

Introduction

Whether they know it or not, when people talk about mythology they are usually talking about Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Casting the entire mythos of classical legend as a cosmos-spanning series of its titular transformations, Ovid's irreverent Roman epic has done more even than the works of Hesiod and Homer to codify what has become known as "Greek" mythology. From Narcissus and Icarus to Pygmalion and Medusa, many of the world's best-known stories take their familiar form or even their origin from Ovid's telling. Much as the Neo-Confucian Classics did for Chinese writers and the *Mahabharata* for Indian literature, the *Metamorphoses* stands apart as a truly seminal text, at once the foundation of a literary canon and one of its highest peaks, holding all subsequent works in its indelible shadow. In the European tradition, it is rivaled in this respect only by the Bible.

Yet in many ways, the *Metamorphoses* is the opposite of the traditionalist, highfaluting work its stature suggests. With its unique blend of silliness, mockery, and subversion, if Ovid's poem is less famous today than the *Aeneid* or the *Odyssey*, that is largely because educators have found it *too* entertaining. Unlike those grand, reverent narratives that give the epic genre its name, the *Metamorphoses* overthrows all things stately, weighty, and heroic to depict an unstable universe ruled by capricious gods and men, one where virtue, vice, and even excess of feeling are at constant risk of turning mortals and lesser deities alike into the natural features of our known world. The poem is shot through with a rebellious streak, satirizing Roman values of tradition

and stoic gravity while taking every opportunity to point up the injustice of the divinities and royals who enforce them. In Ovid's telling, the hero Perseus is a feckless brute reliant on a *deus* to spring out of the *machina*, the Argonauts are at sea for a whole four lines, and all the effusive praise for Rome's gods and rulers is belied by the tell-tale whiff of mock zeal. Best and worst of all, Ovid refuses to take his world seriously. Continually skirting his poetic predecessors, he deploys a constant stream of wit and rhetoric to turn moments of drama into melodrama, while saving true pathos for the victims of powerful oppressors whom other poets would make their protagonists.

Small wonder, then, that the *Metamorphoses* should have proven unpopular with Victorian readers and the orthodox scholars who followed them. In sharp contrast to their treatment of Homer and Virgil, critics largely steered clear of Ovid's work until well into the twentieth century, dismissing it as self-indulgent and amoral even as translators exerted themselves to rob the poem of its most colorful qualities, assigning Ovid their own homophobia and humorlessness while evincing a level of indifference toward sexual assault and misogyny not to be found in the original. This derisive attitude was typified by Edith Hamilton, at one point America's most popular classicist, whose 1942 collection *Mythology* retains a stranglehold on high school curricula despite being dated, bowdlerized, and openly disdainful of its foremost source. In its preface, Hamilton concedes that "no ancient writer can compare" with Ovid as "a compendium of myth," yet continues:

I have avoided using him as far as possible. Undoubtedly he was a good poet and a good storyteller and able to appreciate the myths enough to realize what excellent material they offered him; but he was really farther away from them in his point of view than we are today. They were sheer nonsense to him. . . . He says in effect to his reader, 'Never mind how silly they are. I will dress them up so prettily for you that you will like them.' And he does, often very prettily indeed, but in his hands the stories which were factual truth and solemn truth to the early Greek poets Hesiod and Pindar, and vehicles of deep religious truth to the Greek tragedians, become idle tales, sometimes witty and diverting, often sentimental and distressingly rhetorical (15–16).

It is a matter of taste whether the reader agrees that Ovid's rhetoric is "distressing," that his being "a good poet and a good storyteller" is insufficient grounds to engage with him, or that his work deserves to

be “avoided . . . as far as possible.” But where Hamilton must be challenged is her contention that Ovid’s myths are “sheer nonsense,” blasphemous aberrations from a mind too clever by whole to appreciate the solemn truths revealed to the credulous likes of Hesiod and Pindar. What she takes as dismissive misunderstanding is in fact calculated subversion, and there is no subverting what one does not thoroughly understand. Presumably also no fan of the riddling antics of Socrates, Nasreddin Hodja, or the wise Shakespearean Fool, Hamilton cannot conceive that there may be a point to all Ovid’s pretty dressing, a deeper *irreligious* truth to his out-there point of view.

