

The Loss of Speech and its Effect on Identity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
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This paper examines the role of the ability to speak in Ovid's construction of identity within the *Metamorphoses*. As various scholars have recognized, metamorphosis in Ovid is closely connected with the issue of identity. An important aspect of identity in *Metamorphoses* is the linguistic ability of its characters. Ovid's manipulation of his characters' linguistic ability and, in particular, of their loss of speech adds meaning to what it is to be metamorphosed in Ovid's *chef d'oeuvre*. Throughout the work, Ovid consistently portrays the metamorphosed human characters as changed due to their lack of linguistic ability. Since the ability was seen as an aspect strictly reserved for humans, the loss of such ability led to the dehumanization, or metamorphosis, of the character. In the stories of Lycaon, Acteon, Philomela, Echo, Io, et al., Ovid takes each character's ability to speak from them as they mutate into their changed shape. The *mens* of each is intact; however, they are unable to speak and, thus, are unable to communicate with humanity. This lack of connection to humanity results in the loss of the ability to express identity or, in fact, to have identity.

To explore the role of speech loss in construction of identity, this paper analyzes Ovid's depiction of humans metamorphosed through the lens of modern socio-linguistic theory. The theory of performative utterance first introduced by J.L. Austin and then refined by many other scholars, most notably John Searle, provides an interestingly fresh prism through which to examine Ovid's construction of identity. In addition, if one includes the literary-philosophical ideas of the 20th century scholar Walter Benjamin into the mix, the picture is refined further. To these scholars, if one could not speak, one could not be. Words are not a simple means by which one can communicate. Instead, they form the ability to *do* within a society, thereby describing one's ability to become a part of humanity. By stripping the metamorphosed of their ability to be and, consequently, the ability to do something human, Ovid removes their human identity. Moreover, by looking at such narrative technique through the kaleidoscope of Benjamin, Austin, and Searle, this paper hopes to open doors to the discussion of how Ovid saw his own identity. As a poet, the power of speech was paramount to him and because of such speech, Ovid could be spoken of amongst humanity (*ore legar populi*), a concept later picked up by Martial (3.95,7 and 8.3,7). Could this power have led Ovid to see a heightened identity for himself as well, a *melior pars* that might possibly give him precedence over the rest of mankind, or possibly over Augustus himself? Or, in the words of 18th century German poet Heinrich Heine, "Don't belittle the poets, they can flash and thunder, they are more fierce than the bolt of Jove, which, after all, they created for him."

Select Bibliography

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