

The Muses' Playground 15

Metapoetics in Ovid's
Metamorphoses

Metapoetics

- What is metapoetics?
- A term used to describe the discussion of writing, style, genre choices, etc, within a piece of literature
- Metapoetic discourse is often placed in paratexts (prefaces, forewords, prologues, or epilogues etc);
 - This is quite prevalent in modern texts too

Preface to Martial's epigrams

'I hope that in these little books of mine I have such due proportion that no man [...] can complain about them [...]' seeing that their sportive mood preserves, even towards the meanest individuals, that decent respect in which authors of old were so lacking that they not only made wrongful use of real names, but even did this in the case of the great. For myself I would seek reputation at a lower price than that, and the last thing for which I desire to be commended is mere smartness. May the malicious commentator abstain from meddling with the plain meaning of my jokes [...] I would make no apology for immodest unreserve in word - that is, for the language of epigram - were I the first to use it, but this is the manner in which *Catullus* writes [...] and every other author whose works are read right through; yet even if there be any man so ostentatiously prim, that one may not, even on a single page, speak plain Latin to him, he need not go further than this preface - or rather no further than the title. Epigrams are [...] for those who are used to look on at the games of Flora; therefore, let no Cato come to my playhouse; or if he come, let him watch the show [...]

However...

- ...most of the time, metapoetic discourse is considerably less straightforward
- It relies on the reader's ability to decode metaphors used to describe literary discourse:
- *But time and modesty allowed no more; the high task pressed, the challenge of the boar.*
(Ov. Met. 8.327f)

Metapoetics in the *Met.*

- Two types:
 - Reflection on the project of the *Metamorphoses* itself, as well as different sections thereof
 - Reflection on other genres and texts
 - Particularly Ovid's own works – this means elegy!
- We will look at:
 - Arachne in Book 6 (metapoetics relating to the *Met.*)
 - Narcissus in Book 9 (metapoetical discussion of elegy – parody?)

Arachne in Ov. Met. 6.103-128

The Maeonian girl depicts Europa deceived by the form of the bull: you would have thought it a real bull and real waves. She is seen looking back to the shore she has left, and calling to her companions, displaying fear at the touch of the surging water, and drawing up her shrinking feet. Also Arachne showed Asterie, held by the eagle, struggling, and Leda lying beneath the swan's wings. She added Jupiter who, hidden in the form of a satyr, filled Antiope, daughter of Nycteus with twin offspring; who, as Amphitryon, was charmed by you, Alcmena, of Tiryns; by Danaë, as a golden shower; by Aegina, daughter of Asopus, as a flame; by Mnemosyne, as a shepherd; by Proserpine, Ceres's daughter, as a spotted snake. She wove you, Neptune, also, changed to a fierce bull for Canace, Aeolus's daughter. In Enipeus's form you begot the Aloidæ, and deceived Theophane as a ram. The golden-haired, gentlest, mother of the cornfields, knew you as a horse. The snake-haired mother of the winged horse, knew you as a winged bird. Melantho knew you as a dolphin. She gave all these their own aspects, and the aspects of the place. Here is Phoebus like a countryman, and she shows him now with the wings of a hawk, and now in a lion's skin, and how as a shepherd he tricked Isse, Macareus's daughter. She showed how Bacchus ensnared Erigone with delusive grapes, and how Saturn as the double of a horse begot Chiron. The outer edge of the web, surrounded by a narrow border, had flowers interwoven with entangled ivy.

Arachne and the author

- Arachne's woven image has close affinities with the text of the *Metamorphoses* itself
 - Content: Gods in erotic episodes raping mortal women; this is very similar to what we see in the *Met*.
 - Workshop on gender in the *Met*. week after Easter
 - Also, Callimachean focus: these are missing-moments stories, not big epic or tragic arcs
 - Form: 'free-flowing scenes, with the settings sketched out in some detail and the characters marked by individual features' (Pavlock, 2009, 4)
 - Corresponds to the loose structure of Ovid's narrative
- The web becomes a miniature model mirroring the poem's content and throwing light on how Ovid's narrative works?

