

## Lycaon and the Giants: Metamorphosis Defined

As the first obvious example of a transformation in the *Metamorphoses*, Jupiter's story of Lycaon (1.163-252) has been regarded as Ovid's definitive example of metamorphosis, which may be used as a guide for understanding other metamorphoses in the poem (Barkan 1986, Solodow 1988). I would like to challenge this idea in two ways. First, Jupiter's credibility as a narrator, and thus his description of metamorphosis, is dubious. Second, the story of the Giants, told by the poem's narrator immediately before the story of Lycaon (1.151-62), actually contains the first metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*: Earth transforms the blood of the Giants into human beings. By giving us a true example of metamorphosis immediately before the story of Lycaon, Ovid allows his readers to discern truth from falsehood in Jupiter's narration.

The story of Lycaon is told by Jupiter at a council of the gods, where he argues for the eradication of the entire human race. Jupiter offers the story of Lycaon as evidence in support of his argument, and so we must wonder whether he has twisted the truth to prove his point. Indeed, everywhere else in his speech Jupiter proves himself a scheming tyrant. He subtly intimidates his subjects (1.196-8); he exaggerates the threat Lycaon and other mortals pose to the gods (1.82-3); and he ironically claims an altruistic concern for the welfare of the Nymphs and woodland spirits (1.192-3) – ironic because Jupiter is the most famous predator of Nymphs!

In order to corroborate Jupiter's description of metamorphosis, we must compare it to the description offered by the narrator in the story of the Giants. In doing so we learn that metamorphosis is not the function of a just and orderly universe, as Jupiter would have us believe, but an amoral process of the natural world. In addition, by encouraging these kinds of context based readings, Ovid teaches us readers how we are to engage with his epic. We must focus on what is less obvious, and never read any story in the *Metamorphoses* as an isolated

episode. It is true, then, that the story of Lycaon (when read in the larger context of the council of the gods and the story of the Giants) can be read as a guide to understanding the *Metamorphoses*.

#### Works Cited

- Barkan, Leonard. *The gods made flesh: metamorphosis & the pursuit of paganism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Solodow, Joseph B.. *The World of Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.