The political and cultural shifts of the last half-century, however, have made it less objectionable to “speak truth to power” or to shed satirical light on old, accepted ideas. In recent years especially, Ovid’s blend of irreverence toward authority, skepticism toward tradition, and compassion toward victims has become especially timely. Such shifting of sands is part and parcel of all literary reception but seems particularly suited to the metamorphic nature of this work, which wears the idea of fluctuation as a badge, a shackle, and a spine, not to mention as a title. Though few would be surprised that prudish mid-century authorities failed to understand Ovid’s approach, part of what makes his poem so essential and worthy of study is that its contents—the shared cultural basis for a whole artistic tradition—have always been controversial, both among those who failed to understand them and those who did not like what they understood. Indeed, Ovid’s biography has long made him a symbol of oppressed writers in every age. After all, was it for telling merely “idle tales” that he was banished by the Emperor?

OVID’S LIFE AND TIMES

When Publius Ovidius Naso was born at Sulmo on March 20, 43 BCE, some forty miles east of Rome, the internecine wars that had marked the last century of Roman Italy were reaching a fever pitch. Julius Caesar had been dead for less than a year and the next month’s battle between his heir Octavian and his lieutenant Mark Antony saw the last hopes of a free republic die on the besieged walls of Mutina. But Ovid was only twelve when Octavian polished off his rival at Actium, and not yet sixteen when he proclaimed himself Augustus and founded

the Roman Empire. While these enterprises of great pith and moment would have colored the young poet's worldview, the Rome in which Ovid spent his adult life, though still freshly scarred by battle, was one in which power, conflict, and change had moved behind the scenes. On the surface, society would experience a prolonged stability unavailable to his immediate literary forebears.

According to Ovid, his own poetic instinct was innate. Born to a prosperous but not patrician family, he was apparently destined for a life in politics, yet although his father warned him that even Homer had died penniless, Ovid claimed that his attempts at writing always came out in verse. Sent to be educated in the capital, the teenager was wildly successful in the schools of rhetoric, even as he became a celebrated reciter of his own poems. After a few half-hearted stints in minor bureaucratic roles, he resigned to become the youngest fixture of the Roman literary scene, then blossoming into what has since been deemed the Golden Age of Latin literature.

The golden boy of that Golden Age was undoubtedly Virgil. Author of Rome's court-commissioned national epic the *Aeneid*, Virgil is traditionally grouped with Horace and Ovid as the three major "Augustan" poets. Augustus, however, enjoyed a very long reign, and Ovid later wrote that he only ever clapped eyes on the older writer. Instead, Ovid's introduction to cultural circles would come through friendships with the elderly didactic poet Aemilius Macer and Ovid's slightly senior contemporary Propertius, the third (after Gallus and Tibullus) of the great love elegists. Upon publishing the *Amores* (*Loves*) in 16 BCE, Ovid would make his name by establishing himself as the fourth.

The very notion that there existed such a genre as the Latin love elegy, or that there were four primary contributors to it, is itself a sign of Ovid's influence. Developing tropes from the Hellenistic Greeks, early Augustan writers had penned strings of subjective first-person poems that dramatically recounted the joys and especially the miseries of being in love. These were invariably set in the elegiac meter, an uneven form of couplet (one hexameter paired with one pentameter) that would be Ovid's go-to form for his entire life, the *Metamorphoses* excepted. Tibullus and Propertius expanded the variety of topics elegy could address in mounting ever higher heights of melancholy, but the genre achieved its actualization in the hands of the twentysomething Ovid, who returned love elegy to its basics even as he approached

them from new angles, practicing the pose of the anagrammatist of desire who narrates much of the *Metamorphoses*. Unlike their self-serious predecessors, the *Amores* are lighthearted and funny to the point of flirting with parody. At a stroke, Ovid seemed to fulfill the genre's promise and kill its future. Later in life, he would look back on his early success and place himself at the end of the Roman elegiac canon; no subsequent critic has revised his list.

The approach Ovid took with love elegy would become a blueprint for his whole literary life: pick a genre, zero in on its idiosyncrasies, and stand them on their heads. Much as he had done for Propertius' elegies, he soon upended Aemilius Macer's genre of didactic poetry, pretending that love and sex could be taught from a literary manual in the same manner as farming (Virgil's *Georgics*) or writing (Horace's *Ars Poetica*). The resulting *Ars Amatoria* (*Guide for Lovers*) made a tongue-in-cheek show of teaching the art of seduction in three books—two for men and one for women—that quasi-systematically explored, explained, and exploded social conventions for relations between the sexes in cheeky defiance of the Emperor's campaigns for public morality, and extolling among other things the importance of mutual orgasm. The *Ars* was succeeded and subverted by the faux-serious *Remedia Amoris* (*Cures for Love*), and the sadly fragmentary *Medicamina Faciei Feminae* (*Women's Facial Cosmetics*), whose surviving lines contain five surprisingly plausible makeup recipes put, absurdly, into verse. The strength of these works, all written in elegiac meter, catapulted Ovid to unparalleled fame and notoriety. On the deaths of Propertius and Horace, Ovid was by age thirty-five the leading poet in Rome.

