

Guide to Responding

Study Guide for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Main Point Summary/Background:

Metamorphoses is more than a collection of stories of mythical adventures, it is a meditation on the theme of metamorphosis or transformation in all its myriad forms. Ovid uses this motif as the unifying thread of his tales, emphasizing it as a universal principle which explains the ever-changing nature of the world. Moreover, across the fifteen books that form *Metamorphoses*, Ovid examines a large number of themes, including poetry, politics, identity, immortality, love and lust, violence, morality, and even art.

Note that scholars still argue today over the true nature of *Metamorphoses*, particularly whether or not it should be considered a mock-epic. Mock-epics are typically parodies that ridicule common classical stereotypes of heroes and heroic literature. Even though *Metamorphoses* is characterized by its wittiness and ironic shifts, and the characters in its pages are very much marked by their human desires and imperfections, it is probably not correct to call *Metamorphoses* a mock-epic, because even in episodes of ridicule, the main theme is still metamorphosis and not parody. Thus, just remember that this text is still not completely understood today.

Related Readings:

This reading is related to the other reading in Unit 6 "The Roman Kingdom, Republic, and Empire," particularly to Dr. Steven Kreis's "A Brief Social History of the Roman Empire" in subunit 6.2 "Roman Culture and Society."

Instructions:

Below are responses that serve as sample answers for the study questions. Review these answers after you have completed the study questions. Highlighting or taking notes while you read paired with later outlining and paraphrasing is an excellent method to ensure comprehension and retention of difficult material.

1. *Metamorphoses* is a poem about transformation and continuous change. There is very little order, if any at all in the world it portrays; the only constant in the world is change, metamorphosis.

The story of *Metamorphoses* starts with chaos in the story of creation; however, chaos is pervasive during the entire poem, both in the physical world, and in the lives and actions of human beings. Ovid portrays a world in which

metamorphosis is not an orderly transformation but as a dangerous and chaotic stage for his myths.

2. In many ways, Ovid's gods are like the gods in other classical epic poems—anthropomorphic, omnipotent, and meddling in human affairs. However, Ovid's gods differ from the usual epic gods in their behavior. In *Metamorphoses*, the gods lack moral authority in regard to their interactions with humans and among themselves. The gods are a 'divine machine' of metamorphosis. Even though on a few occasions this change inflicted upon humans is the result of a just reward or punishment, on most occasions, it is caused by anger, jealousy, lust, or simple cruelty.

On many occasions, Ovid uses the gods as comic relief for his tragic stories. For example, in the myth of Callisto, Ovid tells us how Jupiter disguises himself as a bull, giving slobbery cow-kisses to Europe—something not appropriate for the king of the gods.

3. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid portrays his women characters as objects of male desire, just distractions to men's destinies. For example, Proserpina is described nearly as an inanimate object, only valued for her physical beauty. However, Ovid presents readers with two types of women: innocent and virginal, or powerful and cruel. Still, all these women have something in common: they are portrayed as irrational, weak, and dependent of men to solve any contrary situation. Even when these women try to fight their fate, as for example with Atalanta, they are easily defeated, and thus they become subjugated to their male counterparts in the myth.
4. In *Metamorphoses*, love is represented as the power that can make fools out of anyone, not only humans but also gods. In *Metamorphoses*, there are depictions to many types of "love." There is self-love as in the story of Narcissus, sexual love as in the myth of Tereus, conjugal love in the tale of Ceyz and Alcyone, sublime love as in the story of Pygmalion, and even incest as in the myth of Myrrha.
5. Ovid uses humor in two ways: firstly, to ease tension in many of the myths. It is a technique to debunk any attempt to explore anything beyond fiction itself. Secondly, he uses humor as another element of "transformation." Humor helps the tone and mood of the poem to constantly change, and subsequently,

tragedies are transformed into comedies. Thus, humor becomes a unifying threat of the world of *Metamorphoses*.

6. This poem was written for the society of the late Augustan age, and subsequently reflected the changed ambience from previous times. *Metamorphoses* was written in a time of relative peace, so it has different concerns than the wartime and post-war poetry of Vergil and Horace. Thus, the simple choice of themes transformation, love/lust, and gods' interactions with humans—rather than war destiny, and glory—is a clear indication of the literary taste of the time.

Metamorphoses offers a great number of observations of the evolution of Roman politics and society in general. The poem reflects Ovid's interest in the structure of power in society. This comes through very clearly in his descriptions of the gods. Ovid applies to the gods the class distinctions found in Roman society. As Romans are divided into *patricians* and *plebeians*, there are greater and lesser gods. Moreover, Ovid uses mockery, especially of the gods, to ridicule the hypocrisies of Augustan society and even Augustus himself. Throughout the poem, we can find several bitter allusions to Emperor Augustus, as for example, in his description of Hercules and in the story of Cupid. These ironic allusions to the emperor are an important clue to understanding Ovid's own society. Some scholars have pointed out that Ovid could have used *Metamorphoses* as an attack on Augustus' efforts to reform society by imposing an artificial religious revival and more strict moral codes. Clearly, the myths contained in the poem tell us of late Augustan society's attitudes toward innumerable subjects such as marriage, virginity, adultery, trust, violence, religion, politics, and art, among many others. Remember that this was a time of cultural crisis, in which many subjects were being questioned.

7. Although Ovid avoids giving a moral treatment of the myths in *Metamorphoses*, it does not mean that there is not a moral lesson to the poem. Since there are two main themes to *Metamorphoses*—firstly, an above all transformation and secondly, love/lust—there are two main moral lessons. The only permanent thing in nature is metamorphosis or continuous change, and trying to order this chaos is futile. Secondly, Ovid gives a moral lesson against yielding to passion/lust. It is this lesson, which made this poem one of the most read texts in Christian Europe during the Middle Ages.