

The Muses' Playground 13

Narratives, narrators and Ovid's
Metamorphoses

Narrating the *Met.*

- ‘Readers of the *Metamorphoses* experience a continuous fluctuation of voices, addressees, levels, and narrative frames.’ (Barchiesi, 2001, 49)
- Ovid has throughout his previous works shown a great interest in using different voices:
 - The *Heroides*
 - The *Amores* and the *Ars*
 - Erotodidactic speakers and the *praeceptor amoris*
 - The thinly disguised use of the external author’s biographical details
- In these texts, the multiplicity of voices has allowed Ovid to investigate from a number of perspectives poetic issues (genre choice; relation to normative society, etc.)
- What does it do in the *Met.*?

Focalisation

- Focalisation, a term coined by Genette in the 1970s, may be defined as a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the story world.
- It corresponds to some degree to 'point of view' or 'perspective' but does not imply the same involvement in the story as these terms do

Narratological basics: focalisers

- Zero focalisation: an all-knowing narrator in control the entire time
 - Narrator > character
- Internal focalisation: narrative seen and presented from the viewpoint of a character part of the story
 - Narrator = character
- External focalisation: the narrator says less than the character knows
 - Narrator < character
- In the *Met.*, we are essentially dealing with 1 and 2

Narrators in the *Metamorphoses*

- The all-knowing narrator ('I') as the highest level
- Double function:
 - Appears frequently with comments particularly on customs and rituals – rooted in religious practice and morals
 - Moral judgements given on characters that deviate from his beliefs; also giving away that he does believe in what he tells (cf. 8.611-615)
 - Only rarely giving away doubts in his own stories (11.346)
 - Fashions himself as scientific historian and a purveyor of didactic epic
 - Uses didactic formulae and focus (cf. 1.5-88)
- Combines two approaches: believer in myth and explicator/rationalising collector of myth

Example: Met. 9.219-229

[...] Along that airy path he hardened, as in icy winds, it's said, raindrop congeal and turn to snow, and snow, soft swirling flakes of snow, combine to form round stones of hail; so Lichas, hurled away, by those gigantic shoulders through the void, blood-drained by fear, all living moisture lost, the old tale tells, was turned to flinty rock. Now from Euboea's waves a short rock-shelf projects with traces still of human shape, 'Lichas' to mariners who, in belief it feels them, fear to tread upon that reef.

- Clash between mythological and scientific explanation
- Reader notices the tension and this has an impact on his/hers interpretations of the stories/explanations offered by the mythic narrator
- => strong encouragement to the reader to reflect on what is 'true' in the *Met.*
- Truths about human behaviour to be extracted from the text
 - Change as part of human nature

Other notable narrators

- Calliope in 5.294-678:
 - Rape of Proserpine, Arethusa, Trioptolemus,
- Orpheus 10.143-739:
 - Ganymede, Hyacinth, Pygmalion, Myrrha, Venus and Adonis, Atalanta,
- Pythagoras 15.75-478; 871-879
 - ‘Pythagorean doctrine’/history + epilogue

What it does

- Presence of new narrators underlines the division of the *Met.* in a five-book structure
 - Cf. last lecture relating to content
- New narrator: new chance to set out poetic aims
 - Cf. Vergil's apostrophe to the muses over the last half of the *Aeneid*; needed at new starting points of the text
- Plays to the rules of the epic genre: demands a narrator voice sparingly used...

Orpheus

- Introduced in a fashion reminding the reader of the author narrator himself:
 - Love story where song does ultimately *not* grant him the return of his beloved
 - Choice of sound corresponding to the narrator's choice of metre / register
 - ...but we are also alerted to the difference, and asked to listen out for it!
 - Harmony promised: the differences will mean something
- Clearly fashions himself – through his speech – as a poet: how is he different or the same as our author narrator?

*Such was the grove the bard assembled. There he sat amid a company of beasts, a flock of birds, and **when he'd tried his strings, and as he tuned**, was satisfied the notes, though **different**, agreed in harmony, he sang this song: 'From Jove, great Mother Muse, inspire my song...'*

Orpheus and Ganymede

*'From Jove, great Mother Muse,
inspire my song: to Jove all creatures
bow; Jove's might I've often hymned
in days gone by. I sang the giants in a
graver theme and bolts victorious in
Phlegra's plains. But now I need a
lighter strain, to sing of boys beloved
of gods and girls bewitched by
lawless fires who paid the price of
lust. The King of Heaven once was
fired with love of Ganymede [...]'*

- Fashioned as a poet – using formulae appropriate for a proem?
- ...but in fact we see that Jove is the first topic: a literary device taken literally
 - Typically Ovidian?
 - Cf. the stealing of the metric foot in *Am.* 1.1?
- Impact on the usual representation of Jupiter as all-powerful?
 - The stand-in narrator useful to imbue the text with humour while retaining the elevated tone for the author narrator and later use?

