OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES* AND THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

Ovid's lack of high seriousness has always more successfully interpreted his readers than they have it. In the Middle Ages, for instance, commentators kindly furnished Ovid a moral dignity I am sure would have delighted him. As a repository of natural science, the *Metamorphoses* always commanded respect.[1] But Ovid's singular virtue during this time was seen as ethical, since readers whose temperament had been conditioned by allegory could avoid surface unseemliness by discovering a decorous example beneath.[2] An ever-present tension, however, subtended all such moralizations, for the age that Ovid so entranced also harkened with alarm to Paul, who foretold a time when itching ears (*prurientes auribus*) would turn from the truth and convert, as it were, to fables (*ad fabulas autem convertentur*, 2 Tim. 4:3–4).[3] As a result, medieval suspicion of classical antiquity, and of Ovid in particular, competed with an equally pronounced medieval desire to appropriate the past. The same figure would be seen from colliding perspectives: Daphne, according to Petrus Berchorius, stands both for worldly glory (insofar as Apollo immoderately chases after her, lured by her physical charms, fol. xxii) and the cross (insofar as the god embraced and loved her after she had been changed to the laurel, fol. xxiii). The fact that such irreconcilable interpretations destroy Daphne's integrity as a character is no problem for Berchorius, since for him her meaning superseded her probability as a person, indeed hardly depended on it.[4] Yet however outrageously medieval commentators violated the sense of the *Metamorphoses*, their exegesis paradoxically followed the pattern of Ovid's fiction. Christian morality ultimately took possession of pagan letters much the way Apollo appropriates Daphne-become-laurel.[5]

In fact, my thesis is that the assumptions and practices of medieval interpretations substantiate, in their peculiar way, Ovid's own opinion of interpretation. That is to say, for Ovid all interpretation is an act of appropriation, an imposition finally based on power, nowhere fully sanctioned by the text, nowhere fully denied by it either. Throughout the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid introduces interpretive moments which disrupt the narrative by calling attention to

[1]See, for instance, Simone Viarre, *La Survie d'Ovide dans la littérature scientifique des XII^e et XIII^e siècles* (Poitiers 1966).

[2]Among the many studies that may be cited here, I would point to two recent books: Judson Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto 1983) and A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theories of Authorship* (London 1984).

[3]The phrase in fact is quoted by Petrus Berchorius at the beginning of his *accessus* to his *Ovidius Moralizatus* (Paris 1515) fol. 1.

[4]Indeed, even if Berchorius thought Daphne was real, he wouldn't have asked of her the integrity or consistency we demand of people today. See Warren Ginsberg, *The Cast of Character: The Representation of Personality in Ancient and Medieval Literature* (Toronto 1983).

[5]"Daphne in lauru[m] est mutata arbor quam sibi phe[bus] appropriauit . . ." Berchorius, fol. xxii, v.

its reader. Moreover, the narrator or characters within stories also often interrupt the events they experience to interpret them. In either case, Ovid alerts us that other meanings aside from the one proposed are equally possible. The art of the *Metamorphoses*, as Ovid says, conceals its significance artfully (*ars latet arte sua*, 10.252). But, as the stories of Phaethon, Lycaon and Apollo and Daphne reveal, that art also exposes how anyone who would interpret it speaks a language of force and seizure.

To gain a sense of a typically Ovidian moment of interpretation, consider Phaethon's catastrophe:

> At Phaethon rutilos flamma populante capillos
> volvitur in praeceps longoque per aera tractu
> fertur, ut interdum de caelo stella sereno,
> etsi non cecidit, potuit cecidisse videri. (2.319–22)[6]
>
> (But Phaethon, flames ravaging his red hair, is turned about headlong and borne through the air with a long train [of fire], as sometimes a star from the clear heavens, can seem to have fallen, even though it has not fallen.)

