of Ovid’s poetry, so frequently noted by recent criticism, thus becomes more than an aesthetic problem, a reflex, as it has sometimes been treated, of contemporary taste for spectacle. **Rather, I want to explore the possibility that the poem’s emphases on the problems of seeing and the simulation of a visual image for its readers appropriate for the text the same potential to realize and refigure the position of audiences in relation to the public rites of the new empire, where, as we saw in chapter 2’s discussion of Augustan visual monuments, who you were was determined by what and how you saw.** Obviously a text’s power to evoke the visual is one of its supreme fictions. To imagine that one sees what is so evidently not there provides an asymptote for the reader’s accession to the poem’s deceptions. But this tension between acquiescence in and resistance to the poem as something to be seen itself mimics the very issues of recognition raised by the visual images it constructs. Like the presence of Io within the guise of the cow, the elevation of the fictive to the same experiential plane as an actual spectacle can seem real or purely imaginary.

To give a clearer sense of how such literary “spectacles” can describe questions of civic identity and prompt reflection on the nature of the state, let us look more closely at Tiberius’s—or Ovid’s—triumph in *Tristia* 4.2. This passage provides an excellent starting place because the very language with which the spectacle is described seems so explicitly to invite comparison between the sights offered in a triumph and Ovid’s text. Also the spectacle within which that text is inscribed is incontrovertibly political, whereas the political nature of sacrificial and dramatic rituals that provide the focus of later discussions needs to be demonstrated. The “changed faces” of the captives recall not only the *Metamorphoses* as a literary composition but also the central hermeneutic problem it raises, the recognition of a stable subject within a changed form. For the very fact of transformation in the case of the triumph is made problematic: some faces are changed, others are not. And how can one be sure of the difference? To return to a similar problem raised at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*, Jupiter presents homicidal king Lycaon’s new wolf’s face not in terms of change but of a clarification of the very identity that justifies his punishment. The first adjective used to describe Germania, *fera* (4.2.1), which equally applies to untamed races and wild animals, perhaps smoothes the transition between the bestial countenances we meet in Ovid’s epic and the fierce captives. The first line of the poem raises a similar question about the change or sameness of Germany

through a linguistic “transformation” that recalls the initial line of the *Metamorphoses*:

*Iam fera Caesaribus Germania, totus ut orbis,
victa potest flexo succubuisse genu.*

At first glance, Germany seems “fierce to the Caesars,” a characterization that changes from predictable to profoundly disconcerting with the last three words, *totus ut orbis* (like the rest of the world!). But a change in syntax as we move on to the second line tames this cosmic disorder. We realize that Germany is no longer fierce to the Caesars, but that, like the rest of the world, she has bent her knee to the Caesars. However, such a comforting conclusion relies on our accepting that Germany as a personification, and as a grammatical subject, is susceptible to change and does not retain her essential quality of hostility even after her subjection. And this, after all, is the question raised by the captive faces beheld in the triumph.

The problem of mutability raised by the captives relates directly to the viewer’s understanding of Rome herself and its effect on the world. To see the German as tamed becomes a sign of the transformative capacity of the state—its ultimate potential to make the entire world bend the knee to its power. On the other hand, the very persistence of Germany and the Germans in ferocity has an equal but opposite benefit for the reading of Roman power. For the ferocity of the Germans legitimates their subjection and demands the civilizing force of Rome, whose violence in turn can be differentiated from the arrogance and indiscriminacy of her foes. Also, the magnitude of Tiberius’s accomplishment demands that the German be seen in all his might. Too humbled a foe threatens to remove the triumphant aspect of the triumph. Attested scenes where the populace reacted with horror and pity to the sight of dejected captives show that this danger was a very real one for the triumphator.³

But if the metamorphosis of the Germans takes on shifting and contrasting meanings that derive value at once from the captives’ sameness and their difference from what they were, the beginnings of the poem present a similarly complex picture of Rome itself as resistant and subject to change. This will be the first of many hints that one of the dangers of mutability—indeed the one stressed by Pythagoras in the context of what we might call the imperialism of consumption—is that enemies will change into one another. The very celebration of victory changes the face of the city. The lofty Palatine is “veiled” with garlands (4.2.3), as if it were the head of a personified Rome matching the allegorical figure of Germany brought low, and the smoke of incense “dyes” the sky (4.2.4).

³ Cf. the pity aroused at the sight of Arsinoe in Caesar’s triumph of 46 (Dio 43.19).

While here Rome's changeability suggests the capacity to put on the face of the victor, another kind of transformation affects the youths growing up in the home of Caesar and the mothers and daughters-in-law whose fertility makes possible the rise of a new generation. Yet the aim of this process of natural renewal is precisely stability. The imperial youth grow up so that the house of Caesar "may rule the earth perpetually (4.2.10)." Livia's gesture of honoring the gods is one that she will repeat frequently (*saepe datura*, 4.2.12). Most revealing of the contrasting impulses toward celebrating Rome's eternity as the result of replacement and renewal and as an unchanging sameness exempt from natural processes is the juxtaposition of mothers with the Vestal Virgins who preserve the sacred fire "with perpetual virginity" (4.2.13–14).

These contradictory views of whether Rome herself changes and how it changes others develop directly from the physical sight of "changed faces" in the triumph. But not only does the text raise the question of whether and how the faces of the captives have changed; they seem to change in the very process of being viewed, as visual elements recorded in the description of the triumph generate new similarities among the participants. This second dimension of change is as important for the political reading of metamorphosis as the first, for it reminds us that not only is the issue of changeability significant—and changeable—in the abstract, but the very recognition of change depends on the active participation of a viewer whose way of construing the scene is, importantly, independent of any objective truth. Hence, Ovid's emphasis on the fact that the spectator whose impressions, recounted in direct speech, become Ovid's description of the triumph, himself does not know what he is talking about but makes up a story to suit the images (4.2.25–26).

One significant visual link that elides the differences between the figures in the triumph comes above all from the color purple, which first describes the blood with which the gleaming white sacrificial victims "beat" the ground (4.2.6). The first of the German captives, the leader in war, conquered (*victum*) if not an actual *victima*, begins the conversion of the image. He too gleams (*fulget*, 4.2.27 ~ *candida*, 4.2.5) with a purple that signifies not blood but the essentially foreign rank of king. That the purple dye is defined as Sidonian at once stresses the foreignness of his garb and further assimilates him to another female victim, Vergil's Dido. The sacrificial pattern is activated again to reestablish a sense of national difference that justifies conquest, as a subsequent German captive is said to be guilty of a hideous violation of the law of nations by performing human sacrifice of Roman victims (4.2.35–36). How just, then, that such a captive should now enter into the victim's role! Unless of course we really do make him a victim, in which case the sense of our own difference as Romans vanishes. The sacrificial victim next appears in the visual

image of the river god, the Rhine, whose crown of sedge cannot conceal that his horns have been broken (4.2.41). This figure, whose ill-disguised broken horns seemed to have plucked him from book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, where the river god Achelous bears the same deformity for the same reason and tries to hide it in the same way, also changes color like a sacrificial victim as we refocus our attention from the deceptive green crown to the native blood (*suo sanguine*, 4.2.42) that infects his waters. Above these images appears the triumphing Caesar.⁴ This distinction between high and low takes us back to the opening distinction made in the poem, as the lofty Palatine will be covered in garlands to celebrate Germany being brought low. But that glance at the first lines becomes less straightforward with the mention of the color of the imperial cloak, *purpureus*, purple, like the blood of the victim (4.2.48).⁵ If it is valuable to the iconography of victory that the faces of the Germans reveal an unchanged ferocity, it is perhaps even more essential that Caesar maintain a stable countenance that shows no signs of changing into that of the defeated, by taking over their regal insignia, their abominable sacrificial practices, or even the stain of defeat manifested by the blood in the Rhine. Yet that is precisely the transformation the text suggests, with the help of some pointers back to the *Metamorphoses*. The flowers that cloak Tiberius's path (*tegente*, 4.2.50) recall the garlands that mask the Rhine's defeat. Garlands themselves appear in the next line as the emperor binds his brow with Phoebus's laurel. The laurel's associations both with victory and with ritual purity are equally relevant here, as the conqueror also stresses his own exemption from pollution. Yet is this too simply a mask for violence and vulnerability? The imperial laurel is a sign we are familiar with, and any reader of the first book of the *Metamorphoses* would know how many differences in perspective lie behind the simple assertion that the laurel belongs to Phoebus. With these associations in mind, the time when the emperor seems most to have put on the form of the victim comes when he utters the conqueror's cry, *io!* (4.2.51).

In one of the most striking transformations enacted in *Tristia* 4.2, the poet Ovid becomes an audience for the reports of the triumph, and yet that very report exists only when audience members themselves become "poets," narrating the events of the spectacle, here, conveniently, in elegiac distichs. This idea of how every reception of imperial images becomes an act of creation—one that we explored at length in chapter 2—reemerges here at the fullest level of political significance as the various

⁴ With what follows, cf. the important comment of Hardie 2002.310 on the figure of the emperor in this poem: "In *Tristia* 4.2 the triumphant Caesar is placed on the same level of reality or unreality as the conquered personification of Germania."

⁵ Oliensis 2004.310 notes that in *Tristia* 1.1.5–6, the same color adorns the cover of books of poetry.

guises that Ovid himself takes on in narrating the triumph figure different positions in relation to the power of the state. Ovid appears as its imperial center, and someone whose remoteness from events takes the form of a flight into fiction and imagination. He bears a likeness to the spectators, whose Romanness consists in reading the triumph, and to the captives, whose current state testifies only to the forces that have defeated them.⁶ The spectator's report of things he does not know puts him in a position of likeness to Ovid, who is simultaneously reporting the same things, in a state of at least equal or greater ignorance.⁷ His later description of this process as fiction links it more directly to the poetic modes of the *Metamorphoses*, whose images we have seen emerge from the description itself. If we accept that reading the images of the triumph becomes a way of "performing civic identity," then Ovid's poem refutes the alterations of exile, ensuring that he is still a *parva pars plebis*.

And yet the written text that results assimilates the poet to the role of Caesar whose triumph contains not only images to be viewed but texts to be read (cf. *leget*, 4.2.20).⁸ Indeed, the images of the triumph render a cosmos as comprehensive as that assembled at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* and through similar means. We have already seen the substance of the triumph glossed in words that recall how Ovid designates his poem, *corpora versa*. The passage in lines 37–38, describing the geographic images presented in the triumph, "this lake, these mountains, these many fortifications and rivers, were full of cruel destruction, full of blood," provides an equally apt shorthand for the landscape of the *Metamorphoses*. And how does one depict a river?⁹ Caesar's Rhine, as we saw, seems to have stepped out of book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, where the very nature of anthropomorphized gods was itself at issue. Ovid, then, occupies the position simultaneously of subject and spectator. Removed by the emperor's edict from the empowering real presences of imperial display, he exerts his own power in relation both to the emperor, by recasting his truth as fiction and giving the fiction that the triumph occurred the ring of truth, and to his own audience-spectators, in imposing on them another written image of the cosmos. Thus, one might say that the changeable face of the victim, who starts off by looking like an emperor and makes the emperor look like him, most resembles Ovid's own. That Ovid's face has changed "according to the time" is after all a con-

⁶ Cf. also the interpretation of Oliensis 2004.310.

