

Ovidian Shakespeare: Wit and the Iconography of the Passions

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In 1598, Francis Meres made a comment about Shakespeare which is still quoted by critics as evidence for Shakespeare's reputation in his own day: "The sweet wittie soule of Ovid lives again in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare; witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugared sonnets among his private friends."¹ But this judgment is not simply historically significant—it is true. And what better way of understanding the full import of Meres' comment than to extend it to include the Ovidian allusions in Shakespeare's plays?

The general context for these allusions is spelled out most clearly in the *Induction to The Taming of the Shrew*. It is part of the joke played on the drunken Sly that he is offered Ovidian paintings as among the possessions befitting a lord:

Dost thou love pictures? We will fetch thee straight
Adonis painted by a running brook
And Cytherea all in sedges hid,
Which seem to move and wanton with her breath
Even as the waving sedges play with wind. (*Ind.* ii. 47–51)²

The other two descriptions, of Io and Daphne, similarly suggest that the beauty of the subject-matter is matched by the skill of the workman, both features Sly is ill-equipped to appreciate.

In at least two of these descriptions, that of Venus and Adonis and that of Daphne, Shakespeare is himself painting with words—more sensuously

¹ Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, 1598, p. 282.

² All quotations from Shakespeare's works are taken from *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York 1969).

The most likely explanation for the un-Ovidian detail of "Adonis painted by a running brook/ And Cytherea all in sedges hid" seems to be Shakespeare's conflation of Ovid's story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus with his story of Venus and Adonis (*Metamorphoses* IV. 306 ff. and X. 524 ff.). But even in Ovid's version of the latter, shade is a component of the *locus amoenus* where the lovers meet: "opportuna sua blanditur populus umbra" (X. 555). On the symbolic features of Ovid's landscapes, see C. P. Segal, *Landscape in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Wiesbaden 1969).

than Ovid, it is true, for the Elizabethans, on the whole, tended to embellish Ovid's descriptions when they borrowed from him. But they thereby paid tribute to the Ovid whom they perceived as a painter with words, one who lent himself to the enrichment of their own style. When Shakespeare competed directly with Ovid, as he does in his *Venus and Adonis*, it was natural then for him to produce a *copia* on Ovid's story, bringing to light all that is merely implied and ringing the changes on every theme. The epigraph prefixed to this poem, itself derived from Ovid, indicates just that sense of an aristocratic and educated audience that the paintings mentioned in the *Induction* to *The Shrew* take for granted: "Vilia miretur vulgus: mihi flavus Apollo/Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua."³ As it happens, these lines from the *Amores* appear, as T. W. Baldwin notes, at the beginning of the *Flores Poetarum* collected by Octavianus Mirandula, a standard grammar school introduction to the poets.⁴ There are no less than four direct allusions to Ovid within Shakespeare's plays, and each one reflects his grammar school training.⁵

One of these again makes a knowledge of Ovid the distinguishing mark of the educated man. Touchstone, in *As You Like It*, demonstrates his superiority to the country folk of the Forest of Arden by comparing himself to Ovid among the Goths. Addressing Audrey, he remarks, "I am here with thee and thy goats, as the most capricious poet, honest Ovid, was among the Goths" (III. ii. 5-6). The two puns, "capricious" from *caper* (goat) and "Goths" (goats), represent the wit that only the educated would appreciate. Jaques, however, in an aside, caps Touchstone's allusion with the comment "O knowledge ill-inhabited, worse than Jove in a thatched house!" (III. iii. 7-8). Not mentioning the story of Philemon and Baucis by name, he reveals his easy familiarity with the *Metamorphoses*, turning the myth into a witty comparison.⁶ If Ovid here means knowledge, it is a sign of wit to be able to play with allusions to his works. Ironically, it sometimes takes the efforts of modern scholars to recover what was once part of every educated person's patrimony.

³ Ovid, *Amores*, I. xv. 35-36. "Let the cheap dazzle the crowd; for me, may golden Apollo minister full cups from the Castalian spring" (trans. from *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, p. 1406).

⁴ T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke* (Urbana 1944), II, p. 410.