Because Phaethon's death is not described as it actually happened, but only as it appeared to, Ovid seems, as Galinsky says, to rob the scene of its profundity.[7] The simile does indeed disrupt the narrative and raise the question of reliability of perspective, but by doing so, Ovid's finale points explicitly to what this first extended story of identity in the *Metamorphoses* has implied throughout: despite the Sun's acknowledgment that Phaethon is his son, in his bones and in his soul, Phaethon equally is *not* his father's son. The flames that ravage Phaethon's red hair send us back to his initial, halting approach to his father's palace. Blinded by Phoebus' radiance, Phaethon must stand far off (. . . *consistitque procul*):

> neque enim propiora ferebat
> lumina: purpurea velatus veste sedebat . . .
> in solio Phoebus. . . . (2.22–23)
>
> (For Phaethon could bear the light no nearer: the Sun sat enthroned, clothed in garb of crimson. . . .)

Indeed, Phoebus must put off his "crown" so that Phaethon might come nearer: *at genitor circum caput omne micantes / deposuit radios propriusque accedere iussit* . . . (2.40–41). The inalienable difference between father and son hinted here at the story's beginning becomes unmistakable by the end. Phaethon is like his father only to the extent that his burning hair and the Sun's flames are red, a likeness insubstantial in itself and obliterated by the fact that

[6]I quote from W. S. Anderson, *Ovidius, Metamorphoses* (Leipzig 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. Wilkinson, "Onomatopoeia and the Skeptics," *CQ* 36 (1942) 125, finds these lines inconspicuous; see also R. C. Bass, "Some Aspects of the Structure of the Phaethon Episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *CQ* 27 (1977) 402–8, esp. p. 406.

[7]G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Berkeley 1975) 63. Galinsky's analysis of the passage is especially sensitive. See also Brooks Otis, *Ovid As an Epic Poet* (Cambridge 1970²) 389–95.

Phaethon dies by means of the very fire his father generates.[8] The thunderbolt that kills Phaethon is Jupiter's, of course, but in its effects it could have been Phoebus': *et saevis conpescuit ignibus ignes* ("he quenches the fire with fell fire," 2.313). For Jupiter is merely an agent of destruction: the deeper cause of Phaethon's downfall is his desire to be like his father.

Throughout the story, therefore, Ovid explodes the idea that paternity determines continuity of identity; for him, "like father, like son" is a myth. The truth of the relationship between offspring and parent must remain radically in doubt, must always be in essence at least as much a matter of differences as similarities. Against the biological fact of paternity there is always also Telemachus' question: "Who has known his own engendering?" (*Odyssey* 1.216). Thus, in the final simile, Phaethon's fall appears at first to recall the Sun's course. For a second, Phaethon seems a star at night to the Sun's daytime splendor, as though both are bodies of light and what separates them is a matter of intensity, of maturity. But *interdum* reminds us that Phaethon flames and falls, turning about (*volvitur*) only once, while his father makes his revolution every day. The difference, made all the more poignant for the intensity of Phaethon's desire to be his father, to ride his chariot, is one not of degree, but of kind.

I say for a second Phaethon seems a star, because as Galinsky reminds us, there actually is no comparison at all between Phoebus and his son. The patent incongruity of the final equation startles us, for the logic of the simile belies Phaethon's fate. Natural science tells us that stars do not fall even if they appear to. Phaethon, however, does fall. If we conclude, as we seem urged to, that Phaethon's fall was only an appearance, we have granted that, like his father, Phaethon is a star—an assumption everywhere denied by his experience. Or should we say that Phaethon somehow survives his fall, is still somehow a star? The simile adopts the rhetoric of logic and science, but ratiocination infallibly leads us to contradict the evident truth of what the story has told us.

Yet, in a book called the *Metamorphoses*, reality will not be confined strictly to what the mind's reasoning eye can see. One may, of course, from a different perspective, say that Phaethon is a star, and his fall is only an appearance, since the fall occurs only in Ovid's poetry, in which, after all, all is appearance. There is, however, a deeper sense in which Phaethon very much is a star. For Phaethon, without doubt, is Phoebus' natural son. But unlike his father, Phaethon is mortal. We would think that death, in its relation to identity (which, as many have said, is what distinguishes Ovid's Phaethon from his predecessors'), is unambiguous.[9] But Phaethon's demise, instead of completing his definition of self-knowledge, throws his relation with his father into confusion. The hard fact of consanguinity, Ovid seems to say, can be truthfully expressed only as a metaphor.

