

The Muses' Playground: Order/Disorder; progression/regression. The poetics of flux

A) How is the *Metamorphoses* structured?

a)

i) division into 3 pentads (1-5, 6-10, 11-15)

ii) division into 3 parts, epochs of gods/heroes/history (Barchiesi 1997: first division= *Met.* 6.420-1). Threefold chronological stride: gods (1-6: Athens 6.419ff.)>heroes (6-11; Troy 11.194ff.)>history (11-15): cf. Muse's narrative (5.250-678), song of Orpheus (10.143-739) and Pythagoras' speech (15.75-478). Gods> human experience

b) individual books as coherent units (e.g. Book 10: coherence through Orpheus)

c) forward movement through time

1) "...lead my lay / In one continuous song from nature's first / Remote beginnings to our modern times" (*Met.* 1.3-4)

▪ cf. chronographic work of Varro *De gente populi romani*, "on the race of the Roman people" (prob. completed 43 BC): e.g. dated foundation of Rome to 754/3 BC; Ennius *Annals*: fall of Troy (1184/3?) to 184/3 BC; *Aeneid* upto Augustus

d) movements through narrative space: e.g. Greece to Rome

▪ Progressive poem? Things getting better (e.g. humans managing own destiny)? Ordered poem?

B) Order

▪ cf. chaos ordered in cosmogony (e.g. elements get fixed, separate place)

2) "Ere land and sea and the all-covering sky / Were made, in the whole world the countenance / Of nature was the same, all one, well named / Chaos, a raw and undivided mass" (*Met.* 1.5-7)

3) "This strife a god, with nature's blessing, solved / Who severed land from sky and sea from land, / And from the denser vapours set apart / The ethereal sky and, each from the blind heap / Resolved and freed, he fastened in its place / Appropriate in peace and harmony" (*Met.* 1.21-25)

4) "[the god] may therefore be read as a figure for the poet, and the ordering of the universe as a metaphor for creation of the poem; thus the "real" subject of Ovid's cosmogony may be the literary creation of *Metamorphoses*" (Wheeler 1995:117)

▪ palace of sun (*Met.* 2.1-30): palace (1-4), door carvings, showing universe: triple earth, sea and sky (5-18), interior scene (23-30): order and symmetry

5) "For Vulcan had engraved / The world's great orb, the seas that ring the world, / The sky that hangs above" (*Met.* 2.5-7)

6) "And, set above them the bright signs of heaven, / In glory shining, six upon each door" (*Met.* 2.17-18)

7) "Enrobed in purple vestments Phoebus sat, / High on a throne of gleaming emeralds. Attending him on either side stood Day / And Month and Year and Century, and Hours disposed at equal intervals between" (*Met.* 2.24-6)

8) “[Vulcan’s representation implies] the universal, all-embracing scope of [Ovid's own] *carmen perpetuum*” (Brown 1987: 219).

- NB irony: Apollo, guarantor of cosmic order, causes disorder of universe (Phaethon’s chariot)

9) “the wide seas / Shrink and where ocean lay a wilderness / Of dry sand spreads” (*Met.* 2.262-3, effect of Phaethon's charioteering)

10) “[the function of the ecphrasis] is to provide an image of the sun’s benign maintenance of universal order whereby the extent of the disorder caused by Phaethon can be gauged.” (Brown 1987: 215)

C) Disorder

- playful description of sea deities (e.g. Triton, Proteus, Aegaeon: blended, unstable, monstrous) return of chaos/recreation; order and disorder

11) “Aegaeon, his huge arms / Entwined around the backs of giant whales, / Ambiguous Proteus, Triton, with his horn” (*Met.* 2.8-10, images of sea-deities on palace)

12) “by dwelling on them [sea-deities] disproportionately and describing them as he does, [Ovid] has upset the symmetry of the of the ‘original’ design” (Brown 1987: 218)

- Chaos permanent aspect. Flood (1.262-312; earth and sea mixed 1.291); disruption caused by Phaethon (2.150-332)

13) “now land and sea had no distinction” (*Met.* 1.291, due to flood caused by Jupiter)

14) “If land sea, if heaven’s high palaces / Perish, prime chaos will us all confound [*confundimur*]” (*Met.* 2.298-99)

- Other versions of chaos: gigantomachy (*Met.* 1.151-62), presence of a hellish Fury on earth (1.241). Boundaries threatened

- description of palace recalls creation narrative (Book 1)

15) “Here in static visual form the divine artist Vulcan has represented the universe that the reader saw in the process of being created by the demiurge at the beginning of the poet’s own verbal narrative” (Hardie 2002: 177, of the palace of the Sun)

16) [books one and two] “begin with lofty visions of a well-designed, orderly universe; in both the vision dissolves through the effects, respectively, of moral deterioration and folly” (Brown 1987: 216)