⁷ See the perceptive comments of Hardie 2002c.309.

⁸ Though there is an important difference: Caesar's *tituli* give each captive a precise and stable identity reflecting reality, just what they do not have in Ovid's report. For, except for the Rhine, he gives no proper names to people or places, and the identity of all figures correspondingly remains anything but stable.

⁹ Hinds 2001b.130–36.

stant refrain of the exile poetry.¹⁰ If in reality the emperor has been able to remove the poet from the state, fiction allows him back in. More precisely, Ovid's power comes from the ability of the figures in the triumph seemingly to change their identities, whereas the emperor has everything invested in keeping them always the same.

This reading of *Tristia* 4.2 has so far shown how Ovid's conjuring of imperial spectacle gives him another means for presenting the political consequences of metamorphosis, as described in chapter 1, and for creating his own poetic persona as a model for the imperial subject whose response to the representations of imperial power becomes in turn a form of art. In this chapter, I want to expand the discussion by adding a new dimension to the likeness between Ovidian poetry and public spectacle. **Rather than see the poetry merely as evoking and appropriating actual spectacles, as Ovid claims to do here in the case of Tiberius' triumph, we can also read the poetry as offering its own visualizations of the past that, without any reference to the events of the forum or circus, take over the political dynamics present there to construct a civic dimension to the act of reading and provide a new sphere to measure the powers of the poet.**

This shift away from reading real spectacle as the model for Ovidian spectacle, however difficult it would have been for a Roman reader who had the emperor's monuments inevitably before her eyes, is doubly appropriate for the *Metamorphoses*. First, that poem seems deliberately to avoid doing what the *Tristia* does in describing specific historical events. Most of the scenes to be visualized in the poem take place in a mythological past far removed from contemporary history. And when actual events are described, like the assassination of Julius Caesar, the poet deliberately creates a very different spectacle from what any real viewer could possibly have seen by showing the action from the perspective of mythical characters, the gods Venus and Jupiter. Yet the distance between past and present cannot be absolute. **From the gladiatorial spectacles now known to scholars as "fatal charades" to theatrical performances like Varius's *Thyestes*, performed at the Actian games of 29 BCE, to the artistic "spectacles" of the temples of Apollo on the Palatine, imperial self-presentation recasts Greek myth to define the present.** At the same time, converting the fabulous and far-off to the real and immediate by, for example, showing Actaeon torn apart by dogs conveyed the wondrous perhaps even god-like magic of Roman imperial power, however "playfully." This overlap in subject matter inevitably contaminates the two aesthetic experiences of reading and viewing and brings me to the second reason why the juxtaposition of the two suits this poem distinctively among all Ovid's works: a tension between visualizing Ovid's myths in terms of spectacle and re-

¹⁰ Most tellingly, in relation to the *Metamorphoses*, cf. the *vultus* of *Tristia* 1.7.1.

reading spectacle through the lens of the narratives the poet tells becomes in itself yet another kind of visual doubling that allows the reader to think about the relative pressure imperial reality and poetic fantasy exert on one another. One sign of this relates to the etiological character of Ovid's transformations. Ovid's stories may be locked in the distant past, and they may reach a reader through the comparatively remote and paradigmatically unreliable idiom of the reported tale. But for all that, their fictions promise to take us back to *the Actaeon*, or *the Niobe*, whom artistic depictions and imperial games can evoke only through representations. If we did not have the Actaeon story as a paradigm, the sight of a man torn apart by dogs would take on a different cultural meaning. More precisely, the battle between reality and fiction involved in seeing the gladiator as Actaeon or, in Ovid's case, seeing Actaeon as a gladiator reproduces and brings into focus similar issues to those evoked by the violence of the spectacle in isolation.

In making this argument about the reciprocity between Ovidian visualization and contemporary Roman spectacle, I aim to unite two modern approaches to the poem. The first, we might say, gives priority to Ovid, by focusing on the descriptive elements that provoke a visual response to his work. The second, in turn, attributes this interest to extratextual influences. It is commonly assumed that the "graphic" elements of Ovid's work respond to the greater popularity of spectacle, especially violent spectacle, in imperial Roman culture. Ovid by including such scenes as the flaying of Marsyas was either catering to his audience's taste for such spectacles or indulging his own.¹¹



Gianpiero Rosati provides the fullest and most influential example of the first approach, detailing how Ovid's techniques of description provoke a visual response from his readers through such devices as particularization of details, the inclusion of internal spectators, and the imagined presence of the reader herself as "viewer" through such narrative statements as "you could have seen..." Another important contribution of Rosati's study was to recognize the correlation between problems of seeing and the phenomenon of metamorphosis, as something experienced visually from a number of contrasting perspectives. In explaining Ovid's interest in the contradictory aspects of appearance, Rosati bases it on the poet's perception of the nature of reality itself as bearing the uncertainties of artifice; he speaks of the "spettacolo del mondo" where nothing is ever as it seems.¹² Thus, he is using spectacle at once in its most general sense

as something to be seen and with a more specific and particularly modern meaning of "artifice," "deception." Ovid's illusionism for him derives from a theory about the nature of all reality, not the specific representations of his historical period. He too recognizes the connection between Ovid's text and staged spectacles, as well as the omnipresent visual representations of mythological scenes in works of art.¹³ But for Rosati, these images are important for Ovid primarily because they make it easier for him to elicit visual responses to his poem from an audience that would already be habituated to "see" the scenes he describes.

If Rosati's work leaves room for more analysis of the importance of Roman *spectacula* in understanding Ovid's use of the visual, those approaches that explain his interest in constructing visual scenes simply as the product of an imperial Zeitgeist are limited both by their vagueness about the effects of such generalized influence and by their failure to connect Ovid's emulations of actual spectacles with the importance of visual response as a thematic interest within the poem. Such comparisons were often developed before recent interest in Roman spectacles, particularly gladiatorial competitions, has revealed their political and, indeed, aesthetic complexity. Thus, Galinsky, writing in 1975 about the effect of Roman taste on Ovid's focus on violence, claims, "Quite in contrast to its treatment in Greek literary poetry, the horror of myth is transmuted into a non-spiritual, non-intellectual, and external affair which corresponds to Roman realities."¹⁴ Fuller consideration of the cultural significance of violent spectacle in Roman culture makes Ovid's textual evocations much more than an index of his participation in Roman cruelty.

My approach here tries to work both outward from the text and inward from the cultural phenomena it refers to. Specifically, I argue that Ovid's stagings of episodes as gladiatorial, ritual, or theatrical spectacle are most fully explained as more than simple borrowings that add vividness to the distant and unfamiliar episode and contextualize it in the here and now. Rather, as has emerged from the analysis of literary intertexts, the evocations of extraliterary "sources" as well invites reflection on the differences and resemblances between their manifestations "on the stage and on the page." At one level, the competition between imitation and reality involved in seeing stories as spectacles offers another way of defining the position of the poet, but consideration of the significance of vision within the text, especially the important role of seeing as a trigger for exploring the multivalence of metamorphosis itself, suggests a more focused, and ambitious, claim: the problems of recognition that emerge from seeing within the poem resemble different forms of visual

¹¹ See the discussion in Tissol 1997.125, citing Wilkinson 1955.162 and Galinsky 1975.63.

¹² Rosati 1983.95–173, esp. 169–70.

¹³ On shows and games, see Rosati 1983.143–44, and 137–38 on the visual arts.

¹⁴ Galinsky 1975.139.

ambiguity present in actual spectacle. In both cases, reconciling different possible points of view energizes the response to the sight and demands reflection on the position—speaking politically as well as literally—of the viewer. Thus, perception of an overlap between the audience's experience of Ovid's work and the spectator's attendance at civic spectacles shows at once what is at stake in the reading of Ovid by pointing up its relation to issues of community and identity and, at the same time, clarifies and comments on the processes of spectacle itself.

Two important precedents for reading Ovidian spectacle as in dialogue with, rather than as reflections of, actual spectacles provide our starting point. Stephen Hinds, writing in 1987, made an observation similar to Rosati's on Ovid's evocation of theater and arena as stages for climactic events in his poem. The self-consciously described pastoral landscape on Mount Enna, where Proserpina plays before her abduction by Pluto, consists of an open glade surrounded by trees that "deflect the sun's beams with their leaves, as if with an awning." (5.388–89). That last comparison, as Hinds points out, relates the shady grove typical of poetic "pleasant places" to the circular space of the amphitheater, where awnings would protect spectators from the sun. So too, Ovid explicitly likens the killing of Orpheus by Thracian Maenads to the sight of a deer killed by dogs in a *venatio* (11.26–27). Again, the simile alerts the reader to the spectacular configuration of Ovid's setting: the Maenads first see the poet as spectators (*cernunt*) as he performs for a very different audience of tamed beasts, which are in turn described as a theatrical audience (*theatri*, 11.22). **But where Rosati saw allusions to spectacle as a device to alert the reader to the visual qualities of Ovid's own work, Hinds sees a deliberate blurring of literary landscapes and the contemporary settings of the stage. And this blurring at once changes the character of the scene, in this case again Proserpina's abduction, by highlighting the audience's expectation of violence: "The familiar 'stage' of pastoral is here an amphitheatrical arena, and the performance ... no bucolic song recital, but a cruel spectacle of which the maiden Persephone is destined to be the unwilling star."**¹⁵

The overlap Ovid constructs between the fictional landscape of his poetry and the all-too-real urban settings of the actual spectacle takes on a broader significance in the recent work of Philip Hardie. For Hardie, the evocation of spectacle points forward to the literature of the later first century in confusing the categories of "spectacle" and reality.¹⁶ As spectacle replaces reality in the self-presentation of the emperors, Ovid's appropriation of that realm within his own poetry—and Hardie here is

speaking primarily of the representations of specific Roman spectacles in the exile poetry—both points up the fictional aspects of imperial display and, in so doing, elevates his own fictions to the same level of authority. This last move becomes a typically Ovidian refraction of an established Augustan interest in asserting equivalences between literary and imperial display well exemplified in the works of Vergil and Livy. Thus, in *Georgics* 3, Vergil promises to construct a temple for the new emperor that bears comparison with the actual temple of Palatine Apollo even then being built. And Livy's portrayal of historical events as spectacles belongs in the context of Augustan reenactments of the Roman past. Ovid's distinctive technique of putting imperial images on the same representational plane as his own both emphasizes and reflects "a decisive shift in the relationship between 'show' and 'reality' as principate replaced Republic."¹⁷

For Hardie, then, Ovid's unmasking of the fictive in imperial spectacle stands at an opposite pole from writers who try to enhance the authority of the text by assimilating its own images to actual public display. As his interpretations reveal, however, either relationship is very much in the eyes of a reader who can make the arrows of priority point in either direction. My own dissent from the position Hardie's last quote suggests springs from a different conception of the function of the world of "show." Ovid's reproductions of spectacle may indeed implicate triumph and ritual in a fictional nexus where reality can emerge only from representations, or the poetry may gain a purchase in the real present by describing staged events that, even if they offer their audience the Rhine River only in the guise of a man with horns and garlands, nevertheless can be perceived with the eyes as opposed to the mind. But my position will be that this play of fictionality is not something that the poetry alone exposes about these representations. **On the contrary, like the architectural programs we considered in chapter 2, even spectacles like the triumph present a variety of claims about the world, and the audience must always work out for itself what to accept or reject.** Nor does this process imply disloyal skepticism or resistance; rather, it is how the spectator participates in the event. The negotiation of truth and fiction in public spectacle helps determine the audience's response to the ritual elements at the core of sacrifice, gladiatorial spectacle, and, in represented form, the triumph. From this perspective, Ovid's emphasis on the representational aspects of these scenes, far from undermining their civic function, enhances one of its essential effects and at the same time makes it clear that this effect is also one that his own poetry strives to reproduce. **The more he seems to oppose the perspectives generated by his own representations to those of the emperor, the closer he draws his work to the experience of imperial spectacle.**

¹⁵ Hinds 1987a.35.

