

BRIEF MENTION



METAMORPHOSES: A PLAY BY MARY ZIMMERMAN

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I CANNOT REMEMBER A TIME when scholarly interest in a particular classical author was equaled, and maybe exceeded, by a popular enthusiasm measured in weeks on the best-seller lists, boffo box office, and Tony awards. But this seems now to have happened with Ovid. Latinists for some time have been taking Ovid much more seriously than they had done, making his poetry a vehicle for new directions in their work. Over roughly the same period, we have seen Ovidian novels by David Malouf, Christoph Ransmayr, and Jane Alison; fresh translations and ambitious reworkings by Ted Hughes and other poets; and now a remarkable new play by the extraordinary Mary Zimmerman (Circle in the Square, New York, N.Y., from 4 March 2002).¹

Zimmerman, a professor of performance studies at Northwestern and a former MacArthur fellow, is a major figure in innovative theatrical venues nationwide. She is known to classicists particularly for her adaptation of the *Odyssey*, which has been staged in a number of cities since its 1989 premiere. *Metamorphoses* is, however, her first Broadway production. The show opened off Broadway last fall, and that run was preceded by several others in Chicago, Seattle, Berkeley, and Los Angeles over the past five or more years.² As a result, probably everybody

¹ Novels: David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (New York: George Braziller, 1978); Christoph Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt* (Nördlingen: Greno Verlagsgesellschaft, 1988), *The Last World*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Grove Press, 1990); Jane Alison, *The Love-Artist* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). Translations of the *Metamorphoses*: (entire) A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993), David R. Slavitt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); (excerpts) David Michael Hofman and James Lasdun, eds., *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994); Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997); Mary Zimmerman, *Metamorphoses: A Play* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002).

² A proto-*Metamorphoses* was produced in Chicago in 1996 and was followed by the premiere of a revised version in 1998.

knows something about the play, if only that it is staged in and around a pool of water. The pool is in many ways the star of the show. In the play's opening episode, the *Cosmogony*, it signifies elemental water, and it recalls its original elemental role in subsequent appearances while signaling that in an Ovidian world, even elemental substances undergo constant change. Thus, water, the most protean of elements, becomes the luxurious swimming pool of a nouveau riche Midas, the ocean in which Ceyx drowns, the food devoured by Erysichthon, Narcissus' mirror, a basin to hold Myrrha's tears, the River Styx when it is crossed by Orpheus, another swimming pool (or maybe the River Po?) on which Phaethon neurotically floats. The pool is surrounded by a three-foot-wide deck, and the minimalist set is completed by an imposing double door behind the pool and to the left; a raised platform behind the pool and to the right; a rectangle of painted skyscape, vaguely reminiscent of Magritte, above the platform; and a chandelier above the pool. A cast of ten actors plays a couple of dozen characters, changing in and out of costumes that are evocative of a generalized antiquity but one in which such things as suspenders and trousers are not unknown: a dream antiquity, then, in which modern viewers can lose themselves or find themselves as circumstances dictate.

The advance notices that I had heard or read prepared me to enjoy the play, but its power surprised me. *Metamorphoses* was an elating experience and one that moved me nearly to tears. It accomplished this by unexpected means. The script is not designed as a vehicle for virtuoso acting. The cast respect this quality in their lines and do not overplay the hand that they are dealt. Instead, the basic emotions of each story are allowed to speak directly. Not that the script or the actors' readings are naïve—on the contrary, they are generally inflected in just the right directions throughout a series of episodes that are, by turns, campy, risqué, or silly and then sweet, shocking, or exquisitely, heart-wrenchingly sad. It is in fact here that this play and this production excel: Laughter and tears walk side by side in each episode but with a different cadence in each case. Now tears are a reproach for taking a story too lightly; now laughter lightens and consoles in the midst of sorrow. In conducting the audience through this spectrum of emotions, Zimmerman has captured the seriocomic element in Ovid as perhaps no other interpreter has ever done.³ It is worth mentioning here that the basis of Zimmerman's text is

³ Despite the enthusiastic reception the play has enjoyed, it seems that not all theatergoers appreciate this aspect: See John Lahr's review in the March 18 edition of *The New Yorker*.

the popular but much-maligned Slavitt translation.⁴ I personally have always enjoyed and even occasionally taught from the Slavitt, so its success in this arena does not surprise me. Whether the production will vindicate Slavitt in the eyes of his critics is a question worth asking.

