Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Roman Empire
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Please Silence Cell Phones
Publius Ovidius Naso (44 B.C-18 A.D.)

- Born to wealthy equestrian parents
- Two unhappy marriages; third was happy
- 8 A.D. Imperial decree of Banishment to Black Sea
- Official Reason—immorality of his poetry; suspected he may have had an affair with Julia, the Emperor's daughter

Overview of *Metamorphoses*

- Title means "changes"
- Creation Story as an act of Change
- Loosely connected stories of humans changed into natural objects and gods
- Ends with metamorphosis of Julius Caesar into a God
- Most of the stories are from Greek myth; Adopt and Adapt

Why Metamorphoses?

- But what unifies this collection of metamorphosis stories?
- "All things are always changing, but nothing dies. The spirit comes and goes, is housed wherever it wills, shifts residence from beasts to men, from men to beasts, but always it keeps on living."(Book 15, Pythagoras)
- Eras and nations change too…"I hear that Rome is rising, out of Trojan blood…Rome is changing; growing to Greatness…" (book 15)

Creation

- "Before the ocean was, or earth or heaven,

Nature was all alike, a shapelessness,
Chaos, so-called, all rude and lumpy matter,
Nothing but bulk, inert, in whose confusion
Discordant atoms warred: there was no moon
… No earth hung balanced in the surrounding air;
No sea reached far along the fringe of shore…
Substance forever changing, forever at war…" (Book 1)

Creation Story Explained

- Influence of Democritus, Epicureanism, and Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*
- As in most early myths of creation, Separation is the concept that explains how word is created out of Chaos
- Aristotelian idea of four basic elements: Fire, Earth, Water, Air; everything naturally finds its place

Origin of Man

"But something else was needed, a finer being,
More capable of mind, a sage, a ruler,
So Man was born, it may be, in God's image,
Or Earth, perhaps, so newly separated
From the old fire of Heaven, still retained
Some seed of the celestial force which fashioned
Gods out of living clay and running water.
All other animals look downward; Man,
Alone, erect, can raise his face toward Heaven."

Four Ages of Man

- Golden Age: "a time that cherished of its own will, justice and right; no law. No punishment was called for…" No war. The earth provided what men needed.
- Silver Age; Bronze Age
- Iron Age: "whose base vein let loose all evil: modesty and truth and righteousness fled earth, and in their place came trickery and slyness, potting, swindling, violence and the damned desire of having." War. End of fidelity among guest-friends or family

Gods and Men: Good and Bad

- Giants are thrown down and their blood mingled with earth produced Men.
- Lycaon: Hospitality Abused; Zeus turns him into a Wolf
- Zeus prepares to destroy mankind with fire but thinks better to use water

Flood

- Deucalion and Pyrrha land on Mount Parnassus
- "There was no better man than this Deucalion, no one more fond of right; there was no woman more scrupulously reverent than Pyrrha."
- Oracle of Themis: 'Cover your heads, loosen your robes, and throw your mother's bones behind you!"

- Earth as mother: stones turned to human beings

Daphne and Apollo

- Apollo Insults Cupid
- But Daphne ran fast and Apollo pursued as “when a hound starts a rabbit in an open field, one runs for game, one safety,…”
- She prays to father, river god, and he turns her into Laurel tree; “Since you can never be my bride, my tree at least you shall be! Let the laurel adorn my hair, my lyre, my quiver: Let Roman victors wear laurel wreaths for triumph…”
- Cupid as Supreme God

Jove (Zeus) and Io

- Ovid’s Io is a lyrical story full of Pathos
- Io can’t supplicate: ‘When she wanted to reach toward Argus her imploring arms, she had no arms to reach with; when she tried to plead, she only lowed…”
- Flees to her father and writes her name in dust with hoof
- Io sent in terror of flight until stopped by Nile river; prays to Jove; He embraces Juno and asks her to end the punishment and “I will never cause you anguish”

Phaeton: Don’t strive to be like Gods

- Phaeton was son of Sun God but no one believed him
- Oath of Sun God
- “My son, what you want is dangerous; you ask for power beyond your strength and years; your lot is mortal, but what you ask is beyond the lot of mortals.”
- He burns the earth and so Jove must shoot him down with a lightning blast

Don’t Challenge Gods (Book VI)

- Arachne—challenged Athena at weaving; Spider
- Niobe—Challenged Leto/Latona; turned into a Weeping Stone
- Lycian Peasants deny Water to Latona; Frogs
- Marsyas—challenged Apollo at flute; flayed alive; tears form the Maryas river in Phrygia

Themes

- Gods desire mortals and mortals suffer

- Mortals deign to challenge gods and mortals suffer
- Bad men punished and good and bad transformed into forms that fit their character

Deification of Caesar

- His victories over Britons, Egypt, Africa, surpassed only by “being father of one yet greater, one who rules the world as proof that the immortal gods have given rich blessing to the human race, so much so we cannot think him mortal, our Augustus, therefore our Julius must be made a god to justify his son.” (Book 15)

Conclusion

- This is an encyclopedic collection of knowledge woven together into a cohesive story that justifies and explains the ascension of Rome over the world and of Augustus as Emperor.
- Age of Iron to be replaced by this new age, the Pax Romana, of Augustus
- Under Augustus the injustice that exists between men and between men and Gods will be ended.
- *Metamorphoses* is comprehensive story of Earthly and Supernatural Change, with Romans as the culmination of History.