¹⁶ Hardie 2002c.316.

¹⁷ Hardie 2002c.317.

To back up this claim, I want to examine the kind of spectacle that comes closest in subject matter and perhaps in aesthetic effect to certain episodes of the *Metamorphoses*: the reenactments of mythical events in the gladiatorial arena, which Kathleen Coleman has called “fatal charades.”¹⁸ The staged execution of condemned criminals provides the context for these “performances.” We hear, for example, of a certain Meniscus offering “a great spectacle to all” by being burned alive like Hercules, after having been made to steal the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. Another criminal perished in a reenactment of the death of Orpheus, and there are also accounts of a Daedalus and a Pasiphae. The attested examples of this kind of execution cluster in the reigns of Nero and the Flavian emperors and thus postdate Ovid’s poem by more than half a century. What justification, then, is there for using them to understand the interaction between the *Metamorphoses* and the performances of its own era? First of all, my reading does not assume that Ovid’s poetry responds to or reproduces specific enactments of the myths he describes as “fatal charades,” although the possibility cannot be ruled out.¹⁹ When Ovid invites us to see the death of Orpheus played out as a *venatio*, he is not simply evoking something he had seen (indeed, his Orpheus is simultaneously likened to a deer!). However, to understand in what way precisely this imaginary setting would transform the significance of the scene, it is very revealing to see how one Roman responded when Orpheus actually did meet his fate in the “morning show.” Closer examination of accounts of “fatal charades” indicates that the realms of myth and imperial spectacle are not so far apart. The use of amphitheatrical spectacle to represent the realm of myth, and vice versa, reproducing the same kind of contextual overlapping as Ovid’s similes, puts questions of fiction like those we have encountered in the *Metamorphoses* at the center of public spectacle and connects these questions to other dimensions of the event as well. Thus, the thought exercise of imagining some responsivity between Ovid’s depiction of the death of Orpheus, for example, and the enactment of the same event in the arena, even if we cannot be sure that it is one that

¹⁸ Coleman 1990.

¹⁹ Our evidence is not in itself sufficient to establish a sure starting point for the practice. The fullest accounts come from a very unique source, the *liber spectaculorum* written by Martial collecting epigrammatic mementos of the unprecedented series of games with which Titus inaugurated the Colosseum. We have no such detailed accounts of specific *munera* earlier in the imperial period. But there is evidence for adding an element of role-playing to violent spectacles already in the reigns of Caesar and Augustus: a large-scale naval battle in 46 BCE showed “Tyrians” battling “Egyptians”; another under Augustus in 2 BCE reenacted Salamis, with “Athenians” against “Persians” (Coleman 1990.70–71). (The evidence for the first spectacle comes from Suet. *Jul.* 39.4, for Augustus’s from Dio 55.10.7.) The death of the bandit Selurus in the mid-thirties BCE shows that both the taste and the technology for elaborate executions were already in place (see below, n.25).

would actually have been available to Ovid’s original audience, nevertheless throws into relief a number of important similarities between the two modes of representation and can help explain the significance of Ovid’s simile.

Comparison to Livy, another author, of an earlier generation, who also uses the production of visual scenes to define the political position of his work, can help reveal what is distinctive in Ovid’s evocations of spectacle in the *Metamorphoses*. Livy’s “spectacles” took the form of historical scenes focused through the perceptions of viewers within the narrative, helping his own audience to “see” as they read. The visualization of the past was also an important element in the displays of the emperor, whether this took the form of reviving archaic rituals, constructing his own actions as imitations of past ones, or integrating statues of exemplary figures from the past into the design of his forum. But one striking aspect of Livy’s use of spectacle is its autonomy. While his reader may compare his own description of the fetal ritual, for example, with its actual reperformance, Livy’s visualizations of events are not staged as contemporary ritual but approximate it by putting the past directly on display. In showing these historical scenes to his readers, Livy may be implicitly rivaling Augustus, but the figures he explicitly follows in directing the gaze of his readers are the kings and consuls summoned up by his own narrative. The “self-generating” aspect of Livian spectacle is also closely bound up with the question of genre. While, as recent scholarship has stressed, Livy’s discussions of historical methods reveal all reconstructions of past events as just that,²⁰ nevertheless he also relies on the audience’s expectation that what a historical narrative offers is the truth. The battle of Aquilonia, for example, belongs to the realm of fact, not fiction. Livy’s narrative then, to speak in very general terms, derives its authority from the ability vividly to convey “real” events from the past by means of the narrative alone, without needing to evoke contemporary scenes to lend them impact.

Ovid’s comparisons of mythical events to contemporary scenes, like those of the arena, are almost diametrically different in respect both to expectations about the “reality” of what he describes and to the relation between his text and contemporary spectacle. In inviting his readers to visualize the death of Orpheus as a *venatio*, he has taken an episode that is both miraculous and mythical and set it in a context immediately apprehensible from the lived experience of his readers. A fundamental tension arises from the projection of the utterly fictional into the empirically real. In a similar way, the first representation of Ovidian gods at their most fabulous, that is, as the personifications familiar from epic poetry,

²⁰ See Miles 1995.8–74.

simultaneously makes them wear the masks of contemporary prestige. They dwell on a Palatine, they meet in a Senate, and they regard their leader as the Romans do Caesar. Thus, whereas Livy's visualizations of the past by virtue of the essential reality of what he put on display could transport the reader out of the present, Ovid summons up the visual aspects of the present to create a tension between present and past that at once makes the fabulous impossibly real and, in doing so, implicates reality in his own fictions. A spectator of the staged death of Orpheus who knew Ovid's text might have experienced all the more keenly a reciprocal tension between a representation that was undeniably real of an event that could never have happened. Indeed, it would perhaps complete the Ovidian miracle in a way that no textual image ever could, thus exposing at once the powers and the limits of his poetry.

An emphasis on the fictionality of what spectacle represents has an obviously different political charge in the case of a "fatal charade" than of the scenes depicted in a triumph—although even there we have seen that the superimposition of the fictional characters of the *Metamorphoses* onto the historical actors of the triumph emphasizes issues that the viewing of that event perhaps ought to raise for its Roman spectators. Everyone in the audience at a mythological charade—if they were capable of recognizing the allusion in the first place—knew that the man they saw being torn apart was not Orpheus, and probably the majority of those who did would have recognized that, whatever the historicity of Orpheus as a poet, the figure with the power to charm inanimate objects who was torn apart by Maenads belonged to the realm of fable rather than literary history. Far from spoiling the fun, the reification of fiction was the point of the display. To assent to this belief and, at the same time, to realize the impossibility of such an assent were perhaps key to the aesthetic experience involved in such displays. As the poet Martial says of a reenactment of Pasiphae's mating with a bull, *accepit fabula prisca fidem* ("the old story has become believable," *Spect.* 5.2), a comment that not only evokes precisely Ovid's language of fiction but also demonstrates the importance of an awareness of the fabulous nature of the story at the very moment it is being made real.²¹ So Kathleen Coleman has suggested the reality of such performances stood in contrast to their fictional imitation on the theatrical stage and also showed the emperor "work[ing] a miracle."²² In this context, if Ovid's restaging of the event in purely fictional terms is taken to highlight the fictionality of what is depicted, this only amplifies the miraculous effect of an actual reenactment and makes

the miracle all the more vivid. By contrast, his own poem offers its mimesis of reality without any actual visual images and thus stands at a further remove; indeed, the very flimsiness of its own illusionism would seem all the more exposed by comparison to the such performances. Yet another way of interpreting the absence of a present manifestation of Ovid's Orpheus, though, is that by doing more with less, Ovid's fiction, if it succeeds in making the reader accept it, has performed the greater miracle. At the same time such an acceptance exposes the gladiatorial Orpheus as nothing but a slave, his poem describes the authentic, legendary Orpheus.

Thus, the juxtaposition of the two representations of Orpheus in the arena, rather than manifesting the superiority of poetic making over imperial display, creates a far more complex effect because there is no sure way of assigning priority to present reality or to the myth it illustrates. The poet's restaging of the imperial reification of his story may be seen as enhancing the effect of actual imperial display in contrast with his own or as beating the emperor at his own game. And if we think not of how a reading of Ovid affects interpretation of the amphitheater but of how knowing about the amphitheater changes one's reading of Ovid, then whatever enhancement Ovid gave the emperor in the former case, the emperor now returns to the poet, for without projecting the amphitheatrical paradigm onto Ovid's narrative, its full ambition and power would not emerge so clearly. Ovid has perhaps relocated the site for experiencing the effects of this miraculous conversion of fiction to reality from the arena to the text, but in doing so he reveals the debt his poetic accomplishment owes to the model of actual imperial display.

Another aspect of Coleman's discussion of mythological charades complements this analysis by demonstrating that "fatal charades" themselves raised the question of the relative priority of the here-and-now performance and the myth it enacted. The performance of myth in the present and without the artificiality of the stage, where you knew that what you were seeing was make-believe, could make its miracles "credible" in a way they never had been before. This is particularly true in the gruesome case of an impersonation of Pasiphae where a female prisoner seems actually to be mated with a bull. Here the fantastic process of metamorphosis—albeit a metamorphosis that even in myth was the product of artifice rather than miracle—becomes all too real. But on the other hand, whenever mythical representation was transferred from the meticulously controlled world of the text or the fabrications of the stage to the reality of the arena, anything could happen. The best-known stories can be transformed when enacted by real protagonists fighting for their lives, and it is revealing about what interested a Roman audience in these performances that our accounts of "fatal charades" note such variations. Thus, two of Martial's epigrams describe stories that came out

²¹ Coleman 1990.67.

