

Exemplarity in the *Metamorphoses*

The *Metamorphoses* may at first glance appear an unlikely candidate for a study of exemplarity. Whereas its predecessor in the Roman epic genre, the *Aeneid*, is centered on a single hero endowed with exemplary qualities,²¹ Ovid's narrative comprises a series of discrete but interconnected tales focused on the experiences of different characters.²² And yet, this episodic nature is, arguably, one of the very qualities which makes the poem such an appropriate subject for a critical inquiry of this sort. The *Metamorphoses* could perhaps be considered a compendium of exemplary tales, a collection of human acts of violence, irreverence, foolishness, envy, hubris, and (occasionally) piety so extraordinary that they frequently culminate in the most extraordinary act of all: metamorphosis.

The act of metamorphosis, in fact, shares a degree of common ground with the figure of the *exemplum*. In the first place, both are unique and spectacular enough to garner attention from an audience.²³ Just as *exempla* walk the fine line between history and myth, moreover, so too do we find stories of metamorphosis within the poem presented as factual by their narrators, but met with disbelief and scorn by listeners who consider them too preposterous to be believable.²⁴ And like the exemplary tale, an account of an extraordinary incident or individual which is plucked from its surrounding context and offered as a stand-alone narrative, Ovid's episodes typically record an

²¹ See e.g., Aeneas' exhortation that his son should be inspired by the *exempla* of both himself and the boy's uncle, Hector ("tu facito . . . / sis memor et te animo repetentem exempla tuorum / et pater Aeneas et auunculus excitet Hector," *Aen.* 12.438-40). A number of more minor characters in the *Aeneid*, such as Camilla or Nisus and Euryalus, could also be described as "exemplary."

²² Segal (1985) 59; see also Segal (1998) 14.

²³ Ovid opens the *Metamorphoses* by declaring that, *in noua fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora* ("my mind compels me to tell of forms changed into new bodies," 1.1-2), with the accompanying implication that tales of transformation are tales worth telling (*dicere*). Both the poet and storytellers within the epic itself frequently introduce or conclude a report of metamorphosis with a claim that it is marvelous or deserves recounting, a convenient shorthand for its narrative value (e.g., Perseus' account of the snaky transformation of Medusa's hair is *digna relatu*, "worth relating," 4.793).

²⁴ See below for examples, with Feeney (1991) 229-32, Wheeler (1999) 162-93.

astonishing one-time event excerpted from a character's longer life, such as an arboreal transformation which affords escape from divine rape. The metamorphosed body, moreover, shares with the exemplary monument the dual qualities of preservation and prescription, in that it both recalls its human subject and often instructs those who encounter it to apply the lessons from that human's life to their own.

The significance of the theme of exemplarity in the *Metamorphoses* is also suggested by Ovid's use of the term "*exemplum*" at critical moments in the opening and closing books of the poem, discussed in detail in Chapters 1 and 3 of this study. In Book 1, Deucalion classifies himself and his wife, the sole survivors of a world-wide deluge, as "the *exempla* of mankind" (*hominum . . . exempla*, 1.366),²⁵ before the couple cast the stones which are to be transformed into the new generation of men and women.²⁶ Meanwhile, in Book 15, Jupiter predicts that Augustus "shall guide morality by his own *exemplum*" (*exemplo . . . suo mores reget*, 15.834); shortly after, the emperor and Julius Caesar are compared to a series of mythological sons and fathers, including Jupiter and Saturn, who are deemed "*exempla* equaling them" (*exemplis ipsos aequantibus*, 15.857). This bookending of the poem by the figure of the *exemplum* attests to the relevance of exemplarity from early human history (Deucalion and Pyrrha) to Ovid's own day (Augustus).

Elsewhere in the epic, the term "*exemplum*" appears in an educational context of warning, consolation, and persuasion. As a tool for instruction, however, the rhetoric of

²⁵ In quoting from the *Metamorphoses* throughout this study, I use Tarrant (2004). Translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

²⁶ The use of the word "*exemplum*" in reference to Deucalion and Pyrrha captures their singularity as *both* the most pious members of the human race *and* its only representatives in the aftermath of the flood; see further Chapter 1 below.

exemplarity proves inadequate time and again.²⁷ The failure of *exempla* becomes particularly apparent in the tale of Arachne in Book 6, who vies with Minerva in a weaving contest (6.1-145). In the four corners of her tapestry, the goddess adds miniature pictures of humans who dared to challenge the immortals and subsequently suffered the fate of metamorphosis. The reasoning behind Minerva's creation of these vignettes, the poet explains, is "so that her rival for praise might understand from *exempla* what reward she might expect for such mad audacity" (*ut . . . exemplis intellegat aemula laudis | quod pretium speret pro tam furialibus ausis*, 6.83-4). But Arachne, we may surmise, either fails to notice the images and the parallels between these characters' acts of hubris and her own, or else simply chooses to ignore them.²⁸ In any case, no mention is made in the text of her acknowledgement of these *exempla*, and she continues in her willful and reckless competition with the goddess, with the eventual outcome of her transformation into a spider.

