Hales W (1984)

BAUCIS AND PHILEMON: PARADIGM OR PARADOX?

The story of Baucis and Philemon (Ovid *Met.* 8.611-724) is one of the best-loved stories in the poem.[1] In this episode Jupiter and Mercury, disguised as mortals, wander the Phrygian countryside asking for shelter. They are turned away by all but Baucis and Philemon, a poor old couple, who prepare a humble meal for their unrecognized guests. After the miraculous refilling of the winebowl reveals their divinity, the gods punish the inhospitable neighbors and reward Baucis and Philemon. The story is presented within the larger narrative specifically as a moral paradigm to reprove one who doubts the gods. The central reason for this story's popularity is that its characters and setting are seen as more appealing, its outcome as more ethically and emotionally satisfactory than those of other episodes. Rustic simplicity, *pietas*, a tranquil, happy relationship between male and female, clear justice and a happy ending are not evident in many *Metamorphoses* stories. Ovid has drawn on diverse sources such as Callimachus' *Hecale*, in which a poor old peasant woman offers hospitality to Theseus, and Roman pastoral to create what is apparently an idyllic genre piece. Many readers find that the style of this episode, too, differs from that of others: "Here for once Ovid has left his wit and cleverness behind, and with affection and gentle humor has presented sympathetically the laudable qualities of humility, piety, loyalty, and contentment."[2] But when this episode is examined carefully its idyllic and morally paradigmatic qualities, and its seemingly straightforward narration, become complicated by some peculiarly Ovidian themes and techniques.

Like many episodes of the poem, the Baucis and Philemon story is presented as a narration within the narrative of the poem itself, and the narrative context in which the story is told affects it significantly.[3] It is recounted at the dinner-table of the river-god Achelous with Theseus and other heroes in attendance. The river Achelous is swollen and dangerous, but the river-god invites the company to his house to wait till the flood abates. In Callimachus' *Hecale* Theseus is on his way to encounter the bull of Marathon when he stops at Hecale's house; here he is returning from tackling the Calydonian boar. As often with Ovid's references to other literary works, the allusion points up quite different elements in his account. His Theseus, for example, is much less heroic than Callimachus'. The

whole boar hunt (8.260-544) is a burlesque of epic derring-do; the glorious heroes who participate are anything but brave or even efficient as they bungle the job completely.[4] At one point Theseus advises his friend Pirithous not to get too close, saying *licet eminus esse/ fortibus* ("the strong can fight from a distance," 406-07). Now he decides not to brave the river, but to use Achelous' house as well as his advice (560-61). Another significant difference from the *Hecale* is that there Theseus actually stayed with the poor old woman; here he only hears a story of rustic hospitality while enjoying something far more luxurious.

Achelous' house is a baroque grotto described in terms of elegant Roman dwellings (*atria* 562)–though with moss for rugs and shells as ceiling decorations–and the guests drink from jeweled cups (573). Such a setting provides a calculated contrast to Baucis and Philemon's small, thatch-covered hovel, and the contrast includes both physical surroundings and different kinds of relationships. Whereas the company of male heroes is waited on by nymphs, in Baucis and Philemon's house "no use asking for masters or servants; the household is two, each serves and commands" (*nec refert, dominos illic famulosne requiras:/ tota domus duo sunt, idem parentque iubentque* 635-36). Such a contrast resembles many similar ones in Roman literature, in which rustic simplicity contrasts favorably with decadent luxury.[5] But the contrast here is not so straightforward.

Achelous tells his captive audience about some nymphs who neglected proper homage to his divinity and how he took vengeance on them by transforming them into islands; he follows this with a description of a transformation accomplished by Neptune. At this point, Pirithous mocks the idea that gods can wreak such transformations. Such an opinion is not only impious but offensive to the host, and even dangerous; Pirithous is doing just what the nymphs did, and Achelous has described his anger and power in detail, explicitly justifying Diana's action in sending the Calydonian boar. So the company's shock and disapproval (*obstipuere omnes nec talia dicta probarunt* 616) may have a practical motive. Lelex acts as their spokesman; he is described as greying (*raris iam sparsus tempora canis* 568) and wise (*animo maturus et aevo* 617). He offers the story of Baucis and Philemon as proof that the gods do have the power to transform, and also no doubt to turn the conversation away from the insult Achelous has just received.