⁵ The direct allusions are in: *Titus Andronicus* (IV. i. 42); *Taming of the Shrew* (I. i. 33); *Love's Labor's Lost* (IV. ii. 118); *As You Like It* (II. iii. 5-6). Additional allusions, without mention of Ovid by name, occur in *The Merchant of Venice* (V. i. 79-80), and *Cymbeline* (II. ii. 44-45).

⁶ *Met.* VIII. 630: "parva quidem, stipulis et canna tecta palustri." Arthur Golding, whose 1586 translation occasionally affected Shakespeare's own phrasing, translates this passage: "The roofe thereof was thatched all with straw and fennish reede" (VIII. 806). According to Baldwin, Shakespeare used both Ovid and Golding, like other English poets of the day, who did not share the modern prejudice against the use of translations. Even people who could read the original used them. See *William Shakespeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greek*, II, ch. XLII.

If we leave fashion aside and inquire into the rhetorical purposes of Shakespeare's mythological allusions, there is one word that sums up all of them: *copia*. From his schooldays, Shakespeare would have learned that Ovid is a treasure-house of examples for the enrichment of speech. The wit of the exercise lies in choosing the appropriate myth and giving it the form that will suit the speaker's expressive purpose, whether it be *exemplum*, simile, metaphor, or other form of comparison. Erasmus' schoolbook on *copia* particularly recommends the use of *exempla* derived from the fables of poets; the instances he gives are the sort to be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "for they can be related both fully and briefly, if circumstances and propriety allow."⁷ His emphasis on decorum provides exactly the signpost we need for the direction in which to pursue our inquiry into Shakespeare's use of classical myth.

As an ornament of style, Ovid's stories usually appear in Shakespeare's plays in the form of simile. Pictorial by their very nature, they need to be kept logically separate from the main argument of the speaker. Only when passion breaks down such logical separations does the Ovidian allusion take the form of metaphor. It will be simplest to illustrate the broad distinction with an example drawn from comedy and one drawn from tragedy. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Prince of Morocco compares himself to Hercules in the contest for Portia's hand:

But alas the while,
If Hercules and Lichas play at dice
Which is the better man, the greater throw
May turn by fortune from the weaker hand.
So is Alcides beaten by his rogue,
And so may I, blind Fortune leading me. . . . (II. i. 31-36)

The parallel between the pompous suitor and Hercules is humorous enough, but I cite it chiefly for the way the allusion appears in the form of a comparison: "So is Alcides beaten by his rogue, / And so may I." In *Antony and Cleopatra*, on the other hand, Antony in his defeat cries out:

The shirt of Nessus is upon me; teach me,
Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage,
Let me lodge Lichas on the horns o' th' moon
And with those hands that grasped the heaviest club
Subdue my worthiest self. (IV. xii. 43-47)

Antony is expressing his own rage by his development of the image, from simple comparison to an identification between himself and Hercules complete enough that, like Hercules, he would cast to the skies (not into the

⁷ Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King and M. David Rix (Milwaukee 1963), p. 70.

sea, as in Ovid)⁸ the bringer of his distress and then end his own misery by destroying himself. Pictorially, the image grows to vent the speaker's passion; but even Morocco's more limited comparison has its pictorial component in the line "If Hercules and Lichas play at dice." No reader of Ovid can forget the memorable pictures he creates with words, and something of this quality accompanies Shakespeare's briefest mythological allusions.⁹

Where such pictures play a part, it is not as allegory but as analogy, Ovid's images set alongside Shakespeare's immediate expression of the thoughts and emotions of his characters, as an enrichment of them. But a better term than "analogy" might be "poetic paradigm," since it includes both the variety of rhetorical uses to which Shakespeare puts his Ovidian allusions and the richness of signification contained in them. Studying these images then becomes less a matter of identifying their source—a fairly simple task in most instances—than of asking the purpose of each one in its particular context. Only in this way can we hope to approach an answer to the question of why certain plays contain so many more mythological images than others, what their relationship to genre might be, and, finally, what possible changes in Shakespeare's attitude to them are discernible in the course of his development as a dramatist. I shall approach these issues chiefly with mythological examples that imply a narrative, not simple references to deities, since it is Ovid's genius as a story-teller that must have quickened Shakespeare's own imagination.