The Hippolytus episode in Book 15 is another instance in which the *exemplum* fails to fulfill its stated and desired purpose (15.479-546). Here, the young man seeks to console Numa's grieving widow, the nymph Egeria, by urging her to reflect on the comparable suffering of others.²⁹ He cites his own misfortunes as one such precedent: "I wish that the *exempla* which could relieve you in your sorrow were not my own; but mine, too, can do so" (*utinamque exempla dolentem | non mea te possent releuare – sed et mea possunt*, 15.495-96). The next fifty lines are devoted to Hippolytus' tale of woe:

²⁷ In this respect, exemplarity is of a piece with the theme of failed rhetoric in Ovid's work more generally, discussed in Tarrant (1995), Schiesaro (2002) 74.

²⁸ Oliensis (2004) 286-90, Salzman-Mitchell (2005) 125. See also Leach (1974), Feeney (1991) 190-94.

²⁹ On exemplarity in this episode, see Gildenhard and Zissos (1999b) 179-81, Hardie (2002b) 205. The use of *exempla*, either historical or mythological, is a standard feature of the *consolatio* genre. See Wilcox (2005) on this theme in Cicero's letters, and Wilcox (2006) on Seneca's *Consolatio ad Marciam* and *Consolatio ad Helviam*.

his step-mother's treachery, his father's curse, his fatal chariot-ride, and his rebirth as Diana's follower, Virbius (15.497-546). No sooner has he finished speaking, however, than we are told that Egeria finds no solace in others' losses; instead, she dissolves into grief and is transformed into a spring (15.547-51). One character's attempt to guide another by designating himself as an *exemplum* has been in vain.

The problematic nature of the rhetoric of exemplarity is also on display in the myth of Byblis in Book 9, in which a young woman falls hopelessly in love with her twin brother (9.454-665). The term "*exemplum*" features three times, making this the episode in which the word appears most frequently. The story is presented as an exemplary tale in its opening verse: "Byblis serves as an *exemplum* that girls should love lawfully" (*Byblis in exemplo est ut ament concessa puellae*, 9.454).³⁰ And yet, as the narrative proceeds, the discourse of exemplarity is dismantled and undermined almost immediately. In an effort to convince herself and her brother, Caunus, that incest is an acceptable option, Byblis cites a series of divine precedents for sibling marriage: Saturn and Ops, Oceanus and Tethys, Jupiter and Juno.³¹ Even as she proffers these examples, however, she recognizes their inapplicability to her own situation, conceding that the gods are a law unto themselves and the customs of humans are different (9.497-501). Byblis has stumbled upon one of the perennial problems of the *exemplum*: the distance between the two points of reference (in this case, deities and mortals) which cannot be bridged.³² Nevertheless, this realization does not stop her from trying to force the

³⁰ See Nugent (2008) 164. This is the only time in the epic that the poet-narrator himself explicitly declares a character to be an *exemplum*. His statement raises the question of whom, exactly, the case of Byblis is intended to instruct: the audience within the world of the *Metamorphoses*, or Ovid's own readers (as the present tense, *est*, perhaps indicates)?

³¹ See Feeney (1991) 196-97, Raval (2001) 289-92, Hardie (2002b) 206.

³² See Nugent (2008) 156 on Byblis' flawed logic here.

comparison, and she returns twice more to the subject of divine sibling unions. First, in her monologue, she invokes the case of the sons and daughters of the god Aeolus, before asking herself, “why have I provided these *exempla*?” (*cur haec exempla paravi?*, 9.508); soon after, propositioning Caunus in a letter, she claims that “we follow the *exempla* of the great gods” (*sequimur magnorum exempla deorum*, 9.555). But if she cannot even make *herself* believe that a parallel may be drawn between divine and mortal incest, she certainly cannot persuade her brother of it (and it is possible that he does not even reach that point in the letter; we learn that he disgustingly throws the tablets aside without reading to the end, 9.575). *Exempla*, in this case, are exposed as specious rhetorical devices peddled, despite the speaker’s full awareness of their inadequacy, as a means of casting a legitimate veneer on an act otherwise considered morally reprehensible.

