# *Introduction*

Ovid was born the year after the death of Julius Caesar and flourished in the Rome of Augustus. He completed the *Metamorphoses* around the time of the birth of Christ, was later banished for some unknown offence against the Emperor, and spent the last ten years of his life in exile at Tomis on the Black Sea.

In its length and metre, the *Metamorphoses* resembles an epic. But the opening lines describe the very different kind of poem that Ovid set out to write: an account of how from the beginning of the world right down to his own time bodies had been magically changed, by the power of the gods, into other bodies.

This licensed him to take a wide sweep through the teeming underworld or overworld of Romanised Greek myth and legend. The right man had met the right material at the right moment. The *Metamorphoses* was a success in its own day. During the Middle Ages throughout the Christian West it became the most popular work from the classical era, a source-book of imagery and situations for artists, poets and the life of high culture. It entered English poetry at a fountainhead, as one of Chaucer's favourite books, which he plundered openly, sometimes—as with the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe—in quite close translation. A little later, it played an even more dynamic role for Shakespeare's generation—and perhaps for Shakespeare in particular. The "sweet, witty soul" of Ovid was said to live again in him. But perhaps

Shakespeare's closest affinity did not lie so much in the sweet, witty Ovidian facility for "smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy," as one of his characters put it, nor in his aptitude for lifting images or even whole passages nearly verbatim, nor in drawing from two stories in the *Metamorphoses* his own best-seller, the seminal long poem *Venus and Adonis*. A more crucial connection, maybe, can be found in their common taste for a tortured subjectivity and catastrophic extremes of passion that border on the grotesque. In this vein, Shakespeare's most Ovidian work was his first—*Titus Andronicus*. Thirty or so dramas later, in *Cymbeline*, his mild and blameless heroine Imogen—whom her beloved husband will try to murder, whom her loathed stepbrother will try to rape—chooses for her bedtime reading Ovid's shocking tale of Tereus and Philomela.

Different aspects of the poem continued to fascinate Western culture, saturating literature and art. And by now, many of the stories seem inseparable from our unconscious imaginative life.

Why the world should have so clasped Ovid's versions of these myths and tales to its bosom is a mystery. As a guide to the historic, original forms of the myths, Ovid is of little use. His attitude to his material is like that of the many later poets who have adapted what he presents. He, too, is an adaptor. He takes up only those tales which catch his fancy, and engages with each one no further than it liberates his own creative zest. Of those he does take up—about two hundred and fifty in all—he gives his full attention to only a proportion, sketching the others more briefly in ornamental digressions or cramming them as clusters of foreshortened portraits into some eddy of his unfurling drift.

Myths and fantastic legends, wonder-tales about the embroilment of the natural human world with the supernatural, obviously held a quite special attraction for



him—as they have done for most people throughout history. But this aspect of his material, though it is usually dominant, does not altogether explain his addictive appeal for generations of imaginative artists. Nor does his urbane, cavalier lightness of touch, or the swiftness and filmic economy of his narrative, or the playful philosophical breadth of his detachment, his readiness to entertain every possibility, his strange yoking of incompatible moods. All these qualities are there, with many more, and all are important. But perhaps what has gone deepest into his long succession of readers, and brought him so intimately into the life of art, is what he shared with Shakespeare. Above all, Ovid was interested in passion. Or rather, in what a passion feels like to the one possessed by it. Not just ordinary passion either, but human passion *in extremis*—passion where it combusts, or levitates, or mutates into an experience of the supernatural.

This is the current he divines and follows in each of his tales—the current of human passion. He adapts each myth to this theme. Where details or complexities of the traditional story encumber or diffuse his theme, he simply omits them. He must have known the full myth of Venus and Adonis, in which the Goddess of Love and her opposite in the underworld, the Goddess of Death, quarrel for possession of the baby Adonis, and in which the Boar has multiple identities, and where the whole sequence of events completes the annual cycle of the sacrificed god. But all Ovid wants is the story of hopelessly besotted and doomed love in the most intense form imaginable—as suffered by the love-goddess herself.

The act of metamorphosis, which at some point touches each of the tales, operates as the symbolic guarantee that the passion has become mythic, has achieved the unendurable intensity that lifts the whole episode

onto the supernatural or divine plane. Sometimes this happens because mortals tangle with gods, sometimes because mortal passion makes the breakthrough by sheer excess, without divine intervention—as in the tale of Tereus and Philomela. But in every case, to a greater or lesser degree, Ovid locates and captures the peculiar frisson of that event, where the all-too-human victim stumbles out into the mythic arena and is transformed.

However impossible these intensities might seem to be on one level, on another, apparently more significant level Ovid renders them with compelling psychological truth and force. In his earlier books, preoccupied with erotic love, he had been a sophisticated entertainer. Perhaps here, too, in the *Metamorphoses* he set out simply to entertain. But something else joined in, something emerging from the very nature of his materials yet belonging to that unique moment in history—the moment of the birth of Christ within the Roman Empire. The Greek/Roman pantheon had fallen in on men's heads. The obsolete paraphernalia of the old official religion were lying in heaps, like old masks in the lumber room of a theatre, and new ones had not yet arrived. The mythic plane, so to speak, had been defrocked. At the same time, perhaps one could say as a result, the Empire was flooded with ecstatic cults. For all its Augustan stability, it was at sea in hysteria and despair, at one extreme wallowing in the bottomless appetites and sufferings of the gladiatorial arena, and at the other searching higher and higher for a spiritual transcendence—which eventually did take form, on the crucifix. The tension between these extremes, and occasionally their collision, can be felt in these tales. They establish a rough register of what it feels like to live in the psychological gulf that opens at the end of an era. Among everything else that we see in them, we certainly recognise this.