²² Coleman 1990.68 and 73 (quote). See also Bartsch 1994.50–51 with the comments of August 1972.103 and Dupont 1985.398 cited there.

differently in the arena: “Orpheus,” of course, fails to charm with his lyre the wild animals sent to kill him and is done in by a bear (*Spect.* 24–25). Another bear dispatches a Daedalus, who cannot escape with his wings.²³

Not only did these performances provoke speculation on whether such realization affirmed the power of myth or triumphed over it by demonstrating its essential falsity. Penetration of the illusion by a focus on what was actually happening rather than on the represented story shows another aspect of the battle between truth and fiction in the reception of these events. The most telling example of this comes from another of Martial’s epigrams (10.25), this one describing the reenactment not of a Greek myth but of a quasi-legendary event from the early days of the Roman republic, when Q. Mucius Scaevola endures having his right hand burned off as a demonstration of Roman *fides* and *virtus*. Here the performance seems to have gone exactly according to plan. The “Mucius,” almost unbelievably, succeeded in seeming *patiens*, *durus*, and *fortis* throughout the ordeal. But Martial himself steps in to detonate the audience’s admiration for this feat by differentiating it from legend: “For when, under threat of torture, he was commanded: ‘Burn your hand!’ it was a braver thing to answer ‘No.’” An awareness of the realities of the arena, specifically that this is a slave who, far from resisting torture, only succeeds in his impersonation under the threat of torture, turns on its head the very point of the story.

Martial’s comments reveal another point of contact between the poetics of these performances, if such brutality should be dignified with that expression, and Ovidian fictionality: both potentially involve issues of status. Martial’s exposure of the constraints placed upon the performer in this case deftly transform physical torture from the demonstration of Roman *libertas*, which it was for Scaevola, to the paradigmatic mark of servitude in the case of the real performer. Perhaps one motive for stripping the scene of its verisimilitude is that its very persuasiveness might have blurred the difference between the two and suggested that such fortitude, far from being the prerogative of a Roman master race, which was what Mucius wanted to show, could be equaled even by the lowest of the low, a *damnatus*. The nature of the performance allows one to see the actor at either the top or the bottom of the social scale, depending on whether he is viewed from inside or outside the drama he enacts, with significant consequences in turn for how that drama is interpreted. In a similar way, Ovid’s own position, as we saw in the preceding chapter, shifts

as we construe him as like and unlike the poetic makers described within his poem. In this respect again, conflicting class associations of *fabula* as a rhetorical form come into play. We have already seen how according to Phaedrus *fabulae*, particularly those in which humans mask their voices as those of animals—and it is interesting to note here the role of animal disguise in the “charades” involving Pasiphae and perhaps Daedalus, become a potentially subversive genre through which the low can speak a language incomprehensible to their masters. Does the trumping of *fabulae* by reality here matter in part because it unmasks the slave disguised as something else?²⁴ While we have evidence for only a tiny fraction of what may have been a much broader repertoire of myths to be enacted in the tortures of the amphitheater, it is interesting that both Orpheus and Daedalus are attested as subjects. For these are not simply figures from myth, but characters who themselves produce representations through song or the mechanical imitation of nature. Because both artists offer their own images of reality, their appearance within the spectacles of the emperor further heightens an awareness of the contrast between truth and fiction. The presentation of both characters in the amphitheater would thus be of a piece with Ovid’s deployment of them in his poetry, where the autonomy of the world created by each—as we have seen demonstrated in the analysis of the Daedalus passage—becomes an issue through which Ovid can pose the question of the status of his own poetry. The death of Orpheus in the arena may then represent in the crudest possible terms the ultimate victory of the *princeps* over the *poeta*.

There is in fact some evidence that staged deaths could indeed be used to subvert the “fictions” of the victim: thus, the bandit Selurus, who boasted that he was son of Etna, was executed by being thrown to the beasts when a collapsible model of the volcano dropped him into their cages. Augustus was not simply hoisting the bandit on his own petard; he was demonstrating precisely through the flimsy staginess of his props that Selurus’s boasts were mere fictions and that the power of life and, in this case, death belonged to the emperor.²⁵

²⁴ Another way of reading the *fabulae* performed in the arena, though, works in the other direction. The *fabulae* of myth, when viewed from lower down in the social hierarchy, offered a mark of social status to those who learned them—hence the eagerness of Petronius’s upwardly mobile Trimalchio to demonstrate his command of myth, and his high-status creator’s emphasis on the spectacular errors he makes. In the context of the arena, the bears who undermine the glamour of myth by devouring the poet Orpheus may perhaps have cheered those who regarded such mythological references as the mark of a status from which they were excluded, and so enhanced the common touch of the emperor who produced the show.

²⁵ Strabo 6.273. See the discussion of Coleman 1990.53, who proposes a date in the mid-thirties BCE.

²³ *Spect.* 10. I am less convinced than Coleman that this was a staging of the Daedalus myth as a fatal charade. Rather, but equally significantly, I think it is Martial who has staged the execution as myth by playing on the name of the victim.

This last example stresses the way that death provides a “moment of truth” for the fictions enacted in such shows, compelling spectators to make decisions about what is real and what is artifice. We can imagine this process as a stripping away of disguises to remind spectators either of the real identity of all participants or of the point when they succumb to fictions so completely as to accept them as real. We may also imagine that such complex revelations become difficult for any author of spectacles to control. One can readily conceive of a sympathetic account of Selurus that would stress precisely his humanity and convert the stage props and papier-mâché Etna into the hubristic cruelties of a tyrant. In a very similar way, we have seen how Pythagoras’s representation of sacrifice replaces what would be the moment of death at an actual ritual performance with two divergent ways of reading the victim, either unmasking her as a human beneath false appearances or transforming a real cow into a tragic Iphigeneia through a poetic sleight of hand, depending on the reader’s preferences and predispositions.

As the last example shows, the relation between questions of fiction and reality and responses to violence influence one another reciprocally in complex ways. If we assent to Pythagoras’s view of what the cow really is, then “we” potentially cross the boundaries of the spectacle by identifying with the victim against the society that profits from her death. If we keep our eyes on bovine appearances, it helps us to watch her death as that of an “other.” In the arena, masking violence as the enactment of a mythical plot can help distance spectators from its all too real effects. But it can also heroize and raise the status of a servile or even animal victim—the danger, perhaps, that Martial senses in the slave’s too successful impersonation of Scaevola. Conversely, too great an awareness of the suffering of the victim can make it impossible to sustain the dramatic illusion and cast an unwelcome attention on the artificer himself.

Helen Morales has documented a very similar process at work in the reception of visual arts. She examines a *controversia*, an imaginary court case, recorded by the Elder Seneca (10.5),²⁶ centered on a famous painting by Parrhasius on display in the temple of Minerva. The painting depicted Prometheus in bondage, and Parrhasius had tortured a slave to death to observe the effects of such torment in the flesh. The case to be argued is the prosecution of Parrhasius for harming the state by this action, and the various rhetoricians who take it on are forced to consider the question of what it is that one sees when one looks at the painting. If it is the Titan hero, the artist’s fiction is accepted as reality, and the “real” context of the painting, to honor the chief god of Athens, rebuts the charge of harm-

ing the state. But if we see the reality behind the realistic fiction, and it is of course the realism of the painting that creates this dilemma, then the artist becomes merely a torturer who has defiled the temple rather than adorning it. Another equally important issue in this debate, teased out by Morales, is the audience’s potential absorption into both the fiction and the creative process. The recognition of “Prometheus” as a slave disintegrates fictionality not only from within, by restoring the absent model, but from without, by creating a sympathy that puts the spectator himself in pain through identification with the victim. More precisely, Morales demonstrates that the viewers’ absorption potentially involves taking on either a passive role (Parrhasius “tortures”—*torquet*, 10.5.3—the eyes of the spectators as he tortured the slave) or an active one, making them complicit in the punishment they see inflicted (they view as the artist and so as the performer of torture). We have repeatedly seen this process at work in Ovidian fiction, as absorption in a story subjects internal audiences to metamorphosis or conversely puts them in the role of the agent of transformation.

Morales’ analysis helps us perceive the problems of fictionality raised by Ovid’s text as part of a broader response to representative arts in the early imperial period, one clearly shaped by responses to contemporary arena spectacle. Although the fictional case is set in Athens, it has been translated to Rome by more than the simple act of being made the subject of a Latin declamation; the rhetor’s imaginary exhortation of Parrhasius to “burn, whip, torture” his slave model echoes the famous gladiator’s oath to undergo precisely these punishments. The construction of viewing as a collective act, benefiting or harming the entire community, the conflation of representation with violence, and the emphasis on the participatory nature of spectation all find important analogues in responses to gladiatorial spectacle. What is the relevance of this discussion for a reading of Ovid? It is not simply that all roads lead back to the arena and that Ovidian conceptions of fiction find their origins in or primarily address those spectacles. **Rather I want to demonstrate the readiness with which questions of reality and fiction manifest themselves in aspects of Roman practice including the arena shows, sacrificial ritual, and theatrical performance.** Thus, in the context of Augustan culture—and Ovid in various ways encourages us to recognize this overlap—a topic that we may think of as primarily a formal, narratological question possesses an unexpected utility as a map of responses to phenomena powerfully and directly connected with the construction of each reader’s identity as a member of Roman society. **Not only, then, does Ovid train the gaze of his audience by exploring the limits of fiction, but he potentially transfers such a civic context to the reception of otherwise very remote events.** The *Metamorphoses’* fictions energize and are energized by a dialogue with

²⁶ And therefore from a milieu in which we can document Ovid himself participating as a young man. Morales 1996.

the spectacular emanations of imperial power. The poet moving from the realm of fantasy and fiction gives solid flesh to his creations, while the emperor competes with the poet in realizing myth. The aim of the rest of this chapter is to show how such a dialogue emerges from another episode in the poem where the acceptance of fictions receives explicit attention, the encounter between Pentheus and Dionysus.

The story, so familiar from Euripides' *Bacchae*, forms the climax of the third book at the conclusion of a set of tales about the origins of Thebes, many of which share a number of motifs in common. First, like Argus from book 1, three of the central characters in this book, Cadmus, Actaeon, and Pentheus, find themselves suddenly thrust from the role of audience or spectator into that of participant—or, indeed, victim. For again, as in the Argus episode, the transition from spectator to spectacle coincides with the moment when each story reaches its violent climax. The pattern is first articulated at the instant when Cadmus has killed the monstrous serpent that has devoured his companions. While Cadmus inspects the monster's size, he hears a mysterious voice ask him why he is staring at the serpent, "since [he] too will be gazed upon as a serpent" (*quid, Agenore nate, peremptum / serpentem spectas? et tu spectabere serpens*, 3.97–98).

The last line points to a second significant theme in these episodes: the sudden shift from the active to passive role in the act of gazing accentuates a dramatic disjunction between outward form and a perceiving self. This receives extensive treatment at the center of the book in the story of Echo and Narcissus, where the youth has the, to him, incomprehensible experience of viewing his appearance from outside.²⁷ The role of metamorphosis in signifying such a split receives extended treatment in the story of Actaeon, changed to a deer for glimpsing the naked Diana and then torn apart by his own hounds. As his companions watch his gruesome death, they wish that Actaeon himself could be present as a spectator, a wish that figures him as a "mirror image" of Narcissus who cannot stand apart from his form to view it: "They complain that he is absent and that, slow, he does not perceive the spectacle of this fortuitous prey. He would indeed wish to be absent, but he is present, and he would rather watch than feel the cruel deeds of his dogs" (3.245–48).

Finally, the text offers many stimuli for translating the dilemmas of viewing it explores to the contexts of contemporary Roman spectacle.