As paradigm, no myth is more illustrative of Shakespeare's sensitivity to emotional color than the story of Philomela. We are given a glimpse of his approach to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in his early play *Titus Andronicus*. Lavinia, the ravaged heroine, turns the pages of the copy of the *Metamorphoses* given to young Lucius by his mother, until she has found the tale of Philomela's rape by Tereus. Titus rightly interprets the message she is trying to convey:

Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl,
 Ravished and wronged as Philomela was,
 Forced in the ruthless, vast, and gloomy woods?
 See, see!
 Ay, such a place there is where we did hunt
 (O had we never, never, hunted there!),
 Patterned by that the poet here describes

⁸ *Met.* IX. 217-18: "corripit Alcides, et terque quaterque rotatum / mittit in Euboicas tormento fortius undas." R. K. Root thinks that the difference between Ovid's account and Shakespeare's may be attributed to Shakespeare's possible knowledge of Seneca's play *Hercules Oetaeus*, but this is by no means certain. See Root's *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare* (New York 1903), p. 74.

⁹ Cf. Coleridge: "The power of Poetry is by a single word to produce that energy in the mind as compels the imagination to produce the picture." (*Coleridge on Shakespeare*, ed. R. A. Foakes [Charlottesville, Virginia 1971], p. 110.)

By nature made for murders and for rapes. (IV. i. 51–58)

I could almost take as my own text the line "Patterned by that the poet here describes," because it sums up the part Ovid's stories play in supplying analogies laden with mythic significance.¹⁰

Two other of Shakespeare's heroines also find in the story of Philomela the pattern of their own sufferings. One is Lucrece. Like Lavinia she finds a kind of sense in the pattern of Ovid's tale:

'Come, Philomele, that sing'st of ravishment,
Make thy sad grove in my dishevelled hair.
As the dank earth weeps at thy languishment,
So I at each sad strain will strain a tear
And with deep groans the diapason bear;
For burden-wise I'll hum on Tarquin still,
While thou on Tereus descants better skill.' (1128–34)

This stanza is followed by two more on the same theme: in one, Lucrece compares the knife she will use against herself with the thorn against which the nightingale leans; in the other, she contemplates finding out a dark, deep desert where, like Philomel, she may unfold "To creatures stern sad tunes, to change their kinds. / Since men prove beasts, let beasts bear gentle minds" (1147–48). The music of her complaint might almost seem to disguise her heartbreak, turning it to sweetness, just as Philomel did. But Lucrece, for her part, may serve as the type of wronged innocence, as happens when Macbeth, reflecting on the crime he is about to commit, peoples the darkness with figures, including "withered murder," who with "Tarquin's ravishing strides" moves like a ghost "towards his design" (II. i. 55).¹¹

My final example is drawn from *Cymbeline*. When Iachimo is looking at the sleeping Imogen in her bedroom at night, he notes, "She hath been reading late/ The tale of Tereus. Here the leaf's turned down/ Where Philomel gave up" (II. ii. 44–46). Imogen reads, however, not to convey her plight, as Lavinia did, but to find, as it were, an image for her own chastity and vulnerability, like a prophetic warning of Iachimo's design against her. Like her reading, the decoration of her room, including the Cleopatra tapestry, the ceiling "with golden cherubins . . . fretted," and the chimney piece showing Diana bathing, reflects the cultivated and fashionable taste of the times. Nevertheless, as Iachimo notes such features as the andirons ("I had forgot them") in the shape of "two winking Cupids/ Of silver, each on one foot standing, nicely/ Depending on their brands" (II. iv. 88–91), he intends to prove not merely that he has been in her room but

¹⁰ Ovid's account of the place where Tereus brings Philomela in order to rape her is: "in stabula alta trahit, silvis obscura vetustis" (*Met.* VI. 521). For Shakespeare's use of the word "pattern" to stand for the Ovidian type of allusions, cf. the passage from *As You Like It*, quoted below, p. 130, in which Rosalind refers to Troilus as "one of the patterns of love."