[8]As is noted in the Haupt-Ehwald edition, Phoebus' garb is *purpurea* not only because he is a lord, but because Ovid calls bright-red sunlight and the day *purpureus*: "das dunkelrote Sonnenlicht und der Tag purpurfarbig genannt werden." (See *Heriodes* 4.160; *Fasti* 3.518.) *P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen*, ed. M. Haupt, R. Ehwald et al. (Zurich 1966[10]) 83.

[9]See, for instance, Galinsky, *Metamorphoses* 49.

Ovid's simile, however, is startling not just because it makes Phaethon's death seem so doubtful but because it manages to relocate that doubt in us. We become uncertain about what we have just witnessed; indeed, our perplexity has been carefully prepared for. When Phaethon approaches his father, our distance from the Sun mirrors his, in that we "see" the crown we suppose the Sun wears only in the verb *deposuit*; the rays that shine in all directions about Phoebus' head are bright enough to conceal the crown from our eyes as well as from Phaethon's. We realize with something of a shock that we are more like Phaethon than he is like his father. Or, to put it in other words, Phaethon's doubts about his paternity, as well as Ovid's more profound questioning, are reconstituted in the reader as a problem in interpretation. We have the Sun's word that Phaethon is his child, we have the evidence of our eyes to disprove it. And again, all we can say with assurance, it seems, is that the doubtful truth of the matter has its appropriate signature as a poetic simile. The flux and endless variety that rule Ovid's world, and which preclude any rigid, formal structure for his stories, extend to the interpreter's world as well, where meaning is undetermined, pulled between equal possibilities. Phaethon is and is not his father's son.[10]

In more general terms I would say that Phaethon exemplifies at least one of Ovid's ideas concerning interpretation. To determine the truth, import, meaning of the story is up to us, but whatever interpretation we decide upon is an appropriation of other possible meanings. Ovid is the poet of potentiality: by making us aware of other possibilities, he invites and subverts any attempt to make his stories mean only one thing.

For Ovid, however, the appropriation inherent in interpretation ultimately is as much a political as a rhetorical act. Here the tales of Lycaon and Apollo and Daphne are central, since they are respectively the last metamorphosis before the flood and the first after the world has been repopulated. We expect that these stories, taken together, should define how the new order differs from the old. And of course, the most notable difference is love: Lycaon's wickedness gives way to the affection of Deucalion and Pyrrha, to the sentiment and passion of Apollo's love for Daphne. But "*plus ça change*": a disturbing sense of continuity underlies all this seeming change, a continuity Ovid pointedly associates with Rome.

Apollo and Daphne have received much attention, for the changes Ovid made in his sources, for the wit he has introduced in his telling, or for the way he subverts the conventions of the epic.[11] What has been less noticed is the way the tale ends. Daphne has been changed to the laurel tree, but Apollo still makes her his:

[10]Compare Richard Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven 1976) 48–64.

[11]Among the studies I have consulted are L. C. Curran, "Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*," *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 213–41; N. P. Gross, "Rhetorical Wit and Amatory Persuasion in Ovid," *CJ* 74 (1979) 305–18; W. R. Nethercut, "Daphne and Apollo: A Dynamic Encounter," *CJ* 74 (1979) 333–47. A. Primmer, "Mythos und Natur in Ovids 'Apollo and Daphne,' " *WS*, *N.F.* 10 (1976), 210–20; Otis, *Ovid* 101–4; B. E. Stirrup, "Techniques of Rape: Variety of Wit in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *G&R* 24 (1977) 170–84.