Even in episodes where the word “*exemplum*” itself does not appear, the theme of inimitable models and unheeded warnings persists. Two of Ovid’s most famous episodes, those of Phaethon (1.747-2.400, discussed in Chapter 3) and Icarus (8.183-235, Conclusion), feature a son who is incapable of following, quite literally, in the path of his extraordinary father. In each case, it is not simply that the child does not live up to his exemplary parent; the attempt to do so in fact proves to be the death of him. Models of behavior related by characters themselves tend to be equally ineffective.³³ The poem is populated by a host of bad listeners, internal audiences who recklessly disregard or disbelieve the stories that they are told, and suffer dire consequences.³⁴ Pentheus scorns his guest Acoetes’ account of Bacchus’ power, and fatally experiences the full force of that power himself (3.511-733). Niobe pays no attention to the cautionary tale of her

³³ See Fabre-Serris (1995) 364-74 on exemplary narratives offered by characters within the epic.

³⁴ See Konstan (1991), Wheeler (1999) 181-85. On internal narratives in the *Metamorphoses*, see also Rosati (2002).

countrywoman, Arachne, commits the same offense by pitting herself against a goddess, and meets a similar fate (6.146-312). The Pierides give a rendition of the Giants' challenge against the Olympians, even as they themselves vie against the Muses in a singing contest (5.662-78), and are transformed into magpies as a punishment.³⁵

As is clear from each of these episodes, exemplarity, whereby an action performed by one individual is held to be worthy of imitation or avoidance by others, is an inherently social process. Reception is built into the very concept: a model, after all, never stands alone, but is always (or always has the potential to be) a model *for* someone else, whether the identity of that person is made explicit, or merely implied. The act of imitation is described by Bryan Warnick, in his philosophical study of the educational value of examples, as “a way of both sending and receiving social feedback.”³⁶ Replicating a particular deed, he explains, is a means of signaling that one has seen it and admires it, and of forging a connection with others. In Rome, we might add, those “others” comprised not only the agent and imitator of the deed themselves, but also the wider community, who endorsed or denounced it according to their mutual values.³⁷ The *exemplum*, in short, functions as a mode of communication between members of society.

And, like any other mode of communication, the *exemplum* is prone to failure.³⁸ Its creator (whether the individual who performs the extraordinary action, or the observer or narrator who relates it) cannot, despite his or her best efforts, maintain authority over it. Charles Martindale's frequently quoted observation, “[m]eaning . . . is always realized

³⁵ On the complex narrative structure of this episode in particular, see Leach (1974) 113-15, Johnson and Malamud (1988), Hinds (1987a) 128-33, Wheeler (1999) 81-84, Rosati (2002) 299-301, and Johnson (2008) 41-73.

³⁶ Warnick (2008) 93.

³⁷ Roller (2004) 3-5, Roller (2009) 216.

³⁸ As Warnick (2008) 44 puts it, “[e]xamples always slip out of a teacher's hands, usually saying both more and less than what the teacher wants them to say.”

at the point of reception,”³⁹ holds equally true in the case of the *exemplum*. So while Daedalus may urge Icarus to follow his example by flying in the middle course across the sky, he cannot stop the boy from rejecting him as a role model and cutting his own path. Conversely, a character may select and adopt as a model a deed or individual that is wholly inimitable. Phaethon, for instance, is intent on taking Sol, in his role of both father and extraordinary figure, as a model for imitation, whether he wishes to be one or not - and, as the god’s frequent and futile attempts to dissuade his son from riding in his solar chariot clearly indicate, he does not.

As previous studies of exemplarity such as Chaplin’s work on Livy have demonstrated, however, Ovid is hardly the only ancient author to concern himself with the inability or unwillingness of characters to learn by example.⁴⁰ As early as the *Iliad*, Achilles remained unmoved in the face of the cautionary tale of Meleager, proffered by Phoenix in an attempt to persuade him to rejoin the Trojan War (*Il.* 9.524-608).⁴¹ It seems, then, that as long as there have been *exempla*, there have been those who would resist and reject them. So what is it about the failure of the exemplarity in the *Metamorphoses* in particular which sets it apart from that in the other texts, and makes it worthy of extended analysis? First, and most obviously, the sheer number and variety of ways in which *exempla* stray from their intended course in this poem, touched on in the preceding discussion, points to a pattern which calls for some explanation. But the subject of exemplarity is afforded additional relevance by the cultural context of the

³⁹ Martindale (1993) 3.