¹¹ In *Titus Andronicus*, the villain Aaron compares Lavinia to Lucretia (II. i. 108–09); in *Cymbeline*, Iachimo compares himself to Tarquin (II. ii. 12–14).

that there is something lascivious in her tastes. But for us it is worth remembering that George Chapman in his vision of virtuous ladies allows them to represent the Ovidian tales in their embroidery, "their needles leading / Affection prisoner through their own-built citties, / Pinnioned with stories and Arachnean ditties."¹² Only the literal-minded would wish to banish the particular realm of the imagination to which Ovid holds the key.

If the story of Philomel is inherently lyrical and feminine, there are other myths that may also lend something lyrical to the dialogue. Among the most immediate examples to come to mind are allusions to Apollo and Orpheus in the romantic comedies. Even the most conventional of these hides an intensity of daring such as may be found in Proteus' speech on poetry in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: "For Orpheus' lute was strung with poets' sinews, / Whose golden touch could soften steel and stones, / Make tigers tame, and huge leviathans / Forsake unsounded deeps to dance on sands" (III. ii. 77).¹³ No classical precedent has been found for the first line, but it appears to mean that the poet makes his music within himself, on his own heart strings. Wonderful as this is, there is another passage on the power of music that is yet more deeply rooted in its dramatic context. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon is reminding Puck of the time they witnessed the flight of Cupid's arrow and saw it land on a flower, which in its turn became imbued with the power to make people fall in love:

Thou rememb'rest
 Since once I sat upon a promontory
 And heard a mermaid, on a dolphin's back,
 Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
 That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
 And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
 To hear the sea maid's music. (II. i. 148-54)

In this passage, myth appears, not as comparison, but in its own right. The character of Oberon as king of the fairies stands revealed, but more important, the very essence of the play is contained here. Like the Orpheus

¹² Chapman, "Hero and Leander," Fourth Sestiad, 119-21. Leonard Barkan in his recent book *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven 1986) not only compares Iachimo's "reading" of Imogen's body and her room to "raping," but also treats the Renaissance fondness for reading Ovid and for depicting his stories in decoration as a species of "voyeurism." "The voyeurism in *Cymbeline* reflects at once upon pagan traditions and upon the contemporary pursuit of them" (p. 251). Just where does this remark leave Imogen, who both reads Ovid and decorates her room with pagan and erotic figures? Barkan seems to imply a reductive view of the imagination as itself voyeuristic.

¹³ Ovid tells the story of Orpheus in *Met.* X and XI. Root (above, note 8) notes (p. 94) a source for the detail in the second line, referring to Orpheus' power over steel and stones in *Met.* XI. 7-12 and for the fourth line, the taming of tigers, in Virgil's *Georgics* IV. 510: "mulcentem tigris et agentem carmine quercus." For the first and last lines he can find no classical authority. Shakespeare is extravagantly expressive in the praise of poetry, but not poetry simply as words, as Root suggests. Cf. Berowne's praise of love in *Love's Labor's Lost*, IV. iii. 337-38: "as sweet and musical/ As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair."

myth, the passage pays tribute to the beauty and power of music. But the imaginative freedom of expression is of the nature of a *parergon*, that classical conception of ornament, whereby the artist can do as he pleases, amusing himself to the enrichment of his artistic conception.

What some critics, such as Douglas Bush, refer to as Shakespeare's more "bookish" allusions¹⁴ may in fact illuminate, in the sense of brightening, a passage by reminding the listener of one of Ovid's own luminous stories. The richness of the allusion depends, however, on the richness of the play in which it appears. For example, it is one thing for Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to draw a parallel between her case and that of Ariadne, forsaken by Theseus; it is another for Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* to refer to the rape of Proserpina in her flower catalogue. Julia's allusion is just that—a passing reference:

Madam, 'twas Ariadne passioning
For Theseus' perjury and unjust flight,
Which I so lively acted with my tears
That my poor mistress, moved therewithal,
Wept bitterly. . . . (IV. iv. 165–69)¹⁵

Covertly alluding to her own plight, Julia, disguised as Sebastian, describes to Sylvia a fictitious performance she gave as Ariadne, while wearing a gown of Julia's, with Julia in the audience. The two-line summary of the myth is intended as a brief characterization of the speaker's predicament. Pictorial in effect, it also ornaments the text, adding a grace note to the layers of dramatic irony.

