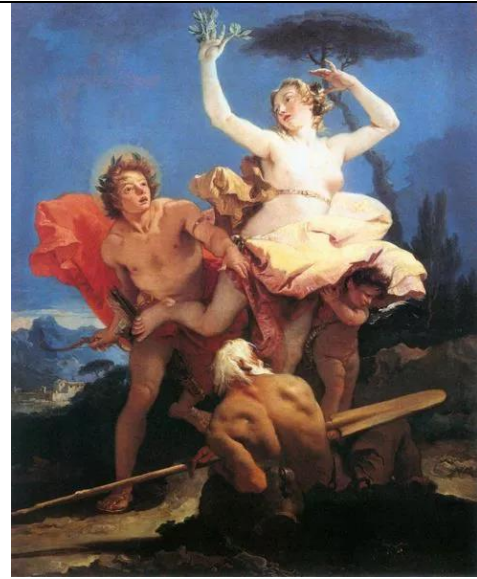


## OID ON CHANGE

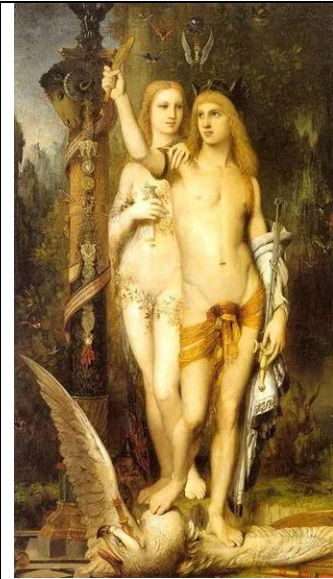
Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD ([Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu](mailto:Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu))



Apollo Chasing Daphne, by Gianbattista Tiepolo.



Europa and Jupiter, by Noël-Nicolas Coypel.



Jason and Medea, by Gustave Moreau

**Ovid** (43 BCE to 17 CE) is, along with Virgil, the most famous and influential poet of the entire Roman period. In terms of direct influence on future *writers* and *artists*, he is perhaps one of the most influential writers ever. This is in large part because of his book *Metamorphoses*, which future writers in the Western tradition would rely on (almost exclusively!) for information on Roman and Greek myths (and really, for an example of a non-Christian worldview). His shorter poems—which were self-deprecating, funny, and often sex-obsessed—would help set the standard for later lyric poetry and for modern “comedy.” Ovid was one of the biggest influences on both Shakespeare and Chaucer and, through them, on basically all subsequent English language literature and film. Ovid has, at least indirectly, shaped much of the “art” that people enjoy in their day-to-day lives, from superhero films to raunchy comedies to the lyrics of pop songs.

In comparison to earlier writers, we know a fair amount about Ovid’s life and work:

1. He lived during an exciting time in Roman history, and knew many of the movers and shakers. Julius Caesar was assassinated the year before he was born, Octavian defeated Cleopatra and Anthony when he was still young, and Augustus (with whom he got in trouble) died just a few years before Ovid did.
2. Two of his major interests were love/sex (the more inappropriate, the better) and Greek/Roman mythology. He also loves to mix these themes. His work ranges from the humorous/bawdy to the tragic. Some of his more famous works include *Amores* (a “confession” of a poet recounting his love affair), *Ars Amatoria* (a half-sarcastic “instruction manual” for love and sex), and *Heroides* (a bunch of letters written by mythological women, such as Medea or Dido, to their generally terrible lovers and husbands). His most famous work is *Metamorphoses* (or “Changes”), which tells \*his\* version of “transformation stories” from Greek and Roman mythology.
3. His writing about sex in particular seems to have got him in trouble with the Emperor Augustus (who wanted to promote marital fidelity, and the raising of children; Ovid seemed to celebrate infidelity, and regularly wrote about sex in a decidedly non-procreative way), and he got exiled. His works have been banned MANY TIMES over the last 2,000 years, including **Cristopher’s Marlowe’s** famous translation into English (in 1599) and in the United States during the twentieth century.

In this lesson, we’ll be taking a brief look at one of Ovid’s “love” poems (of the sort that might have led to his exile), before considering some stories of the *Metamorphoses* in more detail.

### “EITHER SHE WAS FOUL, OR HER ATTIRE WAS BAD” (TRANS. CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE)

Here, is a selection of a longer Ovid poem about impotence, which he uses for both comic effect, and to reflect on the (unwelcome) changes that come with old age. This sort of poem that would prove influential both on the development of modern comedy (the translator, Christopher Marlowe, was an important early English playwright) and poetry. It also illustrates some of themes and ideas that have led to his work being banned over the years.

