

Life in the Iron Age: “The Transformation of Daphne into a Laurel” as a Significant Part of Ovid's Historicism

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The *Metamorphoses* is a set of fables that have a deeply political tone underlying it. Ovid lived at the time of Christ. Given the era in which he was active, his time was revolutionary. The simple concept is that Rome was now a sprawling military empire rather than a republic. The former was based on the power of a strong Emperor and army, the latter on the oligarchy of the Senate. Like most writers of the era, he was a royalist.

Several points of this work are essential:

First, he lists the four ages of humanity: the Golden age of innocence (knowledge was intuited, not grasped through concepts), the Silver age of culture and morals (the development of conceptual thinking), the Bronze age of warfare and the Iron age of total and constant war at every level. The Iron age is where language is used to deceive and all morals are deemed relative.

We live in the Iron age. Knowledge here is important too: from intuition to concept is a falling away from unity. Conceptual logic alienates and separates us from the world. But in the Bronze and Iron age, even this has broken down, and soon, it becomes a war of all against all. Here, there are no truths of any kind except life and death. Not even taxes were guaranteed at the time.

Second, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a story of constant, radical change. He believed in a theory of evolution, though devolution would be more accurate. Man came from matter and developed reason. Man also adapts to his environment. These adaptations are aspects of the *Metamorphoses* symbolized by divine intervention. Remember, most pagans did not believe the stories of the Gods, but rather, saw them as symbols of higher truths that otherwise would be difficult to understand.

Third, because of this, no situation is ever stable. All is flux and becoming. Ovid's view is that things are changing for the worse, and human history, symbolized by the totality of Greek myth, is a story of degeneration. This negative change is a motion from the pristine simplicity of nature and humanity in the Golden age, to the arrogant, violent and elitist world of today (and in Ovid's time). Gold (symbolizing the sun) decays to Silver (moon), Bronze (Mars, or warfare) to Iron (normally associated with Saturn, as is lead). Saturn is the metal of separation. The scythe of Saturn separates man from God and ushers in the end of the Silver age into more rapid degeneration.

Fourth, one of the most important symbols here is the story of gods raping human women. It comes up over and over again. This is a symbol of civilization. Nature, water, the flower, etc., are almost universal symbols for woman. Nature, before civilization, was pristine and pure. As the Silver age degenerated, nature was seen as an arena where elites build cities that violate and exploit the natural order. These cities exist to concentrate labor and are fortified against their many enemies.

Fifth, the book is about power. Power corrupts all it touches. Love turns to rape. Politics

turns to war. Communities turn into personal egos. Money goes from a medium of exchange to a power in its own right. Earth and nature turn to exploitation for gain (mining, farming, etc, which by the way, require sacrifice). Power is the engine of change and is thus the very core of the book. Change is change for the worse, since mankind is continually changing into more vile forms over time.

Finally, under all appearances is confusion. In social life, the state fixes some relatively stable ideology that makes pandemonium into order. When the emperors took over, they did so for two reasons: first, because Rome was split into violent factions under the republic, and second, the republic was bedlam, it was rule by status. The Republic was an oligarchy.

Military emperors used force to place order on this chaos. It is the start of the Iron age. Emperors have done nothing wrong. They have rationally and ruthlessly used force to establish their rule and permit at least the appearance of order. The gods themselves come out of this chaos as man struggles to make sense out of this lack of order. There is order, of course, but at the end of the Bronze age, men only see their desires, not nature. This is the main issue (also see Hardie, 2002: 34-37).

Narcissus is the symbol for this. That too is in the *Metamorphoses* (Book III). First, he is a hunter. Hunting in Ovid always means the sex drive. This is a form of power in the sense that it turns the object of desire into a thing, merely an image. Second, he is the apogee of the end of the Bronze age. This explains his obsession with his own image.

Third, physical beauty (for men, strength and musculature) is the ultimate good. Since knowledge has degenerated, he does not know that he sees only an image of himself. He takes the image for reality. A nymph (named Echo, since she loved the sound of her own voice) has tried to seduce him, and being arrogant, pushes her away with an “I can do better” sort of attitude. The nymph then, after a time, meets Nemesis, the god of revenge, and hence, created the pool of water as water is always female, hunting is always male.

Remember that Zeus has raped her several times, as well as a bunch of other nymphs. She is as arrogant as Narcissus. Echo, Zeus and Narcissus are all prideful, arrogant and cannot control their own lust. Nemesis, however, is crafty and rational, using Narcissus' own petty obsessions to trap him forever. The thing is that his image is not even real, it is just his reflection.

