

Conclusion

Keith Hopkins describes the operation of Roman ritual as follows:

Rituals cumulatively, throughout each year and each lifetime, provided Romans with a system of action and knowledge by which they negotiated standardized and repetitive ways of dealing with powerful imponderables, such as sexual appetite, hierarchy, and sickness. Sacrifices, for example, joined humans with their gods, gladiatorial games confirmed Roman superiority over defeated enemies and highlighted the risks of cowardice in battle, the Lupercalia helped delineate the multiple differences between men and women and their mutually problematic sexuality, the Saturnalia dealt with slaves by subverting rank and temporarily giving slaves the power to command This whole array of Roman rituals ... was like an orchestra with each ritual standing for a single instrument. None of them can be understood alone, by itself. Each ritual depended on the others. To be sure there was no conductor, no ritual dictator. Each citizen could play or hear different tunes on each instrument.¹

More than any specifically literary formulation, this vision of civic and religious ritual has inspired my understanding of Ovid's poem. That work too makes up an enormous whole whose parts echo and define each other in ways that no single analysis can catalog for they depend on the different journeys individual readers make through it, noting linguistic and thematic links and contrasts, responding differently to each transformation as they identify differently with the figures in the narrative. Like Hopkins's ritual participants, where these readers end up depends to a great extent on where they start from, on the degree of knowledge they bring, on their status, ethnicity, and gender. For some readers the journey may ultimately take them back to where they started, confirming assumptions about who they are in their relations to others; for different readers their experience of the poem may reshape understandings of what it means to be a slave, a woman, a Roman, a human.

The analyses I offer here are a mixture of the prescriptive and the exemplary. I have tried above all to draw attention to several devices Ovid uses to deepen the poem's hermeneutic complexity and to show with

some examples how attention to these devices can increase the breadth of the work's meaning. This breadth involves both the range of issues that we allow the poem to be about and the variety of positions in relation to them that it makes meaningful.

My central methodological claim starts from the work's most emphatically unifying feature, metamorphosis itself. Each metamorphosis raises a question of recognition: is the new form the same as what it replaces? Our answer to this question will not only help determine whether we read a story as fundamentally tragic or comic but also shape our conception of the place of the narrative itself within the world of experience. For the move from form to form takes us from an exclusively narrative presence—Daphne, Procne, Marsyas—to one that makes up a part of the here and now—a laurel tree, a swallow, a spring. Ovid's specific strategies for narrating transformation both sharpen and deepen this connection between reading metamorphoses and reading *Metamorphoses*. By highlighting alternative narrative focalizations in such programmatic stories as Daphne, Io, and Lycaon, Ovid establishes a link between the perspective we adopt on transformation and our ability to see events through the eyes of different figures within the narrative. This makes clear how reading transformation and reading the story within which it is embedded depend on one another. More fundamentally, it also opens new bridges between the reader as subject and the text by showing how the questions of likeness and difference raised by metamorphosis extend from whether Daphne is the laurel tree to how I the reader am and am not Daphne. Because metamorphosis itself had an important role in establishing a taxonomy of narratives that would have made the stories Ovid tells by definition unbelievable, his emphasis on transformation also possesses a programmatic, self-reflexive quality stressing the link between interpreting a transformation and interpreting narrative. This intrinsic connection between subject matter and form also draws attention to how Ovid's poem challenges the rules by which a Roman reader was trained to make sense of a story, even as the metamorphic products it describes are simultaneously real and unbelievable.