Perdita, on the other hand, has an immediate dramatic context for her allusions to goddesses as flower deities at the sheep-shearing feast; she also invokes a greater descriptive richness in keeping with the profounder conception of theme and character in the play:

O Proserpina,
For the flowers now that, frightened, thou let'st fall
From Dis's wagon; daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty (IV. iv. 116–20)¹⁶

¹⁴ See Douglas Bush, "Classical Myth in Shakespeare's Plays," in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson* (Oxford 1959), pp. 65–85.

¹⁵ As Root notes (p. 41), the word "perjury" suggests *Fasti* III. 473: "dicebam, memini, 'periure et perfide Theseu!'" The epithet "periusus" also occurs in *Heroides*, 10. 76, and in *Amores* I. 7. 15. It thus became the standard epithet for Theseus in the sixteenth century (Baldwin, II, pp. 424–25).

¹⁶ Shakespeare may be drawing on *Met.* V. 388 ff. and on *Fasti* III. 427 ff. The longer catalogue of flowers in the latter is more nearly parallel, but the descriptive expressions and the analogy between the innocent maiden and the spring flowers is more developed in the *Metamorphoses*; hence, it is a more immediate precedent for Perdita's half-melancholy rapture: "quo dum Proserpina luco / ludit et aut violas aut candida lilia carpit . . ." (*Met.* V. 391–92).

The dark winter days induced by Pluto's rape of Proserpina are obliquely suggested as a counterpoint to the "winter's tale." But when Perdita continues with allusions to violets "sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes/ Or Cytherea's breath," a longing and an almost painful sense of beauty and its loss speak through her words. This is not merely decorating the text, as one might use mythological ornament on a plaster overmantel; rather, it expresses the very being of the speaker, in the fullness of the tragic circumstances of her birth and the loss of her unknown mother's care. But if she has known no Ceres to weep for her, she lives and loves, and this too comes through the beauty of her description of spring flowers, changing the traditional flower catalogue into a freshly painted picture of springtime. The truth is that Shakespeare loved Ovid so well and was so steeped in his works that he virtually could not fail in his mythological allusions. They are not merely the product and sign of his grammar school training but of his response to the poetic spirit of Ovid.

Used for praise or dispraise, as well as for the expression of other emotions, Ovidian allusions work largely within the affective terms of beauty and ugliness. Just as Perdita's allusions are to beauty, so Thersites' in *Troilus and Cressida* are to ugliness. Instead of Proserpina, he dwells on Cerberus; and as he snaps at Ajax, he reveals his own character as much as Ajax's: "Thou grumblest and railest every hour on Achilles, and thou art as full of envy at his greatness as Cerberus is at Prosperina's beauty, ay that thou bark'st at him" (II. i. 30). But the savagery of Thersites' use of classical myth is, needless to say, not typical of Shakespeare's drama. More often, such comparisons are used for praise, in a way that evokes Elizabethan pageantry, as well as foreshadowing the court masque of the seventeenth century, in which kings and princes are regularly represented as classical gods. "Those beautiful characters of sense," as Samuel Daniel called them, could fittingly praise and, at the same time, hold up noble models for princes.¹⁷ The final accolade for Prince Hal before the Battle of Shrewsbury in *Henry IV, Part I* is couched in mythological terms:

I saw young Harry . . .
 Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury,
 And vaulted with such ease into his seat
 As if an angel dropped down from the clouds,
 To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus,
 And witch the world with noble horsemanship. (IV. i. 104-10)¹⁸

¹⁷ Cf., for example, my article "'Those Beautiful Characters of Sense': Classical Deities and the Court Masque," *Comparative Drama* 16 (1982), 166-79.

¹⁸ In fact, Perseus, the implied hero, did not ride Pegasus. When he cut off the head of Medusa, Pegasus sprang from her blood. For a parallel allusion in Ben Jonson, see p. 173 of the article cited in note 17 above.

