Performing Ovid’s Metamorphoses in *Titus Andronicus* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (“Titus”) and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (“Dream”) are both intensely Ovidian plays. Both are brimming with references to the *Metamorphoses*. *Titus* is an adaptation of the story of Philomela, Procne and Tereus from *Metamorphoses* Book 6; its sources also include the myth of Hecuba from Book 13 and story of Narcissus from Book 3. *Dream* draws on numerous Ovidian sources, including the stories of Pyramus and Thisbe, Actaeon and Ino and Athamas. Both plays, moreover, are self-consciously Ovidian: many characters in *Titus* and *Dream* are themselves readers and interpreters of the *Metamorphoses*. At a pivotal moment in *Titus*, the Andronici family reads from a copy of Ovid’s masterpiece, while in the fifth act of *Dream*, the “rude mechanicals”¹ put on a dramatic adaptation of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which appears in Book 4 of Ovid’s epic. Shakespeare is interested not only in the Ovidian stories, but also in different approaches to the interpretation of those stories. In *Titus*, characters take a functionalist approach to Ovidian material; by reading the *Metamorphoses* as if it were a conduct manual, they seek to read Ovid into their own contemporary lives. Throughout the play, they attempt to enact Ovidian metamorphosis by acting out stories from the *Metamorphoses*. Because of the characters’ inability to distinguish between the realm of Ovidian myth and the world of contemporary Rome, however, their attempts to perform Ovid repeatedly fail; these failed performances cause horrific damage and cast serious doubt on the viability of Ovidian dramatic adaptation. In *Dream*, Shakespeare returns to idea of performed metamorphosis, and, in the context of a comedy, provides a response to the concerns raised by *Titus*. The Ovidian performers of *Dream* reject the idea that Ovidian material can be acted out in the “real” world; instead, they limit their performances to a separate and delimited world of the stage. By doing so, they, and Shakespeare, are able to produce an aesthetically successful and socially beneficial drama of Ovidian metamorphosis.

Shakespeare’s interest in ways of reading Ovid is unsurprising. Ovid was a central part of the curriculum of grammar schools such as the one which Shakespeare attended in Stratford; Jonathan Bates writes that “[e]xtensive reading and memorizing of the *Metamorphoses* was almost universally required in sixteenth-century grammar schools.”² Both inside and outside of school, Shakespeare would have been exposed to a number of divergent approaches to interpreting Ovid. Medieval critics had sought to redeem the pagan text by allegorizing it: Ovid’s stories were thus read as echoes of Biblical history, or as moral fables which provided guidance for proper human conduct. Although Renaissance humanist interpreters tended to reject Biblical allegory, they continued to emphasize moral readings of Ovid.³ Arthur Golding’s 1567 translation of the *Metamorphoses* includes Epistles attached to each book which provide moral interpretations of each story. Moral interpretation was not simply an intellectual exercise:

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“Renaissance thinkers believed passionately that the present could learn from the past; [this] belief was the starting point of education.”⁴ At the same time, however, other interpretative traditions sought to engage with Ovid on purely aesthetic grounds. Bates writes that “a newly unapologetic delight in the poetic and erotic qualities of the *Metamorphoses* came to compete with [allegorical and moral readings].”⁵ As Shakespeare embarked on his dramatic career, therefore, he would have been aware that the reading of Ovid was contested between those who saw it as entertaining literature and those who saw it as a guide to practical matters in contemporary daily life.

*Titus Andronicus* is a play in which, as Grace Starry West writes, “everyone [...] whether Roman or Goth, is evidently educated in the best Roman books,”⁶ among which the *Metamorphoses* clearly reigns supreme. Characters constantly allude to Ovid. In the opening scene, after the sacrifice of his older brother, Alarbus, Demetrius urges his mother, Tamora, to take comfort in the story of Hecuba. He insists,

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  The selfsame gods that armed the Queen of Troy
  With opportunity of sharp revenge
  Upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent
  May favour Tamora, the Queen of Goths.⁷
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References to Philomela are particularly abundant. Aaron the Moor first compares Lavinia to Philomela as he plans her rape (*Titus* 2.3.42-3). After the rape, Lavinia’s uncle Marcus makes a similar connection. He cries, “But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee / And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue” (*Titus* 2.4.26-7). Lavinia is familiar with the story herself: “she quotes the leaves” (*Titus* 4.1.50) of an actual copy of the *Metamorphoses* in order to explain the attack to her family. The characters’ familiarity with Ovid’s work is not limited to the myths which structure the plot of the play. Tamora turns Ovidian material into a threat: when Lavinia and Bassianus confront her in the wood, she tells Bassianus, “Had I the power that some say Dian had / Thy temples should be planted presently / With horns, as was Actaeon’s” (*Titus* 2.3.61-3). Elsewhere the *Metamorphoses* furnishes characters with a language of lamentation: later in the same scene Martius refers to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe; upon discovering Bassianus’s body in the pit, he declares, “So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus” (*Titus* 2.3.231). For Titus, Ovid provides a standard to which he can compare his own actions. As he prepares his cannibalistic feast, he invokes the battle between the Centaurs and Lapiths: he hopes his “banquet [...] may prove / More stern and bloody than the centaur’s feast” (*Titus* 5.2.202-3). Reading Ovid does not simply allow the characters in *Titus Andronicus* to recognize the mythic parallels in the action of the play, it also provides them with a rich symbolic and figurative vocabulary through which they communicate their perceptions of the world around them.

