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Metamorphoses book 3: Main themes

Ovid employs Bacchus as a means to linking different stories in Metamorphoses book 3; sexual themes are explored as Ovid's characters struggle to contain their affections within platonic boundaries. At the same time they often fail to identify themselves as either the subject or the object of their affairs. As a mortal longs for the **corpus** of their loved one in vain, they experience frustration that only death can rival in strength. Indeed, this is exactly what takes place; as the descendents of Cadmus attempt to rival the gods, their own passion is turned against them, resulting in imminent death. The tragic dynasty of Thebes endures its curse; as one death smoothly follows another, Bacchus seems to be the force behind the scene. Whether we see him impersonated and taking divine action or not, we are nevertheless made aware of his presence. Ovid does this by reflecting ideas and qualities associated with Bacchus in his other characters.

In the story of Narcissus and Echo, we see parallels being made between Narcissus and Bacchus. Both are youths of an androgynous age, not deprived of effeminate features. Ovid reminds us that such an appearance portrays both sexes, and thus attracts either:

'*Legions of lusty men and bevies of girls desired him'*

This theme of transsexuality is explored in the preceding account of Teiresias in book 3. Jove is contradicted by Juno when he says women derive more pleasure from sex then men. The joke becomes a legal dispute (Juno was infamously deprived of marital rights) and Teiresias is made the judge. Teiresias himself '*experienced love from both angles'* as he was turned into a woman for seven years when he struck two serpents mating in a wood. Cruelly enough, he has to pay for his expertise: Juno deprives him of sight. An indirect reference to Bacchus is made here as we see the combining of two sexes generate violence. Similarly the cult of Bacchus was thought of as sadistic and extremely violent.

Ovid's comment refers to pederasty, which in Ovid's day, though frowned upon, was common practice. The soft unscathed features of a boy attract the men; it is the innocence and distance in Narcissus that liken him to a virgin girl. The description of Narcissus' appearance is brimming with detail; this is done in order to draw attention to some of the main themes in Metamorphoses:

'Stretched on the grass, he saw twin stars, his own two eyes,
Rippling curls like the locks of a god, Apollo or Bacchus'

Ovid deliberately draws out attention to the boy's womanly hair; later on in book 3, the parallel to Bacchus will become obvious. Pentheus scorns the cult of Bacchus as effeminate and urges the dragon born warriors to defend Thebes against this degenerate invasion. He argues: '*His gleaming armour is perfumed locks and womanish garlands'* (line 555) Pentheus resists the bigenderous nature of Bacchus' worship; his death is therefore deeply ironic – he is killed by the women of his own natal family. Pentheus is punished for stumbling upon their secret act of worship no men are allowed to witness.

However, there is another, more subtle link to Bacchus in Narcissus' description. As he stares affectionately at his own reflection he sees the duplicate of his own eyes, described as *twin stars.* Just as Bacchus makes Pentheus see double, in the same way Narcissus is unable to identify the boundary between reality and imitation. He becomes bisected between two different identities, forced by divine punishment to become both '*votary and idol, suitor and sweetheart, taper and fire – at one and the same time'* Although Bacchus is not actually present in the scene, the link is

obvious: Ovid takes delight in playing on words on a grand scale as he toys around with the idea of confused identity.

In fact, reflections, both visual and audible, cause the transformation of Narcissus and the disappearance of Echo. The latter endures divine punishment: Echo distracts Juno while Jupiter chases after nymphs and is consequentially deprived of independent speech. Narcissus, a pre-pubescent boy who has previously rejected many admirers, goes hunting and encounters Echo's voice, as she repeats his last words. Ovid presents the account as an actual conversation, this is seen in the latin: **'ecquis adest? et 'adest'** (*Narcissus says 'who is present' and 'present!' replies Echo)*. The juxtaposition of the same verb adest (adeo, adere – present) naturally emphasizes its multiple meanings that come with the change of speaker. When describing this exchange Ovid uses the word imago (means both echo and reflection) thus referring to the double nature of a misleading, aural and visual reflection.