As so often, more than one mythological allusion occurs in the same passage, as if Shakespeare's imagination, once released into this land of enchantment, must needs follow the allusiveness of one myth into another, as here he moves from Mercury to Pegasus. Although unjustified in terms of narrative, this leap from winged god to winged horse makes perfect sense as emphasizing the transcendent prowess of Hal. Similarly, Hamlet's praise of his dead father includes references to Hyperion, Jove, Mars, and Mercury, and sums up his perfection by referring to "A combination and a form indeed/ Where every god did seem to set his seal/ To give the world assurance of a man" (III. iv. 61-63). This is spoken in the spirit of the history plays, where the grand, ennobling function of classical myth is most evident.

Perhaps, however, the allusions in which Shakespeare is most uniquely himself, and at the same time closest to Ovid, are those that appear in his comedies. He might have caught this spirit from the witty detachment that is yet the counterpoint of the compassion and awe with which Ovid tells stories of the classical deities in the *Metamorphoses*. He might also have caught it from the myths used as *exempla* in Ovid's *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*. The ease with which he introduces the myths without sacrificing their evocativeness appears, for example, in allusions in which not even the names of the mythological characters are necessary. I have already given one instance from *As You Like It*, where Jaques refers to the story of Baucis and Philemon. Another appears near the beginning of *Twelfth Night* when Duke Orsino alludes to the story of Actaeon: "That instant was I turned into a hart, / And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds, / E'er since pursue me" (I. i. 22-24). The moralization of Ovid regularly turned this story into this kind of allegory, but it is significant that Orsino uses the form of a simile—"my desires, like fell and cruel hounds"—leaving no suggestion of an esoteric interpretation.¹⁹ The humor of the passage, deriving from the gap between Orsino's supposed passion and his "changeable taffeta" nature, itself militates against anything very esoteric.

After all, what better way was there to characterize love than through the myths that Ovid tells? In the last act of the *Merchant of Venice*, Jessica and Lorenzo engage in a kind of playful singing match that involves placing themselves in the company of great lovers, with the difference that their love is joined to happiness. The repeated phrase "In such a night" calls attention to the romance of the occasion as they enjoy the evening of moonlight at Belmont. One example from each of the speakers will give the tone:

¹⁹ The behavior of the "fell and cruel hounds" is graphically described in Ovid's account of Actaeon in *Met.* III. 138-252; but with Orsino's interpretation may be compared the standard moralization given in Golding's "Epistle," Book III, or Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586), p. 15: "And as his houndes, soe their affections base, / Shall them deuowre, and all their deedes deface."

Jessica

In such a night
Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew,
And saw the lion's shadow ere himself,
And ran dismayed away.²⁰

Lorenzo

In such a night
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love
To come again to Carthage. (V. i. 6–12)²¹

Lorenzo's examples are chosen from Greek and Roman history; Jessica's from myth, as if in the interest of a decorum for the male and another for the female. And so they continue teasing each other until interrupted by a messenger; then Jessica puts an end to their match by asserting: "I would out-night you, did nobody come; / But hark, I hear the footing of a man" (23–24). The "out-nighting" tells us exactly in what spirit to take these allusions: it is as if Shakespeare were ironizing Ovid's own ironies.

The burlesquing of classical myth has of course a long history before Shakespeare, but he would have needed no more than Ovid—in the *Amores*, for example—to give him the tone of such remarks as Mercutio's comparison of Romeo's beloved to other famous women: "Dido a dowdy; Cleopatra a gypsy, Helen and Hero hildings and harlots, Thisbe a gray eye or so" (II. v. 41). Later, we find similar reduction of classical lovers in *The Tempest*, with the cynics' reference to "widower Aeneas" and "widow Dido." More light-hearted are the references to famous lovers in *The Merchant of Venice* or in Rosalind's speech about Troilus and Leander: "Troilus had his brains dashed out with a Grecian club; yet he did what he could to die before, and he is one of the patterns of love. Leander, he would have lived many a fair year though Hero had turned nun, if it had not been for a hot midsummer night; for, good youth, he went but forth to wash him in the Hellespont, and being taken with the cramp, was drowned; and the foolish chroniclers of that age found it was 'Hero of Sestos'" (*As You Like It* IV. i. 88–96). Lovers' banter in Shakespeare revels in such playful allusions to famous examples. Even the apparently more serious comparisons of lovers to Hercules, such as appear in *Love's Labor's Lost* or *The Merchant of Venice*, are not without a touch of humorous exaggeration.

