

Physiology of Grief in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

The bodies in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are brutalized, dismembered, raped, and diseased, but, instead of giving his characters respite from their condition, the author transforms them with their conditions intact. Ovid clearly had read the Hippocratic and other medical texts, and his knowledge of medicine informed his understanding of bodies (Nelson-Hawkins, forthcoming). I would like to build on this understanding of Ovid as a reader of medical texts and add to the multifaceted understanding of the theme of metamorphosis by introducing the idea that the poet describes most of his characters that undergo metamorphosis as diseased and that the metamorphoses themselves perpetuate suffering by preventing the characters from healing. Feldherr outlines two of the dominant ideological readings of the meaning of metamorphosis : either a way of imposing order or a way of disrupting it (Feldherr, 2002). Other scholars more or less align with one of these generalizing statements in their more nuanced arguments. While I agree with other scholars that the theme of metamorphosis connects to the idea of the state and order (Feldherr, 2002; Habinek, 2002; Hardie, 2002; Fantham, 2004), I argue that something else is going on here: the change in form represents not the power of the state over the body but the frustrated condition of a body that has been prevented from processing and healing from its illness. The bodies in the *Metamorphoses* are diseased but never allowed to heal on account of their transformations.

Despite the recognition of the impact of medical texts on Ovid, scholars have failed to notice that many of the characters that metamorphose are depicted as ill. Characters enduring this hybrid state resemble medical patients who neither heal nor die but instead live in limbo. This comparison between the mythological figures of the poem and diseased patients is evident in the characters' bodies prior to metamorphosis when they present with symptoms from the

Hippocratic texts. The characters' emotions regularly take over their bodies before a metamorphosis causing them to overheat or cool, grow wet or dry out, harden or soften: all conditions that the Hippocratic texts label as problematic. The extremes of any one quality can lead to an imbalance in a person's humoral equilibrium thus leading to disease.

In order to illustrate my argument that Ovid describes his characters as ill and then denies them healing through metamorphosis, I focus on grieving characters. When looking at all these stories together, despite the differences in the details, they form a cohesive picture of diseased bodies that never heal. In fact, it is the metamorphosis that prevents their relief. This pattern of frustrated healing reveals that Ovid's theme of metamorphosis is neither about the maintenance of status quo nor about disrupting it.

Bibliography

Fantham, Elaine. *Ovid's Metamorphoses.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Feldherr, Andrew. "Metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses.*" In *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid.* Edited by Philip Hardie. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002: 163-179.

Habinek, Thomas. "Ovid and Empire." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid.* Edited by Philip Hardie. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002: 46-61.

Hardie, Philip. "Ovid and Early Imperial Literature." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid.* Edited by Philip Hardie. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002: 34-45.