The Poetry of Desire
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Ovid (b. 43 BCE) was one of the younger writers of the Augustan age. He had close ties with the poets Virgil and Horace. In 31 BCE, Octavian, adopted heir to Julius Caesar’s regime, defeated his final foes, Antony and Cleopatra. This was the Battle of Actium. The battle solidified Octavian’s place as sole ruler of Rome, and he would within three years take the name “Augustus” as a mark of his truly ‘august’ victory. The poets were commissioned to memorialize Augustus’ great achievement. Horace’s ode celebrating Augustus’ victory is well-known: *nunc est bibendum*, “It’s time to celebrate.” Virgil’s epic *Aeneid* is a monument to Roman achievement, hearkening back to Aeneas escape with his father, son, and his gods, at the Greek sack of Troy, in the 12th century BCE. Aeneas would go on to found colonies in southern Italy, and his descendant, Romulus, founds the eternal city of Rome. The difficulty with imperial power, however, was already evident, readers would later learn, in Virgil’s request to have his manuscript destroyed upon his death. He composed from 29-19 BCE, but there are signs throughout the epic that it was never really finished.

Ovid took a different tact with respect to the politics of his day than his contemporaries. Humor would be part of his strategy for preserving his poetic voice. In *Ars Amatoria* (1 BCE), a “Handbook on the Art of Love,” he comically advises his reader on how to pick up lovers during Augustus’ public festivals, at monuments to Augustus, no less. If Augustus wanted to create a public, political empathy for Rome and for his empire, through laws, festivals, and poetry, the behavior that Ovid asks his reader to emulate would not be acceptable. By 8 CE, Augustus sent Ovid into exile to Tomis, on the Black Sea. We might never really know the direct cause of the banishment, but Ovid states that the exile was for *carmen et error*, a “poem and a mistake.” The poem might well have been *Ars Amatoria*. Adultery had been made a punishable crime – much more than a moral offense – in Augustan Rome. Julia, Augustus’ granddaughter, had also been banished, so there is speculation of either an affair between Julia and Ovid, or some political conspiracy.

8 CE is also the year of Ovid’s masterpiece, *Metamorphoses*, the epic of heroic transformations from the beginning of time through Julius Caesar’s transformation into a god, a star. Ovid’s poem is a celebration of life, life as matter, *materies*, transforming itself from a cosmic muck (*moles*) to earth, air, wind, and fire, and then to human bodies, loving, longing for love, being transformed through our hopes and dreams, our triumphs and sorrows.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is politically and poetically of profound interest to the question of *mimetic desire*. René Girard’s idea is that all desire is, in a way, created, or generated. Your desire for an object – let’s say a lover – generates my desire for the same. That is, we imitate each other in what we want. I want her because you do, and vice versa. On some level, Augustus recognizes some aspect of this human principle; he tries to generate desire for Rome and for his regime, and he does so through the media of the day: monuments, festivals, and literature. But Ovid has other ideas. His poetry moves public and private desire in another direction: Ovid wants us to want what is truly immortal, truly sublime, even when he brings us to these through humor. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is exceptional poetry. Its language is exquisite, like the lingering taste of the best possible wine, aged with time, subtle and complex, rich with unexpected flavors.
And what about the desire for classical poetry? Great poetry creates desire – desire for love, security, revolt, and even the ability to transform what each of these means. In this way, great poetry is timeless. When Mary Zimmerman first composed her *Metamorphoses* in 1998, she did not need to look any further than Ovid’s first lines, and she echoes these verses: “Bodies, I have in mind, and how they can change to assume new shapes – I ask the help of the gods” – this almost a literal translation of Ovid’s *in nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora; di, coeptis...aspirate meis*. Zimmerman at once creates desire for Ovid’s poem and changes it, for modern times and the contemporary stage. Zimmerman’s play is a favorite topic of discussion in the academic field of Classical Reception Studies, which explores precisely what values contemporary readers take from – or impose upon – classical texts. *Metamorphoses* is one of the Northwestern Professor of Performance Studies’ many successes. She has also transformed for stage *The Odyssey*, and *The Arabian Nights* (1994).

Some further food for thought from Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses* includes:

- **Desire and Nostalgia.** What does it mean to want what we once had, or think we had, and what we perhaps can never have again? This might be the innocence of first love, as in the case of Aleyon and Ceryx, two characters in Ovid’s poem and Zimmerman’s play. It could be a love so overpowering that the thought of living without it is death. When we lose it, what else is there, but death – or so we think. This is the case of Orpheus and Eurydice.
- **Desire and the Material World**, or as one character puts it at the opening of the Midas story, “What would you do with all the money in the world?”
- **Language** as a uniquely human tool and one through which we create desire for or against things. In Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses*, before the creation of mankind, the world is perfect, except for one thing: it lacks words.

We might consider this in terms of past, present, and future: nostalgia is a desire for the past; the material world that surrounds us creates desire in the present; and language – especially *poetic* – language – allows us to shape our future.

Zimmerman’s play does not only underscore the greatness of Ovid’s poem, but it is also in itself a remarkable achievement.

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