Ovid's way of constructing the response to his own narrative through metamorphosis provides the link between reading and experiences like the rituals Hopkins describes. It is thus the bedrock for my expansion of the text's political capacities. For I argue first that the connections Ovid's techniques establish between poem and reality invite reexamination of how real a text can become, of how dynamically it can shape the readers' response to and participation in the world around them. But there is yet a closer connection between Ovid's narratology and such political and cognitive modes as religious ritual, gladiatorial spectacle, and other forms of visual display: the recognition of identity and difference that Ovid makes

¹ Hopkins 1991.485.

central to reading also lie at the core of the political functions of those experiences. How sacrifice affects our understanding of the relationship between men and gods or between the individual spectator and communal authority depends, I believe and have tried to demonstrate, on the degree of likeness and similarity we recognize between ourselves and the victim. How gladiatorial spectacle configures civic identity depends on how the audience identifies with the figures on the sand. How the viewer construes the meaning of a work of art depends on how he sees it, as, for example, an object signifying primarily its own appropriation, or as a representation of alternative subjects. Thus, in making a similar process of identification crucial to the act of reading, Ovid gives the poem a political dimension in two ways, both by stressing a key functional similarity between reading and these other forms of response and by putting his text in dialogue with them, so that Ovid's poem can shape how its audience responds to the material spectacles and rituals around them. His story of Niobe allows one to read Augustus's image of her with new eyes. Pythagoras's view of sacrifice helps focus the ways of viewing generated by metamorphosis onto the actual experience of sacrifice. Of course, this exchange works both ways: Ovid's staging of his relationship with an emperor who always is and is not textualized reveals at once the transformative power of art, the artistry of power, and how the realities to which his poem refers determine the meaning of his text even as his text lets us see them as new.

But the ritual analogy with which I began also highlights fundamental differences between texts and acts that will have made the claims in the preceding paragraph hard for some of my own readers to accept. Reading is not doing, and if we ever lose track of the distance between them we become less, not more, responsive readers of Ovid's poem. The gap between a poem, of which at least nine-tenths is explicitly about Greek myth, and the contemporary practices of Augustan Rome raises two related questions: how can you establish that the poem refers to the present, and then what precisely is the payoff of this recognition—how and within what limits does “reading” translate into “participation”?

I start with the question of reference. As we have seen, the ending point of a metamorphosis narrative juxtaposes the unbelievable past and the undeniable present, and the structure of the poem as a whole does so at least as urgently. The impulse to read the work as a collection of individual stories drawn from Greek myth struggles with the form Ovid emphatically embraces at its start, that of epic, which organizes those stories within a larger narrative trajectory whose end is indeed the present. Making the connection, then, between distant and near, foreign and Roman, fictional and real, becomes the challenge that the poem imposes by virtue of Ovid's choice to write not another episodic *Heroides* but an epic, the

genre whose claim to speak authoritatively, to matter in the present, was after all one of the features that define it against Ovid's previously elegiac compositions. That is not to say that the episodic approach to the poem does not also receive encouragement from the text (the number of translations that use subheadings to designate different stories makes it clear that the poem cannot not be read in this way as well); but even if the work's formal ambiguities do not mandate a reading directed toward the Augustan present, they do justify the reader in asking what such a connection might look like.

The poem's beginning prompts the same questions as its ending point. Book 1 contains three extensive narratives belonging to the most common and familiar kind of metamorphosis tale, the transformation of an individual into an object, plant, or animal: Lycaon, Daphne, and Io, all set in the mythical, Greek, past. Yet Ovid begins the first and ends the second with explicit references to Augustus, while commenting on the phenomenon of reading in the third. In doing so, he highlights the potential of these stories to refer to the political life of the present and further justifies us in adopting a similar perspective on other mythical stories, asking how such connections might be made even if they are not made explicitly, as in the case of Perseus.