Somewhere along the way, Ovid composed the two works (both of uncertain date) that most obviously prefigure the *Metamorphoses*. These are a tragic drama on the mythical sorceress Medea, one of the most bemoanedly lost works of the period, and the *Heroides* (*Heroines*), a collection of letters written in the voice of female characters from mythology, each addressed to an absent and often traitorous male lover. This innovative narrative choice prefigures several of the most prominent speeches in the *Metamorphoses*, including those of Medea (Book 7), Scylla and Althaea (both Book 8), Byblis and Iphis (both Book 9), and Myrrha (Book 10). These extended monologues take the same tactic of breathing new life into old stories by viewing them from an entirely unexpected angle, granting unprecedented

voice and character to women traditionally depicted as somber queens, evil witches, sex-crazed maniacs, or even devoted ciphers. (Medea, for instance, appears in both extant works, occupying a full six hundred lines between them that barely mention the infanticide for which she is otherwise best known.) Though likely deriving from a much earlier time in Ovid's career, the *Heroides* are the clearest antecedent to the *Metamorphoses*, in whose stories Ovid shows the same knack for reinventing familiar myths through the minds of their neglected female characters.

Shortly after the turn of the millennium, Ovid's output underwent a distinct shift in both form and content. Instead of glittering collections of unconventional love poetry, he began laboring concurrently on two monumental works treating Roman religion: the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses*. Straddling the didactic and the epic, the *Fasti* was to be a twelve-book encyclopedia of Roman religious practice set against the outline of the Julian Calendar (one book per month), delivered in the form of jocular interviews with the Roman gods. In contrast, the fifteen books of the *Metamorphoses* would capture the whole of the Greco-Roman mythos in both epic voice and epic hexameter—the sole deviation in Ovid's corpus from his elegiac standard. The *Fasti* was halfway done and the *Metamorphoses* all but complete when, in 8 CE, the Emperor Augustus banished Ovid to the Black Sea town of Tomis, in modern Romania, in the furthest reaches of the Roman world.

It does not appear that Ovid committed a crime, and his famously vague explanation for his exile—"a poem and a mistake" (*carmen et error*, *Tr.* 2.207)—has led to the spillage of vast tides of scholarly ink. In the moralizing context of the Augustan regime, Ovid's most obviously offensive poem was the *Ars Amatoria*, though it was hardly a recent publication and alternatives (including the *Metamorphoses*) have been suggested. The *error* in question is murkier still but seems to have been a scandal; more fanciful scholars have invented an affair with the Emperor's daughter Julia. Whatever happened, the writer and his writings had plainly become dangerous, and his career fell into a disfavor from which it would never recover. Ovid's last two works, the *Tristia* (*Sorrows*) and the *Epistulae ex Ponto* (*Letters from the Black Sea*), consist of elegiac letters to friends, family members, and political operatives, reflecting on his life and pleading for pardon with ever-diminishing hope. If the *Fasti* was ever finished, its second half does

not survive, nor do the poems he supposedly composed in the local language of Getic. The death of Augustus in 14 CE did nothing to alter the poet's circumstances, and Ovid died three years later after a decade in exile. He was about sixty.

STRUCTURE AND THEMES

While Ovid's own popularity has waxed and waned in the two millennia since his death, there has never been any question as to which was his most significant work: Ovid's one epic has always defined his legacy. Yet despite its epic scale, epic form, and clear place in the epic tradition, *epic* is a strange word to describe the *Metamorphoses*, whose artistic program seems predicated on defying any easy description. No other work from antiquity is so unsubtle about being so slippery. Far from the epic norm of pursuing a single hero on a singularly heroic pursuit, the poem endlessly shifts its focus, tone, pace, and place in a flouting of convention and expectation that dazzles with its taxonomies of scale, cramming all of time and space into a uniform structure, even as its themes of identity, credibility, and power continue to register on a humble human level.

