Tragic Thebes:
Greek and Roman Tragedy in Ovid's 'Thebaid' (*Met.* 3-4.603)

Scholars have long recognized a pervasive debt to Athenian tragic drama, and a related interest in republican Roman adaptations of individual Greek tragedies, in the gruesome spectacles, rhetorical fireworks, and emotional intensity characteristic of so many of the episodes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Lafaye 1971.141-53; D'Anna 1959.220-226; Currie 1981). Lafaye (1971.141-53) and Currie (1981), for example, have argued that Ovid makes extensive use of Greek and Roman tragedy respectively in the *Metamorphoses*, and Ovid himself acknowledges his interest in the genre and its practitioners that is borne out by his *Medea* (*Am.* 1.15.15, 19-20; 3.1.67-70; 3.15.17-18: items 1a, b, and c on the handout). Philip Hardie (1990.226) has recently emphasised the crucial importance of tragic models to the whole of Ovid's 'Thebaid,' *Met.* 3-4.603. In this paper, I shall explore Ovid's sophisticated use of allusions to Roman tragedy and its Athenian models in his Theban narrative. I hope to contribute to our understanding of the rich concentration of allusion to tragic models in the 'Thebaid' and I shall suggest that such allusion sustains an extensive engagement with the genre of tragedy in this section of the *Metamorphoses*.

Many scholars have thought that 'the πάθη of Dionysus, the patron god of the drama [as Ovid knew: *Am.* 3.15.17-18, item 1c on the handout], may well be the oldest of all dramatic subjects' (Dodds 1960.xxviii), and it has recently been argued that Thebes, as the birthplace of Dionysus, is the site *par excellence* of Athenian tragedy (Zeitlin 1990.130-67). It is therefore entirely appropriate that Ovid should saturate his Theban narrative with tales drawn from the tragic repertoire. Within the two-book compass of his 'Thebaid,' Ovid narrates at length some six episodes well represented in the tragic canon (the myths of Cadmus, Semele, Pentheus, the Minyads, Athamas and Ino), and repeatedly alludes to Lycurgus and Acrisius, both

of whom provided subjects to the Greek dramatists and their Roman emulators. Even the final episode of Book Four, the rescue of Andromeda by Perseus--which stands, strictly speaking, as a coda to the book and outside of the 'Thebaid' proper (4.663-803)--contributes to the tragic *color* of this section of the *Metamorphoses*, for it too was a popular subject of tragedy. Euripides' production of 412 was the most popular, but plays of this title are also ascribed to Sophocles, Phrynichus and Lycophron among the Greek tragedians, while Roman plays with this title are attributed to Livius, Ennius, and Accius.

Ovid explicitly signals his engagement with the genre of tragedy early in the 'Thebaid.' Like Vergil, who acknowledges an important debt to tragedy in *Aeneid* Four by comparing Dido to characters from the tragic stage (*Aen.* 4.469-73), Ovid establishes the central importance of the drama to his 'Thebaid' with a famous simile comparing the birth of the Spartoi, the 'Sown Men', to the figures represented on the stage curtain which rise from the ground when the stage curtain itself is raised (item 2 on the handout).

> sic, ubi tolluntur festis aulaea theatris,
> surgere signa solent primumque ostendere uultus,
> cetera paulatim, placidoque educta tenore
> tota patent imoque pedes in margine ponunt.
> (*Met.* 3.111-114)

> [So, when the curtains are raised in the theatres on holidays, the figures are accustomed to rise and show first their faces, and the rest little by little, until drawn up with steady motion, whole figures lie revealed and place their feet on the very edge of the curtain.]

I am not suggesting that Ovid raises the curtain on tragedy in our sense of the phrase, for at this period the raising of the curtain came not at the beginning but at the end of the performance (Beare 1964.267-8). Rather, as Philip Hardie has suggested, 'with this simile introducing the men of Thebes Ovid signposts entry into a stagey, tragic world' (Hardie 1990.226 n.14). Certainly the characters who

populate Ovid's Thebes in *Metamorphoses* Three and Four--Cadmus, Actaeon, Semele, Dionysus, Teiresias, Pentheus, Athamas and Ino--were well known on the tragic stage.

