"The fundamental interconnectedness of all things": Michael Longley's Pythagoras

"According to Pythagoras" (*The Ghost Orchid*, 1995), by Irish poet Michael Longley, is a comically allusive poem concerned with mutability and natural processes that appears to be a near translation of the zoological portion of Pythagoras' speech in Ovid's *Met*. (15.361-420). This paper examines how Longley follows, enlarges upon, and strays from the Ovidian source text: he both humorously juxtaposes ancient and modern, while offering glosses and correctives. Indeed, Longley's translation is a critical reading of Pythagoras' speech – one that especially illuminates the response of a modern reader.

Scholarship on Ovid's Pythagoras revolves around: first, whether or not the speech designed to unify the poem and, secondly, whether Ovid's Pythagoras is a serious philosopher or a satirical parody of one. Longley weighs in on both of these issues. His translation, which emphasizes change, death, and gender, suggests that he too reads the Pythagoras episode as intricately related to the larger themes of the *Met*. Moreover, Longley's humorous tone overlaying somber reflection offers an alternative to the binary proposition of Ovid as either serious or satirical.

Where Ovid's Pythagoras claims he could speak all day (15.418-20), Longley concludes with a playful couplet emphasizing the ancient and modern temporal divide: "I could go on and on with these scientific facts. / If it wasn't so late I'd tell you a whole lot more" (29-30). In the Ovidian original the sun has not yet set and Pythagoras continues his discourse; yet, in Longley's translation the hour is late and Pythagoras is finally silenced. Longley often portrays himself as concluding the classical tradition. In "Remembering the Poets," Longley concretely describes this relationship: "An echo from the past, a melodious complaint / That reaches me here, the last of the singing line."