hanc quoque Phoebus amat positaque in stipite dextra
sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus
conplexusque suis ramos, ut membra, lacertis
oscula dat ligno: refugit tamen oscula lignum.
cui deus "at quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,
arbor eris certe" dixit "mea. semper habebunt
te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae.
tu ducibus Latiis aderis, cum laeta triumphum
vox canet et visent longas Capitolia pompas.
postibus Augustis eadem fidissima custos
ante fores stabis mediamque tuebere quercum,
utque meum intonsis caput est iuvenale capillis,
tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondis honores."
finierat Paean: factis modo laurea ramis
adnuit utque caput visa est agitasse cacumen. (1.553–67)

(Phoebus still loved her, and putting his hand on the stock, he felt the heart still beating under the new bark. And with his arms he embraced the branches as if they were arms, and kissed the tree, yet the tree refused the kisses. At which the god said, "since you cannot be my bride, you shall certainly be my tree. My hair, my lyre, my arrows shall always be [entwined] with you, o laurel; you shall be [worn] by the generals of Rome, when joyful voices sing their triumph and the Capitol witnesses long processions. You shall stand a most faithful guardian before the doors of Augustus' palace and watch over the oak between. And as my head is always youthful with uncut locks, you also shall keep the never-changing beauty of your leaves. The God of healing was done: the laurel nods with her new-made branches, and her top seems to shake like a head, yes.)

The language of trees, however, is quite as equivocal as the language we speak: Daphne just as plausibly can be saying no. Ovid suggests that the laurel consents (*adnuit*), but simultaneously reminds us that we cannot know for certain. Whatever the laurel does she does as a tree; whatever we take those nods and shakes to mean can only be our opinion. *Visa est*: it seems she consents.

Yet some opinions, we feel, are better informed than others. It is possible, of course, that Daphne is persuaded by the honors Apollo offers, and assents, if not to Apollo himself, then to the prospect of becoming part of Rome. But if, as some have suggested, the *Metamorphoses* confirms Posidonius' belief that a person's deep-seated character abides while his physical qualities suffer change, then we might well say Daphne was rather more likely saying no than yes.[12] For Daphne has not changed, at least not essentially: *sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus*. She continues to balk Apollo after she has become the laurel: *refugit tamen oscula lignum*. Indeed, *refugit* conveys the

[12]On the Stoic philosopher Posidonius, whose teaching was popular in Rome during Ovid's time, see Galinsky, *Metamorphoses* 47–48.

sense that the laurel still flees Apollo's kisses, but now only in word, just as she had fled in fact when she was Daphne. And this is fitting, for although she has changed her human form for that of a tree, Daphne remains in word what she was: *laurea* is Latin for Greek *daphne*.

What abides in Daphne abides only in word: that, for Apollo, is the point, for in the face of his power, neither her word nor our feeling that she may be saying no carries any force. Though he cannot have Daphne, Apollo declares victory anyway, and takes possession of the laurel by unilaterally defining a new meaning for her. This meaning Ovid fashions into an *aetion* of Roman custom, which, significantly enough, also celebrates Roman power. The poetic and the political are intertwined through the offices of the laurel: Apollo's hair and arrows find their civic equivalents in the wreathed heads of triumphant Roman generals and the laurels that flank and guard the oak at the entrance to Augustus' palace. As I said, Daphne may indeed assent to this. If so, Ovid validates in this way his own place as love-poet in the official fabric of Rome; the *Metamorphoses* is never more Virgilian than here.

But though Ovid can be quite Virgilian, when the mood strikes him, he is never un-Ovidian. He never lets us forget that Apollo did not force Daphne when she was a nymph so much as he does now, after she has become a tree. For once the transformation occurs, Apollo drops all pretense of petition. Apollo's address to the laurel is less coaxing than peremptory: his hair, lyre and arrows will "intertwine" with the laurel (*habebunt te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae*). "Intertwine" is what we understand Apollo to mean; the verb he actually uses, though, is *habebunt*: literally, Apollo's accoutrements will "have," "possess," "hold mastery over," as well as "be situated with" the laurel. It is hard to imagine that Daphne is persuaded when no persuasion has been offered.