Finally, this is consistent with what was said above. Images are not truth. They might point to it, but they are not truth of themselves. Images are unstable, always changing and are manipulated by the mind, both that of their creators and the viewers. They deceive more than they reveal. Knowledge has degenerated to the point where images of things are confused with things. The image has a word attached to it, and language itself takes on a life entirely of its own.

We live in the Iron age because image is reality. Truth is behind appearance, and it takes work to uncover it. Bodies are all that exist in the modern, Iron world. No, spirit exists as well. Reason, thought, universal ideas all speak of spirit. Consciousness itself must be a spirit. Thought does not work in orderly, cause and effect ways and thus, must be free. Something that is free cannot – by definition – be material.

The modern Regime tries to create a man that is helpless over his drives. This can only be if we are bodily and nothing more. Spirit is not of the same substance as bodies. It animates them. Romans held that logos, or rational structures, hold the cosmos together. Unreason is unfreedom – when we become slaves of our drives. Reason sees logos in all things. Unreason only sees the image of the thing. He is two steps away from the real.

Money dominates everything. This is the most archetypal aspect of all. If you found \$1

billion lying around somewhere, you would automatically have celebrity status and your own TV show. You would have hundreds of new friends and land the most beautiful women. None of this is based on your merit, however. Modern western life is just a technological version of life under the Republic. Only, few today know the source of the images that have become so powerful. At least back then, the emperor was able to take over and create some semblance of the Real. History is a cycle. We must degenerate further. Only then will a small minority rebuild true nobility. Now, the only nobility is money, which of course, radically changes its possessor.

The story of Daphne desiring to be turned into a Laurel branch is early in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid is setting out a universal idea of history where humanity descends from the Bronze to the Iron age. This story can only be understood to exemplify the lowest of these ages, since love here has become lust and rape. It is the idea that chaos and death underlie all things, no matter how good. It is a cautionary tale of how reason, symbolized by the sun god, must force its will on the appetites, or the wild nature of woman, in order for anything to remain stable.

Cupid/Eros commits a cruel act of hitting Apollo (or Phoebus, the god of the sun) with the arrow that leads to lust, while hitting Daphne with the blunt, leaden one which can only experience revulsion. The former leads to pursuit, the other, to rejection and disdain. Both are lower drives and passions. This needs to be understood relative to Ovid's own sense of history explained in detail below.

The cruelty was the first problematic thing to notice, but then, Apollo, the representation of the sun and hence gold, is stuck by what amounts to his own arrow: that is, the Golden, sharp arrow, a symbol of the sun as gold always is. Yet, if the gold (that is, the rational) is Apollo himself, then it is possible that he's being forced to experience the contradictions that the rise of reason (which is also the rise of science and civilization) present. Reason is found in the Silver age.

The argument presented here is that Ovid sees all things as a mixture of stable forms and chaotic flux. Reason (or the emperor, writ large) must place form on this chaos for any knowledge or action to make sense. It is very easy to transfer this to the male imposition of "himself" upon woman. The poem reads, concerning Apollo/Phoebus:

The King of Gods begot me: what shall be,
Or is, or ever was, in Fate, I see.
Mine is th' invention of the charming lyre;
Sweet notes, and heav'nly numbers, I inspire.

This is the foundation of all civilization: numbers, building, geometry. That they are "heavenly" refers to the fact that they are ideal, they are inherent in all rational things in civilization, but identical with none of them. The lyre needs to be tuned: the result, using skill and rational education, is harmony in music, or in social life.¹ All is rational and all is idea. This means all is free. That is, until Apollo is struck by his own arrow.

The fact that Ovid personally was subject to two failed marriages and only loosely connected to a third woman that lasted for the rest of his life is worth mentioning (Volk, 2010: 23). That he was also raised during the transition from the late republic to empire is also well

¹ Many of the symbolic associations I use here come from Fulkerson, L (2006) Apollo, Paenitentia, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. *Mnemosyne* 59: 388-402 which was very helpful in developing this thesis.

known, and has everything to do with focusing on the constant changes he sees around him. The old republic, really an oligarchy, pretended to base itself on virtue while only concerned with conquest and hence, slavery. The new empire was far more egalitarian and no one missed the overwhelming power of the Senators. But the empire too, while a rational result of Senatorial arrogance, was a step backwards in Ovid's own sense of world history (Volk, 2010: 25-27ff).

