

The Muses' Playground 12

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1 & 15

How to write epic after Vergil?

Where the text comes from

Vergil

- Pastoral poetry (*Eclogues*)
- Didactic (*Georgics*)
- Epic themes touched on but ultimately rejected (cf. *Ecl.* 4)

Ovid

- Love elegies (*Amores*)
- Letter love elegy (*Heroides*)
- Tragedy (*Medea*; now lost)
- Didactic (?; *Art of Love*)
- Epic writing rejected in numerous *recusationes* – but epic material frequently (*mis?*)used esp. in the *Heroides*

Intense engagement: Ov. *Epist.* 7

Where do you flee to? Storms obstruct you. The storms' aid will benefit me! See how the wind excites the crashing waves. The storm I wished for you, comes to pass without me: wind and wave are more just to me than your heart. I'm not worth so much that you should perish, unjustly, by not being stopped from fleeing me over the wide seas. You'd be cultivating constancy and hatred too lavishly, if, though free of me, you met a common fate, Soon the winds will die, and, evenly, over the level waves, Triton will drive his dark-green horses through the waters. I wish that you too might be altered like the winds, and you will, unless you're harder than an oak. Why, unless you're ignorant of how furious the seas can be, do you so often, so wrongly, trust the waters you've tried? Even, when you loose the hawsers, persuaded by the tide, still the wide sea holds many sorrows.

The *Heroides* and epic

- Elegiac letters: they present a very specific, blinkered viewpoint on these well-known stories
- Letters set up to fail: the reader knows full well that the internal author will fail to convince
 - The cumulative effect of 15 letters will underscore this
- What does that mean in terms of genre and genre hierarchy?
 - The epic version is the ‘right one’: ‘canon’ vs. AU
 - A different way of representing genre hierarchy

Poetic aspiration: Ov. *Am.* 3.15

Find a new poet, mother of gentle Love! My elegies have scraped past the last turning-post: I composed them, child of Pelignian country –and my pleasures have not led me astray –For what it's worth, I'm heir to an ancient line, not a knight fashioned by the whirlwind of war. Mantua celebrates Virgil, Verona Catullus: I'll be known as the glory of Peligni's people, who won honourable freedom with their arms, when Rome was fearful of their collective force. And some stranger, seeing the walls of watery Sulmo, and how small a measure of land it occupies, will say 'What a great poet you were able to bear: I'll call you great, however small you are. 'Graceful boy, and, you, the graceful boy's Cyprian mother, take away your golden standard from my field! Horned Bacchus rebukes me with his weightier rod: there's a greater space beaten by greater steeds. Unwarlike elegies, joyful Muse, farewell, this work that will still stand forever, when I'm dead.

- Similar to the *recusationes* of Vergil;
- Fictionalises own career, merging narrator and external author *personae*
- ...but this is primarily about tragedy, setting up the *Medea*
- *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris* do not contain references to a new work emerging, just to the appropriate close of their own circles

Effects

- That means the reader comes to the *Metamorphoses* without explicit preparation
- ...because the leap between Ovid's epic and his earlier writings is not such a big one after all?
 - Making us alert to genre overlaps in the *Met.*
- ...or because epic is the only way to go after tragedy?

*There are also fifteen books
on changing forms,
songs saved just now from
my funeral rites.*

*Tell them the face of my own
fortunes
can be reckoned among
those Metamorphoses.*

(Ov. *Trist.* 1.1.xx)

The opening of the *Met.*

*Of bodies changed to other forms I
tell
You Gods, who have yourselves
wrought every change,
Inspire my enterprise and lead
(deducite) my lay
In one continuous song from nature's
first
Remote beginnings to our modern
times*

- No lead-up: no extensive prologue – but...
- Multitude of condensed information here
 - Compression in expansive form?
Gives away something about how this is going to be different epic, too?
- Transformations – mythological transformations, as betrayed by the invocation to the gods
- Connection to Callimachus established: The *Aitia*
- ...continues the interaction with Hellenistic poetry, as in earlier works