Contrast Minerva Ov. *Met.* 6.70-102

Pallas Athene depicts the hill of Mars, and the court of the Aeropagus, in Cecrops's Athens, and the old dispute between Neptune and herself, as to who had the right to the city and its name. There the twelve gods sit in great majesty, on their high thrones, with Jupiter in the middle. She weaves the gods with their familiar attributes. The image of Jupiter is a royal one. There she portrays the Ocean god, standing and striking the rough stone, with his long trident, and seawater flowing from the centre of the shattered rock, a token of his claim to the city. She gives herself a shield, a sharp pointed spear, and a helmet for her head, while the aegis protects her breast. She shows an olive-tree with pale trunk, thick with fruit, born from the earth at a blow from her spear, the gods marvelling: and Victory crowns the work. Then she adds four scenes of contest in the four corners, each with miniature figures, in their own clear colours, so that her rival might learn, from the examples quoted, what prize she might expect, for her outrageous daring. One corner shows Thracian Mount Rhodope and Mount Haemus, now icy peaks, once mortal beings who ascribed the names of the highest gods to themselves. A second corner shows the miserable fate of the queen of the Pygmies: how Juno, having overcome her in a contest, ordered her to become a crane and make war on her own people. Also she pictures Antigone, whom Queen Juno turned into a bird for having dared to compete with Jupiter's great consort: neither her father Laomedon, nor her city Ilium were of any use to her, but taking wing as a white stork she applauds herself with clattering beak. The only corner left shows Cinyras, bereaved: and he is seen weeping as he clasps the stone steps of the temple that were once his daughters' limbs. Minerva surrounded the outer edges with the olive wreaths of peace (this was the last part) and so ended her work with emblems of her own tree.

Athena's web

- Material arranged in a formal way: note how the initial lines take in the scene step by step
- The topic: the contest of Minerva and Neptune for Athens
 - **Centre:** Minerva and Neptune with the other 10 Olympian gods
 - **Corners:** punishment for impiety through metamorphosis
- The topic and structure resemble those of pre-Ovidian epic
- ...in fact, there are links between Minerva's web and the shield *ekphrasis* of Verg. *Aen.* 8:
 - **Centre:** Octavian, Cleopatra and Anthony, with Octavian receiving support from the gods
 - **Periphery:** scenes reinforcing the values of the central panel

Results of the juxtaposition

- *Carmen deductum* mentioned in Ovid's 'preface' to the *Met* (Ov. *Met.* 1.4):
 - Phrase borrowed from spinning and weaving to describe fine-spun literature: means weaving is likely to be a metaphor about literature
- The meaning of the contest?
 - 'Minerva's and Arachne's tapestries are microcosmic versions of two very different epic poems' (Pavlock, 2009, 5)

Arachne's fate, and the author's

*Her thoughts turned to Arachne, of Maeonia, **whom she had heard would not give her due credit**, in the art of spinning. [...] The girl was not known for her place of birth, or family, but for her skill. It was not only a joy to see the finished cloths, but also to watch them made: so much beauty added to art. Whether at first she was winding the rough yarn into a new ball, or working the stuff with her fingers, teasing out the clouds of wool, repeatedly, drawing them into long equal threads, twirling the slender spindle with practised thumb, or embroidering with her needle, **you could see she was taught by Pallas**. Yet she denied it, and **took offense at the idea of such a teacher**. 'Contend with me' she said 'I will not disagree at all if I am beaten'.*

- Arachne challenges the goddess and becomes guilty of hubris
 - ...in the rejection of the wisdom of old
 - ...because she does not heed the significance of the images in Minerva's web and their encouragement to pay the gods proper respect

Ovid, Vergil, and Arachne

- Yet Ovid makes us sympathise with Arachne and see connections between his work and hers?
 - One solution: to connect it to a defiant approach of the author (real-life Ovid) who might have concerns about the fall-out of his at times irreverent poem
 - Ovid's exile
 - Another: The description of Arachne's flaws carefully highlights that she is indebted to Minerva
 - => we can view this as an acknowledgement by Ovid of his debt to Vergil and Homeric epic

Narcissus and elegy

1. *'So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves!'* (3.405)
 2. *'While he seeks to slake his thirst another thirst springs up, and while he drinks he is smitten by the sight of the beautiful form he sees. He loves an unsubstantial hope and thinks that substance which is only shadow.'* (3.415-417)
 3. *'he gazes at his eyes [...], and his locks [...], on his smooth cheeks, his ivory neck, the glorious beauty of his face [...]'* (3.4.421-423)
- The Narcissus episode corresponds to the process of falling in love and suffering unrequited love common in Roman love elegy
 - Elegiac lovers have moments of blissful union, but are mostly parted from their beloveds: constant and secure love is unattainable (1)
 - The gaze is the starting point of love (cf. Prop. 1.1.1f and lecture 14) (2)
 - Bodies of elegiac beloveds are described and construed body part by body part (3)

Build your own girlfriend: Ov. Am. 1.5.17-24

*When she stood before my eyes, the clothing set
aside,*

there was never a flaw in all her body.

What shoulders, what arms, I saw and touched!

Breasts formed as if they were made for pressing!