17) “Despite the initial creation from chaos to cosmos, the overall tendency of both books is from cosmos to chaos, or at least disorder” (Brown 1987: 216)

18) “[Hades’] king ... shudders lest the ground / In gaping seams should open and the day / Stream down and terrify the trembling shades” (*Met.* 5.356-8; possibility of chaos return)

- physical threat of chaos recedes after book 5: chronological progression? BUT moral chaos: cf. e.g. Tereus narrative (Tarrant 2002) where moral chaos and lack of celestial intervention

19) “All is confused! I’m made a concubine, / My sister’s rival; you’re a husband twice, / And Procne ought to be my enemy” (*Met.* 6.537–38)

20) “She stormed ahead, confusing [*confusura*] right and wrong” (*Met.* 6.585-6)

D) progression

- Blurring of structural demarcations: e.g. book divisions (e.g. 1 and 2 Phaethon; 10 and 11 Orpheus)

21) “He [Phaethon] quickly reached his fathers rising-place” (*Met.* 1.776, end of Book 1)

22) “The palace of the Sun rose high aloft / On soaring columns” (*Met.* 2.1: story of Phaethon runs into next book)

- blurring over transition between 3 parts: suggested by geographical features which form demarcations? Isthmus of Corinth (i.e. thin boundary) at 6.420-1 (transition from gods to men) and Hellespont (narrow boundary) at 11.195 (transition from heroes to history)

23) “His vengeance won, Apollo made his way / From Tmolus through the bright clear air and reached, / On the same side of Helle’s narrow strait, / Laomedon’s domains” (*Met.* 11.194-6)

- forward movement through time complicated by e.g. return to creation

- organizing through time: but cf. Troy (11.199-201; 11.749-58; fall 13.404); foundation of Rome passed by

24) “there he saw Laomedon at work, / Toiling to build the first new battlements / Of Troy, a huge slow formidable task, / Needing no small resources” (*Met.* 11.199-201: rebuilt after Heracles)

25) “And Priam who was destined for defeat / In Troy’s last days” (*Met.* 11.757-8): fall mentioned

26) “The whole of the war’s narrative is analepsis: the fall is over before it is narrated ... The fall of Troy, then, is made entirely valueless as a secure foundation for the time-frame of the poem” (Feeney 1999: 20)

27) “Next wicked Amulius by force of arms / Ruled rich Ausonia, till old Numitor / By a grandson’s bounty gained the throne he’d lost. / And then on Pales’ festal day the walls / Of Rome were founded” (*Met.* 14.772-5, passing reference to foundation of Rome)

28) “The canonical and authoritative time-structures available to Ovid, then are put under extreme pressure in the poem. His scheme is ordered in its own ways” (Feeney 1999: 24)

29) “No sun as yet poured light upon the world, / No waxing moon her crescent filled anew” (*Met.* 1.10-11)> initially no time, no demarcation between day and night

- Complications to idea of narrative progression

i) narrative returning on itself (e.g. return to character/story: laurel reference in Book 2 after story in 1)

ii) linear sequences distorted/hard to pin down e.g. Hercules' life: 9.159–272, death; 9.281–323, birth; Heracles' death/apotheosis 9.229 ff, before references to his sack of Troy; Atlas: carries the heavens on his shoulders (2.296), shown getting heavens at 4. 632ff. > impression of confusion

30) "[Heracles] seized the battlements, / Twice-perjured battlements, and conquered Troy." (*Met.* 11.214-15)

31) "Let him unbest the beast, her shape restore, / as Io's was, his other paramour" (*Met.* 2.523-4, Juno complaining about Callisto's catasterism)

▪ Some progression in plot advancement: e.g. Apollo: first love to grief at son; emphasis from transgression > vengeance > rescue

32) "her heart rejoiced in that / Disaster had fallen on Agenor's house. Her hatred of that Tyrian concubine [Europa] / She turned against her kin" (*Met.* 3.257-59: Juno hating house of Cadmus)

33) "Thus Jupiter's marital infidelity reaches its climax in the rape of Europa, Juno's vengeance in the persecution of Ino, and Jupiter's rescue in the apotheosis of Hercules. Towards the end of the poem, Juno gives up her traditional anger and even displays her beneficence in the deification of Hersilia (14.829-51). Jupiter renounces the pursuit of love and presides over the deification of heroes and historical figures... Below the surface of the poem's seemingly divergent actions lies the master plot of an evolving family drama" (Wheeler 2000: 97)

▪ Hidden order: links/motifs e.g. kin strife/civil war (Theban history: Cadmus exiled, earthborn brothers fight, Pentheus quarrels with family and is killed by mother; Athamas pursues his family); mother earth (books 1 and 2; earthborn men from); hunting (Actaeon, Narcissus, maddened Athamas); chance/bad luck/unwitting crime (Cadmus, Actaeon, Narcissus); sight; doubting humans (e.g. Phaethon, Pentheus)

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