

Ovid Metamorphoses - Book III, The Death Of Pentheus

A Commentary

710	<i>hic oculis illum cernentem sacra profanis prima videt, prima est insano concita cursu, prima suum misso violavit Penthea thyrsos mater et 'o geminae' clamavit 'adeste sorores. ille aper, in nostris errat qui maximus agris,</i>	At this, while with uninitiated eyes watching the holy rites, she sees him first, she's first to be roused up into a mad charge, the first to wound her own Pentheus by hurling her thyrsus, his mother screamed, 'O sisters! Help! Sisters! That huge boar, wandering around our field,
715	<i>ille mihi feriendus aper.' ruit omnis in unum turba furens; cunctae coeunt trepidumque sequuntur, iam trepidum, iam verba minus violenta loquentem, iam se damnantem, iam se peccasse fatentem. saucius ille tamen 'fer opem, matertera' dixit</i>	that's mine to kill, that boar.' They rush, all in one furious crowd; they all come together and follow the fearful one, now fearful, now speaking less violent words, now condemning himself, now confessing his wrong-doings. Wounded, yet 'bring help, my aunt', he said,
720	<i>'Autonoe! moveant animos Actaeonis umbrae.' illa quis Actaeon nescit dextramque precantis abstulit, Inoo lacerata est altera raptu. non habet infelix quae matri bracchia tendat, trunca sed ostendens deiectis vulnera membris</i>	'Autonoe! Stir your feelings of Actaeon's shadows.' Who Actaeon is, she does not know, and his praying right hand wrenched away, the other was torn to pieces by Inoo's seizing. The unfortunate doesn't have arms to extend to his mother, but showing his mutilated wounds, with his limbs cast down,
725	<i>'aspice, mater!' ait.</i>	'look, mother!' he affirms.

Introduction

The goal of this commentary is to guide a Latin beginner with a basic grasp of the language, but inexperienced with verse, through this passage of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, introducing the key features of Latin verse that are present. For this reason, to aid comprehension of the grammar and vocabulary, the translation I have provided aims to be as literal as possible. A major drawback of this approach is that many of the metrical features of Ovid's verse are lost. To a certain extent, this cannot be helped, no matter the approach of the translator. English, as a stress-timed language rather than an inflecting one, doesn't 'fit' well into hexameter verse.

To remedy this, I shall also explore the poetical and metrical features the poet uses, to give a greater sense of how the *Metamorphoses* would have been received by a Latin audience. For this purpose, all a beginner needs to know is that hexameter metre includes ‘feet’ of heavy spondees (– –) and rapid dactyls (– ∪ ∪). These refer to different syllable lengths, and their uses will be explained. Each line also contains a caesura, a break which can be placed in different feet for different effects. Without trying to understand how the poem sounds when read aloud, many of the features Ovid uses may seem strange to a beginner. The repeated use of rhetorical devices described below, for example, were effective because the poetry was written to be read aloud, and ideas take longer to be communicated through the ear than the eye.¹

Passage Background

Pentheus was king of Thebes, who was displeased by the spread of a new religion in his city, the cult of Dionysus, who was known to the Romans as Bacchus. Followers of this religion, including his own mother and aunts, are engaged in a *Bacchanalia*, a frenzied religious ceremony, in the mountains above the city. It’s difficult to say more than this with any accuracy, because most of what we know about this religion and myth comes to us from Euripides’ *Bacchantes*, which Ovid is retelling, though we cannot be sure exactly which sources he used himself, as many have not survived.²

Key differences exist between Ovid and Euripides’ version of the myth. However, to explore them fully would involve going beyond the scope of this passage, and so have not been noted. Similarly, although issues with the manuscript tradition exist,³ they do not impact this passage, other than a handful of words. As none of these impact the reading for a beginner, they also have been left out from this commentary.

¹ A. G. Lee, *Ovid: Metamorphoses I* (Great Britain: Bristol Classical Press, 1953), pp. 25-26.