Ovidian knowledge shapes characters’ actions as well as their rhetoric. The story of Philomela,

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in particular, is used repeatedly as a blueprint for rape and revenge. Aaron, Chiron and Demetrius consciously use Tereus’s rape of Philomela as a model for their attack on Lavinia. When Aaron first suggests the rape, he makes no mention of Philomela, or of mutilation: he advises Tamora’s sons to assault Lavinia in the woods “And strike her home by force, if not by words” (Titus 2.1.119) and recommends that they consult with Tamora who, he believes, “shall file our engines with advice” (Titus 2.1.124). Shakespeare does not show this second conference on stage, but by the time Aaron has reached the woods, it is clear that he and the Goths have taken Tereus as their model. The terrible mutilation that dominates Ovid’s tale is uppermost in Aaron’s mind; indeed, it now takes precedence over the act of rape itself. He reminds Tamora, “This is the day of doom for Bassianus / His Philomel must lose her tongue today / Thy sons make pillage of her chastity” (Titus 2.3.42-4). Aaron’s prophecy is soon fulfilled. After the rape, Chiron and Demetrius return to the stage “with Lavinia, her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished” (Titus 2.4.0). By cutting off Lavinia’s hands, Chiron and Demetrius show themselves to be attentive readers of the Metamorphoses. In Ovid’s tale, Tereus cuts out Philomela’s tongue, but not her hands. She is able, therefore, to sew a tapestry with which she identifies her assailant. Because they have read the Ovidian myth, Chiron and Demetrius know that they must close off this avenue of communication too. Chiron even taunts Lavinia with this knowledge; he tells her, “Write down thy mind, bemail thy meaning so / An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe” (Titus 2.4.3-4). Reading Ovid allows Chiron and Demetrius to each become, as Marcus says, “a craftier Tereus” (Titus 2.4.41).

While the Goths use the Metamorphoses as a handbook for rape, Titus uses it as a manual for revenge. After the rape of Lavinia and the deaths of Quintus and Martius, Titus seeks recourse in books. After the banquet of the Andronici at the beginning of Act Four, he tells his daughter, “Lavinia, go with me; / I’ll to thy closet, and go read with thee / Sad stories chanced in the times of old” (Titus 4.1.80-2). Titus’s reading is no recreational pastime. When Tamora visits him dressed as Revenge, he insists on a link between his reading and his own plans for vengeance. He accuses of her of interrupting him in order to ensure that “all [his] study be to no effect” (Titus 5.2.12), and assures her, “You are deceived for what I mean to do / See here in bloody lines I have set down / And what is written shall be executed” (Titus 5.2.13-5). What Titus means to do is re-enact the conclusion of the Philomela story. Once Chiron and Demetrius are in his power he tells them, “[I will] make two pasties of your shameful heads / And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam / Like to the earth swallow her own increase” (Titus 5.2.189-91). He explicitly cites Ovid as his source for the idea; he tells the doomed brothers, “worse than Philomel you used my daughter / And worse than Proene I will be revenged” (Titus 5.2.194-5). Like the Goths Titus reads the Metamorphoses as a living and relevant text, and insists on applying its stories to his own life and the contemporary world.

In their interpretative approach to Ovid, then, both Romans and Goth, align themselves with moralizing tradition of Ovidian interpretation. Like the moralizers, the characters of Titus believe treat the Metamorphoses as a didactic text, with practical value for the conduct of contemporary life. In Titus, this functionalist reading of Ovid has dire consequences. Rather than providing characters with moral wisdom, Ovid furnishes them with justifications and instructions for horrifically immoral actions. Nor is reading Ovid particularly conducive to a good life. By the final curtain, Titus, Tamora, Demetrius, Chiron, Lavinia, Aaron, Bassianus and Saturninus are either dead or dying as a direct result of the various
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Attempts to read Ovid into the modern world. The social outcomes are also disastrous: although Titus’s son Lucius is proclaimed Emperor at the end of the play, he owes his ascendancy to the conquest of Rome by an army of Goths. By refusing to distinguish between literary fiction and real life, the educated readers of *Titus* unleash horrifying Ovidian violence into their contemporary world.