Contrasts: Orpheus as *vates*

*While men still lived in the woods, Orpheus,
the gods'
Sacred medium, prevented bloodshed and vile
customs,
Hence it's said that he tamed tigers and raging
lions.
It's said too that Amphion, who built Thebes'
citadel,
Moved stones at the sound of his lyre, and set
them
Where he wished with its charmed entreaty.
Once it was
Wisdom to separate public and private, sacred
And profane, to bar chance union, set
marriage rights,
Build towns, and inscribe the laws on pieces of
wood.
So divine bards and their poems achieved
honour
And fame. (Hor. Ars 391-398)*

- Prestige of poetry + lawful and civil love
- The *Met.* reverses this:
 - Orpheus is the teller of frivolous love stories with boys
 - ...and bestial and incestuous love stories
- Engagement with Augustan poetics – or politics?

Orpheus and Myrrha again

- [...] Terrible my tale will be! Away, daughters! Away, parents! Away! Or if my singing charms hold you, hold this tale in disbelief; suppose the deed not done; or, with belief, believe the punishment.
- Is this an intrusion of the author narrator?
- Does Ovid need to cover himself against recriminations of too licentious material?
 - Cf. similar approach in the *Ars* – but clearly intended as enticement!

Orpheus' narratives

- [Orpheus and Eurydice, Cyparissus] Ganymede, Hyacinth, Pygmalion, Myrrha, Venus and Adonis, Atalanta
- Opening the five books on humans:
- Many of his stories staged at the point of a transition
 - Cf. the transition element in Eurydice's story too
 - Background in Orpheus' double allegiance to Apollo and Dionysus
- The example of Myrrha: wavering permeates the story
- Possible question: would the narrative waver in the same way if told by the author narrator?
 - Links to earlier works
 - Ov. Am. 1.5.1f: *aestus erat*

Midnight had come and sleep relaxed the limbs and cares of men, but Myrrha lay awake, a prey to ungoverned passion, and resumed her frenzied longings, sometimes in despair, sometimes resolved to try, at once ashamed and yearning, vainly groping for some plan. And as a huge tree, wounded by an axe, only the last stroke left, will wait in doubt which way to fall and every side's in fear, so Myrrha's mind, weakened by wound on wound, wavered uncertainly this way and that, nodding on either side and found no end, no respite for her love except in death. Death it shall be!

Orpheus and Myrrha: Ironies

- [...] Terrible my tale will be! Away, daughters! Away, parents! Away! Or if **my singing charms hold you**, hold this tale in disbelief; suppose the deed not done; or, with belief, believe the punishment. If nature does allow such crimes at least how happy are our countrymen, this land of Thrace, this world of ours, to be so far from realms that rear such sin.
- Clearly spoken by Orpheus
- A *vates* should avoid impure persons: here he is heading straight for them
- What elements are most plausible here?
- Location?
 - Overlap between Thrace and implicitly, by allusion, Roman countryside
 - Can we believe in the morally upright Thrace?
 - Location undermines Orpheus' rejection of the tale he tells
- Audience: animals
 - Cf. Myrrha's own arguments and Horace on Orpheus making men depart from '*more ferarum*'

Or engaging with the issue?

- ‘Orpheus’ song in *Met.* 10 is not just interested [...] in desire as a problem, in the outcome of desire as a destructive force, but also in revisiting again and again the intimate interval and moment of interaction in which desire is created and exists – which is also the gate of wonder and of (self-)transformation.’ (Rimell, 2006, 109)

Narratives in the *Met.*

- ‘We cannot gain an overview of the story as a whole, and even when we turn to the individual tales, beginning as they do in mid-sentence and mid-hexameter, straddling book division, and framing each other, they resist separation and reordering.’ (Barchiesi, 2002, 187)
- The aim of a *perpetuum carmen*, continuous song: no single story is the point, no single narrator the puppet master?
- The challenge of the text: is it possible (or desirable) to pull unity out of diversity?