Despite Lelex's didactic intention to provide a moral paradigm, his use of different styles and intrusions of his own opinions complicate matters. Here is the way he describes Baucis and Philemon's house and the entrance of the gods into it:

mille domos clausere serae; tamen una recepit,
parva quidem, stipulis et canna tecta palustri,
sed pia; Baucis anus parilique aetate Philemon
illa sunt annis iuncti iuvenalibus, illa
consenuere casa paupertatemque fatendo
effecere levem nec iniqua mente ferendo;
nec refert, dominos illic famulosne requiras:
tota domus duo sunt, idem parentque iubentque.
ergo ubi caelicolae parvos tetigere Penates
submissoque humiles intrarunt vertice postes,
membra senex posito iussit relevare sedili. . . . 629-39

A thousand homes were barred; yet one received them,
small, to be sure, thatched with marsh reeds, but pious.
Old lady Baucis and Philemon, same age as she,
were joined in that house as young folks, and there
grew old along with the house; by owning up to
their poverty, and taking it easy, they made it light.
No use asking for master or servants there:
the household is two, each serves and commands.
Therefore, when the heaven-dwellers reached
this small abode, and entered, bowing their heads
'neath the lowly door, the old man offered a chair
and told them to take their ease.

The first sentence is rambling, paratactic, repetitive (*illa. . . illa*), simple in diction, colloquial (e.g., the informal second person *requiras*), rhyming (*fatendo. . . ferendo*). The next is compressed, syntactic, elegant in diction and rhetoric with its archaic compound *caelicolae*, the metonymy *parvos Penates* and the metaphor *vertice*, and contains a Golden Line (638). The style itself is doing what the narrative portrays–introducing lofty figures into a humble setting, as if Lelex wished to be faithful to the principles of narrative decorum. In fact, however, these different styles do not rest easily together, but clash. And some of the narrator's qualifications of his narrative raise questions about his attitude towards what he is describing. For example, *quidem* ("certainly," 630) after *parva* implies that he regrets having to mention the poverty of the house. *Ergo* (637) also

sounds odd; why say "therefore" when after the arrival of the gods Philemon drew up a chair for them? The implication is that since there are no slaves in the house Philemon has to do this himself. Thus the narrator has described something meaningful in terms of character and value (Baucis and Philemon's interdependence and equality) in order to explain something meaningful only in social and economic terms (the absence of slaves). The use of the verb *iussit* three lines after *iubent* (635) suggests that Philemon is a hick who does not recognize his guests as gods, and so treats them as equals. These details indicate that the narrator is standing outside his narrative and commenting on it, perhaps even mocking details of it.

Uneasy contrasts between different styles and indications of the narrator's attitude continue in the description of the meal the old couple serve the gods:

> . . . ignes
> suscitat hesternos foliisque et cortice sicco
> nutrit et ad flammas anima producit anili
> multifidasque faces ramaliaque arida tecto
> detulit et minuit parvoque admovit aëno,
> quodque suus coniunx riguo conlegerat horto,
> truncat holus foliis. 641-47
>
> She rekindles yesterday's fire and feeds it with leaves
> and dry bark, getting it to flame with her aged breath,
> brings down kindling and dry twigs from the rafters,
> breaks them up and puts them under a small copper kettle.
> Her husband had gathered a cabbage in the well-watered garden;
> she lops off its leaves.