How flat the belly beneath the slender waist!

What flanks, what form! What young thighs!

*Why recall each aspect? I saw nothing lacking
praise*

and I hugged her naked body against mine.

What does the Narcissus episode tell us?

- Correspondences between the genres enable us to read Narcissus as another run-through of the elegiac scenario: his death underlines the reader's experience that elegiac life can never be successful
 - Correspondences also on the level of vocabulary throughout
- This is underscored by the addition of narrator voice comments: *'O fondly foolish boy, why vainly seek to clasp a fleeting image? [...] That which you behold is but the shadow of a reflected form and has no substance of its own. With you it comes, with you it stays, and it will go with you – if you can go.'* (3.432-436)

Narcissus and the writing of elegy

- The Narcissus episode also hints at the workings of elegy writing:
 - *He loves an unsubstantial hope and thinks that substance which is only shadow. (3.417)*
 - *[I]t has no substance of its own. With you it comes, with you it stays, and it will go with you. (3.435)*
 - *I both kindle the flames and suffer them (464)*
- Cf. the elegiac beloved as a literary creation of the elegiac poets: no real-life background, no real-life girl!

Build your own girl-friend: Pygmalion

- The *locus classicus* illuminating the construct of the elegiac beloved is the Pygmalion episode in *Met.* 10
- This passage is layered with elegiac vocabulary and corresponds to a number of elegies by Ovid and Propertius
 - Cf. Prop. 1.3 (left)

Cynthia seemed like that to me, breathing the tender silence, her head resting on unquiet hands, when I came, deep in wine, dragging my drunken feet, while the boys were shaking the late night torches. My senses not yet totally dazed, I tried to approach her, pressing gently against the bed: and though seized by a twin passion, here Amore there Bacchus, both cruel gods, urging me on, to attempt to slip my arm beneath her as she lay there, and lifting my hand snatch eager kisses, I was still not brave enough to trouble my mistress's rest, fearing her proven fierceness in a quarrel, but, frozen there, clung to her, gazing intently, like Argus on Io's new-horned brow. Now I freed the garlands from my forehead, and set them on your temples: now I delighted in playing with your loose hair, furtively slipping apples into your open hands, bestowing every gift on your ungrateful sleep, repeated gifts breathed from my bowed body. And whenever you, stirring, gave occasional sighs, I was transfixed, believing false omens, some vision bringing you strange fears, or that another forced you to be his, against your will.

Ov. Met. 10.243-

Pygmalion had seen them, spending their lives in wickedness, and, offended by the failings that nature gave the female heart, he lived as a bachelor, without a wife or partner for his bed. But, with wonderful skill, he carved a figure, brilliantly, out of snow-white ivory, no mortal woman, and fell in love with his own creation. The features are those of a real girl, who, you might think, lived, and wished to move, if modesty did not forbid it. Indeed, art hides his art. He marvels: and passion, for this bodily image, consumes his heart. Often, he runs his hands over the work, tempted as to whether it is flesh or ivory, not admitting it to be ivory. he kisses it and thinks his kisses are returned; and speaks to it; and holds it, and imagines that his fingers press into the limbs, and is afraid lest bruises appear from the pressure. Now he addresses it with compliments, now brings it gifts that please girls, shells and polished pebbles, little birds, and many-coloured flowers, lilies and tinted beads, and the Heliades's amber tears, that drip from the trees. He dresses the body, also, in clothing; places rings on the fingers; places a long necklace round its neck; pearls hang from the ears, and cinctures round the breasts. All are fitting: but it appears no less lovely, naked. He arranges the statue on a bed on which cloths dyed with Tyrian murex are spread, and calls it his bedfellow, and rests its neck against soft down, as if it could feel.

Art hides its art

Ars latet arte sua

- Key interpretation by A. Sharrock in the article 'Wom manufacture' *JRS* 81, 1991, 36-49
- 'The *Metamorphoses* myth of the art-object which becomes a love-object mirrors the elegiac myth of love-object as art-object. The elegists represent the *puella* as both art and flesh. Pygmalion 3 deconstructs the erotic realism of elegy and by its frankness about the power of the male artist discloses elegy's operations. It tells us how to read the *puella* - as a work of art; and the lover - as an artist obsessed with his own creation.' (Sharrock, 1991, 36)
- Later followed by articles by both Sharrock and Wyke (also in *JRS*)

To take away

- Metapoetics is the reflection on writing in a literary medium: art reflecting on art
- In the *Met.*, we encounter both reflection on the *Met* themselves, as well as on earlier writings of Ovid's
- These reflections are part of the process to delineate what this particular epic is about