

OVID: *METAMORPHOSES*

Johnston Center, Spring 2023

Bill McDonald

MW 9:25-10:40

Nihil est toto, quod perstet, in orbe: "There is nothing in the world that does not change."
Ovid/Pythagoras's motto (*Meta. XV*)

"I felt acutely a kind of deep myth... still there, still living.... As if it had only happened yesterday, as if it was still to come."

John Fowles, *Diaries*, 1957

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the great repository of Greek and Roman mythology in the West. It's an anthology of poems that is enormously entertaining in its own right before any theories or claims for contemporary relevance show their faces. Coming at the end of millennia-long traditions, OVID (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BCE – 18 CE) brings together the *crème de la crème* of the Old Stories and does so in a newly invented epic form and in rollicking high style. He offers us not only a compendium of mythology, but sparkling great poetry (even in translation), tragedy and comedy, melodrama and farce, wit and irony, with plenty of sex/love/gender trouble, inventive polytheism, disturbing violence, as well as insight into the mythic patterns of our own culture, the consequences of endless change, and a challenging skepticism. Myths are vitally important in every culture, but they aren't canonical, and variants abound; this is *not* a holy book. The stories have an inherent charm and give prodigious pleasure—sometimes for clear reasons, and sometimes for mysterious, exciting ones. We'll be looking especially at how Ovid charts the subliminal, half-buried lives of his characters and narrators in a subtle mapping of the human spirit that can teach us much about our contemporary modes of self-understanding.

If there's interest, we'll also spend some time looking at how *Metamorphoses* inspired many Western painters from the Renaissance forward. And we'll take up at least one modern novel—David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, reimagining Ovid's years in exile from Rome—and we'll read a number of short works that brings Ovid's work into contemporary prose and especially poetry. Be prepared for fun, challenge, personal and cultural immersion!

- **Required** translation: Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Charles Martin. Norton Critical Ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009. ISBN: 978-0-393-92534-0.

- *Required.* David Malouf. *An Imaginary Life*. New York: Vintage, 1978. **ISBN:** 978-0679767930