Ovid's version of the myth of Pentheus (*Met.* 3.511-733) has long been the focus of critical discussion of Ovid's engagement with the genre of tragedy in the *Metamorphoses*. Pentheus' demise was a perennially popular subject of tragic drama: the story is most famously told in Euripides' *Bacchae*, but the titles 'Bacchae' and 'Pentheus' are also recorded against the names of Thespis, Aeschylus, Polyphrasmon (467), Xenocles (415), Iophon, Lycophron and Pacuvius. Ovid stages the confrontation between Dionysus and Pentheus as a conflict between the god of cathartic release and a descendant of the god of war. Pentheus overvalues his descent from Echion (3.513, 531, 701), one of the five Spartoi sprung from the teeth of the serpent of Mars (*Met.* 3.31-2, 126), and he repeatedly contrasts his martial ancestry and morals with Dionysus' softness and effeminacy (*Met.* 3.531-7, 540, 553-6). In the contest between Pentheus, fit champion of martial epic (e.g., 3.704-7), and Dionysus, god of the theatre, Ovid implicitly inscribes a literary confrontation between the genres of epic and tragedy (*Met.* 3.704-711, item 3 on the handout).

Comparison of Ovid's Pentheus episode with Euripides' *Bacchae* reveals that Ovid knew the Euripidean play and imitated it in a number of ways. Teiresias' warning that Pentheus will regret his contempt for the prophet (item 4 on the handout, *Met.* 3.517-25) serves to focus our attention on the nature of the drama to come, like the prologue spoken by Dionysus himself in the *Bacchae* (1-63), and verbal echoes of the Euripidean prologue heighten the tragic tension. Bömer (1976.573-4) notes that Ovid's emphasis on Dionysus as a new god (*Met.* 3. 520, item 5) is derived from the portrait of the god in Euripides' play (items 5a, b and c on the handout, *Ba.* 219-20, 256-7, 272), while the prominent role Ovid assigns to Pentheus'

mother and aunts (*Met.* 3.523, item 4) is expressed in diction that closely echoes Euripides' (item 6 on the handout, ἀδελφα μητρός, *Ba.* 26). Even the arrival of the god is announced in Ovid's *Pentheus* (item 7 on the handout, 3.528) with a brusqueness and an economy of phrasing reminiscent of the opening words of Euripides' tragedy (item 8 on the handout, Ἥκω Διὸς παῖς . . . Διόνυσος, *Ba.* 1). The Ovidian episode as a whole, moreover, is modelled generally on Euripides play, beginning with Pentheus' hostility to the new god (*Ba.* 215-370~*Met.* 3.531-561), his order that the imposter be apprehended (*Ba.* 352-7~*Met.* 562-3), and the opposition of Cadmus and the rest of the Thebans to this plan of action (*Ba.* 330-469~*Met.* 3.564-5; cf. 3. 511-27). The centrepiece of the Ovidian narrative is Pentheus' interview with Acœtes (*Met.* 3.572–695), which replaces the three Euripidean scenes in which Pentheus spars with the Stranger, the disguised Dionysus (*Ba.* 434-518, 642-56, 787-860). Unlike Euripides, however, whose *Bacchae* continues for another five hundred lines after the report of Pentheus' death, Ovid ends his *Pentheus* immediately after his protagonist's death and dismemberment (*Met.* 3.701-733).

The *Bacchae* thus cannot have been Ovid's only model. The role of the stranger in particular is handled differently in the two authors, for it belongs to the god in Euripides' play but to Acœtes in Ovid's *Pentheus* (3.582-691). Currie (1981.2716-18) has therefore suggested that while Ovid's Pentheus episode (*Met.* 3.511-733) incorporates numerous verbal and formal references to Euripides' *Bacchae*, it owes its overall shape to Pacuvius' *Pentheus*, for which Euripides' play provided the model. D'Anna (1959.220-26) has discussed the extensive parallels between the two works, and I have reproduced his schematic summary of the correspondences on the handout (items 9a and b on the handout). The left-hand column contains Servius auctus' notice of the contents of Pacuvius' play (on Verg. *Aen.* 4.469), the right-hand column the corresponding lines of Ovid's version of the Pentheus narrative in the *Metamorphoses*.

