SHAWN O'BRYHIM

A STUDENT'S COMMENTARY ON
OVID'S
METAMORPHOSES

BOOK 10

A Student's Commentary on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 10

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Shawn O'Bryhim

Franklin & Marshall College
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

WILEY Blackwell

For Angela O'Bryhim
uxori optimae amicaeque

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Acknowledgments

Preface

Of Ovid's many works, Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses* has had perhaps the greatest impact on western culture. Its tales of Orpheus and Eurydice, Pygmalion and his statue, and Venus and Adonis have inspired artists, poets, writers, and composers from the Middle Ages to the modern era. Because most commentaries on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* survey large portions of the epic, the attention that they are able devote to individual books is limited. Bömer's German commentary is a scholarly resource that provides a wealth of information on the individual myths that constitute Book 10, but offers little analysis of their significance to the book as a whole. Although the German commentary on the *Metamorphoses* by Haupt, Korn, Ewaldt, and von Albrecht is better for literary analysis, the space devoted to Book 10 is limited by the commentary's broad scope. The same can be said of Bosselaar's *Metamorphoseon* in Dutch and Galasso's *Le metamorfosi* in Italian. Although Anderson's commentary on Books 6–10 is very good, it rarely ventures beyond literary analysis, as does Hill's short commentary on Books 9–12, which is intended for students of literature. Reed's *Ovidio: Metamorfosi*, vol. 5, a volume devoted to Books 10–13, is excellent, but it is in Italian and is far too advanced for undergraduates. Fratantuono's stand-alone commentary on Book 10 offers some observations on Orphism, but otherwise is purely literary. This book deals not only with the literary, grammatical, and textual matters that are integral parts of any commentary on a classical text but also examines the religious, archaeological, and cultural background of the myths. For Book 10, this background is not only Greek and Roman but also Near Eastern. It is my hope that this multidisciplinary approach will facilitate a more holistic understanding of Book 10, especially at a time when a broader conception of classics is coming to the fore – a conception that encompasses the contribution of the Near East to the Greek and Roman world.

This commentary is intended primarily for undergraduate students of Latin who have completed at least two years of language instruction. It may also be of use to graduate students, and perhaps even to researchers who are unfamiliar with some of the nonliterary elements of Book 10. Its focus, however, is on its primary audience. Since these students will have already mastered the basics of Latin grammar, only its more uncommon aspects receive comment here. While literary interpretations of some of the myths of Book 10 abound, several are not mentioned in this commentary for a variety of reasons, but they can be introduced during class to promote discussion, if the instructor so chooses. The text follows that of Tarrant and Anderson, with the substitution of some readings from other editors and from the manuscripts.

Introduction

i. Ovid's Biography

Most of what we know about the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso comes from *Tristia*, a collection of autobiographical poems that he wrote after Augustus relegated him to the Black Sea. Because this information cannot be confirmed by independent sources, it must be used with caution, particularly when it comes to Ovid's complaints about his place of exile.

At *Tristia* 4.10, Ovid says that he was born into a respectable equestrian family of moderate means on March 20, 43 BC, in Sulmo (modern Sulmona), a small city about 100 miles to the east of Rome. Ovid's brother, who was born in the previous year, shared his birthday. Both were educated by the best local teachers. While Ovid's brother favored oratory, Ovid himself gravitated toward poetry. When his father attempted to dissuade him from focusing on verse because he thought that there was no money in it, Ovid tried to please him by writing prose. This ultimately failed: as the rhetorician Seneca the Elder (*Controversiae* 2.2.8) put it, he simply wrote verse in prose. When his brother died at the age of 20, Ovid embarked upon a political career. He was first elected to the board of the *tresviri capitales* (three officials who oversaw policing), and later to that of the *decemviri stlitibus iudicandis* (ten officials who judged lawsuits) (*Fasti* 4.383–384). The next logical step was a major political office. Politics, however, did not interest Ovid. Instead of continuing on this course, he returned to his first love: poetry.

Ovid went to Rome and began giving public recitations of his love poetry, much of which centered on his (possibly fictional) lover, "Corinna." His talent made him popular in literary circles and provided access to the most famous

poets of the time: Macer, Propertius, Ponticus, Bassus, and Horace. After two divorces, he married a woman who gave him a daughter and stood by him even after Augustus relegated him in AD 7 to Tomis, a settlement on the west shore of the Black Sea (modern Constanţa, Romania). This punishment was particularly irksome to Ovid, as the locals did not know Latin and therefore were unable to appreciate his talent.