This failure to distinguish between art and reality is a central problem not only with the reading of Ovid in *Titus*, but also with the characters’ repeated attempts to give the *Metamorphoses* dramatic form. Unlike Aaron and the Goths, Titus and the other Andronicus are not content to read the *Metamorphoses* merely as a sourcebook; they also seek to turn it into a dramatic script. Even at their most imitative, Demetrius, Chiron and Aaron keep themselves and their actions distinct from their source material. When Tamora’s sons rape Lavinia, she may become Philomela, but neither of the brothers, nor Aaron ever compares himself to Tereus. Indeed, by cutting off Lavinia’s arms, Chiron and Demetrius demonstrate their ability to use Ovid while going beyond the content of Ovidian materials. In carrying out his revenge plot, in contrast, Titus does not simply draw isolated lessons from the *Metamorphoses*; instead, he actually becomes on Ovidian character. When he declares, “worse than Procne I will be revenged” (*Titus* 5.2.195), he places himself within the Ovidian story and takes on the role of Procne, Philomela’s sister and avenger. In Titus’s mind the banquet to which he has invited Tamora will be more than the occasion of his revenge; it will also be a kind of theatrical spectacle, at which poetic resolution will be achieved through the completion of Philomela’s story. Titus himself emphasizes the theatricality of the event. After cutting the throats of the Goth princes he tells his assembled relatives and supporters to bring the corpses to the kitchen, and adds, “I’ll play the cook / And see them ready against their mother comes” (*Titus* 5.2.204-5). The final scene of the play thus becomes a suppressed play-within-a-play, as Titus turns his banquet into a re-enactment of the cannibalistic feast of Tereus at the end of the Ovidian myth. More broadly, the rhetoric of the Andronicus figures the rape of Lavinia as a dramatic performance of the Philomela story. Looking at a copy of the *Metamorphoses*, Titus describes the rape scene in the woods as “Patterned by that the poet here describes / By nature made for murders and for rapes” (*Titus* 4.1.56-7); his language transforms the natural setting into a stage set determined by an Ovidian script. Marcus is even more explicit in his reply; he laments, “O why should nature build so foul a den / Unless the gods delight in tragedies” (*Titus* 4.1.58-9).

Although Titus and Marcus use the language of dramatic representation to describe action of the play, their own Ovidian performances recognize no distinction between drama and real life. The consequences of Titus’s playing Procne are horrifically real: the role of Itys proves genuinely fatal for Chiron and Demetrius. By re-enacting Ovid’s stories in the non-literary world, moreover, the Andronicus hope to create resolution for the horrific calamities which the families have suffered. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid provides resolution for stories of intense suffering through the “Ovidian release” of transformation. In the story of Philomela and Tereus, Philomela is redeemed by transformation: by becoming a nightingale she recovers her lost voice, and indeed becomes the “archetypal songster and poet.”

Titus longs for this release, and seeks it repeatedly through attempted Ovidian performance. Before completing Lavinia’s Philomela story, Titus considers re-enacting other Ovidian tales culminating in meta-

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8 Bates, 116.
9 Ibid., 111.
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morphic release. At his first sight of his mutilated daughter, Titus turns to Ovidian re-enactment as a means of responding to traumatic experience. He asks Lavinia, “Shall thy good uncle and they brother Lucius / And thou and I sit round about some fountain / Looking all downwards to behold our cheeks [?]” (Titus 3.1.122-4). These lines allude clearly to the story of Narcissus, the beautiful youth who fall in love with his own reflection in Metamorphoses Book 3. Confronted by Lavinia’s Ovidian suffering, Titus offers to join his daughter by turning himself into another sorrowful Ovidian figure. Narcissus’s eventual metamorphosis into a flower may not be as redemptive as Philomela’s transformation, but it nevertheless provides his story with emotional release and structural closure; it is this closure that Titus desperately seeks to achieve through his dramatic Metamorphoses.