Servius auctus	Ovidius
Pentheus Echionis et Agaues filius	Spernit Echionides tamen hunc . . . . . . Pentheus (*Met.* 3.513-14)
misit satellites qui eum uinctum ad se perducerent	'Ite citi' (famulis hoc imperat), 'ite ducemque adtrahite huc uinctum!' (*Met.* 3.562-3)
qui cum ipsum non inuenissent	quaerenti domino Bacchum uidisse negarunt (*Met.* 3.573)
unum ex comitibus eius Acoeten captum ad Pentheum perduxerunt	'hunc' dixere 'tamen comitem famulumque sacrorum cepimus' et tradunt manibus post terga ligatis (*Met.* 3.574-5)
	ille metu uacuus 'nomen mihi' dixit 'Acoetes (*Met.* 3.582)
is cum de eo grauiorem poenam constitueret iussit eum interim claudi uinctum	protinus abstractus solidis Tyrrhenus Acoetes clauditur in tectis; et dum crudelia iussae instrumenta necis ferrumque ignesque parantur, (*Met.* 3.696-8)
cumque sponte sua et carceris fores apertae essent et uincula Acoetis excidissent	sponte sua patuisse fores lapsasque lacertis sponte sua fama est nullo soluente catenas. (*Met.* 3.699-700)
Pentheus spectaturus sacra Liberi patris Cithaerona petit	. . . Echionides . . . ipse uadit, ubi electus facienda ad sacra Cithaeron (*Met.* 3.701-2)
quem . . . Bacchae discerpserunt	. . . sunt membra uiri manibus direpta nefandis (*Met.* 3.731)
prima autem Agaue mater eius	prima suum misso uiolauit Penthea thyrso mater . . . (*Met.* 3.712-13)
amputasse caput dicitur	auulsumque caput digitis complexa cruentis (*Met.* 3.727)
feram esse existimans.	ille aper, in nostris errat qui maximus agris, ille mihi feriendus aper.' (*Met.*3.714-15)

D'Anna 1959.221-222

[Pentheus, the son of Echion and Agave, king of the Thebans ... sent his partisans to bind Liber and bring him before him. When they couldn't find him, they brought Acœtes, one of his companions, to Pentheus. He, since he determined a harsher penalty for him, bade him in the meantime be bound and imprisoned; and when of their own accord the doors of the prison had been opened and Acœtes' chains had fallen from him, Pentheus sought Cithaeron to watch the rites of father Liber; there the Bacchants dismembered him. Moreover his mother Agave first is said to have cut off his head, thinking him a wild beast.]

The narrative line of the Ovidian *Pentheus* very closely follows the trajectory of Pacuvius' play, as it is reported by Servius auctus. Ovid thus seems to have indulged here in one of his favourite techniques of composition, that of 'alluding to a model [in this case Euripides' *Bacchae*] both directly and [indirectly] through an intermediary' (Hinds 1987.9), in this case Pacuvius' *Pentheus*. In addition to the verbal reminiscences of Euripides' *Bacchae* and the structural similarities to Pacuvius' *Pentheus*, formal features of Ovid's *Pentheus* testify to the influence of tragedy on the shape of the narrative: besides the prologue-like admonition of Teiresias (3.511-27), we may note the high proportion of direct speech in the episode (167 out of 223 lines, almost 75% of the passage), and the temporal abridgement so characteristic of tragedy (3.528, 572: cf. Bömer 1969.586, on 3.572).

The pervasive deployment of themes and formal features drawn from tragedy in Ovid's *Pentheus* is hardly surprising in an episode whose literary antecedents include the most famous Dionysiac drama, but the influence of tragedy continues to be felt in the far less celebrated tale of the daughters of Minyas, which occupies the first half of Book Four (*Met.* 4.1-415). The impious daughters of Minyas--variously named in our sources as Leukippe, Arsippe or Arsinoe, and Alkathoe or Alkithoe--spurn the newly-established rites of Bacchus to devote themselves to the long-established rites of Minerva (spinning and weaving) and are duly punished by the aggrieved god with transformation into bats (*Met.* 4.1-415). Ovid motivates the tale by thematic link with the story of Pentheus' impiety that closes the preceding book, and he forges a further link through the structural similarity of the tales. Greek versions of the Pentheus story include among those who spurn the new god--and who are accordingly punished by him--Semele's sisters Agave (Pentheus' mother), Autonoe, and Ino (Euripides, *Bacchae* 26-42). While Ovid does not include this part of the Pentheus myth in book three, he retains the

motif of a trio of sisters who spurn the god and are in turn punished by him in book four with the Minyads.