⁴⁰ Chaplin (2000) 3-4, 73-105. Cf. the title of Goldhill (1994), “The Failure of Exemplarity,” a theoretical approach to the problematic nature of *exempla* in Greek literature.

⁴¹ See Alden (2000) 229-41, part of an extended analysis of the paradigm of Meleager in the *Iliad*, with further bibliography.

Metamorphoses, as well as by Ovid's own process of poetic production and his conception of his place within the literary tradition.

Imperial *Exempla*, Intertextual *Exempla*

Ovid's verses have long been mined by critics in search of evidence for his attitude towards imperial rule and ideology. But earlier scholarly attempts to label him staunchly "Augustan" or "anti-Augustan" have tended to generate readings which, although reassuringly tidy, are frequently one-sided and implicate the emperor too heavily in the poet's work.⁴² My project, in approaching exemplarity as a matter of shared interest to Ovid and Augustus alike, aligns itself instead with current research on the *Metamorphoses* which has produced an altogether more nuanced understanding of the poet's relationship to the imperial regime. These studies (to venture a generalization about an array of complex discussions) see Ovid engaging with issues of demonstrable concern to Augustus himself, such as succession, time, power, and art.⁴³ It is argued that, by opening these areas up to interpretation, Ovid interrogates and presents alternatives to imperial authority. Exemplarity, I suggest, is another such area in which both poet and emperor have a stake.⁴⁴ The final part of the dissertation, meanwhile, seeks to contribute to the broader body of scholarship on Roman exemplary discourse by applying the findings of recent studies on exemplarity to this most intertextually inclined of authors,

⁴² For a discussion of the difficulties of the "Augustan"/"anti-Augustan" dichotomy, see Galinsky (1975) 210-17, Kennedy (1992), and Barchiesi (1997) 5-8, 84.

⁴³ E.g., Hardie (1997), Feeney (1999), Oliensis (2004), Feldherr (2010) 60-122. On this trend in Ovidian scholarship, see Myers (1999) 197-98, Williams (2009).

⁴⁴ O'Gorman (1997) discusses Ovid's and Augustus' mutual interest in the didactic uses of *exempla*, though her focus is on the poet's elegiac works rather than his epic.

and thereby demonstrating the usefulness of the category of the *exemplum* within a poetic and metapoetic context.⁴⁵

Always a distinctive feature of Roman culture, the phenomenon of teaching and learning by example acquired a new and notable significance within Ovid's own lifetime. The advent of the Principate, with its accompanying spotlight trained on a single and singular individual, inevitably heralded a shift in the nature and function of the rhetoric of exemplarity. Christina Kraus, in a discussion of the tendency among Roman imperial historians to focus their narratives on "exemplary figures," captures the sense of this change. "When history's gaze," she writes, "is more or less forcibly directed at the emperor – especially (but not exclusively) to the emperor functioning as positive role model – the prescriptive function of *exempla* becomes dominant. The flexibility inherent in the *exemplum* being thus threatened or even lost, the audience's independent response to the spectacular suggestiveness of exemplarity is repressed or redirected, and its constructive use profoundly compromised."⁴⁶ It is, I suggest, to this increasing control over *exempla* that Ovid is responding in the *Metamorphoses*.

The practice of exemplarity and imitation, like so many other long-established customs at Rome, was transformed at the hands of Augustus, even as he claimed to preserve its traditions.⁴⁷ It has plausibly been observed, in fact, that the category of the *exemplum*, with its ability to accommodate both past precedents and future prospects, was key to the paradox which lay at the heart of the foundation of the Principate, a new

⁴⁵ Regarding the applicability of the rhetoric of exemplarity to literary production, some groundwork has already been laid by Barchiesi (2009a) esp. 46, Fleming (2009) 26-27, and Seo (2013) 10, 64-65, 185-86.

⁴⁶ Kraus (2005) 188.

⁴⁷ Barchiesi (2009a) 52 notes that "the function of exemplarity undergoes massive refashioning at the beginning of Imperial culture. It is important to remember that this is both a time of crisis and a time of intense systematization and rationalization in the 'factory' of public *exempla*." See also Chaplin (2000) 169-96, Kraus (2005), Lowrie (2007) 102-12, Peachin (2007), Bell (2008) 11, Lobur (2013), Gunderson (2014), Langlands (2014).

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