The Andronici’s staging of the Metamorphoses, however, repeatedly fails to provide them with any kind of successful resolution. Their failure is due precisely to their inability to distinguish between the world of drama and literary artifice and the real world in which they live. In the contemporary world of Titus Andronicus, literal Ovidian metamorphosis is an impossibility. Early in the play, Tamora relegates Ovidian metamorphosis to an imagined mythical world; she tells Bassianus, “Had I the power that some say Dian had / Thy temples should be planted presently / With horns, as was Actaeon’s” (Titus 2.3.61-3). Soon after issuing this threat, Tamora has Bassianus murdered by her sons; in the world of the play, metamorphic threats are followed up with mundane and entirely human violence. The absence of metamorphosis from the world of Titus Andronicus has devastating implications for Titus’s attempts to perform the Metamorphoses. However closely he follows his Ovidian script, he cannot reproduce the central moment of his original story, in which Philomela’s voice is restored. In their performance of the Philomela story, the Andronici try desperately to restore some kind of speech to Lavinia. When Marcus discovers her in the woods, he asks her “Shall I speak for thee?” (Titus 2.4.33), and Lucius later asks him to do so; he cries, “O say thou for her, who hath done this deed?” (Titus 3.1.87). Titus repeatedly claims that he will be able to restore Lavinia’s ability to communicate. He insists, “Mark, Marcus, mark. I understand her sings / Had she a tongue to speak, now would she say / That to her brother which I said to thee” (Titus 3.1.143-5). In the next scene he repeats this claim even more forcefully; he cries out, “Hark, Marcus, what she says – / I can interpret all her martyred signs – / She says she drinks no other drink but tears” (Titus 3.2.35-7). He tells Lavinia, “Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought” (Titus 3.2.29), and reassures her that he “will wrest an alphabet” (Titus 3.2.44) from her inarticulate gestures, “And by still practice learn to know [her] meaning” (Titus 3.2.45). Some critics have tried to read these rhetorical performances as effective substitutes for Ovidian metamorphosis. Philip Kolin sees Lavinia as the writer of texts and describes her as “a later day Ovid for a post-Empire ignoble Rome.”

Bates focuses on the long, rhetorically embellished speech which Marcus makes upon discovering his niece; he claims that “Marcus sings like a poet of her dismemberment. In that song a recovery is enacted.” Such a recovery is illusory, however. Titus’s attempts to turn Lavinia’s “martyred signs” into “what she says” are fruitless: when Lavinia is finally able to communicate, she does so through the written voice of Ovid, not her own unspoken language. Marcus’s lyri-

11 Bates, 111.
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cal descriptions of Lavinia’s suffering, moreover, themselves acknowledge the impossibility of Ovidian metamorphosis. He tells Lucius that Lavinia’s tongue “Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage / Where like a sweet melodious bird it sung / Sweet varied notes, enchanting every ear” (*Titus* 3.1.84-6). Lavinia’s mutilation is compared to the killing of a songbird: Marcus understands that, in the contemporary world of the play, the act of mutilation includes the negation of Philomela’s redemptive metamorphosis. Lavinia’s rape and mutilation cannot be redeemed. Her death has contains no Ovidian release: she is stabbed by Titus in the first killing of the play’s final massacre.

As Bates points out, Shakespeare creates tragedy in *Titus Andronicus* precisely by stripping the story of Philomela of its “Ovidian release.”12 For Titus’s play-within-a-play, however, the loss of metamorphic redemption leads only to a failure of drama. When metamorphic release is not forthcoming, Ovidian performance simply becomes another source of chaos and bloodshed. Titus’s play-as-banquet ends with an outburst of violence as savage and gory as the murder of Bassianus and the rape of Lavinia. Within the space of forty lines, Titus stabs Lavinia, reveals the fate of Chiron and Demetrius, kills Tamora and is killed by Saturninus, who is then himself cut down by Lucius. Here too, critics have attempted to reconcile this scene with its Ovidian models. Eugene Waith argues that Titus’s obsession with revenge is a kind of “psychic metamorphosis;”13 he writes that “at the end […] Titus […] produces an effect like that of Ovid’s Hecuba, for whom even the gods felt pity when revenge had dreadfully transformed her.”14 Pity for Titus, however, comes not from a divine source, but from his brother Marcus, whose appeal for pity from the Roman people is driven, at least in part, by self interest: after claiming that Titus suffered “wrongs unspeakable, past patience / Or more than any living man could bear” (*Titus* 5.3.126-7), Marcus asks on behalf of all the Andronici, “what say you, Romans? / Have we done aught amiss?” (*Titus* 5.3.128-9). Even more importantly, Hecuba’s “psychic metamorphosis” is accompanied by the Ovidian release of a physical transformation; *Titus* ends with the interment of Titus’s resolutely unchanged dead body. Ultimately, except for Tamora’s cannibalistic consumption of her sons, there is little in the conclusion of Titus’s Ovidian performance that is actually Ovidian. Instead, Titus’s unsophisticated and unimaginative attempt to bring the *Metamorphoses* into the modern world simply provides a pretext and provocation for unremittingly modern violence.

