

Old Myths Through New Eyes: A Feminist Re-Appropriation of Ovid's Metamorphoses



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The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/bc386k55n or scan the QR code.

Abstract

Even though the common reader may not be familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, over centuries of circulation, this epic poem has woven itself into the very fabric of our present-day culture. In my thesis, I will analyze three of its most popular myths, searching for new feminist meanings in these ancient, male-dominated texts. In my introduction, "The Metamorphosis of the *Metamorphoses*: A Brief History," I examine the epic's history of translation and explore the ethos of retelling and reinterpreting stories about rape and female subordination. In my first chapter, "From Beheld to Beheaded: Medusa and the Male Gaze," I show how Medusa's gaze symbolizes the belief that to truly see and appreciate the woman would result in a man's loss of identity. In Chapter II, "Modern Arachne and Ancient Webs of Female Misogyny," I explain how Arachne's myth exposes the patriarchy's reliance on rivalry between women to maintain male dominance. Lastly, in "Pygmalion's Womb Envy: The Male Suppression and Appropriation of the Female Procreative Life Force," I prove that Pygmalion sculpts his perfect woman not only to use her as an object of sexual gratification but also as one of reproduction. Drawing inspiration from feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Bordo, and Karen Horney—and depending exclusively on Stephanie McCarter's translations—I analyze how the patriarchy uses stories to inculcate and perpetuate its ideology.

A Brief History of Ovidian Translation and Interpretation

To change the normative gaze—the standard way we look at the world and thus act upon it—we must change the way we see; conversely, in order to change the way we tell Ovid's myths, we must change the way we read them. In *Arguments with Silence*, Amy Richlin argues that most feminist critics choose one of three paths when approaching male-centric texts: "throw them out, take them apart, [or] find female-based ones instead." She poses another option: she suggests we re-appropriate them by "taking myths and looking at them in a different way" (137). Elissa Marder also evaluates the ways a feminist might interact with Ovid's texts, arguing that a progressive analysis "must go beyond reading for the plot of male oppression and female victimization." Rather than dictating "specific political action," she claims, a feminist reading should "[open] up the fabric of a literary text" to "examine the discursive structure of patriarchy" and "formulate an effective language of response" (156). To tell these stories newly, in a way that reflects our own era's readership, we must revise them, or, rather, see them through new eyes. The word "revise" literally means to see (vis) again (re); only through this re-vision can we begin to develop an "effective language of response."

In 11,995 lines and fifteen books, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* recounts a history of humanity from the dawn of time to the death of Julius Caesar (only one year before Ovid's birth) through a catalog of myths and transformations. These stories are translations of popular myths of his time, with inspiration drawn heavily from Homer and Hesiod. While Ovid wrote the poem in 8 A.D., no original manuscript of the epic survived antiquity. Several fragments appeared in the ninth and tenth centuries, with the first full transcripts hailing from the eleventh century (Anderson 31-32). The oldest fragments are of French origin; "from France the text went to Germany, and ultimately to Italy" (Bruère 100-1). The abundance of translations accessible to us now hail from seventeenth-century scholar Nicolaus Heinsius: "In the course of diplomatic missions in various parts of Europe during the years 1640-52, [he] collated more than a hundred manuscripts of the *Metamorphoses*" (Tarrant 343). Translation is no easy feat, especially that of a so-called "dead language." The tremendous difficulty of the task requires a multitude of varied perspectives and oppositional dialogues. But for the past several hundreds of years, translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have suffered from the narrow converse among men alone.... Stephanie McCarter's 2022 translation, which I will use through the entirety of my thesis, is the first version in over sixty years to be translated into English by a woman.

[...]

In her own evaluation of how we should continue to tell Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, McCarter states that the epic is a "product of a patriarchal culture whose sexual politics we would do well not to emulate," and that if we "do not rethink these texts through the lens of the present, they will cease to have any meaning for the present." Furthermore, she argues that Ovid's emphasis on rape suggests that he felt "such violence was worthy of critical interrogation." She, too, agrees with Corran that, "not to focus our reading on the theme of sexual violence, or to quickly explain it away," misses the point, as well as "the opportunity to trace the legacies of such abusive power in our own world so as to understand and combat them" (McCarter xxix). One of my central goals in writing this thesis is, in fact, to take "the opportunity" to identify and protest "legacies of abusive power." I agree with McCarter that the *Metamorphoses* are a product of a patriarchal culture and that we must confront and engage with the sexual violence within its verses; I agree even more strongly that these stories will quickly lose meaning in modernity if not reappropriated through a feminist lens.

Therefore, in this thesis, I will examine three of Ovid's most ubiquitous tales to determine their modern relevance and how one can preserve their value while actively opposing the destructive hegemony from which they originate.

[...]

Works Cited

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