

From the Library:

The Transformation of Ovid's Metamorphoses

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The Transformation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

With each passing generation, Ovid's popular book was used in new ways and meant different things to its readers. In the Middle Ages, the *Metamorphoses* was interpreted by scholars and churchmen who wrote moral and allegorical interpretations of the myths. The commentaries that they produced were used by preachers and teachers to explain biblical stories and figures, to cast light on how to live a good Christian life, and as illustrations of the results of vice, violence, and virtue.

In the Renaissance, as the art and literature of classical Greece and Rome were being enthusiastically rediscovered, the *Metamorphoses* was celebrated by scholars and humanists as a text written by one of the great poets of the classical age. The humanists were concerned with the literary value and textual accuracy of the work, but most importantly they found in the *Metamorphoses* a way to understand the ancient world. A good edition of the *Metamorphoses* could be the foundation of a liberal education — used to teach Latin and poetic form, but also geography, music, rhetoric, and philosophy. Ovid's epic tale of gods and men came to be seen as an encyclopedia of ancient knowledge.

As baroque tastes and enlightenment ideas took hold in Europe, so attitudes toward the *Metamorphoses* changed. In England, its fortunes waned as critics found Ovid's tales too fanciful and his language too ornate. It was thought to be a morally dubious, though pleasantly titillating, text, used for Latin lessons as well as for entertainment. However, on the Continent the popularity of the *Metamorphoses* continued. It was a source of inspiration to poets such as La Fontaine and Marino, whose mythological poems in an Ovidian style were very influential.

While the books of the *Metamorphoses* were used for the study of languages, theology, and literature, they also became an enormously influential source of material for artists and poets. This becomes especially obvious from the sixteenth century, when the use of the printing press, the development of new printing technologies, and the availability of ever cheaper books meant that the woodcuts and engravings that illustrated the early printed copies of the *Metamorphoses* reached a growing audience, including artists, patrons, and readers.

Giacomo Franco (1550 – 1620), "Title page for Book Two,"
engraving in Ovid, *Le metamorfosi di Ouidio*, Venice, Bern:
Giunti, 1584, David K. E. Bruce Fund

The popularity of the *Metamorphoses* ensured that it was read and used by a variety of people for a variety of reasons. Dense textual editions were produced for study, and richly decorated editions for pleasure. This selection of books demonstrates the range of editions that were produced for different audiences.

1 Unknown artist, “The Judgment of Paris,” engraving in Ovid, *Les Metamorphoses D’Ovide*, vol 2, Paris: Nyon pere, 1738, David K. E. Bruce Fund

This image shows Paris awarding the Golden Apple to Venus, judging her to be more beautiful than Minerva or Juno, and thus instigating the start of the Trojan War. Although this event gets only a passing mention in the *Metamorphoses*, it was a well known part of the story with which contemporary readers would have been familiar. It was not uncommon, as here, for the translator, compiler, or publisher of the *Metamorphoses* to include a separate section at the end of the book dedicated to telling the story of the Judgment of Paris.

2 Unknown artist, “The Sacrifice of Iphigenia,” woodcut in *Le metamorfosi di Ovidio*, Venice: Camillo Franceschini, 1581, David K. E. Bruce Fund

The dedication of this edition to Henry II of France suggests that the author may have hoped for a wealthy or aristocratic audience. The story is retold in Italian, in a poetic form called *ottava rima* that was made popular by Giovanni Boccaccio. At the end of each chapter there is a commentary section interjected into the main text. The book is sparsely illustrated, but contains elaborate classical borders surrounding the *argomento* with *putti* and grotesques hidden in the faux architectural forms. The borders found alongside this woodcut image were probably borrowed from another publishing project. Foliated initials also enrich the page and harken back to the handwritten and painted manuscripts of the Middle Ages.