But to look only at how the text refers to the here and now is but half the picture, for it was an essential characteristic of contemporary political iconography and ritual dramatically to expand its own frame of reference and specifically to redeploy Greek myth as a means of describing the present. To take a striking and now familiar example, the temple of Apollo on the Palatine makes a range of mythical references as extensive and rich as any book of Ovid's poem available for understanding a recent historical event, the battle of Actium, and the political order that results from it. Religious rituals show a similar malleability: Mary Beard has demonstrated the transformation of the festival of the Parilia from a shepherds' festival to purify the flock to a commemoration of Rome's foundation.² Her analysis is based on Ovid's *Fasti*, where the poet describes his own participation in the ritual (4.725–26) and then turns from what was done to why it was done. This exploration of what the Parilia means takes him from the pastoral realities of the ritual and prayer to the story of Romulus and Remus, but along the way he also considers explanations drawn from science (the conjunction of fire and water that creates life) and explicitly rejects as unbelievable an allusion to two of the myths that he refers to prominently at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*, the flood and the fire that destroyed Phaethon. Ovid here poses Greek myth as something that some bring up in explaining the festival, even if he rejects it. But

² Beard 1987.

there is far more to the explanation and its rejection than that. For in the reference to disbelief we recognize the characteristic terms in which Ovid cites his own transformation tales as unbelievable. The raconteurs the author does not believe become those who tell his own stories, and this hint may make us recognize that the entire passage explaining the Parilia constitutes a *Metamorphoses* in miniature, beginning with creation, incorporating myths like Deucalion, before moving on chronologically via Aeneas to Rome's foundation and a prayer for its future stability under Augustus. There can be no better illustration of how Ovid imagines his narratives do intervene, via ritual, in the interpretation of the present, even as he highlights the barriers that they must jump over to do so.

Any such references or glosses, however, do not simply impose a particular point of view on contemporary experience, whether affirmative or subversive. Because of the inherently prismatic effect of reading metamorphosis, the text rather exposes and explores alternative responses, transferring them to the experiential realm that each story both does and does not signify. Such "transference," though, is the stage of my argument that must remain ultimately unprovable. Obviously we have no access to the psychology of any specific ancient reading. But more important, the twin "reality" effects I have described, moving into the text through absorption into its fictions and seeing that narrative as a part of the phenomena of real experience, are each presented only as one alternative for responding to the poem—and indeed themselves pull in opposite directions. Like Argus, some in Ovid's audience may vigilantly keep the fantastic within its bounds—and the same episode that illustrates this approach to fiction simultaneously cautions us against too simply categorizing it as misreading. But just so, many participants in a sacrificial ritual will never have lost sight of the victim's bovine form. And as Hopkins's model of ritual suggests, even this reaction constitutes a specific kind of participation, productive of a distinctive positioning in relation to the set of oppositions (e.g., human-divine, male-female, Roman-foreign, leader-follower) that animate and politicize ritual experience. This is why I call my readings exemplary: they are meant as possible readings, possible, though, because they develop a logic of reading and take up questions that the text invites.

But the interpretative process that transformation sets in motion is political also in the questions it raises about the nature of authorship and—via a semantic overlap that the Latin word *auctor* makes apparent—of authority. As I discussed in chapter 2, Karl Galinsky presents authority—cognate with the very name *Augustus* chose for himself—as a defining issue for all forms of cultural expression under the first emperor. But authority constitutes more than the subject of the art, literature, and ritual he describes. In Galinsky's view, the media through which author-

ity is discussed themselves project and manifest authority, as polysemy gives way to authorial guidance in articulating their meaning. Similarly, Keith Hopkins, in the passage with which I began, significantly speaks of a "symphony," not "polyphony." He goes on in the sentence just after I ended my quotation to make a stronger claim about the unitary meaning that emerges from ritual performance: "Even so, out of the diversity and apparent cacophony, collective rhythms emerge. Diversity of experience and understanding does not preclude a recognizable score which was identifiably Roman."

My own reading of the poem parts company with both these "authorities" in its reluctance to define a similar authorial score. Indeed, several of the passages analyzed here have featured divine figures attempting to impose a political meaning on stories in which they themselves appear as characters—Jupiter on Lycaon, Apollo on Daphne, Minerva on Arachne. But in each case we have also seen how interpreting the resulting metamorphosis, again taken as a programmatic gesture for reading the poem, while not necessarily refuting these claims, nevertheless presents them as themselves subject to response and as part of a broader spectrum of readings. At the same time, Ovid notoriously makes his own authorial position in relation to these internal narrators uncertain, itself a subject of interpretation.