One of the most important ideas in this story is that of the gods pursuing women. This is tantamount to rape. Why Apollo? The god of the sun and reason. Daphne, daughter of the ever changing river, is impervious to reason. Apollo is a symbol of civilization. Nature, moisture, woman, plants, etc are not only symbols for the feminine, but the state of creation prior to the development of reason. As the Silver age moved into lower realms, existence became the domain where warriors create civilization and thus demand that the natural order give more than she would otherwise. Creating enemies, these civilizations, based around the fortress, are a crime and are paid for by constant sacrifice: that is, war and blood (Fulkerson, 2006: 395-396).

The *Metamorphoses* is about the power resulting from the destruction of the Silver age (Hardie, 2002: 33). It is not a precise chronology even though the book does start with the creation of the world. It is not obvious that the empire was a negative development, nor is the Silver age necessarily about just rules and moral conduct. It might be the mere appearance of it. The empire can be seen as the "revelation" of all that has been hidden by rhetoric.

However, this story seems to fit in the present Iron age. This age is both Ovid's and the age of the current age. No one has gone beyond reason, despite the fact that Old Rome, the middle ages and the modern era all sought to base themselves on rational order. Reason – and hence Apollo-- is the age of reason. This is not the Golden age of which Apollo is thought to rule over. Apollo is the age of true knowledge, however, he has descended in this story to pursuing a human woman as if to rape her. This is not the mind of the Golden age at all.

Eros is not pure, but approaches forcible rape. Civilization is not about the common good, but about the rule of the warrior class (Hardie, 2002: 168ff). The good goes from love to law, and from law to brute strength, whether it be money or power itself. As always, mining and farming are needed to support this new order, and it thus requires more sacrifice since nature will not yield up its goodness at that level voluntarily. It needs to be conquered. From this is born the Iron Age idea of politics.

Politics is the destruction of stability and the introduction of constant change. The repulsion of Daphne against Apollo is that of reason against creation, one approaching the other as an opponent, as ground to be conquered. Possession is all that's possible in this age. Ovid's understanding is that human affairs are degenerating. The work as a whole is speaking of this degeneration and this story in particular is that of this constant change, confrontation and despair. After all, this is why Daphne wants to change: to become numb, to check out of this civilization men (following Apollo and the sun of reason and science) have created (Fulkerson, 2006: 390-394).

Bronze is the symbol for Mars, or warfare. Warfare is the natural result of civilization, of an elite taking a chunk of nature and calling it "theirs." Instead of living off nature, nature is conquered and forced to bear more than she normally would. This is labor, and labor can only be protected by armed force lest others seek it. Therefore, nothing is stable and all is violence, including Eros. In the story, we read:

Med'cine is mine; what herbs and simples grow

In fields, and forrests, all their pow'rs I know;
And am the great physician call'd, below.
Alas that fields and forrests can afford.
No remedies to heal their love-sick lord!
To cure the pains of love, no plant avails:
And his own physick, the physician falls.

Hence, Apollo is manifesting his nature: the rational dissection of nature that lies at the base of civilization. In this case, medicine and the use of herbs and potions to cure human problems. However, given the nature of the female psyche, coming itself from the always changing river (water an eternal symbol of the moon, silver, and woman), cannot be so easily controlled. It might be a manifestation of the female chaos that seems to lie at the basis of all things and Ovid's own metaphysics.

In the Golden age, love was actually love: it required no rules and was an Edenic time. The story of Daphne turning into a Laurel to escape "reason" or male conquest could not have occurred. This story is a powerful symbol of the Iron age, yet it is so early in the work, only in Book I. This must mean that Ovid is showing that storytellers in the Iron age will not be able to grasp the mentality of the Gold, but will explain everything as a matter of conquest, since that's all the age can understand. Even the *Metamorphoses* itself goes from the realm of the gods and hence the age of Gold in books 1-5, while this degenerates into heroes in the middle section and then that of man, the Bronze and Iron, at the end, books 11-15 (Volk, 2010: 11).

The other option is that Ovid is foreshadowing the decay of history in this story, using a god, one of the most popular, to experience his own manifestation at this lower age. Once history decays, maybe even the gods, if they are to intervene with humanity at all, must conform to the nature of the historical cycle that even they cannot control. In the *Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, we read this,

Among the first creatures to emerge from the earth after the flood is Python, an enormous snake killed by Phoebus, who then introduced the Pythian games in memory of his triumph. But winners at the games could not be adorned with the laurel, which did not yet exist because Phoebus had not yet fallen in love with Daphne. . . The primordial creation of Python is followed immediately by the games, then by the story of Phoebus' passion for Daphne, without any clear-cut separation between human and mythical times, nor between different stages of human development. Since most of the stories are then joined together by often rather flimsy connections, even the internal sense of chronology disappears (Hardie, 2002: 67).

