

First & Last Name

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Transformations and Rebirth

It is no secret that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is about change, as the very name denotes. The very structure of the narrative is ever changing, switching central characters and stories. Even the various characters, themselves, in the different stories change shape. So, what does this mean when applied to the world, as Ovid knew it and as modern humans know it?

In Book V: *Europa and Jove*, Jove changes himself into a bull to deceive the virgin, Europa. In contrast, Venus changes Atalanta and Hippomenes into lions as a punishment for forgetting her favor. This is an example of how Ovid incorporates change within change creating a world where nothing is permanent except impermanence.

Amidst this notion of inconstancy is striving for stability on the part of the characters. Daphne is, in a sense, not scrabbling away from Apollo who pursues her, she is searching for a way to maintain the constant in her life: her virginity. By changing forms she is able to accomplish this lasting stability. This idea is reflective of the political atmosphere experienced by him, as well as the previous generation. Out of the chaos of civil war came a strong victor who was able to give Rome the solidity it had lacked. Augustus created the steadiness that he was able to achieve through change. It is this paradoxical relationship between destruction and creation, war and peace, and change and constancy. Ovid intertwines these seemingly opposite concepts. They create this reactionary relationship to which they bounce back and forth. For

example, volcanic soil is among the most fertile in the world, yet there must come an eruption to spread it and stabilize the environment for a while.

Nature seems to be a stabilizing factor amongst all the change. The characters are always turning into animals or plants. Ovid might also be alluding to the fact that the essence of nature is change and it is basic to the world around us. The seasons come and go, the revolutions of the Sun and Moon shift, and life is born and fades. The story of Adonis is a good example. He is created by nature, spawned from a tree and he is destroyed by nature, gutted by a boar. Venus then transforms him to a flower called Anemon meaning “‘born of the wind’—because winds shake its fragile petals, and they fall” (X.762-763). Adonis becomes a symbol of the fragility and fleeting nature of life. Even in this flower that has a brief life, Venus promises to Adonis that “our memory will live eternally:/ each year they will repeat this final scene—your day of death, my day of grief, will be/ enacted in a feast that bears your name” (X.742-745).

What else can be gleaned from the story of Adonis is a sense of life cycle. A cycle still embodies change, but instead of a linear change, it is a circular change emphasizing this idea of ending where you began; similar to the Greek way of thinking. Adonis is born and Ovid describes a phenomenon that every modern human is painfully aware of: “The flight of time eludes our eyes, it glides/ unseen; no thing is swifter than the years” (X.418-419) and thus Adonis grows. He is an infant, then an adolescent, and finally a man. He changes throughout his life, yet in the grip of death he is the “wailing boy” that he was when he first given life (X.409).

For all of Ovid’s silliness and comedy, there is something truly profound in what is illustrated by his sensational stories. The message I ascertain from it all is that change is inevitable; embrace it or be destroyed by it.