Each of these three divine figures has been plausibly identified as "Augustan," Jupiter and Apollo via specific analogies in the text. If these internal authorities at the poem's beginning seem to figure Augustus, the real center point for Roman *auctoritas*, so the work ends by staging an attempt to bring the outside in, textualizing Augustus himself. As a result of this dialogue between authorship and authority, the figures of emperor and poet each enter into a hermeneutic dance, as the struggle of one to control the other depends in turn on the limits of our assent to the text. That Ovid questions his own authorial capacity in this process—as opposed to projecting a unitary alternative voice—renders his destabilization of the concept of authority in both its textual and political aspects yet more radical. My interpretation in turn reflects an image of Augustan culture centered less on the *princeps* per se than on the issue of response to the *princeps*, on how the presence of such totalizing claims to authority changed the terms in which all members of that society could project their own position, which was now increasingly subject to judgment as "like" or "different," "for" or "against" Augustus.

It is a truism in Ovidian studies that criticism of the *Metamorphoses* is continually transforming itself in response to the intellectual climate in which the poem is read. The self-conscious artist of the new critics long cohabited with the anti-Augustan dissident of more historicizing read-

ers. Deconstruction brought an emphasis on inconsistencies and tensions that make the poem resistant to closed readings while new historicism inspired investigation of how this poetic openness figured in the text's exchanges with its cultural context. Readings of many literary works have doubtless followed a similar path. But I think the *Metamorphoses*' continually addresses the present—and not just our present—with special urgency. And this has to do with more than its obvious hermeneutic complexity or its own emphasis on change. Its multiple internal narratives highlight the poet's narrative cleverness, but they equally stress the pressures of reception: how do stories told about distant cultures and times from contrasting moral perspectives, told by gods to mortals and by mortals to gods, told about women by men and about men by women, communicate across such differences? So Ovid's poem explicitly relates stories from a foreign culture in a medium that resists straightforward application to a historical present while nevertheless building these stories into a trajectory that connects the long ago and far away with the here and now. And these tensions are, as we have seen, conveyed through a set of narratological devices that, despite their changing significance over time, are still universalizable in that they generate questions about representation only in their telling.

My own response to the poem has itself been shaped by the shifting critical interests of the decades during which it was written. For this was, in general, a period in which many of the barriers within literary studies were challenged as critics in different ways explored the limits of textuality. "Neo-Aristotelians" such as Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum restated the claims that literature can teach ethics.³ And the contemporary "ethical turn" in deconstruction has led a school that more than any other challenged the notion that a text can ever "mean" to reexamine literature's ability to refer to the world outside.⁴ The role of literature in articulating the conditions of colonialism has inspired reexamination of how reading can be political, specifically how literature allows both writer and reader to adopt different social roles, escaping from and reaffirming their positions through the transformations texts allow.⁵ I have drawn on none of these ideas explicitly in building my own arguments about Ovid, but I think it is important to record them in ending this book, and not just as a further caveat about the potential limitations of my own perspective nor, I hope, in a meretricious gesture toward "rel-

evance." All authors reveal expectations about how their works will be received, but the historical and cultural changes of the period when he wrote led Ovid to investigate the political role of literature and the ways in which reality and representation configure one another with particular energy and brilliance. The results of his investigation have much more to tell us about literature than my book could suggest.

³ Booth 1988; Nussbaum 1990.

⁴ The phrase is Baker's (1995). Key primary texts are Miller 1987 and Derrida 1992.

⁵ The bibliography is too enormous to summarize, but the position of Kristeva 1988 seems particularly productive for developing the strategies of reading Ovid's fictions put forward here. See also the summary in Rye 2000.

Playing Gods

OVID'S METAMORPHOSES AND
THE POLITICS OF FICTION

Andrew Feldherr

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