The structural point is made clear through comparison with Virgil's *Aeneid*, to whose paramount position in Roman literature Ovid is constantly reacting. In true epic fashion, Ovid's poem is divided into a series of books. But where the *Aeneid* set a neat bar of twelve episodic books per epic, later followed by the likes of Statius and Milton, Ovid instead plumps for the three-upmanship of fifteen, only then to ignore the framework he has chosen. Multiple books cut off in the middle of a story, while several more begin on a conjunction, as if lampooning the structural division by showing how easily it can be bridged. Further complications arise when attempting to group the books by theme, as is easily done with the *Aeneid*'s six-book halves. At the most general level, the *Metamorphoses* progresses chronologically from the creation of the universe to the death of Julius Caesar, in the process gradually shifting focus from a divinity-dominated cosmos (Books 1–5) to an age of heroes (Books 6–10) and on into human history (Books 11–15). This pattern only holds, however, so long as one wears pattern-colored glasses. Once the reader is down in the storytelling trenches of the poem, Ovid's narratorial force will carry them here

and there, jumping over times in a series of kaleidoscopic transitions—some natural, many utterly ridiculous, but all highly stylized—making the poem difficult to classify or segment, in large part because it just keeps rolling along. The difference is evident even in the poems' titles. The *Aeneid* is about Aeneas, a lone hero of heroic qualities embarked on a hero's journey. The *Metamorphoses* is about change.

All this flies full in the face of how a good epic ought to behave. Where the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* channel the will of fate, making plain in omniscient narration where they are headed from the opening verse, Ovid takes a meandering approach that belies the very notion of a neat, destiny-driven plot. Accordingly, a good third of his poem is occupied by nested sets of stories within stories (often compared to Russian dolls and Chinese boxes) such that the Book 10 tale of Atalanta and Hippomenes—a parable narrated by Venus to Adonis in a song sung by Orpheus to a collection of walking trees—is not even close to the most layered moment of narration in the poem. Despite appearances, however, this device does not make the plots difficult to follow so much as difficult to believe, as droves of secondary narrators pop up to take over for a story or seven, import their own biases, and conflict with one another. Such contradictions were long ascribed to simple sloppiness, the result of a foolhardy attempt to fit so much into a single work, yet the poem's anachronisms and discrepancies are often so ostentatious that it would be silly *not* to view them as an intentional rebellion against the typical epic's pursuit of its inexorable ending. In the *Metamorphoses*, chronology is a haze, credibility an open question, and the finality of fiction rendered undisguisedly fictional. Amid the blur of space, time, and narrative, what remains are the thematic resonances to be found as one story transforms into another.

Transformation is, after all, the name of the game. Boldly jettisoning a traditional unified narrative in favor of variations on a theme, the critical understanding that Ovid uses to construct his epic is the pinpointing of metamorphosis as the one great thread running through Greco-Roman myth, whose stories are made mythical by the presence of supernatural transformative power. Yet despite being the stated theme of the work, the act of metamorphosis remains fundamentally ambiguous, without consistent rationale or moral bearing. Transformations occur as punishments, as rewards, as escape mechanisms, plot devices, memorials, and mysteries, with every body at

potential risk of bursting out into something as new and variable as the world of the poem itself—a world, however, that becomes increasingly recognizable as metamorphosis after metamorphosis explains the origin of some familiar real-life feature. The poem's metamorphic playground is the scene of a tug-of-war between permeability and permanence, where forces as different and unpredictable as the whims of gods, the sorcery of witches, or even the strongest mortal emotions are liable to yank the rope in a new direction.

At stake throughout is one of Ovid's main concerns: identity. With each transformation offering an opportunity to compare the before and after, questions naturally arise about what it is to be human or inhuman, and to what degree such distinctions are societal, theological, and/or scientific. Some characters' metamorphoses equate with the freeing of some inner, truer self; for others, their essence is horribly perverted. Yet although describing such a variety of changes may make the poem sound like one great muddle, so many colors swirling into brown, the observance of categorical distinctions in spite of categorical shifts is a precondition to having a metamorphosis: the magic lies in distinguishing what changes from what does not. In Book 1, when the nymph Daphne turns into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's assault, Ovid writes that "just life's glow remained" (1.553), indicating a complete metamorphosis that would seem to fulfill an inevitable fate, since *daphne* means "laurel" in Greek. Yet the trunk's bark continues to shrink before the god's touch, and the passage's final line, "like a head the treetop seemed to nod" (1.567), teases the possibility that some aspect of the vanished woman has survived her transformation, imbuing the wood with her will. There must be a point in each metamorphosis when the human ceases to be one, and the fascination is in the uncertainty of when that is and what is left of them thereafter.