²⁷ For the thematic centrality of this seemingly divergent story to Ovid's Theban cycle, see the important analysis of Gildenhard and Zissos 2000b who convincingly read it as a stand-in for the omitted story of Oedipus.

The first of these invitations comes just after the issue of shifting spectacular roles has been signaled by the mysterious warning to Cadmus that he too will be gazed at. After Cadmus sows the dragon's teeth, a simile compares the crop of earthborn warriors to figures (*signa*) on a theater curtain being raised:

*sic ubi tolluntur festis aulaea theatri
surgere signa solent primumque ostendere vultus
cetera paulatim, placidoque educta tenore
tota patent imoque pedes in margine ponunt.*
(3.111–14)

As, when curtains are raised at the theater on festival days, images are wont to rise and show forth first the faces and then the rest little by little, and are exposed, drawn up in a gentle motion, and set their feet on the lowest edge.

This simile has been taken to mark the beginning of a series of episodes drawn from tragedy, but such an explicit "staging" of the narrative forms an important step in a developing interest in the unstable position of the spectator.²⁸ For the simile does more than simply invoke stage machinery; it also enacts its own theatrical illusion by bringing depicted *signa* to life. This effect emerges most clearly in the simile's final line, when the images, which have so far been described in language more or less appropriate to their real status as curtains, now seem to set their own feet on the "threshold" as though they were real people. The actors on the stage? Or the people that they in turn represent? As if to signify how these images have suddenly crossed the line, Ovid omits any transition back from the vehicle of the simile to its tenor, the sown men. But these efforts to bring the reader into the illusionary space created—a move made easier by staging it in terms familiar from contemporary spectacle—are answered within the narrative by a warning issued by one of these actor-warriors to the internal spectator Cadmus, not to "insert himself" among them (3.117). Doing this would mean entering a cycle of civil war in which killer and victim immediately change places, again precisely the import of the warning voice at the serpent's death. Appropriately, then, just as the scene takes on a contemporary Roman flavor that seems potentially to envelope the poem's historical audience, the reader is forcibly pulled back into the role of mere observer. Yet, of course, this injunction doubly implies her absorption, because on the one hand it means identifying with Cadmus and on the other it closely connects the experience of reading to

²⁸ Hardie 1990.226. See also Gildenhard and Zissos 1999a.172.

that, for example, of a gladiatorial competition, where it was precisely by maintaining such distance even in the face of gripping identification with the combatants that the spectator underlined his distance as a Roman from the servile fighters below.

The death of Actaeon too may be compared to a *venatio*, the hunting shows of the arena, though here Actaeon has fallen out of stands to become the victim. And the process culminates in the death of Pentheus himself, who is suddenly seen even as he goes to see the rites of the Maenads (*hic oculis illum cernentem sacra profanes / prima videt* ..., 3.710–11). Euripides, of course, had “staged” Pentheus’s death by casting the king as a spectator who is seen as he himself tries to gain a better vantage by mounting to the top of a fir tree. But Ovid updates the scene to the Roman arena, setting it in a plain, *campus*, that is clear of trees and, for that reason, easy to see or good for seeing (*spectabilis*, 3.714), and set off by the forests that surround it.

But these reminders of settings where a contemporary audience might have seen events like the death of Actaeon played out visually do not simply make Ovid’s narrative more “spectacular.” On the contrary, they create a tense dialogue between the two mimetic modes, which, far from blending into one another, can also appear as adversaries pulling their audiences toward opposite responses and understandings of what they represent. We have earlier encountered viewers within the narrative who facilitate the audience’s own imagined visual participation in the scene. Here, though, we meet spectators whose understanding of events veers dramatically from that of Ovid’s own audience, and again the phenomenon of changed appearance provides the gauge for this difference. The audience that thrills to the action of Actaeon’s death can do so because it remains in ignorance of the story Ovid has told and sees only a deer. Pentheus’s own death signals the split even more dramatically. His violent dismemberment at the hands of his mother and aunts has sometimes appeared as an anomalous appendix to the tale of the prisoner “Acoetes,” which features precisely the kind of metamorphosis missing in the account of Pentheus. Yet here more than anywhere else, metamorphosis emerges as a question of perspective. Agave and Ino in their madness do perceive that Pentheus has an animal form, that of a wild boar,²⁹ whereas the reader of Ovid’s narrative will acknowledge no such change. The double vision of metamorphosis has here been split neatly in half between these audiences, one of which sees only a boar, the other only a man, and neither a man becoming a boar. The narrative drives a further wedge between its audience and these internal spectators with a moment of self-reference. When Pentheus fails to make his aunt recognize him, he appeals to her recollec-

tion of the dead Actaeon. But she “does not know who Actaeon is” (*illa quis Actaeon nescit*, 3.721). Her ignorance at once assimilates her to her son’s killers and separates her from readers who “witnessed” Actaeon’s transformation through the medium of Ovid’s narrative.³⁰

The tension between reading and seeing that plays out in Pentheus’s final moments emerges appropriately from an agon between two combatants that in several ways symbolizes the competition between fiction and imperial spectacle as a mode for perceiving what is happening. The idea of Dionysus as a practitioner of the same kind of art as the author of the text that represents him will be familiar to anyone who approached Ovid’s text with Euripides’ metatheatrical *Bacchae* in mind. However, by replacing the “palace miracle” of that play with a retelling of the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus, Ovid substitutes for the dramaturgical god working through *opsis* to hint at his identity an “epic” divinity who uses a narrative about metamorphosis to prove that he is who he is not (i.e., Acoetes). Pentheus’s response to the narrative also couples its deceptive, riddling nature with its status as something heard rather than seen (“*Praebuimus longis*” *Pentheus*, “*ambagibus aures*,” 3.692).³¹ And instead of emerging in visible form, as the god did at the end of the *Bacchae*, Bacchus’s final mention here has him slipping away from the “solid” chains in which the king sought to bind him into the more nebulous world of narrative, for his miraculous escape is merely something reported (*fama est*, 3.700).

Pentheus’s role, by contrast, is throughout the narrative to impose “real” physical compulsion on speakers of words by his presence. He “casts forth” (*proturbat*, 3.526) the prophet Teiresias, in the midst of his speech (*talia dicentem*, 3.526), and, in a frenzy of imperatives, gives orders for the god himself to be brought in bound (“*ite citi*”—*famulis hoc imperat*—“*ite ducemque! attrahite huc vinctum! Iussis mora segnis abesto*,” 3.563–64). The Pentheus who considers listening to stories a waste of time and had begun his “reception” of the god with his eyes rather than his ears (*adspicit hunc oculis*, 7.577) has similarly been trans-

³⁰ The very words of Pentheus enact another division between internal spectators and the witnesses of metamorphosis. For the reader, Pentheus’s appeal will look very much like Shakespeare’s Lavinia citing Philomela as a way of telling her own story. Actaeon was seen as a deer but was really not, so don’t you bacchantes make the same mistake now. But I doubt whether this can be taken as Pentheus’s intention. First of all, there is no sign that Actaeon ever was “recognized” in the guise of a deer by a human audience, and it is equally unclear that Pentheus perceives that the bacchantes see him as a beast. In such circumstances, Pentheus’s appeal to Actaeon’s shade need be nothing other than a rhetorically familiar appeal for pity by making the potential perpetrator of violence see a resemblance between the victim and a near relation (human, of course). When Pentheus invokes the “specter” of Actaeon, then, he expects his audience to see a human image, while the poet’s audience will be more likely to see a deer’s.

³¹ Can one even hear “hearing” in the Greek name Acoetes?

²⁹ Also Otis 1970.140.

lated into a very Roman in figure in the way he combines violent spectacle with the projection of his own authority. His final shift from watcher to victim not only shatters the conventional image of the spectator's distance from events but also more subtly inverts a paradox of Roman power, that an emperor was never more conspicuously powerful than when he adopted the role of spectator. For another striking feature of Pentheus's first glimpse of the disguised god comes when the narrative focuses attention on the king's eyes less as instruments of vision than as objects of vision that themselves convey his own fury (*oculis quos ira tremendos fecerat*, 7.577). Far from being weakened when seen as opposed to seeing, his very act of viewing his victim reveals his own might.³² A corresponding emphasis on visual manifestations of power emerges from Pentheus's first address to his captive, as someone "about to perish and furnish by your death an example to others," 3.579–80. Pentheus's reliance on Bacchus's death as evidence of the folly of violating his own authority not only recalls the general Roman language of exemplarity but more specifically resembles the violent death of a figure like Selurus, himself a brigand, as direct visible proof of what legitimate imperial authority looks like. Pentheus's victim must be witnessed to affirm his authority, or if it is merely recorded, it must be believed as something true, not something made up.

A more direct link to contemporary Roman ideologies of power comes in the content of Pentheus's exhortation to his fellow Thebans to resist physically the imposition of the new cult. Philip Hardie has pointed out the many similarities between the Theban heritage Pentheus invokes here and the foundation legends that, in the words of Livy (*praef.* 7), add majesty to the Romans' own account of their origins.³³ The Thebans are children of Mars (3.531—called by his old Roman name, *Mavors*).³⁴ Their ancestry, somewhat incongruously, combines a divinely led band from an eastern city (Tyre, 3.539), and the vigor of a native stock, the Sown Men born from the dragon's teeth. Pentheus exhorts his hearers to live up to the reputation won by their ancestors in the past by demonstrating manliness against a stereotypical characterization of an effeminate easterner, "locks dripping with myrrh, soft [*molles*] crowns, and clothing embroi-

³² This moment in the downfall of Pentheus echoes his own (mis)interpretation of his descent from the dragon slain by Cadmus. Cadmus assumes that this implies his own assumption of the place of his victim and thus responds with terror. But the combination in that earlier scene of the words *serpens* and *specto* suggests the Greek name for the beast, *drakon*, the gazer. And the terror that Cadmus experienced in looking at the snake was appropriate to a creature whose power came precisely from its gaze.

³³ On the Roman overtones of Pentheus's speech, see esp. Janan 2004. For the similarities between Theban and Roman origins in general, see Hardie 1990, Galinsky 1975.221.

³⁴ Also noted by Anderson 1996.391, who throughout his commentary on the passage astutely observes important parallels with contemporary political rhetoric, and especially with the vision(s) of the Roman past developed in the *Aeneid*.

dered with purple and gold" (3.555–56), who, rather problematically, recalls their own origins in the East. Interestingly, his concern is less with the physical survival of Thebes than with the preservation and projection of a true image of hard Theban manliness. References to shame and disgrace punctuate his exhortation. If Thebes must fall, let it fall by war so that its fate will compel lamentation rather than concealment (3.548–52). It befits the youth of Thebes to adorn themselves with arms and helmets, rather than bacchic garlands (3.541–42). And the Thebans will affirm their strength and power by proving the falsehood of the story that the "other" tells about himself. "I will force [the youthful Bacchus] to confess that his 'father' is falsely claimed and that his rights are fictions" (3.558).