But whatever translation she uses, Zimmerman does not aim to dramatize the entire *Metamorphoses* and so imposes a far-reaching interpretation on the poem by her selection of episodes. As I watched the play unfold and as I considered the ways in which it edits Ovid's poem, my main impression was and remains one of having witnessed bold, unconventional choices, chutzpah, and independence from any received interpretation with which I am familiar. Certainly, no one can accuse Zimmerman of taking the easy way. Needing to pare fifteen books of narrative into a ninety-minute play, she nevertheless faces head-on the most difficult staging challenges. Among the most specifically literary passages in the poem, not one but two of Ovid's most ambitious ecphrases (Fames from book 8 and Somnus from 11) are actually put before our eyes and with superb theatrical results. These decisions suggest a willingness to confront anything and an ability to carry it off.

On the other hand, large swaths of the poem are cut, and the stories that remain focus almost entirely on human loves. This means that several of Ovid's great themes are underrepresented, and the treatment of these themes when they do appear suggests that this de-emphasis is quite deliberate. Apart from an effective treatment of the Cosmogony that opens both the poem and the play and, much later, the story of Phaethon (played hilariously as an adolescent whining to his shrink about his relationship with Dad), none of the stories comes from the first half of the poem. Many of the omitted stories deal with divine caprice, even to the point of injustice perpetrated by gods and goddesses against humans. There is very little of that in the play. Perhaps the closest it comes is in the story of Myrrha, who is indeed forced by Aphrodite (sic: the script seems to make a point of vacillating between Greek and Roman names) to fall in love with her father; but this is her punishment for adopting a Hippolytus-like disregard for Aphrodite's cult. There is also very little violence and, in particular, no sexual violence. Rape is so common in Ovid's stories that the reader soon grows to expect it. By the time one

⁴ I cannot resist passing on the reaction of a friend who knows Ovid mainly from Mandelbaum's equally fine but more high-minded translation of the *Metamorphoses* and who was surprised that this production took Ovid so lightheartedly. When an intelligent reader reacts to Ovid in this way, some sort of sea change in the poet's reception has taken place.

reads the tale of Pomona and Vertumnus in book 14, the merest suggestion (*uimque parat*, 770) is sufficient to summon up a long history of predatory male lust that permeates almost the entire poem. Zimmerman's Vertumnus, dressing up as an old woman as in Ovid, does not even think about violence but instead tells Pomona the tale of Myrrha to warn her of the perils of scorning Aphrodite. So it seems fair to say that certain characteristically Ovidian themes not only fail to appear, but that they also have been very carefully excised from this adaptation.

The internal narration of Myrrha's tale within that of Pomona and Vertumnus shows that Zimmerman, while taking liberties with Ovid's own structural decisions, weaves into her script the kind of narratological arrangements that are among the chief pleasures of the poem. This is true not just of paired stories, but also on a larger scale. The play opens with the Cosmogony and then moves to a scene in which a number of women doing their laundry at the edge of the pool tell the story of Midas. That story is told as a kind of parable whose relevance to an audience of well-to-do theatergoers in 2002 is made very explicit. The episode ends with Midas accidentally turning his daughter to gold and then going off in search of the pool in which he must wash to restore her to life. (Here are two more roles for the pool to play—laundry basin and magic pond.) As Midas leaves the stage, the laundry women launch into the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, but after this story, the laundry women are forgotten, and the play runs its course, shifting from episode to episode via an assortment of entertaining transitional devices. The last episode (it is actually introduced as such) is the tale of Philemon and Baucis: The true love of this honest, simple pair is rewarded when they are transformed into trees. But just as this transformation takes place, Midas—by this time long forgotten and in any case unexpected—reappears, newly returned from his quest. Through the double doorway, his daughter appears, restored to life. He is afraid to embrace her again, but at length he does; and on this note of love rewarded (Philemon and Baucis) and love redeemed (Midas), the play comes to an end.

I have summarized enough of the play to show how far, using entirely Ovidian material (or almost entirely—it includes the episode of Cupid and Psyche from those other *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius), the script is willing to depart from Ovid. If one concluded that it presents a kind of *Ovide moralisé*, that would not be entirely wrong. To those who object that it suppresses or excludes major thematic elements of the poem, I can only admit that it does. These and similar thoughts were in my mind from the beginning to the end of the performance, and they have stayed with me as I have thought of the play in the weeks since I

watched it. But those thoughts did not interfere at all with the intense emotional satisfaction that Zimmerman and her troupe conveyed. The play has been very popular with audiences of all sorts. The pleasure of this production to the professional classicist consists, I think, both in watching a beloved poem realized anew in a different medium and for a contemporary audience and in contemplating a really gifted artist's independent engagement with these stories. Whether in spite of Zimmerman's departures from Ovid or because of them, I found a new appreciation and enthusiasm for his craft in her solutions to the problems that they both faced.

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