The Rejection of Authoritarian Order in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as Related to Plautus

Alex Stevenson - 30073617
Trinity Davis - 30081558

There are many hints and themes of anarchism in the poetry of Plautus that regard natural chaos and oppressive order, and these same characteristics are present in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Anarchism can be defined in this context as being against hierarchical order in society where the top of the hierarchy rules with force and cruelty over their subjects. This is consistent with the inherent power disparity in Roman government and structured authority. The writings of Plautus are quite chaotic when order is not involved with a natural flow between events; this is clear in both the *Mostellaria* and *the Brothers Menaechmi*. When order becomes involved, it is typically administered by force and the threat of violence in a negative way. There are similar aspects in the *Metamorphoses*. In *Metamorphoses 1*, the actions of Zeus as the absolute ruler are cruel and unjustified. There are two major sections of *Metamorphoses 3* that relate to this theme of anarchism. The first is the founding of Thebes due to the abuse of power by the king of Phoenicia. Another major section is at the end of the book with the triumph of freedom and anarchy, represented by Bacchus and the Maenads, over an unjust and violent king. *Metamorphoses 10-11* contains elements of anarchism as Orpheus rejects the imposed structure and order of the underworld, leading to catastrophe and his own demise. Finally *Metamorphoses 15* contains stories of Myscelus and a speech of Pythagoras that highlights freedom from an autocratic society and inherent natural freedom.

In *Metamorphoses 1*, Lycaon can be considered a problematic character on his own, however the actions of Zeus are cruel and unjustified. A demonstration that the king of the gods and the greatest of authorities rules by force and power. This is the first of the books contained within the *Metamorphoses*, with many characteristics of anarchism that are present in Plautus' plays. Zeus arrives in Arcadia and openly demonstrates his divine nature as a way to prove that he has absolute power and control of the land and its inhabitants. Lycaon rejects his claim, requiring further proof before he decides to accept Zeus as his master. Due to this distrust and trickery, along with the methods used, the god punishes Lycaon by destroying his home and transforms him into a wolf. This metamorphoses is an arbitrary punishment, the change to his physical form is an evocation of helplessness and the abrupt tearing away of everything that makes his life worthwhile (Segal, Charles pg 36).The cruelty of Zeus is continued as he floods the world, determined to drown humanity beneath the waves (*Metamorphoses*, Book 1 ln 244-273) punishing the people of the Iron Age and causing mass death for all except Deucalion and Pyrrha, his devout worshippers. He allows the remaining humans to repopulate the Earth by the metamorphoses of turning stones to humans, more worshippers for the god. The flood and subsequent genocide of humanity demonstrates that Zeus only rules through force, power, and brutality, accepting none who would not honor him. The ideas of this story in the *Metamorphoses* are similar to the general plot of the *Mostellaria* by Plautus, in a less significant way. Comparisons can be drawn between the start of the *Mostellaria* and the story of Lycaon, where Philolaches, Callidamates, and Tranio must deceive the authority of the household in Theopropides. As punishment for the deception and rejection of his

authority, Theopropides resolves to arrest and torture Tranio, the slave and lower class human, over his son who originally caused the problem. Jokes and comments of torture and death of the slave are used here, and are often used in Plautus' works, as a reminder of the absolute power of life and death held over these slaves (Parker, Holt pg 238). As with Zeus' flood, the authority figure in Plautus' play plans on punishing one who is not the source of the issue and who can not fully defend themselves due to the power disparity.

Another part of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that includes anarchic elements similar to Plautus is in *Metamorphoses 3*, with the founding of Thebes. Despite this part of the book being about the creation of a new city that upholds social structure and the birth of a new line of nobility, there are several parts of the story that point to problems and power disparities in hierarchical order. The first of these happen at the very start, where Cadmus is ordered to find his sister Europa by his father, the king of Phoenicia, where exile is his punishment if he fails to find her (*Metamorphoses*, Book 3 ln 1-49). Given no choice in the matter due to the power wielded by the king, Cadmus tries and fails to return Europa. He prays to Apollo, who sends a pristine heifer to lead him to a place where he will establish a city. This can be seen as a dichotomy between the nature and purity of the holy heifer compared to the fabricated social structure and power disparity of Phoenicia. A second similarity in this story to anarchism can be drawn after the slaying of the serpent at the future site of Thebes. Cadmus is about to make a sacrifice to Jupiter, resulting in the death of his men as they search for vital components of the sacrifice. Their death is avenged by Cadmus, killing the serpent and reinstating the proper sacrificial order (Nikolopoulos, Anastasios D. pg 76). The creation of the spartoi

from the teeth of the serpent is a myth designed to explain the origin of Theban nobility as the first citizens of Thebes, instead of Cadmus' deceased traveling companions (Gildenhard, Ingo, and Andrew Zissos, "Ovid's Theban Narrative" pg 33-34). The first act of the spartoi was to kill each other, leaving only five when the others were felled by mutual wounds (*Metamorphoses*, Book 3 ln 115-137).This can draw another similarity of the brutality and force required to create a hierarchical order for humans and governance.