In *Titus Andronicus*, then, the young Shakespeare takes a clear stand against reductive, functionalist interpretations of Ovidian material. Titus’s attempt to apply Ovid to contemporary concerns is an ethical and interpretative failure. As Bates and Andrew Ettin suggest, therefore, *Titus Andronicus* enters Renaissance debates on the proper reading of Ovid in strong opposition to the dominant tradition of moralizing, didactic interpretation. Ettin argues that “Shakespeare [perhaps] recognized also that the tradition of *Ovide moralisé* – of which Golding was a part – was intrinsically false to the experience of reading Ovid, false even to the nature of the stories themselves,”15 while Jonathan Bates, pointing also to the play’s frequent references to the act of teaching, describes *Titus* as “an examination of the effi-

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cacy of humanist education.” Shakespeare’s critique of Ovidian interpretation, furthermore, goes beyond the schoolroom and ultimately implicates Shakespeare’s own dramatic art: Titus’s failed Ovidian performance throws the viability of dramatic adaptation of the Metamorphoses into serious doubt.

Composed in 1595 or 1596, three of four years after Titus Andronicus, A Midsummer Night’s Dream is in many ways Shakespeare’s attempt to restore the viability of Ovidian performance. The Athens of Dream, like Titus’s Rome is full of readers. Lysander’s knowledge of love comes from books. Early in the play he tells Hermia, “Ay me, for aught that I could ever read / Could ever hear by tale or history / The course of true love never did run smooth” (Dream 1.1.132-4): it is tempting to think that Ovid’s poetry is the source for some of these tales and histories. Helena is certainly familiar with the Metamorphoses: following Demetrius through the woods, she casts their experience in Ovidian terms. She challenges him, “Run when you will. The story shall be changed: / Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase” (Dream 2.1.230-1). Theseus, although he groups “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet” (Dream 5.1.7) together as recipients of his scorn, is clearly an attentive reader of Ovid. Indeed, for Theseus, all poetry is Ovidian is definitional of poetry; he tells Hippolyta,

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name. (Dream 5.1.12-17)

These lines closely echo Ovid’s own statement of his poetic mission at the beginning of the Metamorphoses. Ovid writes, (in Golding’s translation), “Of shapes transformde to bodies straunge, I purpose to entreate.” Even the lower-class actors preparing a play for Theseus’s wedding banquet are readers of the Metamorphoses: their play “The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe” (Dream 1.2.11-12) is drawn from Metamorphoses Book 4. Nor are the “rude mechanicals” the only Athenian entertainers looking for material in the Metamorphoses. The other entertainments offered to Theseus on his wedding night are also Ovidian stories. Theseus is offered “The battle with the centaurs” (Dream 5.1.44-45) which appears in Metamorphoses Book XII and “The riot of the tipsy baccanals / Tearing the Thracian singer in their rage” (Dream 5.1.48-49), based upon the story of Orpheus which takes up much of Books 10 and 11 of the Metamorphoses. Like their Roman counterparts in Titus, moreover, the literate Athenians read Ovidian stories for the sake of education as well as for entertainment. A.B. Taylor notes somewhat patronizingly that Lysander and Hermia’s “pretty duet on the way love is oppressed in this world is led by Lysander and based not on experience but on books”. Although Tay-

16 Bates, 104.
19 Bates, 140.
20 A.B. Taylor, “Ovid’s Myths and the Unsmooth Course of Love in A Midsu
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lor suggests that this a sign of the lovers’ “naiveté,” Lysander’s use of fiction and poetry as a guide to love is consistent with Renaissance approaches to reading Classical literature.

Unsurprisingly, the characters of the comedic *Dream* do not read Ovid with an eye to committing more sophisticated atrocities. Nevertheless, their reading of Ovid is not purely light-hearted: Ovidian stories of metamorphosis have imbued the Athenians with substantial anxiety about change and inconstancy. When Hermia affirms her love to Lysander, she swears, oddly, “By that fire which burned the Carthage queen / When the false Trojan under sail was seen / By all the vows that ever men have broke” (*Dream* 1.1.173-5). This reference is the oath-breaking Ovidian Aeneas of *Metamorphoses* Book 14 and *Heroides* 7. Even as she swears to elope with Lysander, Hermia betrays the extent to which Ovidian stories have influenced her views on love. Hermia’s concerns about the changeableness of love persist in the forest; as she and Lysander lie down to sleep, Hermia says to him, “good night sweet friend. / Thy love ne’er alter till thy sweet love end” (*Dream* 2.2.67). Helena similarly is concerned about love’s metamorphic potential. Lamenting her inability to abandon her unrequited affection for Demetrius, Helena declares that she “errs […] […] in admiring of his qualities” (*Dream* 1.1.231); she does so, she claims, because “Things base and vile, holding no quantity / Love can transpose to form and dignity” (*Dream* 1.1.232). Indeed, the emotive force of personal metamorphosis for the lovers is so great that inconstancy becomes one of their most serious terms of abuse. As their first confrontation becomes increasingly heated, Lysander attacks Demetrius for being a “spotted and inconstant man” (*Dream* 1.1.110). The lovers’ anxieties are well-founded. In ruling that Hermia must either obey Egeus or become a nun, Theseus cites an Ovidian notion of metamorphic identity. He tells Hermia, “To you your father should be as a god / One that composed your beauties yea, and one / To whom you are but as a form in wax” (*Dream* 1.1.47-29). Theseus’s model of male power is drawn, as Heather James points out, from the story of Pygmalion, who literally sculpted his wife, Galatea, out of ivory. At the climax of the story, Galatea becomes human under Pygmalion’s hands; as Golding puts it, “The Ivory wexed soft: and putting guyght away / All hardnesse, yeelded underneathe his fingers, as wee see / A peece of wax made soft against the Sunne.” For the upper-class Athenian lovers, the prospect of Ovidian metamorphosis is a serious threat to their well-being.