Apollo's "devotion" to the laurel, in fact, is really a flourish of absolute rhetorical power meant to cover or compensate for the fact that Daphne has escaped him. For whatever he may say, Apollo's experience with Daphne is also a chronicle of brute force and the failure of love: his victory is his declaration alone. Apollo desired to possess Daphne, but possession for the god is nothing less than a verbal appropriation so complete Daphne must cease to exist. Apollo's wish "to have and to hold" leaves Daphne with nothing of her own, divorces her even from her name, so that he may make the newly named *laurea* an extension of himself.[13]

Yet despite Apollo's power to enforce meaning, Daphne refuses to disappear entirely. Her "no," as much as his "yes," continues to sound throughout the story. And the same ambivalence extends to Rome, for the implication seems clear that just as Apollo would take Daphne by force, so Rome would determine meaning by its authority. The meaning Apollo and Rome find in Daphne may very well be legitimate, but Ovid allows that it is equally possible that it is not. The effect of this is that, as interpreters, we find ourselves interpreted. If we accept Apollo's reading of the laurel, we are like Apollo; if we resist it, we

[13]One feels almost tempted to recall another meaning of *habere*: "illam suas res habere iussit" [he ordered her to take her things], which was the traditional formula for divorcing a wife. See *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s. v. *habeo* 1.

are like Daphne. In either case, however, we should acknowledge that the language of our interpretation would usurp the language of Ovid's text. The laurel says nothing; the "yes" or "no" we give her is our own.

The story of Apollo and Daphne is the first metamorphosis after Deucalion and Pyrrha repopulate the world. The political dimension of interpretation, which Ovid associates with Rome, seems as much a part of the new world as love; whatever our misgivings, both seem certain improvements over the wickedness and tyranny of the old order. All the degeneracy of that age of iron appears embodied in the figure of Lycaon; his transformation is mankind's first epitaph, his lupine howls seal a sad and almost final chapter in human history. Why, then, has Ovid make Lycaon and his world so similar to Apollo and Daphne's?

Lycaon's deeds so epitomize the impious depravity of his age that Jupiter, pondering the condition men have come to (*Quae pater ut summa vidit Saturnius arce*, 1.163), decides to call a council of the gods to announce his intention to destroy the world. The gods hasten to the royal palace along the Milky Way:

> dextra laevaque deorum
> atria nobilium valvis celebrantur apertis.
> plebs habitat diversa loca: hac parte potentes
> caelicolae clarique suos posuere penates;
> hic locus est, quem si verbis audacia detur
> haud timeam magni dixisse Palatia caeli. (1.171–76)
>
> (To the left and right of it the palaces of the high ranking gods, their doors opened wide, are pressed with visitors. The lesser gods dwell in a different neighborhood. Here the powerful and illustrious gods have placed their penates. This is the place which, should I speak presumptuously, I should scarce fear to call the Palatia of great heaven.)

The self-acknowledged audacity of this passage has been frequently noted. To make Rome the blueprint of heaven, and not the other way round, is pure cheek.[14] But how can anyone take offense, when Ovid already has offered (and slapped) the other cheek by making the gods worship their own household gods?[15] Neither parody nor effrontery, however, can hide the fact that Ovid here associates Jupiter and the pending destruction of the world with Rome. The street-map of heaven parallels that of ancient Rome: the Milky Way is its *Sacer Clivus*, which rose from the *Via Sacra* to the Palatine, where Augustus lived. The council that meets in Jupiter's palace, as the Senate met in Augustus' house, follows procedures that are recognizably those of the Roman Senate.[16]

Indeed, the Roman parallels continue when Ovid likens the gods' shock at Lycaon to the trembling horror the whole world felt when Caesar was assassi-

[14]See Otis, *Ovid* 97–98.
[15]Galinsky makes this point, *Metamorphoses* 29.
[16]Otis, *Ovid* 98.