Again, the proof of Pentheus's own power comes through a demonstration of the reality of appearances. Pentheus will show that his opponent is exactly what he seems to be, an effeminate eastern boy, in part by demonstrating the actual emptiness of his own divine paraphernalia. Not only are the god's forces physically weak; they are illusory. Bacchus is a *vanum numen* (3.559–60), an empty divinity who relies on deceptions, *magicae fraudes* (3.534). The dancing and music to which he devotes himself appear in Pentheus's words not only as effeminate but also as materially insubstantial in comparison to the too solid weaponry of the Theban soldiers. Thus, the musical instruments of the god are described as "mere bronze beaten with bronze" (*aera tantum aere repulsa*, 3.532–33) and are said to be without strength. This concept too recalls a characteristic topos of Roman military rhetoric. When for example, in Livy's book 10, the Romans encounter a Samnite legion that has been outfitted with a particularly splendid and distinctive costume, the Roman commander Papirius Cursor exhorts his troops not to fear what he describes as empty finery. Roman iron will prove the ineffectuality of Samnite gold (10.39.12).

Before looking at how "Acoetes'" narrative responds to the issues raised by the king's rhetoric precisely by demonstrating the potency of fictions, it is important to note that Pentheus's claims about the real Theban past, like the ignorance of the bacchantes who kill him, potentially set him apart from the actual audience for Ovid's narrative of Thebes's origins. Most strikingly, Pentheus's rejection of the story of Bacchus's birth requires the rejection of the Semele story, which has been told directly by the narrator. So too, his account of Thebes's own history, itself full of inconsistencies, shows, at best, divergent interpretations of the events Ovid's narrative records. Other than Cadmus, what old men of Tyrian stock survived the dragons' attack?³⁵ And while Cadmus experiences the warning that he

³⁵ Ovid never says that all the Tyrians were killed, although he does not mention any other survivors. And if Cadmus still had surviving companions, then there would seem to be no need to sow the dragon's teeth to restore the lost population.

will become a serpent as a terrifying reminder of the impermanence of victory at the very moment he wins it, Pentheus, identified throughout as the son of the serpent,³⁶ rejoices in that heritage and actually urges the Thebans to imitate the serpent in their defense of their native land. For him, “becoming the serpent,” far from suggesting that all victors will take on the position of victims, provides only a guarantee of future success. The serpent won once, and if they can only continue to be serpents, the Thebans will win in the future. Similarly, Pentheus initially addresses his audiences as the offspring of Mars, recalling that the serpent was itself *Martius* (3.32). However, Ovid earlier says not that the Sown Men were the children of Mars but rather that they died from Mars as a metonym for war (*Marte cadunt*, 3.123).

These discrepancies may at first suggest that the narrative simply sets Pentheus apart from the community of the audience, as, for example, it does those internal spectators who cannot see that the hunter Actaeon has now become the quarry. This kind of reading would also easily assume a contemporary ideological slant: Pentheus’s misunderstanding, or willful misreading, of his nation’s legendary past to cement his own authority could have found some important parallels in contemporary manipulations of Rome’s own history.³⁷ Yet to read Pentheus’s speech exclusively in this way is in another sense to underestimate the power of Ovid’s portrayal of him not just as a figure of the present but indeed as a figure who assumes an independent reality apart from Ovid’s representation. If we expect that Ovid’s audience might resist Pentheus’s rhetoric, that is actually the situation in which Pentheus finds himself in addressing the Thebans under the spell of Bacchus (note “you just stand back!” *modo vos abstite*, 3.557), so that fictional narrative here represents the actual circumstances of its reception. Ovid also strikingly adopts the first person in a simile that describes the king’s wrath by comparing it to a raging river, “as I myself have seen” (*sic ego ... vidi*, 3.568–69), at once intruding his own presence into the internal audience, and suggesting that Pentheus is to be figured only by things that can really be seen.³⁸ If we accept this invitation to move the king into the contemporary present,

³⁶ The literal meaning of the name of his father Echion, who was one of the five surviving offspring of the dragon’s teeth.

³⁷ See Janan 2004.

³⁸ This desire to be present, which importantly goes together with the need to manifest authority, plays a pivotal role in precipitating Pentheus’s death. In the *Bacchae*, of course, Pentheus is lured to destruction by a secret desire to see the lubricious mysteries of the god. But such a motif does not drive Ovid’s Pentheus. Rather his trip to the mountain appears as the next stage in a process of giving commands. “Pentheus persists and now no longer simply orders others to go, but goes himself” (*nec iam iubet ire, sed ipse / vadit*, 3.701–2), as though his physical presence were a way of imposing his *imperium* ever more directly.

as the familiarity of his patriotic topoi would have made it easy for an Augustan audience to do, then his claims appear as something more than misreading. He becomes the voice of history whose version of the events of Roman prehistory has been borne out by the distinctiveness of its own accomplishments.

This emphasis on Pentheus as a present figure can perhaps be tracked by the frequency with which he is named in the narrative, and the uses he makes of the patronymic Echionides to advance claims about his own identity on the basis of inheritance. But his name occurs for the last time in the story at the moment when he is first struck by his mother’s weapon (3.712). From then on, as his own kin fail to know him, in place of a name he seeks to be recognized by claiming likeness to a figure in a story, one that his addressees either do not know or do not believe. And as his identity disappears, so his physical presence literally dissolves as the parts of his body are stripped away. Appropriately, Ovid omits anything like the final scenes of the *Bacchae*, where the identity of the victim is finally recognized in gazing at his severed head.

The figure who confronts the king is altogether more difficult to get a hold of. If Pentheus moves from presence to absence by becoming like the character in a metamorphosis narrative, it is only as a figure in fiction that his opponent assumes any identity at all. The narrative parallels to Euripides’ play strongly suggest that we take Acoetes to be the god in disguise, but he is never identified as such directly.³⁹ There are hints in this direction, but by leaving out an epiphany and keeping his god firmly offstage, Ovid ensures that we recognize Bacchus only when he appears as what he is not, as a character who recedes ever further back into the realm of miraculous narrative. This lack of identifiable substance goes together with a further play on appearances on the part of “Acoetes.” As his opponent trusts so much in the power of presence, believing that things are what they seem and discounting illusions, like the hollow bronze of the god’s instruments, by reducing them to what they really are, so the god appears in precisely the vulnerable guise that his opponents assume to be his real identity. The guards who capture Dionysus present him not as a god but as a mere servant (*comitem famulumque sacrorum*, 3.574), assimilating him to the class of people that the king himself orders about (cf. *famulis*, 3.562). This is also what the pirates within Acoetes’ narrative make of the god, thinking that his vulnerable appearance makes him sim-

³⁹ The figure of Acoetes himself is not referred to anywhere in extant earlier Greek literature but first appears in the *Pentheus* of Pacuvius (synopsis in Serv. Auct. *ad Aen.* 4.469). For background and a discussion of the “oft ventilierte Frage” of whether Acoetes is to be regarded as a figure in his own right or simply as an alias for Dionysus, see Bömer 1969–86.2.588–89. Hardie 1990.231, n. 41, suggests that Ovid’s Acoetes may have been influenced by Vergil’s Sinon.

ply something to be plundered (*praeda*, 3.606). So here the god tricks his opponent by seeming to be what he is seen as. Pentheus accuses Bacchus of lying when he claims to be the son of Jupiter; Acoetes makes just the opposite claim, identifying his status as that of a humble fisherman and stressing that this *ars* is his sole inheritance.

Let us now look more closely at the narrative with which Acoetes attempts to persuade Pentheus to believe the unbelievable in order to see precisely how it enacts the power of fiction. The stranger claims to be a fisherman who has learned the skills of navigation. When the ship on which he is helmsman puts in at Chios, the sailors find a mysterious somnolent youth, whom they wish to kidnap and hold for ransom but whom he alone recognizes as a god. As they make off with him, the ship suddenly halts; tendrils of ivy and bunches of grapes encase the oars and sails. The god appears surrounded by the *simulacra inania* of lynxes and the “fierce bodies of painted panthers,” and all the men, except the narrator himself, are transformed into dolphins (3.668–75). The vivid, exotic, and fantastical elements of the narrative directly answer Pentheus’s earlier splenetic rejection of the foreign and the unbelievable. Yet the strategy of the poet and the god is not quite a simple insistence that the miraculous story is literally true. Rather, the story emphasizes the potency even of mere appearances, stressing that the god is most emphatically there when he seems to be someone else. Thus, for “Acoetes” the form that deceives the sailors provides a sign of their victim’s divinity. “I behold his dress, his appearance, and his gait; nothing I saw could be considered mortal” (3.609–10). So too the epiphany of the god aboard the ship is heralded by apparitions that are explicitly identified as false: “empty images” of lynxes and “fierce bodies of painted panthers.”⁴⁰ And, to move out one fictional level from the story that Acoetes tells to the circumstances of the telling, the same paradox appears when the disguised god swears by himself. “I swear by the god himself [and no god is more present, *praesentior*] that what I am recounting is as much true as it surpasses credibility [*tam vera ... quam veri maiora fide*, 3.658–60].” The narrator’s attempt to swear by the god, of course, further enhances the fiction that he is not Dionysus himself and thus constitutes another deception.⁴¹ But the claim that no god is *praesentior* is an absolutely true statement—if we read Acoetes as the god, of course. Notice correspond-

ingly that what Acoetes claims is that the story is true *in proportion* to its apparent unbelievability.

Various kinds of transformation accompany the god’s epiphany. We have noticed before that the *simulacra* of lynxes surrounding the god seem to highlight the emptiness of the appearances the divinity produces. Yet at the moment of transformation, the sailors physically experience such *miracula* in their own bodies; like so many Actaeons, they feel rather than see their destruction. And as we have identified such a shift in perspective as a moment when the effects of metamorphosis spread outward to include its audience, so we become aware at the instant when the unbelievable happens that the narrative being told to Pentheus describes the situation in which he finds himself—disbelieving a god who appears before him—and predicts his own destiny. For the transformation of the sailors’ bodies in this false narrative closely anticipates the actual dismemberment of the unmetamorphosed body of Pentheus. One of the sailors attempts to stretch his arms toward the ropes of the ship to save himself only to discover that his arms have turned to fins. In the same way, Pentheus will discover that he has “no arms with which to supplicate his mother” (3.723 ~ 3.679–80).

But as an unbelievable story begins to control reality both for the sailors and for Pentheus, a similar process may well be at work for Ovid’s audience, thanks, again, to the evocation of the experience of contemporary spectacle. As the first stage in the miracle, the ship stands still, as if the dry shipyard held it (3.661), an expression that may hint at Ovid’s own transportation of the ship to the terrestrial realm of his audience, and perhaps of the similar transformation of elements effected by imperial power thematically important in circus spectacle among others. Lest this last suggestion seem too fantastical, the word Ovid uses of the dry dock, *navale*, was also applied to the *stagnum navale*, the term for the artificial lake on which emperors would stage sham sea battles.⁴² And if there is a fleeting hint of such contemporary events in Acoetes’ simile, it sets the stage for an initial transformation of the god’s victims into spectators. Although busily engaged in trying to get the frozen ship under way, the sailors are first described as looking on in wonder (*admirantes*, 3.662). At the same time their activities seem to transform them into stagehands who can only put the finishing touches on the conversion of the scene to a spectacle. The sailors keep trying to ply their oars and unfurl the sail; the word used for sails, *vela*, can also be applied to the awnings that shaded the audience at a spectacle. But the oars are frozen as ivy winds around the vessel. Beyond symbolizing Dionysus’s power, ivy was used in artistic

⁴⁰ The description refers most directly to the markings on the hides of real leopards, but it can also suggest that the leopards themselves are merely painted images.