3 Possibly Petrus van der Borcht (1545 – 1608), “The Battle between the Greeks and Trojans,” engraving in *P. Ovidii Nasonis Metamorphoses, Argumentis Brevioribus ex Luctatio Grammatico collectis expositæ*, Antwerp: Ioannis Moreti, 1591, David K. E. Bruce Fund

This little book contains 178 engravings illustrating the fables, each accompanied by a short Latin prose text that explains what is happening in the picture. A book like this may have been used to encourage schoolboys to read the classics and practice their Latin, in addition to providing enjoyment for other members of the household.

Here the image is of the battle between the Trojans and the Greeks on the plains outside the city walls. The text makes reference to the savagery of the battle and to Achilles, one of the great heroes of Greek myth. It is interesting to compare this busy image of the battle with the woodcut in the earlier 1505 edition in the center of this case.



fig. 1



fig. 2



4 Unknown artist, “The Sacrifice of Iphigenia” and “The Siege of Troy,” woodcuts in Ovid, *Habebis candide lector. P. Ovidii Nasonis Metamorphosin castigatissimam*, Parma: Francesco Mazali, 1505, Gift of Robert Erburu

The most popular printed version of the *Metamorphoses* in the early sixteenth century, and the first edition in Italian, was published in 1497 in Venice by Lucantonio Giunta. The cycle of fifty-two woodcuts made for the 1497 edition appear in subsequent editions and influenced many Italian Renaissance artists including Giovanni Bellini, perhaps providing inspiration for such works as *The Feast of the Gods* (gallery M-17, **fig. 1**).

This Latin edition published in Parma in 1505 includes the 1497 woodcuts and a commentary by Raphael Regius, who was an Italian scholar and a grammar and rhetoric teacher. This may have been the edition used by Michelangelo Anselmi, a painter who spent most of his career in Parma, who clearly used the woodcuts to derive his composition for *Apollo and Marsyas* (gallery M-19, **fig. 2**).

This opening shows us two incidents from the Trojan War. On the left, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to Diana to secure favorable winds for their journey to Troy. On the right, the Greek siege of the city is underway.

5 Ovid, *Le Metamorfosi di Ovidio, ridotte da Gio. Andrea dall'Anguillara in ottava rima...*, Venice: Francesco de' Franceschi Sanese, 1579, A.W. Mellon New Century Fund

This tiny book was published in Venice, which was renowned for its publishing houses and mercantile power during the sixteenth century. The small size makes it ideal for travelers, and it is easy to imagine that it might have been read by a merchant or itinerant scholar on long journeys between ports and markets.

6 Possibly Virgil Solis (1514–1562), “The Disputation between Ajax and Ulysses,” woodcut in *Le Transformationi di M. Lodovico Dolce . . .*, Venice: Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari e fratel, 1553, J. Paul Getty Fund in honor of Franklin Murphy



The translator of this version, Lodovico Dolce, was a well-known humanist and prolific writer in Renaissance Venice.

Dolce has not used the traditional division of the book into fifteen sections, but has instead created his own chapters to reflect his poetic rewriting of the stories. The book is a luxury edition, printed on blue paper. The use of this type of paper was popular in Venice near the beginning of the sixteenth century. Blue paper presented several challenges to the printer, but by the mid-sixteenth century such printing reached its zenith.

Here Ajax and Ulysses argue over the armor of Achilles, which was forged by Vulcan himself, the god of fire.

7 Attributed to Bernard Salomon (c. 1506–c. 1561), “The Death of Ajax” and “Hecuba captured by the Greeks,” woodcuts in Gabriele Simeoni, *La vita et Metamorfoseo d’Ovidio, Figurato & abbreviato in form d’Epigrammi da M. Gabriello Symeoni*, Lyon: Giovanni di Tornes, 1559, David K. E. Bruce Fund

This edition of the *Metamorphoses* is perhaps the most lavishly decorated of the books shown here. The dedication tells us that the author hoped for the aristocratic patronage of Diane de Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois. In 1559 the Duchess was mistress to Henry II of France and known as a cultivated arbiter of taste at the court.