Such attention to detail is typical of Hellenistic descriptions of everyday life.[6] But here the narrator attempts to magnify the humble repast by inserting pseudo-epic diction, such as the inflated metaphor *ferventibus undis* ("seething waves," 650) for boiling water, or a "Homeric" epithet, *sincerae baca Minervae* ("the berries of chaste Minerva," i.e. olives, 664). Some of this language comes out sounding rather odd: Baucis "maims" *(truncat)* a cabbage, then "tames" *(domat)* a piece of ham by softening it in boiling water. In using the strange phrase *multifidas faces* ("much-divided brands," 645) for kindling wood, the narrator seems to be describing his own technique of miniaturizing epic components. These attempts to elevate the meal make it seem even more humble than it is. When he restricts himself to simple catalogues of the food served, it seems abundant and luscious:

> conditaque in liquida corna autumnalia faece
> intibaque et radix et lactis massa coacti
> ovaque non acri leviter versata favilla 664-68
>
> fall cornel-cherries preserved in the wine-less,
> endives, radishes, a lump of farmer's cheese,
> eggs roasted lightly in the ashes . . . .
>
> hic nux, hic mixta est rugosis carica palmis
> prunaque et in patulis redolentia mala canistris
> et de purpureis conlectae vitibus uvae,
> candidus in medio favus est 674-77
>
> here are nuts, and wrinkled dates mixed
> with figs, and fragrant apples in wide baskets,
> and grapes, gathered from purple vines,
> with a shining honeycomb in the middle. . . .

Yet even here details are suspect. Cornel-cherries, as a standard item in Golden Age descriptions (for example, *Met.* 1.105), may be a literary cliché. And would a penurious old couple really have so much food available? Or is this a city-dweller's fantasy of the abundance and freshness of country food?[7]

In any case, Lelex can't maintain a consistent attitude of admiration towards the idyll he is describing; his social superiority keeps showing, along with his artistic frustration at having to deal with such humble narrative material. When the hosts bring out their best drape for the banquet-couch, he comments *sed et haec vilisque vetusque/ vestis erat* ("but even this was cheap and old," 659) and adds sarcastically *lecto non indignanda saligno* ("the perfect accompaniment for a willow couch"). When he concludes his list of the food served with *omnia fictilibus* ("everything in earthenware," 668), pottery might seem here, as it is elsewhere in Augustan poetry, "a standard item in the description of the good old days."[8] But he then describes a *crater* "engraved with the same silver" as the food dishes (*caelatus eodem argento* 668)—i.e., not silver at all. This sarcasm is especially disconcerting because soon this mixing-bowl will reveal the gods' presence by its miraculous refilling. The narrator persistently points out defects (*sed erat pes tertius impar*: "the table's third foot was uneven," 661), and is especially fond of litotes, whereby he attempts to minimize both the old couple's meager wine (*nec longae . . . vina senectae* 672) and their generous good will (*nec iners pauperque voluntas* 678). His critical attitude towards the old peasants' life reveals him as an urbane, snobbish

individual, a stranger in the countryside, as we know from his own introduction (622-23). As a result many of his observations become ambiguous: for example, does the detail that Baucis cuts only a small piece off the chine of "long-preserved" bacon indicate admiration for peasant frugality, or is it a sarcastic comment on her stinginess?[9]

The gods, like the narrator, represent forces outside Baucis and Philemon's world, ready to judge rather than to appreciate. They make no response to all the couple's work; even the refilling of the wine-bowl is described as happening by itself rather than by their agency. They have come to punish, and at first give Baucis and Philemon only exemption from the general ruin, in stern legal language:

"di"que "sumus meritasque luet vicinia poenas
inpia" dixerunt; "vobis inmunibus huius
esse mali dabitur." 689-91

"We are gods," they said, "and this impious place
will pay a just penalty; to you immunity
from this disaster is granted."