Ovid and Callimachus

- *Carmen deductum* associated with Callimachean-style small poetry
- Callimachus' *Aitia* in direct opposition to a Homeric-style epic in continual verse
- ...but Ovid refers to the *Met.* as *perpetuum carmen*, continuous song
- Yes: Ovid's epic contains one of the key aspects of narrative epic: one central piece of action, the development of the world
 - Cf. earlier Roman epic: Ennius *Annales*
 - ...and Lucretius' didactic epic *De Rerum Natura*

On structure

- The structure of the *Met* might underline the unity of the stories told
 - 1-5: Gods
 - 6-10: Heroes
 - 11-15: Humans
- ...but the structure of the epic is often obscured and has a less clear feel to it than the structure of e.g. the *Aeneid*
 - Re-shaping epic once more?

All structures great and small

- ‘The Metamorphoses constantly refines lengthy ‘continuous’ epic plots into briefer, often oblique episodes, which give unity to sections of the poem’ (Harrison, 2002, 87)
 - E.g. Little Aeneid from 13.623 onwards
- Episodes particularly clear in Book 1:
 - Apollo and Daphne (interacting with Ov. Am.)
 - Io (interacting with tragedy)
- Stand-alone episodes often have impetus from non-epic genres and interact extensively with them
- ...so that the work as a whole comes to emphasise inclusion of other generic material – a Hellenistic feature

Epic incomplete?

*The Archer god, whose shafts til then
were used / only against wild goats and
fleeing deer, / destroyed the monster
with a thousand arrows, / his quiver
almost emptied, and the wounds, /
black wounds, poured forth their
poison. Then to ensure / the centuries
should have no power to dull / the
lustre of that deed, Apollo founded /
the sacred games, the crowded
contests, known / as Pythian from that
serpent overthrown. / Here all whose
hand or foot or wheel had won, /
received the honour of a wreath of oak.
/ Laurels were still unknown; Apollo
then / the greenery of any tree would
wear / for garlanding his long and
lovely hair.*

- Note here typical epic motifs:
 - Battle
 - Foundation of games (e.g. cf. *Aen.* 5)
 - Normative society? Due award of prizes implied
 - References to size of Python may be read as stylistic allusions: this is
- ...but also that there's something off with Apollo: he does not yet have the laurel
- Can this be read, too, as an indication that Ovid's representation of Apollo is not yet complete?

Ov. Met. 1.452-465

Daphne, Peneus child, was the **first** love / of great Apollo, a
love lit not by chance / unwitting, but by **Cupid's** spiteful
wrath. / The god of Delos, **proud in victory**, / saw Cupid draw
his bow's taut arc, and said: 'Mischievous boy, what are a
brave man's arms / to you? That gear becomes my shoulder
best. / My aim is sure, I wound my enemies, / I wound wild
beasts; my countless arrows slew / but now the bloated
Python, whose vast coils / across so many acres spread their
blight. / You and your loves! You have your torch to light them!
/ Let that content you; never claim my **fame**. / And Venus' son
replied: 'Your bow, Apollo, / may vanquish all, **but mine shall**
vanquish you. As every creature yields to power divine, / so
likewise **shall your glory yield to mine**.'

The two Cupids

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unwitting, but by **Cupid's** spiteful **wrath**. /
The god of Delos, **proud in victory**, / saw
Cupid draw his bow's taut arc, and said:
'Mischievous boy, what are a **brave**
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Venus' son replied: 'Your bow, Apollo, /
may vanquish all, **but mine shall vanquish**
you. As every creature yields to power
divine, / so likewise **shall your glory yield**
to mine.'

- Epic motifs:
 - wrath
 - Pride
 - Fame
- ...all trigger epic action
 - Cf. opening of the *Iliad* – the most epic of all epics
 - Cf. the close of the *Aeneid* – the most recent epic classics for Ovid to interact with