Either she was foul, or her attire was bad,  
 Or she was not the wench I wished t'have had.  
 Idly I lay with her, as if I loved not,  
 And like a burden grieved the bed that moved not.  
 Yet though both of us performed our true intent,  
 Yet I could not cast anchor where I meant.  
 She on my neck her ivory arms did throw,  
 Her arms far whiter than the Scythian snow.  
 And eagerly she kissed me with her tongue,  
 And under mine her wanton thigh she flung.  
 Yea, and she soothed me up and called me sir,  
 And used all speech that might provoke and stir.  
 Yet, like as if cold hemlock I had drunk,  
 It mockèd me, hung down the head, and sunk.  
 ...

Worthy she was to move both gods and men,  
 But neither was I man, nor lived then.  
 Can deaf ear take delight when Phaemius sings?  
 Or Thamiras in curious painted things?  
 What sweet thought is there but I had the same?

And one gave place still as another came.  
 Yet, notwithstanding, like one dead it lay,  
 Drooping more than a rose pulled yesterday.  
 Now, when he should not jet, he bolts upright  
 And craves his task, and seeks to be at fight.  
 Lie down with shame, and see thou stir no more,  
 Seeing thou wouldst deceive me as before.  
 Thou cozenest me, by thee surprised am I,  
 And bide sore loss with endless infamy.  
 Nay more, the wench did not disdain a whit  
 To take it in her hand and play with it.  
 But when she saw it would by no means stand,  
 But still drooped down, regarding not her hand,  
 'Why mockst thou me?' she cried. 'Or, being ill,  
 Who bade thee lie down here against thy will?  
 Either thou art witch, with blood of frogs new dead,  
 Or jaded camest thou from some other bed.'  
 With that, her loose gown on, from me she cast her –  
 In skipping out her naked feet much graced her.  
 And, lest her maid should know of this disgrace,  
 To cover it, spilt water on the place.

## METAMORPHOSES: SELECTED STORIES

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* recounts a number of Greek and Roman myths, which are unified by involving some sort of "transformation." However, Ovid is NOT merely "retelling" stories that he's heard. Instead, he's very deliberate about the ordering and selection of myths, the descriptions of the gods' (and mortals') motivations, and even the plot (in several cases, his version seems to be consciously opposed to more common versions of the myth). There's been a long tradition of scholarship trying to determine "what Ovid was up to," or why he chose to recount the myths as he did. The work has been interpreted as *supporting* the Roman Empire of his day, as *critiquing* it, as exemplifying various philosophies (Stoicism, Skepticism, even a proto-Christianity), or a providing a model of everything these philosophies were opposed to. Part of the reason for these various interpretations is that Ovid plays things "close to the vest," and never tells us directly what *he* thinks of the stories that he's relating, or what message we should take from them. With this in mind, here's a brief overview of some of the more famous sections.

**The Creation of the World and the Origin of Evil.** Ovid's creation story begins in the same way as many religious versions: with a formless watery stuff and some sort of super-powerful god that "separates" out opposites (light/dark, land/water, etc.) in order to make the world that we know. The world is round, with different climates at different locations (e.g., go further north or south and things will get really cold). The story ends with something that is quite DIFFERENT from religious creation myths: Ovid says that we don't know how humans were made, or what their relationship is with the world-creating god. On the one hand, Ovid suggests it might have been that god made the humans in its own image. On the other hand, he suggests it could have been Prometheus who made humans by shaping the clay into an imitation of the god (without the god's permission). At some point, Jove (the sky-god also known as Zeus or Jupiter) takes over the new world, and his first action is to introduce the seasons, and with this, scarcity (since food doesn't grow in winter). Humans begin to fight, though not as much as they do in the final "Age of Iron", when country borders appear, and people begin to abuse and war with each other. This is a far cry from "an all-good God made our nation great!". Both gods and kings come off looking pretty badly, right from the start, as it is *they* who introduce evil into the world, and not ordinary humans.

**A Flood Story.** Like both *Gilgamesh* and the *Torah*, Ovid includes a flood story. As in these stories, the flood is said to be caused by the gods, and ends up wiping all of humanity except a few lucky survivors (who then repopulate the earth). In Ovid's version, Jupiter/Jove/Zeus decides to kill off humanity after a particularly bad human (**Lycaon**) tries to test his power/knowledge tries to trick Jove into eating roasted human flesh (most versions of the myth say it was Lycaon's own son; Ovid says this is wrong). The other gods are upset with this plan (with all the humans dead, who's going to give them sacrifices?), but go along with it anyway. With Neptune/Poseidon's help, Zeus kills off all humans except the (god-fearing) man Deucalion and the woman Pyrrha. These two then repopulate the earth by throwing rocks on the ground, which change into men (if thrown by Deucalion) and women (if thrown by Pyrrha). It's notable that Ovid here seems more concerned with the mechanics of "how could/would two people actually repopulate the earth?" than more traditionally religious versions (where there would presumably need to be a whole bunch of incest in the second and third generations). The gods are, as always, portrayed as somewhat fickle and cruel (why bother killing all the humans if you are just going to make a whole bunch of new ones?).