Prior to this the old couple had treated the gods like any other guests. Now they react to the miracle with stark terror and pleas for forgiveness:[10]

attoniti novitate pavent manibusque supinis
concipiunt Baucisque preces timidusque Philemon
et veniam dapibus nullisque paratibus orant. 681-83

Astonished by the miracle, they tremble; throwing up
their hands, they fearfully begin to pray, begging
forgiveness for the meal and meagre offerings.

They suddenly realize there was more they could have done, and try to kill their only goose. What is elsewhere a noble gesture of reverence[11] is undermined by its lateness and by the comic scene of the old couple vainly pursuing the bird. The gods tell Baucis and Philemon to spare him: is this because their hunger has already been satisfied?[12]

After their guilty neighbors are drowned in a flood which submerges most of the surrounding countryside, their cottage is transformed into a temple:

. . . furcas subiere columnae,
stramina flavescunt aurataque tecta videntur
caelataeque fores adopertaque marmore tellus. 700-02

. . . columns supplanted the forked roof-props,
the thatch began to glow, the roof seemed gilded,
the doors engraved, the earth floor covered with marble.

This transformation of a human dwelling into a divine edifice is presumably a sign of honor to the old couple. Yet Baucis and Philemon have not asked for it, and after the description of their small house, enriched by love and time, its transformation seems more an expropriation than a boon. Like Augustus the gods have left *marmoream* what they found *latericiam*[13] – but what did Baucis and Philemon want? Such abrupt and impulsive action is quite different from the couple's attention to each other's opinion as they decide what boon to ask for (705-06). Moreover, their request highlights the striking difference between the gods' awarding of a *material* and *symbolic* advantage and the old couple's preference for an *emotional* reward, one which again affirms their equality and the mutuality of their relationship: *auferat hora duos eadem, nec coniugis unquam/ busta meae videam, neu sim tumulandus ab illa* ("let one hour carry us both off; never let me see my wife's tomb, nor be buried by her," 709-10).

Thus even in a story which features pious mortals rather than criminals like Niobe, Arachne, Pentheus, *et al.*, the relationship between man and god is a strained, problematic one. The gods are cold, brusque, aloof. Their visit changes Baucis and Philemon's life, but in the way the gods decide. After the gods' self-revelation Baucis and Philemon are terrified and awkward; they know what counts is not intentions but performance. This interaction between god and man is quite different from that in the *Aeneid*. There, Aeneas reacts with terror to the apparition of Mercury (4.265ff.) because he is in the wrong, not because people automatically have something to fear from a god's appearance; many divine appearances are beneficial. But between the gods of the *Metamorphoses* and its human characters yawns a vast distance, a distance which is bridged only with danger to the humans involved. Even when the gods wish humans well they cannot mix themselves in human lives without drastic and usually negative consequences for the latter.[14] Of course, the preamble to the story promises to demonstrate the gods' power, not their justice or kindliness. But this story brings home the consequences of power used without understanding or sympathy to achieve harsh justice. Or is it justice? The gods are avenging an insult to themselves, constructing a monument to themselves.

Again a comparison with the *Aeneid* can bring out an important feature of this story: its very different depiction of the relationship between human character and familial, social and religious roles. In fact, the story suggests a new definition of *pietas*. One of the great themes of Vergil's poem is the definition and illustration of the hierarchy of proper duties towards family, other people, the state, the gods. If emotional relationships do not function in accord with the dictates of *pietas*, disaster results, as when Dido and Aeneas momentarily attempt to forget their roles. Characters constantly address each other in terms of their social and familial roles *(pater, coniunx, rex)* and when no formal ties exist they need to be invented–wrongly, as when Dido calls her affair with Aeneas *coniugium*, or rightly, as when Aeneas considers Pallas his son.