Ovid establishes the dramatic context of the new episode at the outset by drawing extensively on Roman tragic diction in the hymn to Dionysus which opens Book Four. The Minyads' impious rejection of the god is starkly contrasted with the piety of the Theban women (*Met.* 3.732-4.35) who invoke the god in lengthy recitation of his titles (item 10 on the handout):

> turaque dant Bacchumque vocant Bromiumque Lyaeumque
> ignigenamque satumque iterum solumque bimatrem;
> additur his Nyseus indetonsusque Thyoneus
> et cum Lenaeo genialis consitor uvae
> Nycteliusque Eleleusque parens et Iacchus et Euhan
> (*Met.* 4.11-15)

[They consecrate incense, and invoke the god by his titles Bacchus, 'Thunderer,' and 'Loosener,' calling him fire-born and twice-born, who alone has two mothers; to these titles are added god 'of Nysa,' unshorn Thyoneian, along with god 'of the wine-vat' and sower of the cheering grape, god 'of nocturnal rites,' father Eleleus, Iacchus and Euhan.]

A fragment of Ennius's *Athamas*, quoted by Charisius (*G.L.* I, 241, 3ff K), supplies the model for Ovid's diction here (item 11 on the handout):

> His erat in ore Bromius, his Bacchus pater;
> illis Lyaeus uitis inuentor sacrae.
> Tum pariter Euhan <euhoe euhoe> Euhium[1]
> ignotus iuuenum coetus alterna uice
> inibat alacris Bacchico insultans modo.
> (trag. LII 120-4 (Jocelyn).

[On their lips were the titles of the god, 'Bromius,' 'father Bacchus,' and 'Lyaeus,' discoverer of the holy vine. Then mingling the god's titles with their ritual cries,[2] a cohort of unknown youths came on in their turn and danced with quick movements in Bacchic measure.]

Ovid employs all four Ennian titles of the god in his hymn, and in characteristically learned fashion signals his debt to an important model by preserving their initial and final positions in his own catalogue of Bacchus' titles. The first three Ennian

titles (Bromius, Bacchus, Lyaeus) appear as the first three of the god's titles in Ovid's hymn with their order slightly varied, while the final Ovidian title (Euhan) is also drawn from the Ennian passage (Euhan ... Euhium). Instead of repeating Ennius' concluding variations of the cry derived from the god's title Euhan, however, Ovid closes with three different titles of the god also derived from ritual cries uttered in his worship (Eleleus, Iacchus, Euhan). The context of the Ennian lines to which Ovid alludes is also relevant to our discussion, for these lines are attributed by Charisius to Ennius' tragedy *Athamas*, whose hero is the subject of the episode immediately following the Minyads' tales in *Metamorphoses* Four (420-542). A line from Accius' *Bacchae*, for which there is no model in Euripides' play of the same name, may also be echoed in the Ovidian hymn (item 12 on the handout): *O Dionyse | pater optime uitisator Semela genitus, Euhie!* ('O Dionysus, father, best, vine-sower, born of Semele, Euhius!,' Accius *trag.* 241-2). Ovid's Theban women invoke the god spurned by the Minyads in the hymnic style and ritual language earlier adapted to the needs of Roman tragedy.

Spurning the Theban women's celebration of the rites of Dionysus, the daughters of Minyas spin and weave, all the while telling stories in which the Bacchic themes and imagery of the surrounding Theban narrative figure prominently. In this rich Dionysian matrix, allusions to the dramatic conventions and verbal pyrotechnics of Roman tragedy mingle with detailed references to the generic norms of both novel and epic, and constitute an important element in the interplay of genre in this part of the *Metamorphoses*. The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, for example, is usually discussed in relation to the generic conventions of the ancient romance:[3] the opening conjunction of their names (4.55, item 13 on the handout), their superlative beauty (4.55-56), the fabulous Eastern setting of the tale (4.56-58), and the reference to Semiramis, the legendary queen of Babylon who is the heroine of the late Hellenistic Ninos-romance usually dated c. 100 BCE (4.58), set in