⁴¹ This pattern of gods swearing by themselves in disguise is particularly familiar from comedy. In this way, for example, in Plautus’s *Amphitryo* the disguised Mercury tricks Sosia, a scene that bears many other resemblances to this one, not least the god’s assumption of a low-status identity.

⁴² See Coleman 1993.

representations as a border or frame; Arachne will similarly use it to frame her own catalog of gods in disguise. The possibility of seeing the stilling of the ship as its conversion to a representation of itself becomes greater when the ivy reaches the *vela* and “marks them” (*distingunt*, 3.665) with its berries.⁴³ And it is on the stage that has been so constructed that the sailors, converted from *admirantes* to *miracula* (*in quae miracula verteris*, 3.673–74)—an exclamation appropriately put in the mouth of one of the sailors at the instant when he himself turns from watcher to miraculous dolphin—conclude their performance. Their rhythmic swimming comes to look more and more like dancing (*saltus*), as they “play” in the manner of a chorus (*inque chori ludunt speciem*, 3.685). Thus, as the characters within the narrative see their reality suddenly transformed in unbelievable ways, the external audience, as it sees the boat transformed into a painted or staged vessel, sees the miracle come true in the sense that it sees the ship converted into the sort of image in which such a myth might really be enacted. The final moment of the miracle becomes the least miraculous of all, a mere stage illusion. And to one looking back from this scene, it is easy to see simple theatrical expertise revealed as the real secret of the *ars* the character Acoetes claimed at the start. For that art involved deception (*decipere*) of “dancing” fishes (*salientes pisces*) as a substitute for flocks (of actors? *greges*, 3.585–87). So when “Acoetes” lands on Chios, he again dances (*saltus*) on the sand (of the arena? *harena*, 3.599). By this reading, the god does seem indeed reduced to what, like fishing, was a typically low-status and foreign occupation.

Before moving on to a concluding analysis of how this episode construes the relationship between fictional and historical spectacles, I want to highlight another motif that structures both the plot and imagery of the Theban narratives and must also be integrated into any political reading of them. That motif is sacrifice. The previous chapter argued that in Pythagoras’s representation of sacrifice, metamorphosis, which allows the audience to “become” the victim in the sense of seeing from her perspective, functions as a narrative equivalent to the experience of witnessing the killing at an actual ritual. The Theban sequence, perhaps more intensely than anywhere else in the poem, concentrates stories that link the moment of transformation at once with the infliction of violence and with the contrast in perspectives between victim and onlooker. At the same time, the very fact that these stories do form a sequence helps to illustrate what one might call the commutative property of metamorphosis, that each metamorphosis engenders further transformations and that those who witness, and even hear accounts of, metamorphosis are liable to experience their own transformations in turn. Here, too, we will

find that invocations of sacrificial ritual help add a political dimension to these narrative effects. For Pythagoras, sympathetically viewed metamorphosis provides a narrative substitute for the climax of sacrifice; so within the Theban story, the sequence of metamorphoses opens out from an attempt at sacrifice.⁴⁴ After arriving at the site of Thebes, Cadmus prepares to sacrifice to Jupiter, and it is on their way to fetch water for this ritual that his companions meet the deadly serpent who initiates the theme of spectator becoming spectacle. There is no mention in the text of this sacrifice ever being completed, and perhaps the narratives that follow all compensate for this ritual lapse until the final lines of the book close the sequence with Bacchus’s propagation of new *sacra* (3.732).

The very difficulty of imposing any ending on the sequence that leads from Cadmus to Actaeon to Pentheus takes on a special significance in light of this sacrificial precedent. According to René Girard’s theory of sacrifice, every successful sacrifice results from a kind of substitution.⁴⁵ The animal victim in a sacrifice serves as a stand-in for an actual member of the community, against whom the violence of the group can be directed but whose actual death would provoke reprisals and thus precipitate further violence. Thus, at the moment of its death the victim takes on the double role of insider and outsider; while its animal shape obviously differentiates it from the human spectators; nevertheless these spectators’ capacity to recognize a resemblance to themselves in the victim is essential for the success of the sacrifice.⁴⁶ Each sacrifice therefore

⁴⁴ The probable victim of this sacrifice, the cow that led the Tyrians to Thebes, offers another anticipation of Pythagoras’s staging of sacrifice. Of course it also presents a number of ironic and suggestive links to the story of Europa that motivates Cadmus’s quest. She had failed to recognize the presence of an alien consciousness, here divine, in a bull. Now her brother prepares to sacrifice a cow that shares her own defining traits of virginity (here symbolized by the absence of any “mark of servitude,” 3.16) and beauty (*speciosam*, 3.20—the sensual double entendres of the moment when she reclines on the site of Thebes, 3.22–23, heighten the parallels with Ovidian rape narratives). And the recipient of this sacrifice is to be none other than the god who abducted her. (In most other versions of the story the heifer is sacrificed to a chthonic deity, either the earth or, more commonly, Pallas Onka; cf., e.g., Apollodorus *Bibl.* 3.4.1. See Vian 1963.109–10 for discussion and citations.) These recollections alternatively suggest an identification between the sacrificer and his victim, who would here be a kind of substitute for his own lost sister, and between the sacrificer and the god, who similarly victimized Europa. And the reassignment of a bovine countenance from the male divine pursuer to the female mortal victim anticipates already the reciprocity between victor and victim that will be the explicit theme of the following narratives.

⁴⁵ Girard 1977.1–38.

⁴⁶ Girard 1977.5: “Sacrificial substitution implies a degree of misunderstanding. Its vitality as an institution depends on its ability to conceal the displacement on which the rite is based. It must never lose sight entirely, however, of the original object, or cease to be aware of the act of transference from that object to the surrogate victim: without that awareness no substitution can take place and the sacrifice loses all efficacy.”

⁴³ For painted *vela*, see Bieber 1961.179.

simultaneously actualizes two possible conceptions of violence, one in which the collective use of violence against an outsider confirms and unites the community, and another in which the violence of the community appears directed against a member of the group or indeed the spectator himself. In the latter case, a cycle of pointless and unstoppable violence results, Girard's "sacrificial crisis," which can be resolved only by channeling all the antagonistic impulses within a society against a single individual who must be replaced in turn by a ritually acceptable (nonhuman) victim. The imagery of sacrificial crisis has been frequently discovered in the Romans' accounts of their own indiscriminate, and dangerously recurring, civil wars.⁴⁷ And within the Theban narrative we see a similar image of the war of all against all at the very inception of Theban society, in the Sown Men who substitute for the original Tyrians after they became victims instead of sacrificers. Both the impiety of the process and its immediate reciprocity are highlighted: these are brothers killing brothers, as Cadmus's victim would perhaps have substituted for his own sister, and the instant that one brother kills another he himself becomes a victim.

The new Thebans thus seem the collective embodiment of a society where sacrificial substitution has broken down and of the narrative principle of victor becoming victim. As we have seen, for Cadmus the sight of this warfare almost compels him to include himself in it: "Terrified by this new [strange] enemy, Cadmus was preparing to take up arms when one of the people whom the earth had created shouts, 'Don't take them. Don't involve yourself in civil wars'" (3.115–17). Because Cadmus's danger approximates that of the spectator so deceived by theatrical representation that he takes it as real, falling into the scene means losing sight of the distinctness not just of the recent history of Rome, which has so definitively moved out of its period of indiscriminate and unstoppable violence, but also of the distinctness of Rome in the larger schema of world history as the place where the fluctuations of identity caused by metamorphosis stop. Thebes famously played the role of defining other in Athenian drama.⁴⁸ And as Hardie points out, in Pythagoras's prediction of the immortality of Roman *imperium*, Thebes again assumes a contrastive function, as one of the cities whose power has vanished and who survive only as a *nomen* (15.429).⁴⁹ In the crudest terms, the loss of boundaries and distinctions between reality and fiction, and between beast, man, and god, that the Dionysiac presence in the narrative puts in play, imposes a

"Girardian" sacrificial crisis as punishment for a too rigid view of difference, like that adopted and urged by Pentheus, and this crisis projects outward to affect Ovid's own audience via a poetics of allusion in which the Romans' victorious past merges with those of its victims, those whom their own history would make "other." Only a Pentheus, with his insistence on difference, can save them from such deception, as indeed he does in sacrificial terms by emerging as the "one" victim who establishes himself as legitimate. But that is only in a story about other people.

The link between attitudes toward fictionality and the reception of the sacrificial experience as either beneficial or destructive for a society structures many facets of the alternative narratives presented by Pentheus and Bacchus. Pentheus, as we saw, reads the deadly origins of Thebes as a source of strength and life. His narrative of both the encounter with the dragon and the men born from his teeth reveal an identification only with the victors and not with the victims. The serpent alone slew many, with no recognition that it was slain in turn, and the Sown Men themselves are simply those born of Mars, with no mention of precisely the killing of kin that Pentheus himself urges them to enact in the defeat of his cousin Bacchus. This reading of the past gains a sacrificial coloring through the description of the serpent as the one who alone slew many, an inversion of the traditional role of the victim as the one whose death provides salvation for the multitude (*qui multos perdidit unus*, 3.544). Pentheus's own death will illustrate the opposite sacrificial principle, when the "whole crowd rushes against him alone" (*ruit omnis in unum*, 3.715).

The ability of the one to slay many, which Pentheus uses to urge the many to slay one (Bacchus), is undone precisely by the capacity of this "one" to assume a multiplicity of forms. And the language of Acoetes' reply also deploys the motif of the one for many, but to demonstrate the power of the single god against a society that does not recognize him. The narrative of Thebes's foundation as a whole may well constitute an anti-*Aeneid*, but within the encounter of Pentheus and Bacchus, two contrasting readings of the *Aeneid* emerge, refracted largely through different views of its sacrificial moments. Thus, Pentheus's praise of the Tyrian old men as those "who borne through long seas sea voyages have founded a Tyre here, and here settled exiled Penates" (3.538–39) is shot through with the language of the *Aeneid*'s prologue (ironically reapplied to the Tyrians, ancestors also of Rome's arch enemy Carthage). But if Pentheus figuratively claims the mantle of a descendant of Aeneas for those whom the real *Aeneadae* defeat, Acoetes offers his own anti-*Aeneid* in turn, featuring a disastrous voyage where the many are all destroyed on account of their impiety, not simply pursued despite their piety, and in which the narrator plays the pivotal role of anti-Palinurus, a steersman who, rather

⁴⁷ Bandera 1981, Hardie 1993, e.g., and for this episode now esp. Janan 2004.

⁴⁸ See esp. Zeitlin 1986.