In the Baucis and Philemon episode, on the other hand, emotional relationships and human behavior are not adequately defined by external roles. The *pietas* of Baucis and Philemon consists in unconscious acts of second nature rather than self-conscious observance of duties towards those whose relation to them demands it. Philemon is not a *paterfamilias;* phrases such as *idem parentque iubentque* emphasize his and Baucis' equality and similarity. They extend kindly hospitality without knowing that their guests are gods; indeed, that relaxed hospitality is possible only so long as they do not know. The gods, however, insist on clamping Baucis and Philemon into externally defined social and moral categories and hierarchies, creating hierarchy where there was none. When their neighbors, the *vicinia impia,* are punished, Baucis and Philemon "weep for their own" (*deflent fata suorum* 698), not recognizing the moral difference so important to the gods. The gods address them as a hierarchy, "good old man, and wife worthy of a good husband" (*iuste senex et femina coniuge iusto/ digna* 704-05). But they respond by describing their marriage not as a civil institution but as an emotional experience, *concordes egimus annos* ("we have spent years in harmony," 708). Their request to die together contrasts ironically with contemporary Roman marriages whose only point was surviving one's spouse and getting the inheritance.[15]

In this story, then, the imposition of social roles, with their accompanying hierarchy of obligations and restrictions, ignores the complexity and richness of emotional relationships and behavior. Yet the gods insist on this definition of people by fixed social and moral roles. If Baucis and Philemon are pious, they must be made

sacerdotes, officially sanctioned symbols of *pietas,* with a temple rather than a home. The gods appropriate Baucis and Philemon's *pietas* by using them to reinforce their own power and authority. But in order to make this transformation Baucis and Philemon's character and desires, including their quite different form of *pietas,* must be ignored and transformed.

In this the gods again resemble the narrator. Like them, he is not an objective observer, but a judge trying to establish categories, roles, values. Lelex assumes that his urbanity permits him to shape a narrative about country folk into any form he wants. Like the gods, he wants to put their *pietas* into a conventional form, enshrine them in his moral fable. But as the narrative proceeds, he cannot conceal his emotional distance from what he is narrating and his imperfect understanding of it. As a result his narrative is confusing, an odd mixture of perspectives, styles and tones. Paradoxically, his inability to maintain a reductively simple narrative about Baucis and Philemon and their life makes his presentation of them more interesting and complex, including parsimony as well as generosity, fear as well as love, the difficulties as well as the satisfactions of their lives. But the ineluctable distance which separates the narrator from Baucis and Philemon means that his–and hence our–perceptions of them can only be fragmentary and partial. Despite his pose of superior knowledge, the narrator can never completely understand them. Both his desire to idealize and his desire to mock get in his way.

In this story, then, as throughout the *Metamorphoses,* Ovid is representing the power of narration in order to reveal the connections between that power and other kinds of power. He shows that this story's effect is partly the result of its narrator: his appearance, his character, or whatever: "both the subject and the narrator had moved everyone" (*cunctosque et res et moverat auctor* 725). The audience was predisposed, of course, to approve his words, since they were shocked by the blasphemy of the doubter and relieved to hear a pious story. Ovid also demonstrates how this narrator's character and social position inevitably affect his narrative. Like the gods, the narrator is not omniscient or fair: he is fallible and biased, as is every narrator in the *Metamorphoses,* including the central narrator. Even more significant than a particular narrator's prejudices, needs or audience is the inevitable distortion involved in the desire to narrate, to mold material into what is considered a suitable narrative form in terms of plot, language or moral. Such a desire to

impose meaning upon the raw material of experience may in fact be a barrier rather than a means to understanding that experience. Literary devices, conventions, allusions may be a way to constrain experience to fit preconceived patterns, just as the imposition of social roles does. The clashing changes of perspective and style in this story show that Lelex cannot maintain the kind of narrative control he would like. But these changes also suggest that trying to impose a single point of view, a single meaning, onto this or any story is a reduction of the complexity and richness of the material. Baucis and Philemon appear as both attractive and ridiculous, the gods as both powerful and unpleasant, the narrator both wrong and right, the effect both gently charming and grimly minatory. All of the story's elements have a certain validity, and the meaning—a partial, tentative meaning—can emerge only from the balance, even the contradiction, of those elements. We cannot take this narrator, or any narrator, as our guide to meaning, but through his biased vision and representation—revealed in the text—we can create our own meaning.