Ov. Am. 1.1.1-26

Just now, I was preparing to start with heavy fighting and violent war, with a measure to fit the matter. Good enough for lesser verse – laughed Cupid so they say, and stole a foot away. ‘Cruel boy, who gave you power over this song? Poets are the Muses’, we’re not in your crowd. What if Venus snatched golden Minerva’s weapons, while golden Minerva fanned the flaming fires? Who’d approve of Ceres ruling the wooded hills, with the Virgin’s quiver to cultivate the fields? Who’d grant long-haired Phoebus a sharp spear, while Mars played the Aonian lyre? You’ve a mighty kingdom, boy, and too much power, ambitious one, why aspire to fresh works? Or is everything yours? Are Helicon’s metres yours? Is even Phoebus’s lyre now barely his at all? I’ve risen to it well, in the first line, on a clean page, the next one’s weakened my strength: and I’ve no theme fitting for lighter verses, no boy or elegant long-haired girl.’ I was singing, while he quickly selected an arrow from his open quiver, to engineer my ruin, and vigorously bent the sinuous bow against his knee. and said, ‘Poet take this effort for your song!’ Woe is me! That boy has true shafts. I burn, and Love rules my vacant heart.

The two Cupids: 2

- Is the mix-in of another genre that which has been missing from Ovid's own take on epic?
- This section of Met. 1 inverts motifs from Am. 1.1:
 - Apollo rejects love in the way the poet narrator did in *Am.* 1.1: an Ovid reader knows how this will end
 - Apollo believes in his mightier arms as the poet narrator does in his epic project
 - Apollo takes the role of the elegiac lover as Venus takes Minerva's weapons
- Allusions also to Prop. 1.1:
 - Haughtiness of the soon-to-be lover
 - Later: the chase of the lover of the love object
 - Later: the lack of a complete resolution

Poetic control?

- What does it mean, though, that the poet who has staged this battle in the past, with 'himself' in the passive role, now takes control of Apollo himself?
- Cupid controls Apollo, but the poet controls Cupid?
 - It is the narrator who gives us the key adjectives to guide our reading: 'a love not lit by chance unwitting', 'Cupid's spiteful wrath', 'proud in victory', 'deceived by his own oracles', etc.
- => We are outside of the elegiac universe proper?

The close of the episode

*And still Apollo loved her; on the trunk / he placed his hand
and felt beneath the bark / her heart still beating, held in his
embrace / her branches, pressed his kisses on the wood; / yet
from his kisses still the wood recoiled. 'My bride', he said,
'since you can never be, / at least, sweet laurel, you shall be
my tree. / My lyre, my locks, my quiver you shall wreath; /
You shall attend the conquering lords of Rome / when joy
shouts triumph and the Capitol / welcomes the long
procession; you shall stand / beside Augustus' gates, sure
sentinel / on either side, guarding the oak between. My brow
is every young, my locks unshorn; / so keep your leaves' proud
glory ever green.' Thus spoke the god; the laurel in assent /
inclined her new-made branches and bent down, / or seemed
to bend, her head, her leafy crown.*

Ring-composition

And still Apollo loved her; on the trunk / he placed his hand and felt beneath the bark / her heart still beating, held in his embrace / her branches, pressed his kisses on the wood; / yet from his kisses still the wood recoiled. 'My bride', he said, 'since you can never be, / at least, sweet laurel, you shall be my tree. / My lyre, my locks, my quiver you shall wreath; / You shall attend the conquering lords of Rome / when joy shouts triumph and the Capitol / welcomes the long procession; you shall stand / beside Augustus' gates, sure sentinel / on either side, guarding the oak between. My brow is every young, my locks unshorn; / so keep your leaves' proud glory ever green.' Thus spoke the god; the laurel in assent / inclined her new-made branches and bent down, / or seemed to bend, her head, her leafy crown.

- Several motifs refer back to the close of the Python episode:
 - The laurel (here it is!)
 - The locks
 - The quiver
 - The crown
- Several motifs imply that this is now the accepted order of things:
 - The laurel assents
 - She wears the crown – referring back to the crown worn by the winners at the Pythian games
- It is precisely in the metamorphosis that epic and 'the other genre' of elegy can meet: the episode relates specifically to Ovid's unique project of writing an epic of metamorphosis

Apollo and Dapnhe as programmatic

- *Primus amor*: This is the first love-story inserted into the Met.
- Its parties are both intricately associated with poetry
 - Apollo is forced to engage with a different type of poetry here
 - ...but also describes as not as we know him previously
=> author statement: love has its place within epic?
- The episode thus dramatises the engagement of epic with another genre, causing change in both