² *Ibid.* pp. 15-19.

³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume I: Books 1-8*, trans. by Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library 42, 3rd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. viii.

Immediately before this scene, Pentheus, deciding to take matters in to his own hands, has gone to put a stop to the rites. Having concealed himself to approach the worshipers, he is suddenly spotted by someone.

Lines 710 - 713

These opening lines contain many of the poetic devices that Ovid will use repeatedly throughout this passage. As we wait to find out who has seen Pentheus and attacked him, the pace is carried on in an asyndetic sequence, meaning there are no conjunctions to break up the clauses. This adds rhetorical power to the list of actions.⁴ They fall on us, with no pause, in a tricolon crescendo of three successive clauses, the last one being the most potent, as Pentheus is wounded by the hurled *thyrsus*, an ivy-twinned staff tipped with a pine-cone associated with Bacchus.⁵ Enhancing this further is the triple anaphora of *prima... prima... prim*, building this tension even further. Anaphora is another rhetorical device which adds power, by repeating key words,⁶ and two or all of these devices are often combined together.⁷ Anaphora is seen later again with *ille* and *iam*, reminding us of a religious hymn, and, given the themes and the action taking place in this passage, must have been a deliberate stylistic choice.⁸

Finally, after this dramatic build up, the attacker is revealed to us on line 723 as Pentheus' own mother Agave, by the word *mater*. Gildenhard and Zisson have described this revelation and culmination of suspense as, 'surely one of the most devastating enjambments in Latin epic'.⁹ Enjambment is when a line runs over to the start of the next line, and thus gives the greatest

⁴ Mathew Owen, *Ovid Unseens: Practice Passages for Latin Verse Translation and Comprehension* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), p. 31.

⁵ Robert Grave, *The Greek Myths, Volume One* (Great Britain: Penguin, 1955), p. 104.

⁶ Owen, *Ovid Unseens*, p. 30.

⁷ Ibid. p. 35.

⁸ Ingo Gildenhard and Andrew Zissos, *Ovid, Metamorphoses, 3.511-733; Latin Text With Introduction, Commentary, Glossary of Terms, Vocabulary Aid And Study Questions* (Open Book Publishers, 2016), p. 213.

⁹ Ibid. p. 213.

weight to the word.¹⁰ An audience listening to this, would have been held in suspense all this time, waiting for this revelation. Even those familiar with the story, perhaps still unsure what would come next thanks to the combination of these rhetorical poetic devices, would have felt this tension and the shocking release.

The entire passage is full of irony, and we can see this in the word order choices. The first line is organised into an A B B A pattern (*occulis... cernentem sacra profanis*), called a chiasmus, which can be used for many different effects.¹¹ In this line it allows *sacra* and *profanis* to be placed next to each other, a clear oxymoron in itself,¹² grabbing the listeners attention by its stark contrast. In this line the theme of 'seeing' is introduced, and will continue throughout the passage. The irony of who is watching who,¹³ is shown by Agave. She sees Pentheus watching them, something his 'uninitiated eyes' should not be seeing. Yet, she does not really see him, as we find out.

Lines 713 - 716

Agave calls her sisters with a vocative *o*, making her high state of emotion clear.¹⁴ Under the influence of the Bacchanal ritual she sees her son as a wild boar, and her deranged state is emphasised by the word order, with the superlative adjective *maximus* placed in the relative clause.¹⁵ Its position after the 4th foot caesura, combined with the steady spondees of her speech, increases the drama, emphasising her insanity further. It's as though she pauses, to muse aloud on the size of her large, soon-to-be kill, which as Godwin notes, is an especially large boar, being the size of a man.¹⁶ The anaphora of *ille... ille* frames her speech, along with the repetition

¹⁰ John Godwin, *Ovid Metamorphoses III, An Extract: 511-733* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 76.

¹¹ Owen, *Ovid Unseens*, p. 36.

¹² Godwin, *Ovid Metamorphoses III, An Extract: 511-733*, p. 76.