play the familiar conventions of the ancient novel, as does the initial sketch of the innocence of the love-struck teen-agers and the obstacles to their love. Although the tale exploits numerous other conventional features of the romance genre, such as the determination of hero and heroine to marry one another, their inadvertent separation, and the apparent death of the heroine, the story also displays considerable thematic and imagistic overlap with the sphere of Dionysus. Most Dionysian is the hint of σπαραγμός in the torn and bloodied cloak which Pyramus finds in place of Thisbe (4.104, 107-8), and his despairing invitation to the lions to rend and devour his body in the same way that he assumes they have his beloved (*Met.* 4.112-14). Indeed intimations of mangled flesh recur throughout the episode, from the bloody mouth of the lioness (4.96-97) that rends Thisbe's cloak (4.103-104), to the blood-spattered tree under which Pyramus kills himself (4.125-7, 160-1) and the sword still warm from Pyramus' blood by which Thisbe kills herself (4.163). The most spectacularly bloody scene, however, occurs at the centre of the tale in the graphic description of Pyramus' self-inflicted death (item 14 on the handout):

> 'accipe nunc' inquit 'nostri quoque sanguinis haustus!'
> quoque erat accinctus, demisit in ilia ferrum,
> nec mora, feruenti moriens e uulnere traxit.
> ut iacuit resupinus humo, cruor emicat alte,
> non aliter quam cum uitiato fistula plumbo
> scinditur et tenui stridente foramine longas
> eiaculatur aquas atque ictibus aera rumpit.
> arborei fetus adspergine caedis in atram
> uertuntur faciem, madefactaque sanguine radix
> purpureo tinguit pendentia mora colore.
> (*Met.* 4.118-27)

['Now,' he said, 'drink my blood too!' And he plunged the sword which he wore into his groin, and without delay, dying, drew it from the warm wound. As he lay on his back on the ground, his blood spurts high, just as when a pipe with a crack in the lead is split, and spurts long streams of water through the slender hissing opening, and strikes the air with its jets. The fruit of the tree, sprinkled with the blood, is changed to a dark colour, and the roots, moistened with blood, tinged the hanging berries with the purple colour.]

Pyramus' suicide, moreover, is the very point in the Minyad's narrative at which the generic conventions of the ancient romance give way to those of the drama. Thisbe's apparent death lies fully within the generic parameters of the ancient novel, but Pyramus' real death breaks sharply with novelistic conventions to introduce one of the most familiar motifs from the tragic stage, the suicide of a protagonist in the drama. Moreover, the graphic account of Pyramus' blood spurting from his wounds can be parallelled in Roman (if not Greek) tragedy. Indeed, what is generally taken to be a characteristically Ovidian excess in the simile in fact finds an intriguing parallel in a description of the suicide of Ajax, preserved by Festus, from Ennius' tragedy of the same name (item 15 on the handout): *misso sanguine tepido tullii efflantes uolant* ('with gushing, warm blood the spouting jets fly,' Ennius, *Ajax, tr.* XII Jocelyn). The Ennian 'spouting jets' of blood closely parallel the sense, if not the diction, of the Ovidian Minyad's portrait of Pyramus' blood spewing from his wound like long sprays of water bursting from a broken water pipe in a hissing jet. While the contexts of the two passages are extremely similar--both feature the extravagantly gruesome depiction of blood spurting from a wound self-inflicted by a protagonist of the drama--we certainly need not see a specific allusion to the Ennian passage here. Instead we might more usefully speak of the tragic *color* with which Ovid's diction invests Pyramus' character and actions here.

I have argued that allusion to Greek and particularly Roman tragedy in the *Metamorphoses*, while not confined to Ovid's 'Thebaid,' is particularly concentrated in this section of the poem, and it will be apparent that, like Philip Hardie, I think Ovid's 'Thebaid' is constructed throughout by reference to the genre of tragedy. I do not wish, however, to suggest that tragedy is uniformly important throughout this section of the poem. As the shape of my discussion of allusion to tragic models in the 'Thebaid' has implied, the intensity of Ovid's engagement with tragic themes

and models increases as the narrative moves towards and decreases as it moves away from the death and dismemberment of Pentheus, the central panel of the 'Thebaid' and the primal scene that stages the 'dynamic basis of Greek tragedy' (Zeitlin 1996.343). Moreover Ovid frames his tragic program with an epic--indeed Vergilian--narrative of city foundation, in Cadmus' foundation of and exile from Thebes.

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[1]See Jocelyn ad loc. on the textual problem here.

[2]See Jocelyn ad loc.

[3]See Due 1974.123-27 and Newlands 1986.