Such a dramatization of the narrator's distance from and inability to understand what he is describing has significant implications both for this story and for the *Metamorphoses* as a whole. Ovid is not simply mocking contemporary idealizations of country life as Horace does in his second *Epode,* where the final lines reveal that the speaker, *iam iam futurus rusticus* ("eternally a farmer-to-be"), is actually a moneylender. This text seriously questions the assumption that country life can provide moral and political paradigms for urban Rome. Vergil's *Georgics,* often considered a poem which provides such paradigms, nevertheless indicates at crucial points the distance between the country life which is the subject of the poem and the world of Roman politics and militarism. The closing lines (4.559-62) are an emphatic example:

> haec super arvorum cultu pecorumque canebam
> et super arboribus, Caesar dum magnus ad altum
> fulminat Euphraten bello victorque volentes
> per populos dat iura viamque adfectat Olympo.
>
> These lines was I singing of fields, flocks and trees,
> while great Caesar thunders on the deep Euphrates;
> victorious in war, he gives laws to the willing nations
> and sets out on his journey to Olympus.

The Baucis and Philemon episode not only emphasizes the distance between the two worlds, questioning whether they do have any connection, but demonstrates that a viewer from the urban world cannot really *see* the country world. Just as Tityrus says in the first *Eclogue, urbem quam dicunt Romam, Meliboee, putavi/ stultus ego huic nostrae similem* ("like a fool, I used to think that the city they call Rome was like ours"), so an urban visitor who sees characters, relationships and behavior which do not fit his expectations tries to translate them into what he considers appropriate categories of representation. This failure of vision and understanding occurs not only when perceiver and perceived are from different social realms, but affects *all* perception. That there can be no disinterested, objective perception is a theme which runs throughout the poem.

This theme has political as well as epistemological implications. The distortion of perception does not affect all perceivers equally: only some of those perceivers have power, and they exercise that power on the basis of their perceptions. Those who have the power to represent can translate their perceptions into representations which reflect their personal, social and ideological bias. Since gods exercise power over mortals, city over country, narrator over material, the acts of perception and representation result in the transformation of the objects perceived and represented. The power to narrate is *imperium.*

As Baucis and Philemon must deal with the gods, we must deal with the narrator both in the *Metamorphoses* and elsewhere. We cannot do without him, inadequate as he may be, for he is all we readers have. There is no level of divine awareness where all seems clearly revealed, as in *Aeneid* I when the physical and emotional turmoil of the storm gives way to Jove's serene, apparently trustworthy narration of the future. Readers of the *Metamorphoses* are always down on the level of its characters in the confusing, changeable world of the poem. We may conclude, as many readers do, that because there is no way to find a univocal meaning in such a world, the attempt to find any meaning is pointless. We might as well enjoy for their own sake—or criticize—the stylistic ploys, the changes of perspective, the wit.

There are other options, however. The Baucis and Philemon story ends when they are simultaneously turned into trees:

> . . . frondere Philemona Baucis,
> Baucida conspexit senior frondere Philemon.

iamque super geminos crescente cacumine vultus
mutua, dum licuit, reddebant dicta "vale"que
"o coniunx" dixere simul, simul abdita texit
ora frutex. 714-19

. . . Baucis saw Philemon growing leaves,
Philemon saw Baucis growing leaves, and now,
as the foliage spread over each of their faces,
they exchanged reciprocal words, while they could:
"Farewell, my spouse" they said together, and at once
growth covered their mouths.