Ovid maintains that he was not expelled from Rome because of a crime (*Tristia* 4.10.90), but because of "a poem and a mistake" (*carmen et error, Tristia* 2.207). He provides few specifics, since – he claims – the details are well known. Nevertheless, he does identify the poem as *Ars amatoria*, a didactic work on seduction (*Tristia* 2.8; 3.1–8; *Ex Ponto* 2.9.76). The dissemination of this poem is a classic example of bad timing, coming as it did on the heels of Augustus' moral legislation and the exile of his daughter, Julia, on the charge of adultery. While Ovid is open about the incriminating poem, he does not reveal the nature of his error, claiming that he does not want to reopen the wound that he inflicted upon Augustus. Nevertheless, he repeatedly avers that his offense was no crime (*Tristia* 2.208–210, 4.4.37–42, 5.4.18–22; cf. *Ex Ponto* 2.3); it was not rebellion (*Tristia* 2.51–56), murder, fraud, or the breaking of any law (*Ex Ponto* 2.9.63–75). Rather it was something that he witnessed (*Tristia* 2.103–104). Whatever this was, his failure to report it offended Augustus, who banished Ovid on his own authority instead of sending his case to the Senate or to a court (*Tristia* 2.131–138). It may be that he was privy to something embarrassing and that the emperor, not wanting to make this matter public, used the *Ars amatoria* as a pretext for Ovid's exile. Although he defends himself at length against the charge of teaching adultery through the *Ars* (*Tristia* 2.211–212, 2.237–572), he steadfastly refuses to reveal the reason for his exile, perhaps because he hoped to obtain a pardon or, at the very least, a transfer to a more genial location.

Ovid was never allowed to return to Rome. He was forced to remain in Tomis, over eight hundred miles from his home, writing poetry when he could, trying to learn the native language, and even strapping on armor to ward off the neighboring tribes (*Tristia* 5.10). He died in the ninth year of his exile, during the winter of AD 17/18, at the age of 60.

ii. Ovid's Works

Ovid describes ***Amores*** as a work of his youth (*Tristia* 4.10.57–58). It originally consisted of five books; a revision reduced it to three, which is the version that has survived. At *Amores* 1.1–4, Ovid says that he had intended to write an epic poem on a military topic. Indeed, the first line begins with the word *arma*, as

does Vergil's *Aeneid*. Cupid, however, stole a foot from every other line, thereby transforming an epic poem in dactylic hexameter into a collection of love poems in elegiac couplets. When Ovid complains that he should not be writing love poetry because he has never been in love, Cupid responds by shooting him with an arrow, thereby transforming him into a lover. The object of his desire is a woman named Corinna, whose identity was not known to Ovid's contemporaries or to later writers (*Ars amatoria* 3.53–58; Apuleius, *Apologia* 10.2). This suggests either that "Corinna" is a pseudonym for an unidentified woman or that the character who bears this name is fictional (*Tristia* 4.10.59–60). Ovid's *Amores* takes a light-hearted look at the vicissitudes of love and contains many of the tropes and characters found both in previous love poets and in New Comedy.

    Heroides consists of verse letters in elegiac couplets written by the heroines of myth to their husbands, lovers, and potential lovers. Focused on character exposition and persuasion, these poems owe much to Ovid's education in rhetoric, and particularly to the tradition of *suasoriae*, "speeches of persuasion" (Seneca, *Controversiae* 2.2.8). They also involve *prosopopoeia* or *ethopoeia* ("character drawing"), a rhetorical exercise in which speeches are composed that portray the characteristics of famous individuals (Quintilian 3.8.52). While Ovid claims that *Heroides* represents an entirely new genre (*Ars amatoria* 3.346), the pieces in this collection are reminiscent of speeches from Euripidean tragedy and may have been inspired by a fictional letter in Propertius 4.3. Poems 1–15 appear to be youthful compositions in the *personae* of individual female characters, while poems 16–21 – the "double *heroides*," in which letters from heroines are answered by their male addressees – come from a later period. These poems take possibilities left open by earlier authors as their jumping-off point (e.g. a letter that Penelope could have written after her interview with Odysseus in the guise of a beggar). Ovid's use of varied source material allows for new perspectives on familiar tales, while his refashioning of his sources into something unique foreshadows his compositional technique in *Metamorphoses*.

    Ars amatoria is a didactic poem in three books. Here Ovid plays the role of "teacher of love" (*praeceptor amoris*). The first two books teach men how to find and obtain lovers; the third does the same for women. While previous didactic poems were written in dactylic hexameter, Ovid uses elegiac couplets, a meter that is more appropriate to his erotic theme in that it is traditionally associated with love poetry. His advice does not have romance as its primary objective, but is geared toward achieving intercourse through various methods of seduction. After careful study of this poem and the application of its advice, Ovid's readers, unlike the lovers depicted by previous elegiac poets, will be able to control love rather than allow it to control them. In spite of (disingenuous)

disclaimers that this poem is not intended for respectable women (1.31–34, 2.599–600, 3.57–58, 3.483–484, 3.613–616), Augustus used it as a pretext for Ovid's exile. In **Remedia amoris**, Ovid plays the role of the "doctor of love" who cures his love-sick patients by teaching them how to overcome passion and thereby extricate themselves from romantic relationships.