nated (I.200–3). We may find slightly unsettling the fact that the gods demand Lycaon's punishment before they know what he did: *confremuere omnes studiisque ardentibus ausum / talia deposcunt*" (1.199–200. "All trembled, and with burning zeal demanded retribution for him who had dared such things.") For only after this display does Jupiter rehearse Lycaon's crimes. Nevertheless, such loyalty pleased Jove no less than the Roman people's did Augustus: *nec tibi grata pietas, Auguste, tuorum / quam fuit illa Iovi* (204–5). If Augustus ever read this compliment, he might well have found it unnerving. It is as though Ovid would counterbalance the gods' premature condemnation, mob-like in its passion, by eliding all that happened after Caesar was killed, by suppressing the price at which the "*pietas*" of Augustus' subjects was bought.[17] The Triumvirate, Actium, all has vanished as if a puff of smoke. To interpret before the facts seems the prerogative of the gods and Augustan Rome.

Yet surely Jupiter's (and Augustus') vengeance is just, if we consider the wickedness of Lycaon, who would murder Jove himself? Lycaon is turned into a wolf, marrying the savageness of his inner nature with a consonant outer form. The transformation is undoubtedly moral: thus to blot out the general evil whose particular emblem is Lycaon is also just. If we extend the analogy to Ovid's Rome, we come very near to Anchises' vision of her mission: to humble the proud she has conquered, bring laws, order to the nations she rules. But though we are encouraged to embrace this analogy, again we notice an unsettling shift in focus. Jupiter destroys the world because it is unequivocally evil, but Augustus' dominion can be justified if we look only to its virtues, not to what it displaced. For neither Brutus nor the Republic, Antony nor any provincial protectorate, was evil to the extent Lycaon was. The *pax Romana* definitely was necessary. But was it unambiguously moral? By what he pointedly leaves out, Ovid enjoins us to remember all that has been lost in establishing it. Amid the undeniable commendation, one hears, if not outright denial, at least a murmur of doubt.

Indeed, Lycaon's metamorphosis, the first in the book, shows that Ovid's doubt about Rome's exercise of power is inseparable from his commendation of Augustus. For Lycaon is transformed into a wolf. This wolf, we suppose, must stand as the anti-type of Rome, whose symbol is the wolf, and the transformation itself as an instance of what one might call ethical poetic justice. But how can the anti-type be distinguished from the type? Can the wolf that is Lycaon really be told apart from the wolf that is Rome?

Our uneasiness does not abate when we compare the world that comes into being with the world that the flood destroys. Too many incidental details from the account of Lycaon reappear in the tale of Apollo and Daphne. Jupiter's palace, for instance, is fashioned after Augustus', just outside of which Apollo's laurels flank the oak. And the moving of the gods along the Milky

[17]The word *pietas*, as well as Jove's subsequent quieting of the gods, obviously recalls the *Aeneid*. Again it is unsettling, as much as it is funny, that the gods correspond to the rabble (*ignobile uulgus*—a phrase doubly resonant after Ovid has drawn his celestial class distinctions), which Virgil imagines a man remarkable for goodness stilling (*pietate grauem . . . uirum*, I.149–51). Quotations from the *Aeneid* are from *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1969).

Way to the heavenly consistory seems to find its Roman counterpart in the triumphs of conquering generals parading up the Capitoline.[18] Of more particular moment, however, is the fact that Jupiter argues that the race of men must be obliterated for the threat they pose to the divinities who do not yet inhabit the heavens:

> sunt mihi semidei, sunt, rustica numina, Nymphae
> Faunique Satyrique et montecolae Silvani,
> quos, quoniam caeli nondum dignamur honore,
> quas dedimus *certe* terras habitare sinamus. (1.192–95)
>
> (I have demigods, rustic divinities, nymphs, fauns and satyrs, and sylvan gods who dwell on the mountains, whom, since we do not yet think them worthy the honor of heaven, let us certainly permit to live in the lands we have given them.)