Each page in the book is decorated with an intricate border surrounding a small woodcut illustration with a short text below. The title page tells us that the text was abbreviated by Gabriello Symeoni in the form of epigrams, short verses popular with classical satirical writers. Symeoni’s epigrams take the form of *ottava rima*, a popular Renaissance poetic style, allowing him to reference the learned forms of the past and the present.

The stories here are from the end of the Trojan War cycle. On the left Ajax fails to win the armor of Achilles from Ulysses and commits suicide in his anguish. On the right Hecuba, Queen of the Trojans, is taken captive by the Greeks.

8 Salomon Savery (1594–1665) after Francis Clein (c. 1590–1658), “The Sacrifice of Iphigenia, Siege of Troy, Battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths, etc.,” engraving in Ovid, *Pub. Ovidii Nasonis Metamorphoseon*, Paris: Aegidii Morelli, 1637, David K. E. Bruce Fund

This scholarly edition of the *Metamorphoses* contains dense Latin text in two central columns, carefully numbered for reference. The narrow outside columns contain a scholarly commentary that provides information about the form and content of Ovid’s poem. This edition was produced by a noted classical scholar named Thomas Farnaby, and was dedicated to the Chancellor of Oxford University, William Laud.

As a work intended for serious study, illustrations are secondary to the text. Rather than an image for every story, each of the fifteen books that make up the *Metamorphoses* is illustrated with one compound image containing several stories found within the chapter. At the start of book twelve, images of the sacrifice of Iphigenia and her rescue by Diana dominate the foreground, with the battles of the Trojan War, including a reference to the death of Cygnus, in the middle ground, and in the background the mighty battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths and Hercules shooting Periclymenus out of the sky.



There are an abundance of fables in the *Metamorphoses* detailing the lives, loves, and deaths of nymphs, heroes, gods, and goddesses, and many of these tales are not well known to us today. The popularity of certain stories rises and falls with the tastes of the age, reflecting the likes and dislikes of new generations of readers. However, some of the stories have been continually popular. The appeal of these tales changed over time — they might initially have been used as moral exemplars, but later would be enjoyed for their romance and adventure. Some of the stories found particular popularity with artists and poets who produced famous visual or literary representations that helped to keep the stories current. In addition to illustrated books, these popular tales also adorned items such as plaquettes, medals, jewelry, and pottery.



9 Virgil Solis (1514 – 1562), “Apollo and Daphne” and “Jupiter and Io,” woodcuts in Johannes Postius, *Iohan. Posthii Germershemii Tetrasticha in Ovidii Metam. lib. XV...*, Frankfurt: G. Coruinum, S. Feyrabent, and Haerdes vV. Galli, 1563, J. Paul Getty Fund in honor of Franklin Murphy

The stories of Apollo and Daphne and Jupiter and Io are two popular tales that present a recurrent theme in the *Metamorphoses*: the gods taking mortal girls as lovers. Many of these stories share a basic premise: a love-struck god pursues a nymph who ultimately rejects his suit. However, the endings of these two particular stories are quite different. Daphne, fearing Apollo and his ardour, calls upon her father Peneus, a river god, to help her evade Apollo and to ruin the beauty that had attracted him. Peneus obliges Daphne by transforming her into a laurel tree, putting her beyond the reach of any man or god (this story is also illustrated by object 26 in the last case). Io is not so lucky — she is unable to escape Jupiter’s attentions when he envelops her in the form of a cloud. She endures further indignities when Jupiter transforms her into a heifer to hide her from his suspicious wife Juno, who was always on the watch for Jupiter’s infidelities.

10 Possibly Isaac Briot, “The Flaying of Marsyas,” engraving in Ovid, *Les Metamorphoses D’Ovide*, vol 1, Paris: Nyon pere, 1738, David K. E. Bruce Fund

The satyr Marsyas, a gifted musician, challenged Apollo to a musical duel believing that he was the god’s equal in skill. Apollo defeated Marsyas and, to punish the satyr for his presumption, flayed him. This fable of musical competition has been enjoyed both for its moral and for its gore.