A second didactic poem, **Medicamina faciei feminae**, is a fragment of a longer work that Ovid describes as *parvus* (*Ars amatoria* 3.206). The passage that survives, which justifies the use of makeup and provides recipes for it, originally stood at the beginning of the poem. It is unclear whether this was a serious guidebook to cosmetics, a parody of didactic works, or Ovid's attempt to demonstrate his virtuosity as a poet by taking on an unpromising topic.

Fasti is a didactic poem on the Roman calendar in elegiac couplets. It focuses on myths and festivals, but also includes information on astronomy and on Augustus and his family. The broad learning that it contains is reminiscent of the scholarship of the Hellenistic period, particularly Callimachus' *Aetia*. Six books (January through June) were completed before Ovid's exile and were subsequently revised. It appears that books on the remaining six months were not written.

Ovid continued to write even after his exile. **Tristia** and **Epistulae ex Ponto** are elegiac poems addressed primarily to his wife and to anonymous individuals in Rome. The poems addressed to Augustus are pleas for a commutation of his sentence. Others are bleak descriptions of his new home and sorrowful reflections on his past, present, and future.

Ibis, which was modeled on a poem of the same name by Callimachus, is an invective in elegiac couplets instead of the iambics traditionally associated with this genre. In it, Ovid rails against an anonymous enemy who is trying to damage his reputation in Rome during his exile. This poem is replete with references to punishments inflicted on mythic figures that Ovid wishes upon his adversary. Here the unwarlike poet of love transforms himself into a soldier who threatens violence against his enemy through verse. Because Ovid cannot carry out his vengeance from Tomis, *Ibis* expresses his frustration with the situation in which he finds himself: helpless, in the middle of nowhere. In the end, however, the extreme punishments that he conjures up for his enemy are so ridiculous that the poem devolves into humor.

There are references to other works that have not survived. Quintilian (10.1.98) holds up the tragedy **Medea** as an example of Ovid's unrealized potential. This is his only work that is not in elegiac couplets or in dactylic hexameter. There was also a translation of Aratus' *Phaenomena*, a poem on the stars. Ovid refers in *Ex Ponto* (1.2.131, 1.7.30, 3.4, 4.6.17, 4.9.131) to occasional poems that would have focused on particular events. One of these was in Gaetic, the language spoken in Tomis (4.13.19–36).

iii. *Metamorphoses*

With *Metamorphoses*, Ovid exchanges the elegiac couplets of his love poetry for the dactylic hexameter of epic. Superficially, this poem fits the broad definition of an epic: it is in the traditional meter of epic (dactylic hexameter), it is a long work (15 books), and its main characters are gods and heroes. But Ovid departs from this definition in fundamental ways. While *Metamorphoses* is a *carmen perpetuum* ("continuous poem," 1.4) that begins with the creation of the earth and ends in Ovid's time, it is not a long story on one topic, like the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*. Instead, it is a collection of shorter stories, some of which occupy a fraction of a book, while others are so long that they are categorized as *epyllia* ("mini-epics"). These tales are bound together not so much by chronology as by devices such as family relationships or similarities between metamorphoses, and these provide a segue from one story to the next. Not all the myths are about heroes; the story of Arachne, for example, is about a talented woman of the lower class. Moreover, Ovid incorporates nearly every imaginable genre into this work: *epyllion*, tragedy, comedy, rhetoric, hymn, erotic poetry, pastoral poetry, historical myth, and philosophy (Lafaye 1904: 141–159). *Metamorphoses* may be an epic poem, but it does not fit the traditional definition of an epic.

Ovid's sources for the nearly two hundred and fifty stories that comprise his *Metamorphoses* span the history of Greek and Latin literature from Homer to his own time. Many date from the Hellenistic period, when mythological compendia such as Boios' poem on bird metamorphoses and Nicander's work on mythic transformations were popular. The poems of Callimachus provided inspiration as well. It is likely that Ovid used the lost work *About Cyprus*, by the geographer Philostephanus, for many of the myths in Book 10. He also used contemporary poems such as Vergil's *Aeneid* and Cinna's *Myrrha*, and perhaps two separate *Metamorphoses*, one by Parthenius and another by Theodorus. But Ovid was not a slavish copier of his sources. He created variants of myths that would allow his educated audience to make comparisons between traditional versions of these stories and his adaptations. Like Pygmalion, he fashioned raw material into something that was uniquely his.

Metamorphoses was completed shortly before Ovid's exile. Although he burned his copy of the manuscript before departing for Tomis, he says that several others survived. Indeed, there were so many of them that Ovid asked that a preface be added that begged his audience's pardon for the unpolished state of the poem (*Tristia* 1.7.13–40). The sheer number of times that *Metamorphoses* was copied in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (nearly four hundred manuscripts survive today) testifies to its popularity throughout the ages.