The rude mechanicals also worry about metamorphosis, although their particular worries are less clearly Ovidian. The mechanicals are concerned with the problem of dramatic mimesis. They believe that, by taking on their roles in Peter Quince’s play they will, in a sense become Pyramus, or Thisbe, or a lion. As a result, they worry that their audience will be unable to distinguish between their playacting and reality. Bottom fears that the ladies in the audience will think that someone has actually died when “Pyramus” kills himself at the end of the play; as well, he worries that the ladies will believe that the lion played by Snug the Joiner is a real lion. To avoid these risks, Bottom recommends that Peter Quince write a prologue which will “seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed” (*Dream* 3.1.16-18); he adds, “for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear.” (*Dream* 3.1.18-21). Similarly, Bottom

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advises that the lion “must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion’s neck” (*Dream* 3.1.33-4). In *Dream*, as in *Titus*, therefore, Shakespeare is interested in exploring potentially blurred distinction between playacting and reality.

The mechanicals’ choice of play is also significant. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe as Niall Rudd notes, “parodies the relationship of Lysander and Hermia.”24 In both cases, a pair of young lovers kept apart by parental intransigence decides to elope at night and meet outside the city walls. Alarmingly, the Ovidian story ends, as Peter Quince puts it, with the “Most cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe.” (*Dream* 1.2.11-2). By introducing the Ovidian tragedy into the play, Shakespeare holds out the possibility that *Dream*, too, could become a tragedy derived from Ovidian material. Indeed, as Dennis Huston argues, Lysander and Helena flirt with the possibility of becoming Titus-like performers of the *Metamorphoses*. In their conversation about the various obstacles placed in the way to true love, Huston sees a dangerous “act of oversimple scriptwriting in this scene: [Hermia and Lysander] seem subconsciously attracted to the neatness of tragic love stories.”25 As the action of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* moves into the woods outside Athens, then, the play is full of disquieting echoes of *Titus*. Once again, a group of self-conscious Ovidian readers goes into the woods; once again, Shakespeare places the relationship between Ovidian myth and everyday life in the foreground of the action; and once again he suggests that performances of Ovid’s stories have potentially destructive consequences.

In the woods, the play’s comedic nature increasingly asserts itself; nevertheless, the disturbing similarities between *Dream* and *Titus* remain active. The Athenian woods, like Rome’s “wilderness of tigers” (*Titus* 3.1.54) are a stage for re-enactments of Ovidian metamorphosis. Most remarkably, Bottom is, in the words of Peter Quince, “translated” (*Dream* 3.1.113) by Robin Goodfellow into a man-ass hybrid. Bottom’s story, as Leonard Barkan points out, is a retelling of Ovid’s story of Actaeon. Puck only happens upon Bottom because the mechanicals have chosen to rehearse “So near the cradle of the Fairy Queen” (*Dream* 3.1.73), Titania. Like Actaeon, then, Bottom undergoes bestializing transformation as a result of his intrusion upon a divine female; indeed, as Barkan notes, Shakespeare borrows the name “Titania” “directly from Ovid’s sobriquet for Diana in [the story of Actaeon].”27 Unlike Actaeon’s metamorphosis, however, Bottom’s transformation takes place in the context of a performance. Puck is himself a performer. When he first appears, he informs one of Titania’s fairies, “I jest to Oberon and make him smile” (*Dream* 2.1.44). He proceeds to offer a boastful litany of his various performances: in order to make Oberon laugh, he “[beguiles] a fat and bean-fed horse […], / Neighing in likeness of a filly foal” (*Dream* 2.1.45-6), and, at other times, “[lurks] […] in a gossip’s bowl / In very likeness of a roasted crab” (*Dream* 2.1.47-8). Puck’s Ovidian intervention in the mechanicals’ rehearsal is in keeping with this “actorliness.”28 He figures his dealings with the mechanicals as a piece of playacting: happening upon the them, he gleefully exclaims, “What, a play toward? I’ll be an auditor – / An actor, too, perhaps, if I