²⁰ Cf. Ovid, *Met.* IV. 99–101, where Thisbe sees the lioness: "quam procul ad lunae radios Babylonia Thisbe / vidit et obscurum timido pede fugit in antrum, / dumque fugit. . ." As Root notes (p. 104), Shakespeare's familiarity with Golding's translation may have affected his actual wording, but see Baldwin, II, p. 445 for a general caution in judging Golding's influence.

²¹ Root notes (pp. 4–5 and 56–58) that Shakespeare has borrowed a passage from Ovid's *Heroides* 10, where Ariadne addresses Theseus, and transferred it to Dido:

si non audires, ut saltem cernere posses,
iactatae late signa dedere manus;
candidaque inposui longae velamina virgae—
scilicet oblitos admonitura mei! (39–42)

But the very idea of gods becoming beasts for love is both a tribute to the power of love and an invitation to smile. The story of Europa in particular appears over and over, often with a suggestion that Jupiter is wearing the horns as a cuckold—in *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example. But a more extended use of the image occurs in *Much Ado*, when Benedick, about to marry Beatrice at last, is teased by Claudio:

We'll tip thy horns with gold,
And all Europa shall rejoice at thee,
As once Europa did at lusty Jove
When he would play the noble beast in love. (V. iv. 44–47)

Beatrice continues to play on the image with “Bull Jove, sir, had an amiable low, / And some such strange bull leaped your father's cow.” In contrast, Florizel, in *The Winter's Tale*, can take the same story and turn it into a joyous tribute to the power of love, without the mockery attaching to Benedick for his final succumbing to love:

The gods themselves,
Humbling their deities to love, have taken
The shapes of beasts upon them. Jupiter
Became a bull, and bellowed; the green Neptune
A ram, and bleated; and the fire-robed god,
Golden Apollo, a poor humble swain,
As I seem now. Their transformations
Were never for a piece of beauty rarer,
Nor in a way so chaste . . . (IV. iv. 25–33)²²

The gradations of seriousness in Shakespeare's treatment of these myths is manifest in the subtle difference of handling; for instance, in the beauty added by Florizel's use of adjectives: “green,” “fire-robed,” “golden.” Yet it is in the light of the same transformations that we must view Bottom's translation into an ass in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Absurdity is never far from love—that is one of Ovid's great contributions to the literature of love, and Shakespeare is his heir.²³

²² The story of Europa is told in *Met.* II. 846–76, but the main source for *The Winter's Tale*, Robert Green's *Pandosto, The Triumph of Time or Doratus and Fawnia* (1588), contains a passage that more directly influenced Shakespeare here: “And yet Doratus, shame not at thy shepheards weede: the heavenly Godes have sometime earthly thoughtes: Neptune became a ram, Jupiter a Bul, Apollo a shepherd: they Gods, and yet in love: and thou a man appointed to love” (*Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough [London 1975], VIII, p. 184).

²³ In his *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus, under the mask of Folly, draws attention to the absurdity of love (XI): “Neque vero id Venus ipsa, vel reclamante Lucretio, unquam inficias iverit, sine nostri numinis accessione suam vim mancam atque irritam esse.” (“Venus herself, whatever Lucretius says, would never deny that she would be weakened and shom of her power if my own divinity didn't come to her aid”: trans. Betty Radice [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1971], p. 76).

Nowhere is this more apparent than in his *Venus and Adonis*, where the burlesquing of classical myth can be fully developed, since here he is making a *copia* on Ovid's tale, not reducing it to a brief allusion. But narrative demands verisimilitude above all, and that means finding the human truth within the fantastic story. Classical myth is no longer used as vignettes to adorn and illuminate. It is now explored fully as a drama of human emotions. For this is the comedy of love, and the tragedy too. Wit can shine not only in verbal antitheses but in the development of what is only implied in Ovid, the reluctant Adonis and the resulting persuasions of a goddess who, if she does not become exactly a beast like Jupiter, is almost equally ridiculous in wooing a mortal boy who rejects her.²⁴

The fantastic in Ovid becomes exemplary in Shakespeare—not center stage, except in *Venus and Adonis*, but matched to his own characters amid their social setting. The more real the characters, the more integral the classical allusions. He has little interest in literal metamorphosis, neither in the transformation of Bottom nor of Adonis.²⁵ The latter becomes an excuse for Venus to say her last farewell to Adonis, not to reflect on the cyclical nature of life. If myth literalizes metaphor, Shakespeare prefers, in general, to turn it back into metaphor.