**The women pursued by gods: Daphne, Io, and Europa.** Greek and Roman myths are filled with stories of (male) gods pursuing various women, and Ovid relates several such stories. In no cases does it end well for the women. The female gods (such as Juno/Hera and Aphrodite/Venus), for their part, are at least as bad, and spend much of their time either arranging these sorts of affairs or punishing the human women for engaging in them. For example, Venus and her son Cupid decided to cast a spell on the god Phoebus/Apollo that causes him to fall in love with the nymph Daphne (they make sure she hates him). He then cases her around until she's forced to change into a tree to escape him. Jupiter, for his part, rapes Io and then changes her into a cow to hide this from Juno (who would otherwise kill/torture Io). Later, he changes into a bull and rapes Europa. Ovid's versions of these stories would eventually become canonical, and would inspire many paintings/poems, etc.

**Pyramus and Thisbe.** This is the story that would later become the basis for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It features two young lovers: Pyramus and Thisbe, whose parents don't want them to marry. They originally talk through a hole in the wall between their houses, and eventually make a plan to meet by a mulberry tree. However, when Thisbe goes there, she encounters a lioness covered with cow's blood. She runs away and drops her veil, which gets bloody after the lioness picks it up. Pyramus shows up, finds the bloody veil and the lion's tracks, and concludes Thisbe is dead. He falls on his sword. Thisbe comes back a bit later, finds the body of Pyramus and does the same. It's only at *this* point that their families (and the gods) feel bad for them, and they put their ashes in a single urn together.

**Medea.** Ovid apparently really liked Medea as a character (who wouldn't?), and she appears in many of his works. His only play (which was lost) was apparently about her. In the *Metamorphoses*, she's one of the characters whose voice we hear the most of, and she is portrayed as one of the more powerful and self-knowledgeable of mortals (though this won't save her from a bad end). That is: the gods do horrible things to her, but Medea seems to *recognize* this in a way that other mortals don't always, and her responses are neither supplication/pleading/praying nor surrender/suicide. Instead, Medea fights. Among other things, she gives a long speech regretting that she's fallen in love with Jason (again, something caused by the gods), since recognizes this love commits her to doing a number of terrible things, including betraying her father and homeland, and committing a series of murders in order to help Jason defeat his enemies. She also does some magic to give Jason's father back his youth. The irony, of course, is that Jason will end up betraying and leaving her after she's done all of this, with horrible consequences for everyone involved.

## THEMES: THE IMPORTANCE OF CHANGE

As its title suggests, the *Metamorphoses* is, fundamentally, a book about change. A few important aspects of this:

- **Change is rarely “chosen.”** Ovid's characters change in all sorts of ways: they change into trees or cows, they die, they fall in love, they become young again. Many (though not all) of these changes are unpleasant for them. With a few exceptions (most notably Zeus/Jupiter/Jove), the characters do not CHOOSE to change. Instead, they are forced to change, either because the gods directly make them change, or because the actions of the gods (and the world) leave them with no other option.
- **Change has no apparent “direction.”** While Ovid's creation myth briefly suggests that world was once a much better place than it is now, the world of the *Metamorphoses* is, in general, one that seems to get neither “better” nor “worse” from generation to generation. This is unlike the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) in which God seems to have some *plan* for humanity and its salvation.
- **Love as the prime mover.** For Ovid, love (and in particular, romantic/sexual love) is the driving force for change, both for humans and for gods. Aphrodite/Venus and Cupid are probably the only gods that come off as at all “good,” and they generally win their conflicts with the gods.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do Ovid's stories about gods and humans differ from the sorts of stories we find in the Torah, the Iliad/Odyssey, or Gilgamesh? How do they differ from the sorts of stories found in the Christian Bible or Muslim Qur'an?
2. Why do you think Ovid's work have been so uniquely upsetting to governmental/religious authorities?
3. If you were going to make a piece of art (writing, music, painting, film, etc.) inspired by one of Ovid's stories in the *Metamorphoses*, which one would you choose? Why? What kind of art might you make?