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23 Golding, 10.308-10.
24 Rudd, 118.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 266.
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see cause” (Dream 3.1.74-5). After transfiguring Bottom, he “overwhelms and tortures his [the Athenians] with a virtuoso display of transformations”;29 he declares, “Sometime a horse I’ll be, sometime a hound / A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire / And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn” (Dream 3.1.103-5). Bottom’s transformation, moreover, takes place in the context of a larger performance. Puck, turns him into a monster in order to provide Titania with a suitably “vile thing” (Dream 2.2.40) as a love object. Titania’s humiliation is, ultimately, a kind of performance, “a sweet sight” (Dream 4.1.45) for its audience of Oberon and Puck.

Although their experience has no direct Ovidian source, the lovers in the wood are all, through the force of love-in-idleness, subjected to the very sort of personal emotional metamorphosis which terrifies them in Dream’s first act. Hermia, in particular, sees Lysander’s betrayal as moment of terrifying changefulness. After he threatens to “shake [her] from [himself] like a serpent” (Dream 3.2.261) she asks confusedly, “What change is this / Sweet love?” (Dream 3.2.262-3); a few lines later she cries out to him, “Am not I Hermia? Are not you Lysander? / I am as fair now as I was erewhile. / Since night you loved me, yet since night you left me” (Dream 3.2.273-5). Indeed, for a moment it appears that the lovers’ metamorphic experience will result in an Andronican bloodbath. As their squabbling over Helena reaches its climax, Lysander challenges Demetrius to a duel. He demands, “Now follow, if thou dars’t, to try whose right / Of thine or mine is most in Helena” (Dream 3.2.336-7). For Puck, the author of this chaos, however, all this “jangling” is “a sport” (Dream 3.2.253); he is eager to be the audience for “their fond pageant” (Dream 3.2.114). Like Bottom, then, the lovers are the victims of the fairies’ Ovidian dramatizations.

While Dream’s performed metamorphoses carry hints of Titus’s violence, they never actually turn into a Roman bloodbath. In Dream, the performance of Ovidian material always remains performance: although Ovidian myths are acted out by and upon real individuals, they ultimately have little effect on the lives of those individuals outside the context of the performance. For the lovers, the possibility of violence is ultimately eliminated by the same metamorphic drama which produced it. Following Oberon’s orders to “[i]like to Lysander sometime frame [his] tongue / […] And sometime […] rail […] like Demetrius, / And from each other […] lead them thus” (Dream 3.2.360-3), Puck uses his powers of impersonation to separate the combatants. Unlike their Ovidian prototypes, Shakespearean metamorphoses in Dream are entirely reversible. After the lovers have exhausted themselves, Oberon provides Puck with the antidote for the juice of love-in-idleness; he orders him to “crush this herb into Lysander’s eye / Whose liquor has this virtuous property: / To take from thence all error with his might” (Dream 3.2.366-8). Bottom, too, is easily returned to human form, unlike Actaeon, whose bestial metamorphosis leads to his death at the jaws of his own hounds. Oberon simply orders, “gentle puck, take this transformed scalp / From off the head of this Athenian swain” (Dream 4.1.63-4). The phrasing of Oberon’s remark is significant: even with his ass’s head, Bottom is still “an Athenian swain”; his metamorphosis is nothing more than an easily reversible piece of theatrical costuming; as Barry Weller puts it, “Bottom’s face is always visible, even when – or perhaps especially when – he wears an ass’s head.”30 Nor does Shakespearean metamorphosis have any lingering effects. When the lovers wake, the night seems to

29 Ibid.
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them, as Oberon predicts, “a dream and fruitless vision” (*Dream* 3.2.371); in the morning, Demetrius describes the events of the night as “things […] small and indistinguishable” (*Dream* 4.1.186). Although Leonard Barkan argues for the profundity of Bottom’s visionary experience,\(^{31}\) for the weaver too ultimately “[thinks] no more of this night’s accidents / But as the fierce vexation of a dream” (*Dream* 4.1.67-8): it is telling that the ballad of “Bottom’s Dream” which is to tell of Bottom’s “rare vision” (*Dream* 4.1.202) never materialises.

