

## Disorientation in Ovid's "Thebaid"

Ovid's Theban cycle (*Met.* 3-4) highlights specific concerns with illusion and fluidity of identity, as is evident from a comparison with Euripides' *Bacchae*. Not only is there a consistent focus on identity crises in Ovid, but the text itself proves deceptive and seeks to cause disorientation in its audience. This emphasis on interactive readership is especially prominent in Pentheus' dismemberment (*Met.* 3.701-733) and in the transformation of Cadmus and Harmonia (*Met.* 4.563-606). These two scenes offer insight into the Ovidian depiction of Thebes as a place fundamentally characterized by confusion of identity and lack of clarity. Furthermore, they implicate the reader more closely in the text by evoking a feeling of disorientation similar to that experienced by the principal characters.

Gildenhard and Zissos (1999) discuss Ovid's tragic roots more broadly, and Feldherr (1997) investigates the themes of sacrifice and metamorphosis in Ovid's Theban cycle. My paper builds on theirs but expands on the impact on the mythical tradition (and on the reader) of the unjustly neglected characters Autoonë and Harmonia. While James (1986, 1991-1993) and Janan (2004) treat the Pentheus episode, they do not focus on Autoonë or interactive readership.

In Part I, I demonstrate how Ovid's retelling of Pentheus' dismemberment (*Met.* 3.701-733) prioritizes Pentheus' aunt Autoonë instead of his mother Agave. The Ovidian account begins along familiar Euripidean lines: Agave leads the charge (cf. *Bacch.* 1105-1115) and her primary agency is emphasized by the use of the adjective *prima* three times in 3.711-712 (echoing *πρώτη* in *Bacch.* 1114). But while in *Bacch.* 1118-1121 Pentheus begs his mother to recognize him before she tears him apart, in *Met.* 3.719-722 Autoonë temporarily replaces Agave as the focal point of the narrative. Pentheus cries out to her: "*saucius ille tamen fer opem,*

*matertera!* dixit" (719). Thanks to the similarities between *mater* and *matertera*, his counterintuitive addressee is revealed only in the second half of the fifth foot. The reader's expectations, incited by the mythic tradition and by Ovid's own emphasis on Agave's primacy, are frustrated by the syllables *te* and *ra*. The effect is disorientation. Autonoë's unexpected prominence pulls the reader into the text and, by demonstrating the futility of preconceptions, offers an interactive example of Thebes' perennial weakness: confusion of identity.

In Part II, I discuss how the transformation of Cadmus and Harmonia into snakes (*Met.* 4.563-606) sets up a narrative pretense of a happy resolution of the problems of Thebes. In 4.574-576, Cadmus asks for metamorphosis as a way of atoning for his killing of Mars' snake, and the gods appear to accept his bargain: they transform him into a snake. In spite of his new serpentine form, it seems that Cadmus' fate—and Thebes'—has taken a more positive direction. In a critical moment, Harmonia responds to him with unfailing affection (4.595-599) and thus reverses the negative trend of misidentification which proved fatal for Actaeon, Pentheus, and Learchus. She and Cadmus successfully merge the different aspects of their identity (4.602-605). In *Bacch.* 1357-1362 Cadmus describes how he and Harmonia will never cease suffering evils and will never be at peace (*ἡσυχος*, 1362), but in Ovid they achieve a peaceful sort of existence (*placidi*, 4.603). Thus the Ovidian account posits a (relatively) happy conclusion to the Theban saga.

The problem is, of course, that the story of Thebes is *not* at an end: the city will *not* be left alone in peace (since Oedipus and Jocasta are yet to come). The happy solution to the cycle of misidentification is a mere illusion, for Thebes' identity is so unstable that even the narrative structure describing it is deceptive. The pretense evokes a sense of disorientation in the reader

and, as in the case of Autoonö, the narrative structure is contrived to force the reader to experience firsthand the tumultuous disorder of the Theban character.

#### Bibliography

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