This image shows the grim business underway, but other depictions of the story focus on less violent aspects. The plaquette below shows Marsyas and Apollo confronting one another over their instruments of choice before the contest.

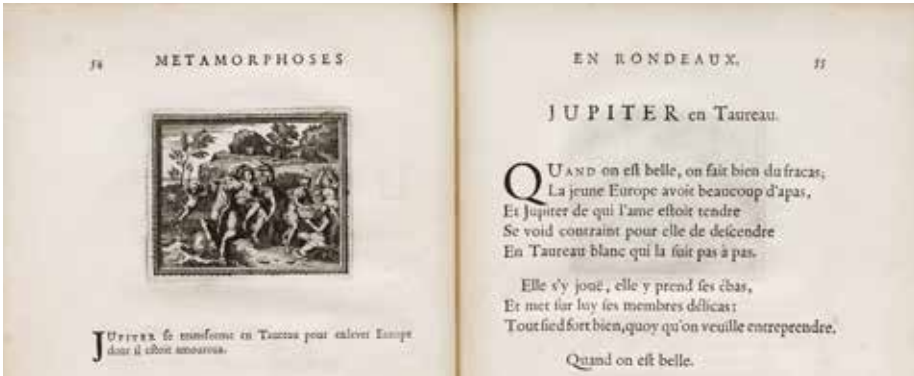
The instruments pictured in this story often reflect current musical tastes. For instance, in Michelangelo Anselmi’s painting (**fig. 2**), rather than the traditional lyre and pan pipes, Apollo plays a courtly viol while Marsyas plays bagpipes, which were associated with rural life.



11 Giovanni Bernardi, Italian, 1494–1553, *Apollo and Marsyas*, gilt bronze, Widener Collection

12 Unknown Artist, “The Abduction of Europa,” woodcut in Ovid, *Les Metamorphoses d’Ovide*, Rouen: Manassez de Preaulx, 1624, A.W. Mellon New Century Fund (back cover)

In the case of Europa, it is Jupiter who is transformed instead of the nymph he pursues. In order to catch Europa, Jupiter assumes the form of a bull and hides in a herd of cattle. While she is initially alarmed by his size, Europa soon conquers her fear of the beautiful animal and decorates him with flowers, eventually daring to sit astride the bull. Jupiter then carries her away across the sea on his back, as we see here. Europa is said to be the mother of King Minos, who built the labyrinth to imprison the Minotaur, and is the sister of Cadmus, who embarks on a quest to find her and founds the city of Thebes.



13 Sébastien Le Clerc (1637–1714) and François Chauveau (1613–1676), “The Abduction of Europa,” engraving in Isaac de Benserade, *Metamorphoses d’Ovide en rondeaux*, Paris: De l’imprimerie royal par Sebastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1676, David K. E. Bruce Fund

By the late seventeenth century, particularly in France, artistic tastes favored softly elegant pastoral scenes, and this was reflected in the depiction of Ovid’s tales. Europa’s maidens wreath Jupiter in garlands in a lush landscape. Leading the bull into the sea by a garland is Cupid, who is not a part of Ovid’s narrative, but is perhaps included here to emphasize the amorous nature of the story. Jean François de Troy’s 1716 painting *The Abduction of Europa* (gallery M-54, **fig. 3**) is similar in character to this illustration, and also captures the moment Jupiter carries Europa away.

In this edition, Ovid’s text has been reworked in two styles. On the left page there is a short description of the event or story, while on the right there is a *rondeau* that comments on the story. The *rondeau* was a popular form of French verse, and was often set to music.



fig. 3

14 Alfred André, French, 1839–1919, *Pendant with Europa and the Bull*, 1870/1890, baroque pear, gold with enamel, sapphires, diamonds, rubies, pearls, and glass, Widener Collection

15 Crispijn van de Passe (c. 1565–1637), “Diana and Actaeon,” engraving in *Metamorphoseon Ovidianarum typi aliquot*, 1602, David K. E. Bruce Fund