This is an important contribution in understanding what's going on. Volk (pg 54) speaks of how these episodes "intrude" on the otherwise smooth flow of history manifest in the work overall. What if this is true? First of all, the Golden age comes after that of chaos, or the true origin of all things. This might mean that flux is built into everything that exists, good or evil, which was suggested above. Second, that the nature of chaos is always just under the surface. This means that the Golden age was never quite Golden, at least because anyone at the time knew that all is an appearance of stability with chaos and terror lying underneath. Third, the issue can

be that at this very early stage in history, the Golden age had no even formed yet, since this act is so early.

All of these have one thing in common: that knowledge, the way humans have always known it, still requires the distinction between subject and object. This introduces separate things, individuals, that all too easily have separate interests. The Iron age is based in part on the nature of these interests almost always being opposed. The Roman empire is then a crude – but necessary – imposition of order on what otherwise would spin out of control.

When Daphne looks at her parent – the river – is she really looking at the Golden age? After all, there are no moral rules in nature, all was pristine instinct. It seems that during the Golden age, the distinctions between reason, feeling and life did not exist. However, this unity does not mean that chaos was gone, just temporarily conquered.

There is another more obvious problem in this story: why is Apollo acting irrationally, that is, acting according to appetite rather than thought. Is it so obvious that Cupid's arrow is the sole thing that is “controlling” the god? Can this even be done? Is Ovid forcing the god of reason and Gold to experience the results of his own (gold) creation? Reason is a tool, it can be used for good or ill. However, as humanity decays (or as the chaos becomes more and more visible under the weak veil of civility), reason becomes a tool that serves the passions and appetites. In the Hardie book, we read:

The metamorphoses that conclude most of Ovid's tales belong to a world in which nature is mutable, whether spontaneously or under the influence of divine intervention. Time and again, the appearance and physical being of an individual give way under the pressure of excessive passions and appetites, evil actions, or accidental transgressions against the gods (Hardie, 2002: 340).

This gives some support for the idea presented here: that even the god whose essence is reason cannot completely live by it, since even he is part chaos, part appetite. There is no reason to believe that chaos, when given proper form, is ever just pure evil. Its not really anything, but it does have the power to overwhelm even the most rational calculation. Reason might justify it, but it cannot cause it. Reason is a tool only, chaos is the engine. It is never irrational to speak (or live) the truth.

Early in the poem, it becomes clear that Daphne has taken a vow of virginity. Coming directly from the natural order, Daphne might be only mimicking the mentality of the Golden age, where nothing so vulgar as physical love could ever remotely symbolize love as such, since the thing and its exemplary idea would have been the same at the time. Virginity is a means to experiencing the true form of something rather than its physical manifestation.

Part of the decay of humanity is that man comes to see appearance as the only reality, not just a useful covering for the chaos that underlies it. A Form in this sense would be the tool by which the gods have organized the flux into things, represented by words and images. Hence, all things have a physical manifestation and the ideal cause that the gods have placed on the flux symbolized by the snake (Hardie, 2002: 67), the first object to emerge after the flood.

Given all this, it is not ludicrous to conclude that the woman here, Daphne, represents pristine creation, the Golden age. Her virginity is about seeing past the physical covering of things, the appearance, and seeing them for what they are: manifestations of how the gods organized the flux after the death of the snake. However, it was Apollo/Phoebus that did this.

Thus, it might be that Apollo, in following appetite, is showing the chaos that exists within him. Given that the sex drive might be the most powerful of all, all it takes is a little nudge from Cupid to overcome his intrinsic reason and get him to behave according to appetite.

Appetite is chaos, that the reason must force itself upon. Chaos is not evil, but neither is Form: both must exist, even in Apollo. This is easily transferred to the age in which Ovid lived, since this is Caesar's job in stopping the oligarchs as well as the common people, motivated only by gain (Hardie, 2002: 213). This is why the emperor can claim divine descent, since it is the form that makes anything exist at all, or in this case, anything has a legal regularity only because the emperor can make it so. Finally, it is also the nature of rape: the woman is the chaos, or the bringer of chaos, that needs reason to smash it down, to control it. Otherwise, no state, no stable existence can occur at all.

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