In the *Metamorphoses,* Ovid uses the gods as different representations of social structure that can be contrasted between authoritarian order and chaos. In the Lycaon story, Zeus is used to represent authoritarian order who must be unquestioningly worshipped on pain of death. Cadmus' interactions with Apollo when founding Thebes represents nature and natural purity, with the pristine heifer as a guide. In *Metamorphoses 3,* Bacchus is used to represent the triumph of chaos and anarchy over ruling by force. This idea is present in both the festival of Bacchus as the depiction of freedom and the Maenads being the ultimate anarchists (Jacqueline A. Pollard). This is most defined in the story of Pentheus, the king of Thebes, who rejects the arrival of Bacchus claiming that madness has stupefied the minds of the Thebans (*Metamorphoses, Book 3* ln 528-571). In doing so he orders his men to seize Acoetes, the priest of the god, by force, arresting him with instructions to torture and kill him. This reinforces the anarchic elements of the *Metamorphoses* as the king abuses his power to impose order on his own people by force. There are additional motives behind Pentheus' actions, as the revelry and freedom associated with Bacchus are able to overtake the population of a city made up of children of the serpent of Mars

(*Metamorphoses, Book 3* ln 528-571), the serpent that Cadmus slew to form the Spartoi (Gildenhard, Ingo and Andrew Zis, "Pentheus and Bacchus" pg 49). Before Acoetes is to be tortured and killed, the powers of Bacchus cause him to be freed. Revelry and chaos granting freedom from an oppressive king and safety from the inevitable death with him. Pentheus ultimately ends up dying at the hands of the anarchic Maenads at the celebration of Bacchus as he is torn apart, ripped limb from limb as a victory sacrifice to the god. This represents a triumph of freedom and anarchy over the oppressive and cruel order imposed by the king of Thebes.

In *Metamorphoses 10*, Ovid uses chaotic anarchism when Orpheus is given a choice after descending to Hades, using his lyre to get in without dying, and begging Pluto and Persephone to allow him to bring Eurydice back. The rejection of the imposed structured order inevitably leads to chaos and destruction. This is true when Orpheus chose to bring back Eurydice rather than to die and join her there. In order to retrieve Eurydice, Orpheus was given one condition, as he was not to look back at her until they have reached the world of the living. This rule imposed on Orpheus ultimately led to the catastrophic ending he faces. As he approached the end, he became worried and looked back at her in defiance of the rules set for him. Due to this she disappears in a metaphorical second death due to authoritative rules set by the King of the Underworld. This starts the chaotic anarchy, leading to the chaos and destruction of the rest of Orpheus' life. Due to the rules imposed on Orpheus, he loses his wife for a second time and begins to reject social structure and the order of society. This led to three years of rejecting all women who were passionate towards him, instead finding solace on his own. Playing his lyre in an empty field to assuage the violence of his grief, where

according to Ovid, to be revenged for his contempt of them and their rites, tore him in pieces (Henry T. Riley, B.A pg 345). In Book 11, the rejection of societal structures leads Orpheus to play his love songs but scorn all women who approach him and instead he seeks sexual relations only with younger men. With his hatred of women due to the heartbreak of losing Eurydice to the Underworld, the Maenads approach him and take advantage of the opportunity to punish him for his indifference towards their sex; and, in the fury inspired by their rites, they beat him to death (Henry T. Riley, B.A pg 379). His head and lyre float out to sea, eventually ending up in Lesbos with his head still singing. Orpheus is relieved to be reunited with Eurydice in the underworld and Bacchus turns the Maenads into trees. The transformation of the Maenads into trees is intended to show that these women did not escape punishment for their misdeeds; and that they were driven by society to spend the rest of their lives in woods and caverns (Henry T. Riley, B.A pg 383).

Metamorphoses 15 highlights the anarchic freedom from laws and autocratic society and the freedom of nature and transformation. The first of these is represented in the story of Myscelus and the founding of the city Crotona. The god Hercules appears in the dream of a Myscelus and instructs him to leave his homeland of Argos and head for a distant land to construct the city. However, the laws of Argos forbid citizens to leave, thus leaving Myscelus to debate if he is to forsake the laws and become an individual anarchist. Hercules then reappeared in his dreams threatening terrible things if he disobeyed and Myscelus prepared to depart knowing it was against the external determinants of society and his government's laws and he could face death. When his fellow citizens found out they voted to convict him of treason for showing contempt for

the law (*Metamorphoses*, Book 15 ln 1-59), however the verdict magically changed in his favour. Myscelus was therefore free to set sail for new lands where he was able to settle the new city of Crotona, away from the punishments of Argos. The next part of *Metamorphoses 15* regards Pythagoras. He is living in exile in Crotona, where he shares his contemplations of the gods, the universe, and nature, formulating a philosophy that he shares freely with whomever will listen. One of Pythagoras' main points of this philosophy is that human beings should not eat meat as he believes it goes against the freedom of nature and the gods. This is a form of humankind imposing their rules and laws on natural beasts and he entreats listeners to let their mouths be free of blood and enjoy milder food (*Metamorphoses,* Book 15 ln 453-478). In this book, Pythagoras gives a lengthy speech that highlights the freedom of nature in his belief of transformation after death. Inherent natural freedom granted to all that is unbound by authoritarian order and rules (Little, Douglas, pg 354), impossible to control or impose order upon. Pythagoras sees this transformation as the basis of all existence, where nothing truly dies but instead merely changes form. Therefore, these natural freedoms expressed cannot be placed or controlled under an authority and are inherent to all living things.

To conclude, there are many points in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that contain anarchic characteristics and aspects similar to the works of Plautus. The stories of Myscelus and the speech of Pythagoras in book 15 underlines freedom from an autocratic society and inherent natural freedom. The tragedy of Orpheus in books 10 and 11 takes shape as he rejects the imposed structure and order of the underworld, leading to catastrophe under enforced and arbitrary rulings. *Metamorphoses 3* regards

the triumph of freedom and anarchy over an authoritarian and unjust king in a city founded due to the abuse of power and the mix of brutality and death. The first book of the *Metamorphoses* considers the creation of the world and the humans of the iron age, brought to near extinction through the mass murder of Zeus, the king of the gods. Therefore, many of the hints and themes of anarchism in the poetry of Plautus regarding natural chaos and oppressive order are present across many books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*

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