The story of Diana and Actaeon tells the tragic tale of a hunter and the goddess of chastity. Actaeon accidentally wanders into a sacred grove where Diana and her nymphs are bathing. Diana is enraged that a mortal should see their chaste company in the nude, and transforms the hapless Actaeon into a stag. Actaeon is then hunted and killed by his own pack of dogs. The themes of revealing and concealing, of accident, fate, and transgression made it a compelling tale. It was taken up in the sixteenth century perhaps most famously in a cycle of paintings by Titian completed for Philip II of Spain. While the opportunity to display so many nubile young women was no doubt a reason for its popularity, the story was also a comment on the punishment of sins and heavenly judgment.

Though the original printer of this suite of plates is unknown, these engravings were copied for an edition printed in Paris in 1622 by Chez la veufue M. Guillemot, S. Thiboust, et M. Guillemot, also in the Library collection.

16 North Italian, *Diana and Actaeon*, early 16th century, bronze, Samuel H. Kress Collection

Through the Centuries

The *Metamorphoses* has been a part of the literary and artistic culture of the West for two millennia, and continues to be a source of inspiration right up to the present day. The items in this case all show images from the story of Phaeton. Phaeton asks his father, Phoebus, to let him drive the chariot of the sun. Phoebus grants this wish, but warns him of the dangers. Phaeton does not heed the warning, and loses control of the chariot, scorching the earth and falling to his death.

The Moderno medallion is strongly influenced by a drawing completed by Michelangelo (c. 1533), which was very popular and much copied in Rome and abroad. Often artists have chosen to focus on the technically difficult tumble of falling horses, as in the 1671 and 1931 editions. George Braque has chosen the triumphant moment before Phaeton's fall. Both Raymond Lafage and Thomas Rowlandson have focused on the body of Phaeton himself in their drawings. Such drawings might be used as sketches for larger works or as practice drawing the human form in unusual poses. In each iteration of the story the artists have used the visual language and styles of their own times, transforming the shape and representation of the tale to reflect current artistic tastes.

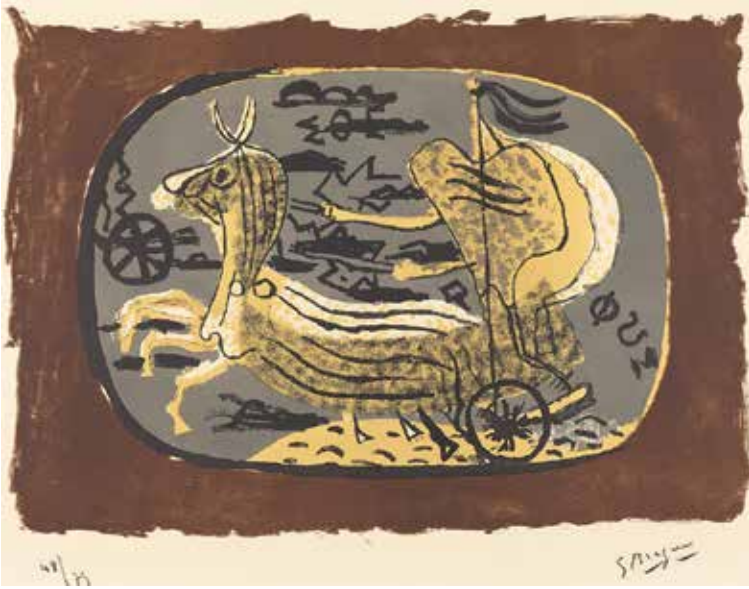
17 Moderno, Italian, 1467–1528, *The Death of Hippolytus, or The Fall of Phaeton*, late 15th–early 16th century, bronze, Widener Collection



18 Unknown artist, “The Fall of Phaeton,” engraving in *Publius Ovidius Nazoos Herscheppinge*, Amsterdam: Abraham de Wees, 1671, David K. E. Bruce Fund (front cover)