This reference provokes us to think about the recurring theme of misleading identities as Narcissus struggles to identify the object of his sexual desire as himself. We witness the interchangeable roles of the subject/object of a love affair, and the tentative boundary between the desirer and the desired. In the case of Narcissus, this boundary is two-dimensional: *'all that keeps us apart is a thin, thin line of water'*. Narcissus' frustration at his inability to physically depict his love is deeply ironic. As with Pyramus and Thisbe, this failure to touch causes death, in one way or another. In the case of Narcissus, his inability to cross the boundary exhausts his mentally and physically, because pure platonic admiration does not satisfy him. Talking to his fading imago, Narcissus cries out in despair:

"*Don't hurry away, please stay! You cannot desert me so cruelly. I love you!' he shoute d. 'Please, if I'm not able to touch you, I must be allowed to see you, to feed my unhappy passion!'*

The nature of this frustrated desire is obviously sexual; Ovid emphasizes this by including the noun **alimenta** (lit. food) in his description of Narcissus' emotional suffering. Unable to fulfill his sexual cravings, the young boy forgets about other needs, such as actual hunger. Food is commonly associated with erotic foreplay, one lover teasing another. It is ironic how in the case of Narcissus this never ending foreplay becomes tantalizing. Narcissus suffers, unable to cross the boundary between visual admiration and physical indulgence, and receives no satisfaction.

The link with Bacchus is self evident: alcohol allows us to think we are able to transgress certain visual boundaries, when in fact this may not be true. At the same time, it is within Bacchus' power to disturb, distort and break down images: ironically, as Narcissus breaks down emotionally, his tears fall and disturb his reflection, his object of desire. As the reflection breaks down, Narcissus, unable to deal with the loss of visual contact (the only contact he is able to experience), breaks down physically into a flower.

Flowers themselves are, of course, sexual symbols. We only have to look at certain works of present day modern art to see a clear reminiscence a flower has to a vulva. At the same time, flowers often represent virginity; for instance the Virgin is often depicted with a white lily. Those two ideas combined with the transformation of a self-absorbed male youth lead us to think about Freudian ideas of natural bisexuality. Narcissus is highly representative of this theory – his sexuality is in a state of constant flux. He seems to naturally embrace his sexual affection for a male, and the only thing he cannot accept is his inability to physically express it.

Narcissus' transformation into a flower shows another link to Bacchus: a previously cold, untouched and unapproachable boy becomes vulnerable in his new physical state. Flowers are easy to pluck, and so is virginity.

'The body, however, was not to be found –
Only a flower with a trumpet of gold and pale white petals'

This image is extremely violent, as we picture the defenseless, tender flower and simultaneously think of the rites of Bacchus. Brutality and vengeance are overshadowing this seemingly innocent scene; we are once again reminded of Bacchus' return and lack of mercy for all who think themselves better. The paleness of the flower reminds us of Narcissus' originally pale, untouched and pure skin. Once again, we are able to sense Bacchus' presence who himself is often described as a pale young boy.

Book 3 is entirely devoted to Bacchus, and every story, whether part of the main narrative or not, reflects the deity's powerful influence. Bacchus is shown to be the god of many things; his presence is constantly tangible throughout book 3 as each theme Ovid touches upon can be traced directly back to Bacchus. Each of these ideas, whether it involves identity, gender, boundaries or tangibility all have one thing in common: Bacchus is able to transgress them. The extent of Bacchus' power becomes apparent to us as we come to realize Bacchus' divine ability to flow back and forth between reality and illusion; this is what makes him present in all accounts. Book 3 is rich with the deaths of Cadmian descendents, in fact the sheer number and predictability of these mortalities dulls our moral judgment. Instead of shock we develop a fascination with Bacchus' violent revenge on his own family, and this is perhaps the most striking aspect of experiencing the narrative: we forget our own moral principles, because the spectacle itself is so strikingly multi-dimensional.

Word count: 1547