By now it should be apparent why Shakespeare's tragedies include relatively few allusions to the classical myths. For him, as for Ovid, the myths, even when they move us to tears, seem to be touched with humor and delight. Where the scene moves into the grandeur of tragedy, there are other reasons of decorum, as well, for being chary of using classical myth: such allusions are not appropriate to the setting of some of his tragedies, such as *Macbeth* or *King Lear*—worlds too remote from Greece and Rome. *Antony and Cleopatra*, on the other hand, can fittingly accommodate some of these allusions, for, apart from the setting, the comic elements of the play encourage them, as *Julius Caesar*, for example, does not. *Troilus and Cressida*, another play with numerous mythological allusions, has both the ancient milieu and the spirit of mockery to which these myths lend themselves, though usually with a happier tone than here. It would appear that genre, including characterization, is the chief determinant in

²⁴ In two articles, I discuss the poem and its critics. See "Ovidian Pictures and 'The Rules and Compasses' of Criticism," *ICS* 9 (1984), 267-75; "Wat the Hare, or Shakespearean Decorum," *Shakespeare Studies* (forthcoming).

²⁵ An emphasis on psychic metamorphosis as discernible in Renaissance poetry and drama is currently fashionable. See, for example, Leonard Barkan's *The Gods Made Flesh* (above, note 12). An interesting variation on this theme appears in Eugene Waith's "Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*," *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), 39-49. He views Ovid's interest in metamorphosis as essentially concerned with "the transforming power of intense states of emotion" (p. 41). Waith also considers the larger issue of whether Ovid can be used successfully as a model for characterization and style in drama. Unfortunately, he ignores Shakespeare's dramatic poem, *Venus and Adonis*, which sheds a different light on the question.

Shakespeare's use of such allusions.²⁶ Fashion indeed may have dictated his choice of genre, but it could not be allowed to dictate his use of classical myth. For that, decorum was his sole criterion.

And this is why iconography alone will never answer the really important questions about Shakespeare's use of classical mythology. What is in question is not the source of his images but why they appear in the particular form they do, in a particular context. Indeed, the mere study of iconography in treating Shakespeare's mythological allusions might find its epitaph in the words of Holofernes in *Love's Labor's Lost*: "Imitari is nothing. So doth the hound his master, the ape his keeper, the tired horse his rider" (IV. ii. 121). His own "varying" underlines the animal instinct which lies behind imitation in its most literal sense. In contrast, he has just referred to Ovid's—Naso's—nose for "smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention." Even Holofernes knows, in theory, that freedom of invention distinguishes the true poet from the would-be poet. Shakespeare appropriated Ovid as no other poet has done, understanding him from the inside and not merely as a schoolbook source of copiousness. Holofernes, on the other hand, is guilty in his similes of the very weakness he criticizes; his examples are as hackneyed as possible. Shakespeare must have enjoyed the joke of giving the pedant this praise of Ovid's originality.

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²⁶Several critics have noted that Shakespeare's mythological allusions are, in general, more numerous in his earlier plays, but no one appears to pay much attention to the significance of these allusions in relation to genre. Root, for example, reaches the patently absurd conclusion that Shakespeare gradually "recognized the insincerity of the Ovidian system" and found in it "only the material for a jest" (p. 11). Douglas Bush, more cautious, views the shift as largely one from an undramatic or perfunctory use of mythology to a more dramatic and integral one, though he maintains that Shakespeare, to the end of his career, was capable of the purely "bookish" or rhetorical allusion (p. 85). I see this as a false dichotomy, since it does not take into account the requirements of genre and decorum.