19 Pablo Picasso, “The Fall of Phaeton,” lithograph in *Ovid, Metamorphoses*, Lausanne: Skira, 1931, facsimile edition c. 1970, David K. E. Bruce Fund



20 George Braque, French, 1882–1963, *Phaeton, or Chariot I*, 1945, color lithograph, Rosenwald Collection



21 Raymond Lafage, French, 1656–1684, *The Fall of Phaeton*, pen and brown ink over graphite, Joseph F. McCrindle Collection



22 Thomas Rowlandson, British, 1756–1827, *The Fall of Phaeton*, pen and brown and gray ink with gray wash over graphite, Joseph F. McCrindle Collection

Transmission of Images

As we have seen, the *Metamorphoses* was produced in many editions from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, and not all publishers commissioned new images. One of the ways that printers illustrated their books was by borrowing, buying, inheriting, or copying previously completed plates and reprinting them in newer editions. Frequently the images bear witness to this process of transmission as they are transformed and altered in each new iteration.

23 Unknown artist, “Perseus,” woodcut in Ovid, *Les xv. livres de la Metamorphofes D’ouide (Poëte treselégât) contenans L’olymp des Histoires poëtiques traduitz de Latin en Francoys, . . .*, Paris: Denys Janot, 1539, David K. E. Bruce Fund

The upside-down image of Perseus here is a reminder of the manual nature of book printing in the handpress period. Each of the letters are arranged with movable type and set around the blocks with the images cut on them. In this type of printing it is easy to make the mistake found here.



24



25

24 Giacomo Franco (1550 – 1620), “Title page for Book Two,” engraving in Ovid, *Le metamorfosi di Ouidio*, Venice, Bern: Giunti, 1584, David K. E. Bruce Fund

25 Léonard Gaultier (1561 – c. 1635), “Title page for Book Two,” engraving in *Les Metamorphoses d’Ovide: de nouveau traduittes en françois: avec xv. discours: . . .*, Paris: Matthieu Guillemot, 1616, David K. E. Bruce Fund

The 1584 and 1616 editions are clearly based on a common ancestor, though there are some obvious differences. The later one was likely copied from a printed image, creating a reversed plate. Stylistic differences employed by each artist are apparent, and the language of the abbreviated captions has also changed from Italian to French.



26 Charles Monnet, “Daphne poursuivie par Apollon, et change en Laurier par son Pere,” ink and wash drawing in *Album of Preliminary Drawings and prints for ‘Les Metamorphoses d’Ovide’* volume 2, 1767/1771, Widener Collection

27 After Charles Monnet, “Daphne poursuivie par Apollon, et change en Laurier par son Pere,” engraving in Ovid, *Les Metamorphoses d’Ovide*, volume 1, Paris: Chez Pancoucke, 1767/1771, Widener Collection

These final two images illustrate the process of producing illustrations for books. A drawing of Daphne and Apollo was made by Charles Monnet. This was then copied by a skilled engraver onto a metal plate using a variety of techniques including cross hatching, stippling, or aquatint etching to mimic the subtle variations in line and wash achieved in the drawing. The plate was inked and then wiped clean, leaving only the ink pressed into the lines engraved on the metal plate. The plate was printed on damp paper, lifting the ink out of the lines, and producing a mirror copy of the original drawing. This lengthy process would be repeated for each illustration, making the production of a fully-illustrated book a time consuming and expensive endeavor.

Selected Reading

Hardin, Richard F. “Ovid in Seventeenth-Century England.” *Comparative Literature* 24, (1972): 44–62.

Moss, Ann. *Ovid In Renaissance France, A Survey of the Latin Editions of Ovid and Commentaries Printed in France before 1600*. Warburg Institute Surveys VIII. London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1982.

Ovid. *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*. Translated by Mary M. Innes. Penguin Classics. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955.

Checklist of the exhibition *The Transformation of Ovid's Metamorphoses*,
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Written by Sarah Schell.

The Gallery website features highlights from the exhibition and links to exhibition
related activities at www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/exhibitions/2013/metamorphoses.