Like most descriptions of metamorphosis this has an element of the absurd; yet the emphasis on the couple's similarity and equality (the words *geminos, mutua, simul,* the balanced construction *frondere Philemona Baucis, Baucida . . . frondere Philemon*) suggests that they have maintained their character and relationship despite the transformation they have undergone. The last words of these *sacerdotes* are not expressions of reverence for the gods, but of love for one another, the true source of their *pietas.*

Lelex, as so often, gets it wrong. He finishes the tale with what is apparently a recapitulation of the moral with which he began: *cura deum di sunt, et, qui coluere, colantur* ("those whom the gods cherish are themselves divine; let the ones who have worshipped be worshipped," 724). As befits his own conventional *pietas,* he emphasizes only the results of their *pietas,* not its emotional source. Even so, however, he has changed the focus from the gods' power to Baucis and Philemon's excellence. Despite the gods' and Lelex's superior power and lack of understanding, the old couple gain a kind of victory.

Just before this concluding moral, however, something brings the entire story into question. According to Lelex, the trees into which Baucis and Philemon were metamorphosed can still be seen. He had mentioned seeing these trees in his preamble (620-21), and now describes how he reverently placed votive wreaths on the boughs (723). But there is a disturbing detail:

ostendit adhuc Thyneius illic
incola de gemino vicinos corpore truncos.
haec mihi non vani (neque erat, cur fallere vellent)
narravere senes 719-22

There a local Bithynian to this day
points out the nearby trees growing from a double root.

Sensible old men told me these things, and there
was no reason why they would wish to deceive . . . .

No reason to deceive? Here again is a hint of the distance between country and city, a hint that even urbane Lelex was credulous enough to be taken in by the desires of the locals to impress him with narrative. The character of the *non vani senes* (approval again expressed in litotes) suited his preconceptions and convinced him of the validity of their narrative just as his *auctoritas* did Theseus and company. Their story conformed to Lelex's conventional *pietas* and ensured the story's survival, however changed, in his version. The visual sign of the two trees, moreover, added just the right proof. Focussing on visual evidence—which does not speak—is a convenient way to avoid considering problematic variations and contradictions between facade and reality, whether of human characters or language. This is another theme which runs throughout the poem.

Yet the story's lack of basis in fact does not deprive it of meaning. Ovid makes the difference between factual basis and ethical meaning clear at the end of the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha in Book I. As the narrator describes the stones turning into human beings, he inserts doubt about the story's credibility: *quis hoc credat, nisi sit pro teste vetustas?* ("Who would believe this, if it weren't for the story's antiquity?" 400). A few lines later, however, this fable is used to explicate human nature:

inde genus durum sumus experiensque laborum
et documenta damus, qua simus origine nati. 414-15

So we are a hard race, accustomed to toil,
and we give proof from what source we were born.

Readers who concluded that the ethical and political implications of the story of Baucis and Philemon were invalidated by its fictiveness or its narrator's fallibility would be just as foolish as Lelex in accepting the story as factual.

Despite the emphasis on the fictional aspects of this story, its contradictory styles and tones, its narrator's prejudices and unreliability, the reader does not have to conclude that "the religious and moralistic content of the myth . . . is so reduced as to furnish only a just sufficiently recognizable backdrop to the literary stylization which replaces it."[16] The conventional religious and moral content is indeed unrecognizably changed. In its place is a complex depiction of human vulnerability and divine ruthlessness, one which is repeated throughout the *Metamorphoses* with radical implications. By

showing that blindness, rigidity and exploitation are inevitable concomitants of power, this poem questions conventional political and social hierarchies. By suggesting that its divinities are less worthy of respect than the humans who worship them, it questions conventional ethical codes. Thus the literary form of this episode, and of the entire poem, is integral to its meaning. The text calls attention to and questions conventional strategies of narration, undermining the narrator's authority as source of truth. The *Metamorphoses* suggests a new relationship between narrative and reader, one in which the reader must examine a narrator's motives, question his presentation, make independent judgments. Such a relationship does not invite the reader to abandon the desire to find ethical, religious and political meaning in narrative, but to seek for it in new ways.