But Daphne is a nymph, whom Apollo certainly does not allow to live unmolested. Instead, Apollo appropriates to himself the right Jove here grants to Daphne:

> "at quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,
> arbor eris *certe*," dixit, "mea." (1.557–58)

Moreover, the metamorphoses of Lycaon and Daphne are identical: since Lycaon means wolf, he becomes what he is in name, just as Daphne becomes what she is.

All these correspondences are very confusing. The problem is that Apollo's behavior with Daphne after the restoration of the world too closely resembles how Jupiter claims men acted before the deluge. But Apollo's actions have been associated with Rome, yet Rome has also been allied with the gods who destroy wickedness in the name of morality. To complete the train of thought we must say that the Rome that chastizes the wicked is also a Rome that behaves wickedly.

The flood, we see, has really made no difference at all, from a certain point of view. The nymphs, Jove declares, are his; Apollo takes total possession of a nymph; the "*pietas*" of Augustus' subjects (*tuorum*) pleases him. In the new age, which is still the age of iron, Apollo puts on his father's power, just as in the age before, Jupiter put on his father's power—the reason why Ovid introduces Jupiter at the start of the episode of Lycaon and the flood as *pater . . . Saturnius*. Even if Apollo's purpose differs from Jupiter's, or Jupiter's from Saturn's, whenever absolute power is exercised, it is affiliated with imperial Rome. And whenever Rome asserts her power, by changing the names of things (as Octavian changed his name to Augustus), Ovid simultaneously undermines it with a counterassertion that other meanings are possible. Ovid often signals this counterthrust by creating deliberate perplexities of interpretation for both his characters and his readers.

[18]See the note in the Haupt-Ehwald edition: "Der Triumph wurde persönlich gedacht wie eine Gottheit des Festaufzuges, der sich auf der Sacra via über das Forum nach dem Kapitol bewegte." 64, n. 560 f.

Ovid "*peri hermenias*": he would remind Aristotle, medieval exegetes and us that Hermes, god of interpretation, is a god of many guises. If the interpreter would see himself as Jove's spokesman, speaking words that are law, Ovid tells us he also is a thief, who would abscond with all meanings not his own. If interpreters claim they are translating from a language no one else knows, Ovid knows that the claim they are making is at heart political, an attempt to impose meaning by force. But Ovid's politics, like his poetics, are essentially republican, even when he is his own subject. The *Metamorphoses* ends with Ovid's interpretation of his own achievement:

> Iamque opus exegi, quod nec Iovis ira nec ignes
> nec poterit ferrum nec edax abolere vetustas. . . .
> quaque patet domitis Romana potentia terris,
> ore legar populi, perque omnia saecula fama,
> siquid habent veri vatum praesagia, vivam. (15.871–72;877–79)
>
> (Now I have completed a work which neither Jove's anger nor fire nor sword nor devouring old age will be able to efface. . . . Wherever Roman power spreads over conquered lands, I shall be read and sung, and in fame forever, if the prophecies of bards have any truth, I shall live.)

The work shall live forever, Ovid says, at once parodying Horace and aligning himself with the poets of Empire. But as if realizing what it means to assert his fame so univocally, Ovid ties it to the power that gives his boast its force. He shall be read and sung wherever Rome extends her power and her language. Virgil had Jupiter say this will be everywhere and forever, but the burden of the last book of the *Metamorphoses* suggests, *pace* Jupiter, that all things shall pass. Even Ovid's irrevocable fame, it seems, has to it an element of contingency. For Ovid's prophecy is the *praesagium* of a poet—notorious tellers of untruths, if we believe Plato and his followers.[19] The final interpretation of the *Metamorphoses* most characterizes all the others, for all round the bravado of certainty one hears the laughter of doubt.

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[19]This despite the solemn overtones Virgil and Horace tried to give the word *vates*, the truth-saying, prophetic bard. Ovid parodies this notion throughout his work. See J. K. Newman, *The Concept of Vates in Augustan Poetry*, Collection Latomus 89 (Brussels 1967) 100–14 and *The Cast of Character* 31 ff.