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Introduction: Re-Inventing Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Karl Enenkel and Jan L. de Jong

The importance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a source for the visual arts and literature is undeniable. The amount of illustrations, representations, adaptations and variations is endless. After the Bible, the *Metamorphoses* may be the text that was most often reworked, illustrated and recreated in other media. Especially in the early modern age, when knowledge of classical Antiquity was rapidly expanding and admiration for its literature and culture correspondingly growing, there were so many representations, adaptations and variations created, that it makes one wonder if these were not better known than the text of the *Metamorphoses* itself. Certain representations, or traditions of representing the *Metamorphoses*, may even have influenced the way we now read or interpret the text. For instance, in a fairly recent study, the author explains that in Ovid's account of Perseus noticing Andromeda chained to a rock, as a prey for a sea-monster (*Metamorphoses* IV, 670–690), the girl's 'embarrassment may also be due to the fact that she is naked.' The author further thinks that, 'It is peculiar [...] that Ovid never says that she would cover her nudity if she could.'¹ In fact, Ovid writes that if Andromeda had not been tied, she would have covered her face with her hands.² That seems certainly strange if she had indeed been naked, but Ovid never says she was!³ This explains why she only wanted to cover her face. It is, moreover, quite unlikely that Ovid even imagined her to be nude, as contemporary Roman paintings illustrating the tale

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- 1 Patricia B. Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies: Gaze, Image, and Gender in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Columbus OH: 2005), 78–79.
 - 2 *Metamorphoses* IV, 682–683; trans. Mary M. Innes, in the Penguin Classics series (first edition: West Drayton: 1955): 'She would have concealed her face modestly behind her hands, had they not been bound fast.'
 - 3 *Metamorphoses* IV, 672–675; trans. Mary M. Innes: 'When Perseus saw the princess, her arms chained to the hard rock, he would have taken her for a marble statue, had not the light breeze stirred her hair, and warm tears streamed from her eyes.'

show Andromeda chained to the rock with her clothes on.⁴ The modern author's presumption that Andromeda was naked seems to result from a reading of Ovid's tale through eyes that have been pre-conditioned by the early modern tradition of representing Andromeda without clothes. The list of examples by Perino del Vaga, Giorgio Vasari, Annibale Carracci, Rubens, Rembrandt and Pierre Monnot can be easily extended with many more cases in various media.⁵

Should these and other artists be blamed for taking liberties and not following the text of Ovid precisely? According to some authors writing after the Council of Trent (1545–1563), they should be. During the Council, it was decreed that artists representing scenes from the Bible must strictly adhere to the holy text and to the Church's interpretation of it. This was understandable, as deviations could lead the faithful astray. Along similar lines, there was a growing expectation that representations of historical events would correspond to the historical facts and not offer an imaginary rendition of what had happened. But what about mythological stories, which were neither sacred texts nor accounts of historical events? Were artists representing or reworking them expected to stick to the letter of poets such as Ovid who had told these tales? Or were they allowed to handle Ovid's text with the same creative freedom as Ovid himself did when he versified the mythological stories first told by others? In 1564, Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano opined in his *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters* that when an artist represents poetic (meaning: mythological) subjects, '... I think that it is legitimate for him to paint everything that his own imagination [*capriccio*] dictates, with those actions and movements, however, that are appropriate to the figures he is representing.'⁶ Twenty years later, Raffaello Borghini voiced a contrary opinion. In *Il Riposo* from 1584 he stated that painters and sculptors representing a mythological or

4 Examples are a wall painting originally in the Villa Imperiale in Boscotrecase, from the end of the 1st century BCE (now in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) and a wall painting originally in the Casa dei Dioscuri in Pompei, from the 1st century CE (now in Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale). The tradition of showing Andromeda with clothes on seems to go back to Greek art, as appears from a Corinthian vase from ca. 560 BCE., found in Cerveteri and now in Berlin, Staatliche Museen.

5 For more examples, see the website *Iconos > Viaggio interattivo nelle Metamorfosi di Ovidio*, s.v. Perseo e Andromeda > Immagini: <http://www.iconos.it/le-metamorfosi-di-ovidio/libro-iv/perseo-e-andromeda/immagini>.

6 Gilio Giovanni Andrea, 'Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori ...' in: *Due Dialogi di M. Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano* (Camerino, Antonio Gioioso: 1564) 75r: '... penso che lecito gli sia dipingere tutto quello che il capriccio gli detta, con quei gesti, con quei sforzi sieno però convenevoli a la figura che egli fa.' Translation quoted after Bury M. – Byatt L. – Richardson C. M. (eds.), Giovanni Andrea Gilio. *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters* (Los Angeles: 2018) 101.

historical story must follow the letter of their written source.⁷ As an example, he blamed Titian for not sticking to the details of the *Metamorphoses* in his painting of Venus and Adonis: '... Titian granted himself those liberties, that painters should not take.'⁸

One may wonder how authoritative or even representative Borghini's opinion was. In an article from 1988 on 'Illustrating Ovid', Nigel Llewellyn has made it clear that, 'in medieval and early modern Europe most of the artists producing Ovidian pictures were illustrating a text which they could not read in the original Latin.' Moreover, they had to transfer the Ovidian stories from one medium (text) to another: 'Many painters and carvers thus became "poets".'⁹ Accordingly, one of the aims of Llewellyn's article is to show, using representations of *The Rape of Europa* as an example, 'how painters can properly work in the spirit of Ovid without necessarily always having to follow every word of his poetry.'¹⁰ His observations and remarks concern sculptures and paintings from the 15th through the 18th century, which means that if Borghini's opinion had any impact, it was not universally heeded and artists acted more in the spirit of Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano (although their notion of 'appropriateness' may have differed).