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NOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay formed part of my doctoral dissertation, in the writing of which I had the benefit of great help from my director, William S. Anderson. I have also made considerable use of his commentary on the episode in *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 6-10* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972). I am grateful to my colleague Laurie J. Churchill and to Leslie Cahoon for their valuable suggestions.

2. Frank Copley, *Latin Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 273.

3. Very few critics take this important factor into account. G. Karl Galinsky, for example, makes no mention that the tale is recounted by a secondary narrator in *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 197-203. A. S. Due in *Changing Form* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1974), p. 80, says only "the praise of the poor but honest simplicity in Philemon and Baucis' house acquires a peculiar flavour (!). . . during a splendid dinner." Manfred Beller comments "the initial discussion is present throughout the entire story as background" but does not specify how this affects the tale (*Philemon und Baucis in der europaischen Literatur* [Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1967], p. 20).

4. See Nicholas Horsfall's excellent article "Epic and Burlesque in Ovid, *Met.* 8.260ff.," *CJ*, 74.4 (1979), 319-32.

5. This contrast is a staple of satire; cf. Lucretius 2.14-36. Horace frequently draws the contrast specifically in terms of food, e.g. in *Sat.* 2.2 and *Ep.* 1.5. The descriptions of Evander's hospitality to Aeneas (*Aen.* 8.175-83, 359-69) emphasize Aeneas' noble willingness to put up with rough conditions.

6. Callimachus wrote, in addition to his *Hecale* with its detailed descriptions, the story of Molorchus (*Aetia* frs. 54-59) describing how an old man entertained Heracles before his encounter with the Nemean lion; his *Aitia* and *Hymn to Demeter* also contain many homey details. Fragments of other works suggest the popularity of such scenes; see the commentary of A. S. Hollis, *Ovid Metamorphoses Book VIII* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 106-07.

7. The literariness of the meal's description is often commented upon, for example by Ludolf Malten, "Motivgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Sagenforschung," *Hermes*, 74 (1939), 185, and Beller (above, note 3), p. 32, but Lelex is never identified as the author.

8. Moritz Haupt, Rudolf Ehwald, and Michael von Albrecht, eds., *P. Ovidius Naso Metamorphosen* (Zurich and Dublin: Weidmann, 1966), II, p. 51, *ad* 8.668.

9. Even critics who distinguish between the secondary narrator and Ovid usually attribute the sarcasm to the latter. Beller (above, note 3), p. 34, is typical: "The dominant characteristic of Ovid's version of the Baucis and Philemon story is his literary depiction of the myth from the point of view of the sophisticated *poet*" (emphasis added).

10. In his commentary on line 681 W. S. Anderson (above, note 1) says that the upraised hands "indicate thanks and wonder." Surely not.

11. Other mortals willing to sacrifice even a prized possession for a god are Abraham, Jephthah, Molorchus and Ilyrieus. Ovid's account of the latter in *Fasti* 5.493-544 indicates that he did not necessarily depict a scene such as this wittily. A poor old man is visited by Jupiter, Mercury and Neptune in disguise. When he realizes who they are he sacrifices his only ox, and its epithet, *cultorem pauperis agri*, emphasizes the pathos and generosity of his deed. He asks for and receives a son as his reward.

12. "Would the gods wish to eat goose after the fruit course?" asks Georges Lafaye, *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide et leurs modèles grecs* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Paris XIX, 1904), p. 186.

13. Suetonius, *Aug.* 28. Cf. also *Aen.* 8.346-47: *Capitolia . . . aurea nunc, olim silvestribus horrida dumis.*

14. The fates of Phaethon, Semele, Coronis, Hyacinthus show that involvement even with friendly gods is dangerous.

15. The poems of Martial amply testify to the existence of such marriages: cf. for example 1.10, 2.26, 2.65, 5.37, 10.8, 10.43. Hollis (above, note 6), p. 126, compares details in this episode to those found in archaic Italian epitaphs.

16. Galinsky (above, note 3), p. 202.