Unlike Titus, Shakespearean performers of the *Metamorphoses* understand the boundaries between their performances and the rest of life; they do not seek, as Titus does, to use Ovidian dramatizations to accomplish their goals in the “real” contemporary world. Although Bottom’s metamorphosis plays a role in Oberon’s plan to humiliate Titania and obtain the changeling child it is not, as Barkan points out, a necessary component of that plan, and is undertaken entirely on Puck’s initiative.\(^{32}\) Oberon’s initial assumption is that Titania, under the influence of love-in-idleness, will fall in love with a natural beast, “Be it ounce, or cat, or bear / Pard, or boar with bristled hair” (*Dream* 2.2.36-7). Puck, ultimately, does not dramatize metamorphoses in order to achieve a serious goal; he does so for the sake of pure entertainment; as he puts it, “those things do best please me / That befall prepost’rously” (*Dream* 3.2.120-1). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, therefore, Shakespeare offers a radically unconventional approach to reading and performing Ovidian material, one which, by recognizing the fundamental distinction between Ovidian artistry and the non-aesthetic world, permits the successful performance of both the Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and metamorphosis in general.

This refusal to approach Ovidian material in a functional or didactic fashion, moreover, actually allows metamorphic drama to achieve a valuable social function. Although the metamorphic play of the Athenian woods is all but forgotten the following morning, the Athens of Acts Four and Five is not the same as the Athens of Act One. By playing out metamorphoses on the stage of the forest, Shakespeare neutralizes Athenian anxieties about the possibility of metamorphosis in the everyday human world. In the morning, the lovers’ fears about shifting human emotional identities have vanished. Theseus has abandoned his attempts to impose an Ovidian notion of metamorphic selfhood, and instead endorses a notion of constant individual identity. When Egeus attempts once again to assert his paternal power, Theseus declares, “Egeus, I will overbear your will / For in the temple by and by with us / These couples shall eternally be knit” (*Dream* 4.1.179-181). Only one metamorphosis from the night is still in force in the morning: Demetrius remains under the influence of love-in-idleness. Demetrius, however, sees his metamorphosis as a restoration to his own true, constant identity. His past rejection of Helena is, he claims, a “sickness” (*Dream* 4.1.173) of which he is now cured; speaking of Helena’s love, he tells Theseus, “But, as in health come to my natural taste / Now I do wish it, love it, long for it / And will for evermore be true to it” (*Dream* 4.1.173-5). For Demetrius and the other Athenian lovers, limited and controlled metamorphic performance provides a way of acting out and eliminating the potential transformative dangers of love.

*Dream* closes with one final performance, as the rude mechanics stage Pyramus and Thisbe for Theseus, Hippolyta and the lovers. Their performance is a final reprise of Titus’s approach to Ovid-

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\(^{31}\) Barkan, 263-4.

\(^{32}\) Ibid. 266.
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ian drama. In the Metamorphoses, the blood of the dying lovers dyes the blossoms of the mulberry tree purple; the tree’s transformation provides the story with its emotional closure and Ovidian release. In the mechanicals’ version, there is no such metamorphosis; like Titus, then, they offer a version of Ovidian tragedy stripped of metamorphic resolution. Their performance is farcical failure, filled with malapropisms, overblown rhetorical flourishes and the repeated destruction of dramatic illusion. Their performance, in one sense, acts as Shakespeare’s final banishment of an inadequate model of Ovidian interpretation. Yet, the mechanicals’ failure is not absolute. While they may be unable to produce successful drama, they are able to overcome their own fears about dramatic metamorphosis. When Snout opens the play with the declaration, “I, one Snout by name, present a wall” (Dream 5.1.155), he eliminates any risk that dramatic metamorphosis will spill over into real life. In some sense, then, even Titus’s Ovidian tragedy is rehabilitated in Dream through the affirmation of the distinction between Ovidian art and unliterary life.

At the very end of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Puck is left alone on stage. He turns to the audience, and reminds them that the “weak and idle theme” (Dream 5.1.418) which has just been performed is “No more yielding but a dream” (Dream 5.1.419). In the play’s final lines, then, Shakespeare pointedly calls attention to the performed nature of his own work. At first glance, the playwright’s decision to point up the illusoriness of his own drama, and abjure any lasting impact is an odd one. For Shakespeare, however, the staged nature of his work is essential to its value. Attempts to use art as a form of practical instruction, and to turn drama into an instrument of concrete change are, as Titus Andronicus makes clear, doomed to both moral and aesthetic failure. Puck’s final speech, then, returns us to the question of how Ovidian interpretation should proceed. In Dream, Shakespeare insists that the Metamorphoses must be read aesthetically, as a glorious product of literary imagination. It is this insistence that allows Shakespeare to transform the Ovidian gore of Titus Andronicus into the Ovidian comedy of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, a play which Niall Rudd aptly describes as “the most magical tribute that Ovid was ever paid.”

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33 Rudd, 125.
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