⁴⁹ See Hardie 1990.225–26.

than being the one victim guaranteeing the salvation of many, becomes the only survivor.⁵⁰

These reminiscences of the successful voyage of the *Aeneid* help to sketch a complex vision of the balance between the individual and the social answering those of Pentheus and his reading of the *Aeneid*. On the simplest level, Acoetes' tale points out the destruction of a collective enterprise—and notice how the many named sailors summon up the same sense of a social group as the catalog of Actaeon's hounds—balanced against the salvation of the one individual. As opposed to Pentheus's attempt to rouse the many Thebans against the one, here the original group's destination, like the sailors themselves, vanishes as the single sailor finally arrives, appropriately, at the new *sacra* of Bacchus.

The play with the role of Palinurus also helps relate this transformation to an overturning of sacrificial roles. The men themselves attempt to ensure the success of their own enterprise, the abduction of Bacchus, by killing the one who resists it—literally trying to cast him overboard as Neptune does Palinurus. One of the villainous crew members, Aethalion, ironically recalls the sacrificial function of Palinurus, as he, again unknowingly aping Neptune, drives Acoetes from the tiller: "Doubtless our whole salvation rests on you alone" (*te scilicet omnis in uno / nostra salus posita est*, 3.647–48). As Pentheus, while focusing on the victory of the single dragon, refuses to see that the one against whom he leads the Thebans may have the same power, so here the men, only too aware of the vulnerability of the individual, fail to recognize his power to benefit them collectively by standing in for all of them. Indeed, rather than seeing him as a metonym for them all, one of the sailors thinks he can simply take the place of Acoetes at the helm.

From the moment in which Bacchus is taken, the voyage moves from the attempt to kill the one on behalf of the many to a true bacchic sacrifice, blurring the boundaries between human and animal so as to combine the destructive and salvific powers of the god. And to guide the audience's own perspective in the same direction, Ovid makes the intended victim himself the narrator,⁵¹ as if to ensure that we see the crewman's

⁵⁰ *de modo viginti ... / restabam solus*, 3.687–88. It is also significant that the sailors who so explicitly fail to recognize the god Bacchus are aiming at Delos, the spot where the Trojans will receive the advice from Apollo that they themselves misinterpret. Indeed, Bacchus himself will become an impersonation of the very Trojan Penates who reveal this mistake to Aeneas, when he cries out to his abductors *non haec mihi litora, nautae, / promissistis* (3.652–53; cf. *Aeneid* 3.161–62: *non haec tibi litora suasit / Delius aut Cretae iussit considerare Apollo*).

⁵¹ More precisely, if we assume that the "fictional" Acoetes is really the god in disguise, then the same figure emerges both as the intended victim within the fiction and as the actual killer for those who recognize him.

attempt as murder, as he sees it, and then witness the bacchic rituals as a participant. The importance of this narratological perspective emerges again in the account Acoetes gives of the sailors' metamorphosis, which drains them simultaneously of individuality and subjectivity. Rather than staging this transformation as instantaneous for all, Acoetes creates a chain of individual events highlighting, as we have seen, the transformation of each viewer into a *miraculum*: Medon starts to change; Lycabass addresses him and becomes a dolphin at the same moment; then Libys sees his own body change, as does an unnamed "other" (*alter*). At this point the perspectives of individual sailors vanish, as the many, who now share but a single appearance, take on plural verbs and the collective identity of a chorus (3.671–86).⁵²

If we read the death of Pentheus as an invitation to think about the interaction between Ovidian fiction and imperial spectacle, what conclusions can we draw from it? Initially the relationship between the two modes of representation seems an agonistic one, as Pentheus, a figure readily transposed with a Roman *imperator*, disbelieves and disregards a narrator of metamorphoses. We have also seen how the battle between the two involves specific strategies of responding to the spectacle of violence. Pentheus's attempt to convert Bacchus's punishment into a *documentum* confirms a powerfully hierarchical view of both external and internal relations. The Thebans as a nation are superior to easterners, and the individual king is superior to the multitude of servants, *famuli*, whom he commands and punishes at will.⁵³ This perspective both reinforces and depends upon accepting things for what they seem to be, that is, judging appearances from an exclusively external perspective perhaps corresponding to the safe position of spectators who watch a gladiatorial combat secure that they will not themselves be tossed into the ring. By contrast, Bacchus insists on just such a possibility and reduces the king who seemed unique in his power to the unique victim of the god's devotees. Believing in *miracula* means precisely losing that sense of isolating externality from what you see and correspondingly surrendering a sure

⁵² The idea that Acoetes has escaped from an impious attempt at "sacrifice" leads to another connection with the use of that motif in the *Aeneid*: Hardie 1990.231, n.41 has compared Acoetes to Sinon, the figure who deceives the Trojans by pretending to have escaped from the plot of his fellow Greeks to sacrifice him to ensure the success of their expedition. If we read Acoetes as Sinon, it provides yet another perspective on Acoetes. The knowledge of the prior text thus resists its transformation and offers a narrative that by also fitting Acoetes' situation encourages us to disbelieve him. Here the *Aeneid* cooperates with Pentheus in framing our view of the stranger.

⁵³ What Actaeon would have said, if he had a voice, is "Know your master" (*dominum cognoscite vestrum*, 3.230).

sense of social identity and position within the group. Thus, an initial impression powerfully suggests that a reading of the *Metamorphoses* equips its audience with other eyes through which to watch sacrifice and gladiatorial spectacle and so strikes at a fundamental mechanism for generating Roman and imperial ideology.

But other elements of the narrative complicate that picture. First, accepting fictions and identifying “selves” within them have consequences for the audiences inside the narrative that may well have spoken to the anxieties of a contemporary reader. In the case of Cadmus, losing awareness of the theatrical conventions that separate a Roman audience from what it saw brings him very close to entering an antisocial world of endless rivalry between equals all too like the period of civil war. The easy recognition of a self in the other that comes, for example, from seeing sacrifice, as Pythagoras will, is undoubtedly a much easier move for a twenty-first-century academic than it would have been for a member of the Roman upper classes where questions of stable succession and the ultimate permanence of Roman power had become acute. Bacchus was always a terrifying god.

In addition to this demonstration of the social dangers of an oppositional reading of spectacle, the very distinctness of these dialectically opposed poles of viewing begins to dissolve, and as a result mapping the figures in the narrative onto contemporary social roles becomes less straightforward. Initially, Pentheus seems to fit the model of the bad reader of fictions, resembling Argus before him and anticipating the skeptical Pirithous of book 8. And yet it is not the king but his bacchic killers whose perspective stands in sharpest contrast to that of Ovid’s audience. They are the ones who do not recognize Actaeon. One way of understanding this is simply as an example of poetic justice, punishing Pentheus’s blindness through an equivalent blindness on the part of his murderers. Perhaps in this sense the comment serves as a final test for the Ovidian audience, ensuring our own ability to recognize the identity of two such seemingly disparate figures. But if so, then the door opened by such recognition makes it difficult to maintain a sense of the distinctness of Ovid’s own bacchic victor. And indeed at the very moment of his triumph Bacchus himself comes most closely to resemble the imperial figure he defeats. The encounter began with Pentheus promising that Bacchus’s death would be a proof (*documentum*); the final interpretation of Pentheus’s death gives it a virtually identical admonitory and exemplary function, but this time affirming the power of the god as opposed to the king: “Warned by such examples, the women of Thebes throng the new rites and make offerings of incense and cultivate the sacred altars” (*talibus exemplis monitae nova sacra frequentant / turaque dant sanctasque colunt Ismenides aras*, 3.732–33). The bacchic perspective, if we may call

it that, has led not to the destruction of sacrifice but to its institution. Our crude identification of Pentheus with the emperor and Bacchus with the poet gives way before a different recognition of the similarities between this triumphant figure and Augustus himself.⁵⁴ For the *princeps* too claimed to be the son of a god and imposed a new religious order after vanquishing the self-promoting jingoism of a hereditary aristocracy.

Acoetes’ metamorphic life story highlights a moment when he himself turned from *ars*, the fishing skill left him by his father, to “rule,” *regimen* (3.593). The next stage in our line of reading would be to uncover in the creator of fictions the true voice of a hidden god by showing how Bacchus’s own conflation with Pentheus parallels a move on the poet’s part to highlight his fiction not as an alternative to public spectacle but as its equivalent. For as we have seen, Bacchus’s final framing of Pentheus as a negative example mirrors the stopping point of Acoetes’ own metamorphosis narrative, which ends when the weird and miraculous dolphins take on the familiar form of a spectacle, specifically a choral dance. So far we have concentrated on how the text accommodates different views of the emperor, but now we must turn the tables and recognize again how the approximation to imperial performance articulates alternative views of poetic fiction itself. For if the end of fiction is to become as real as spectacle, this is at once the performance of a true miracle, in the sense that these creatures of myth have taken on the form that makes them part of the material world of a Roman audience, and the destruction of its miraculous capacity, because the reality it achieves is only that of a stage illusion. So we have seen that in actual spectacle, the mythical story behind “fatal charades” contributes luster to the imperial achievement of staging the impossible and at the same time always potentially shows how far the death of a slave in fancy dress falls short of bringing legend to life. Here too the ability to maintain the priority of either fiction or reality becomes as difficult as distinguishing Pentheus and Bacchus, and the real emphasis of their encounter comes to fall more on the process of dialectic they set in motion than on its resolution.

And the conclusion of the episode contains powerful pointers toward the difficulty of any final closure. Within the sequence of book 3, we saw how the reactions to earlier *miracula*, the death of Actaeon and the birth of Dionysus in particular, generate new narratives as audiences’ perspectives diverge on what they have seen and heard and what it means. The formal unit of the third book seems to end by imposing unanimity in

⁵⁴ Indeed, Wheeler’s (1999.172–81) study of the shaping of audience response within Ovid’s narrative presents the fictions audiences are punished for not believing as precisely the claims of the new emperor. For Augustus as Bacchus, cf. the presentation of Bacchus, a mortal made divine, as a forerunner for Augustus’s own apotheosis in Horace’s *Odes*, e.g., C. 3.3.13.

reading, as the final couplet offers Bacchus's view of Pentheus's death as an *exemplum* and closes the narrative arc that began with failed sacrifice by imposing new *sacra*. But the fourth book begins with the opening up of a new set of divergent readings as the daughters of Minyas refuse to participate in these *sacra* and deny the truth of the story that Bacchus is the son of Jupiter. The processes at work to sustain the momentum of the poem's own narrative themselves have a bearing on the issue of Ovid's appropriation of spectacle. In our earlier discussion of fatal charades, we saw that poetic representation came not only before the event but after it as well; Martial's literary representations of staged representations of legendary events mobilize different ways of responding to those experiences. In simpler terms we may easily imagine that so complex a visual experience as the death of Selurus could have produced neither a unitary response among its audience nor even an unequivocal one on the part of an individual spectator. Thus, the ideological work of such spectacles depends on the story that is told about them, and that story in turn invites revision and reexamination. We have seen how both imperial spectacle and Ovidian fiction can demand consideration of the most fundamental questions of individual and national identity. A synchronic reading of the two highlights the breadth of the questions asked by both and the multiplicity of answers they allow. The uncertain and reciprocal question of which comes first provides a further prism through which these issues are at once intensified and multiplied.

Playing Gods

OVID'S METAMORPHOSES AND
THE POLITICS OF FICTION

Andrew Feldherr

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