It is interesting, however, that Borghini's estimation is tacitly adopted in many 'modern' studies of artworks illustrating scenes from the *Metamorphoses*. The question of how exactly artists followed Ovid's text – and if they didn't, which translation or other text they used as a source – is often the starting point and seems to dominate. This is not necessarily a bad thing, however. Ralph J. Hexter has rightly observed that, 'often it is only an awareness of subsequent hypercriticisms that make us aware of former freedom and artistic license.'¹¹ It is this understanding which is the point of departure for the present volume. We assume that early modern writers and artists were not convinced that a precise rendition of a textual source would guarantee the best

7 Borghini Raffaello, *Il Riposo in cui della pittura e della scultura si favella* (Florence, Giorgio Marescotti: 1584) 64: '... l'inventione, che da'poeti, o dagli historici prendono i pittori, o gli scultori, non doverebbe altramente esser rappresentata, che se l'habbiano i propii Autori scritta, et ordinate ...'

8 Ibidem, 65: '... Titiano di quelle licenze si è preso, che i pittori prender non si doverebbero.' Titian's painting was made in 1553–1554 for the future king Philip II of Spain and is now in the Museo nacional del Prado in Madrid.

9 Llewellyn N., "Illustrating Ovid", in Martindale C. (ed.), *Ovid Renewed. Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: 1988) 151–166, at 152.

10 Ibidem, 153.

11 Hexter R. J., "A visit to the museum: The Ovid Galleries", *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 6.1 (1999) 75–88, at 84.

result. Writers were trained in rhetorical and poetical methods of textual variation, creating narrative *evidentia*, and in other methods of re-interpretation and re-use of all kinds of texts and topics. Furthermore, they were aware of the different requirements of the various genres of literature, as for example tragedy, comedy, epos, elegy or lyrical poetry. Painters and other visual artists were trained in techniques of the 'invention' of images, either on the base of texts or pictorial traditions. They were conscious of the fact that visual representations require other elements and devices than textual narratives, and they felt free to apply them. Moreover, they were well acquainted with pictorial traditions and their use. This is certainly relevant in the case of the *Metamorphoses*, because extended sets of images were available via the numerous editions, translations, versions and synopses that were illustrated with woodcuts or engravings, for instance by Bernard Salomon, Virgil Solis, Pieter van der Borch, Christpijn van de Passe, Antonio Tempesta and Hendrick Goltzius. But even then the artists were also aware that in the case of pictorial traditions, creative variation was an important principle, and that various media and dimensions (such as large oil paintings, tapestries, sculptures, bronze plaques or small prints) required different artistic devices and compositions.

The authors of this volume have studied this phenomenon of creative invention, trying to detect and single out elements in the artistic and literary reception of the *Metamorphoses* that differ from Ovid's narrative. What elements, devices, perspectives, and interpretative markers were used that do not occur in Ovid, what aspects were brought to the fore or emphasized, and how is this to be explained? They have tried to expound the whatabouts of these differences, especially with respect to underlying literary and artistic problems, challenges, principles, and techniques, the requirements of the various literary and artistic media and genres, and the role of the cultural, ideological, religious, and gendered contexts in which these artefacts and writings were created. They have paid special attention to the role of allegorical and moral interpretations, and the role of the nude and the erotic in visual representations. But they have foremost tried to show how writers and artists 'can properly work in the spirit of Ovid without necessarily always having to follow every word of his poetry', thus highlighting their creative *ingenium*.

Yet this is not the only or main aspect of the studies in this volume. Readers of its various contributions will notice that artists and writers re-creating (stories from) Ovid's *Metamorphoses* did indeed exploit their 'creative *ingenium*', but that the results they produced may contain details or elements that can only be understood by an attentive reading of Ovid's text, in combination with knowledge of other writings from classical Antiquity. This does not necessarily mean that we should assume that – after all – artists did personally

read the original text or an accurate translation of the *Metamorphoses*. It may indicate that artists produced their recreations in some sort of collaboration or cross-pollination with advisors, patrons or clients who, thanks to their literary knowledge, could suggest including or elaborating specific details that would further enhance the result and satisfy the predilections of an educated public.¹² Thus an audience that was probably more familiar with the original text and the particulars of the *Metamorphoses* than most artists were, could enjoy both the metamorphosis of Ovid's stories into artworks of a different medium, genre or language, and still recognize 'pure' Ovidian elements acquiring a new meaning in a different context. It would be an interesting starting point for further study to uncover how the recreation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in early modern times was not just a matter of transfer from one medium to another, with its possible consequences, but also a process to which both artists and 'consumers' contributed through a creative interaction of deploying and counterbalancing their own specific skills, knowledge and predilections.

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12 This is not to suggest that we should revive the (tacitly) underlying concept of many studies from the 1970s and 1980s, of a (mostly unidentified) 'humanist' and an artist submissively following his instructions on the basis of some erudite program, often leading to interpretations that are overloaded with complex learning.

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