¹³ Ibid. p. 76.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 77.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 77.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 77.

of *aper*, a poetical device called epanalepsis. This is a rare device in Ovid's work,¹⁷ and here adds emotion and emphasis to the 'boar' Agave believes she can see.

The overall effect is to emphasise the explosion of action on the next line. We switch to the historic present tense, in rapid dactyls, and enjambment is used to its full effect again, with *turba furens* spilling over onto line 716. All of these devices create an image of the frenzied women falling over each other in sudden action, with *furens* adding the sense that they are hallucinating.¹⁸ *omnis in unum* is an example of number antithesis, a favourite technique of Ovid.¹⁹ Here it contrasts the many women, all acting as one crazed crowd, against the single king, who is all alone.

Lines 716 - 718

Facing this onslaught, Pentheus' realisation of his folly dawns on him through the anaphora of *iam... iam... iam... iam*, arranged in two symmetrical couplets, with each one divided by a caesura. *loquentem... damnantem... fatentem*, three similar 'speaking' words, with their rhyming accusative endings, combining with a slowing metre of heavy spondees, to show us his humiliation and mental disintegration.²⁰ For a king, who in earlier passages was willing to condemn men to torture at his whim, this would have been a truly humiliating experience.

Lines 719 - 722

Pentheus' appeal to his aunt Autonoe first may seem strange, but makes sense in the wider context of the *Metamorphoses*, and his family's history. She is the mother of Actaeon, whose story we hear earlier in Book III, torn apart by his own hunting dogs for accidentally gazing upon the goddess Diana while she bathed. Not only the poet, but Pentheus himself, is all too aware of the parallel.²¹

¹⁷ Owen, *Ovid Unseens*, p. 37.

¹⁸ Godwin, *Ovid Metamorphoses III, An Extract: 511-733*, pp. 77 - 78.

¹⁹ A. A. R. Henderson, *Ovid: Metamorphoses III* (Great Britain: Bristol Classical Press, 1979), p. 114.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 115.

²¹ Ibid. p. 115.

His direct command in the subjunctive present, pleading with his aunt to remember the shadows ('memories') of Actaeon, are futile. She cannot remember her own son, nor recognise her own nephew, any more than Agave can recognise her own son. In the following line, *sit* is omitted from the indirect question, a common habit of Ovid, especially for the verb 'to be'.²² The complete phrase would more commonly read *illa nescit quis Actaeon [sit]*, 'she knew not who Actaeon was'. For A. A. R. Henderson, 'All the blind madness of the Bacchanal is encapsulated in these four words'.²³

Suddenly, things turn more violent. The Bacchanal rites were thought to involve 'sparagmos', the ritual tearing apart of live animal sacrifices, while initiates were in a state of *ecstasis*. Once again, thanks to the enjambment of *abstulit*, we feel the shock of what happens next,²⁴ as Autonoe wrenches off his right arm. Inous, another aunt of Pentheus, removes his left. *lacero* is a powerful verb,²⁵ and leaves little doubt of the scene's violence.

Lines 722 - 725

The final lines give us a pitiful scene. The pace slows down, the conjunction *sed* has been moved from its normal position for metrical reasons,²⁶ allowing more heavy spondaic feet to be used for maximum effect. The *infelix*, an understated description, seems to be in shock. The realisation is still dawning on him, with the A B A B pattern in line 723 (*non habet... matri bracchia tendat*) giving the impression he is still connecting the dots, even while his limbs lie on the ground, presented in the ablative absolute *deiectis... membris*.

His final words remind us of the themes that the passage started with, as he shows his mother his stumps and can only say 'look, mother!'

²² Owen, *Ovid Unseen*, pp. 19-20.

²³ Henderson, *Ovid: Metamorphoses III*, p. 115.

²⁴ Godwin, *Ovid Metamorphoses III, An Extract: 511-733*, p. 79.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 79.

²⁶ Henderson, *Ovid: Metamorphoses III*, p. 115.

Word Count: 1,580

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