The story of Apollo and Daphne has acquired further renown for its relation to Ovid's other main thematic interest, the abuse of power. In spite (or, inevitably, because) of his status as a poet of empire, Ovid exhibits a refreshing problem with authority, and the reader is constantly treated to tales of deities and rulers subjecting unlucky mortals (or even less mighty gods) to horrifying wrongs on the flimsiest of pretexts, with the poet often changing the details from his mythic sources to accentuate the cruelty of these powers that were. In one stark example from Book 4, Ovid invents for Medusa a human back-

story in which the monster's monstrosity results from a double miscarriage of divine justice: first at the hands of Neptune, who raped her in the temple of Minerva, then from Minerva herself, who punished the sacrilege by turning the girl into her famously snake-haired self. In no tradition prior to the *Metamorphoses* had Medusa ever been anything but a monster, and the liberties taken in Ovid's revision are revealing of both the poet's priorities and his influence, since this version of Medusa's legend underpins most modern retellings. Hearing her origin story narrated dispassionately by Perseus, whom we have witnessed dandling Medusa's severed head for several scenes, instantly flips our view of the feats we have watched Perseus perform. Suddenly invited to pity the monsters slain throughout the poem, we are simultaneously forced to question the heroism of the myths' accepted protagonists. Considering Ovid's eagerness to destabilize any narrative expectation with an oddly timed pun or mannered exaggeration, the frequency with which he chooses to punch up when faced with a power dynamic reveals an authorial agenda of at times breathtakingly subversive sympathies.

Bearing this in mind will aid in discussing one of the poem's most delicate aspects—namely, rape. In addition to Daphne and Medusa, the pages of the *Metamorphoses* contain seventeen other extended stories of sexual assault (many more are mentioned), nearly all of which are suffered by women, mostly at the hands of gods and kings. Even now it is not uncommon for scholars to meet this fact with a mere grimace or shrug, and there are collegiate horror stories of students whose professors have guided them through passages detailing profound acts of abuse with little comment other than on the beauty of the poetry, a callous oversight historically exacerbated by translators disinclined to call a rape a rape. Compared to the Latin original, English versions of the *Metamorphoses* reliably have more victim-blaming spread out across fewer assaults, resulting in editions of the epic at odds with Ovid, whose general sympathy for the oppressed against their celestial or lordly oppressors often results in near parables on the effects of power abused. The story of Callisto in Book 2, for example, paints a startlingly intense portrait of psychological trauma as the disgraced former huntress suffers ostracism, insomnia, personality changes, and misplaced guilt at the hands of three unconscionably malicious and unfeeling gods. As in the *Heroides*, Ovid takes special

interest in giving maligned mythical women a degree of feeling and focus almost unheard of in Roman writers, a narrative choice of enormous transformative potential both for how a tale is told and what is made of it in the telling.

This is not, of course, to say that Ovid is some kind of present-day feminist out of time. With few exceptions, these earnest investigations of power are compromisingly conducted through a male gaze quite willing to take aesthetic pleasure in the distress of victims whose plight, however piteous, seems always to increase their paradigmatic beauty. Yet wrong as it is to teach the rape scenes of the *Metamorphoses* while dismissing all but their artistic properties, it is also wrong to dismiss the poem as a hopelessly antiquated work with no insights of value to the contemporary reader. In Book 12, when the maiden Caenis is granted a wish by her divine rapist, the sea-god Neptune, she makes a chilling demand expressly intended to be as mighty as his crime: “make me immune to rape” (12.202). When the god accedes by transforming her into a man, how else are we to interpret his act but as the poet’s caustic assessment of his society? For the newly-transitioned Caeneus, there is a newfound security; for women outside the poem, the only solution Neptune proposes was not possible.

The uneasy, fascinating truth is that there exists in the poem a strange balance of sympathies that defies reduction. The natural tendency to focus on individual stories can only lead to unpleasant simplification, since each story has its own circumstances deserving of analysis, some more challenging than others to societal norms and sensitivities, ancient and modern. Yet for the structural reasons described, there is much more to be gained from taking the poem as the continuous whole it is, where the tales of Daphne, Callisto, Medusa, and Caenis do not stand alone but must be read and reread in light of the tales that precede and follow them. While such a reading does not lessen the individual tragedies, it does reveal a greater, critical purpose to all the pain and suffering. Unlike so many Disneyfied and YA retellings of the Greek legends, Ovid’s mythos does not overlook the flaws and transgressions of its most powerful characters, pretend it can fix them, or try to make them less awful than they are. Instead, it presents them, plays them up, and calls them into question. For all its fantastic miracles and magical transformations, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is disarmingly modern in its humanist depiction of a fragile and inequitable

universe, where heroes are drained of their heroism, victims deserve to be heard, and the earth is always holier than heaven.

STYLE AND POLITICS

Even so, viewing the *Metamorphoses* from the airy vantage point of themes and structural composition cannot begin to capture the actual experience of reading the poem. This is because the poet, faced everywhere with the horrors of an unjust world, prefigures the absurdists by confronting them with a sardonic smile. From its opening lines, the work is pervaded by the wit and wobble of Ovid's poetic style. The narrator is delightfully intrusive, often addressing characters and readers in the second person (though most translators edit this out), and his repetition of such phrases as "they say," "rumor has," and "if we can believe it" in the midst of narration reminds the reader that, for all their divine characters, the tales being recounted are far from divinely revealed truths.

Yet muddying the waters of narratorial credibility is only one of the many tricks up Ovid's sleeve. In the tales of abuse discussed earlier, he can be deadly serious, but when handling familiar myths of heroism and glory, the poet's tongue is never far from his cheek. Scenes of high passion are hyperbolized into burlesque, while less impressive moments are lavished with flights of rhetoric they have obviously failed to earn. The death of Achilles ("Pelides") is a fine example:

Now he is ash, and all that yet remains
Of great Achilles scarcely fills an urn;
But still his fame lives on and fills the world,
And in this, the true measure of the man,
Does Pelides endure and shun the void.

(12.615–19)

At first, this seems an impressive eulogy for a great hero tragically slain. The only problem is that Ovid's Achilles has done nothing to lend his demise real impact: his victory over Hector is barely mentioned, Patroclus—the fallen comrade usually so central to Achilles' character arc—has yet to appear, and the only feat we have watched him perform is his confused killing of the demigod Cygnus, who does not even figure in Homer. The silliness of Ovid's grandiloquent epi-

taph is made plain by the preceding sentence, which relates the corpse's cremation: "Now, he—Troy's fear, the guard and grace of Greece, / Aeacides, the tireless warlord—burned."

Such anticlimaxes abound. Heroes are particular targets of irony, and the narrator calls characters by that name only when doing so is ridiculous, as in moments of cowardice or repose ("Autonoë's heroic son turned tail," 3.198). But incidental bits of farce lurk in every story, as situations of would-be intensity are undercut by excessive alliteration, dissonant puns, or bizarre displays of metaphoric language that amuse the reader even as they highlight the artificiality of the plot, as when Ovid strings together ten lines of sparkling wordplay for the last gasps of a dying lover. In one extreme example from Book 12, Ovid uses his favorite trick of pairing verbs with their own participles to propel a battle forward with appalling consonance:

Then, rushing forward, trailing his own guts,
He trod what trailed, the trodden entrails burst,
And, tripping, down he tumbled, disemboweled.
(12.390–92)

The gruesomeness of the image is belied by the playfulness of the poetry in a scene whose brutality—the reader will be unsurprised to hear—is too incessant to be taken seriously, landing more like a lampoon of such set-pieces in other epics. The wit and invention involved here are undeniable, yet one should remember that these are the very features historically dismissed as the unrealistic devices of an overactive mind.

Critics unable to imagine any worthwhile meaning in such stylized lapses of verisimilitude have taken special offense to Books 12–14, which dance around the tales of the Trojan War and the voyages of Aeneas, characterizing them as poor efforts in comparison to the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*. This criticism completely misunderstands how Ovid revels in the very act of running circles around his predecessors, uninterested in retreading the same narrative or tonal ground. The entire story of the abduction of Helen leading into the Trojan War is dispatched in a mere three verses (12.5–7), yet the action grinds to a halt for a three-hundred-line digression on a completely different battle between humans and centaurs. Considering the themes discussed above, however, what some scholars have disparaged as impish