

Why and How have later authors and artists been so strongly influenced by Ovid's Metamorphoses

As anyone who has read Ovid's Metamorphoses will know that because of his style of writing and the way he manages to link two stories, that are not even remotely related, together and makes it seem as if one is a follow up to the other; that they have been in some way influenced by him. The Metamorphoses has not just influenced people because of the way it is written, but it is also a wonderful collection stories. Most of the examples in this essay of the authors and artists that are or have been influenced by the Metamorphoses have been taken from Book VII and Book VIII.

George Fredrick Watts', an artist who lived from 1817-1904, painting 'The Minotaur' portrays the Minotaur with sympathy.

Ovid's very brief account of the Minotaur and how he came to his end, Ovid describes him on page 183, Book VIII:

"...there Minos imprisoned the monster, half-bull, half-man, and twice feasted him on Athenian blood..."

Watts has evidently used Ovid's description of the beast, above as inspiration when he was planning the design and what the painting will be trying to convey to people once it is completed. Watts must have been so inspired by such tiny detail in the book and this may have made him go against the traditional view of the Minotaur. The message that Watts is trying to get across to us, is that even though he is an abomination of mankind, he is still, to quote Ovid "half-man" and therefore he has the needs, feelings, and urges that all humans have; as well as the needs and urges of a bull. This is why in the painting the Minotaur is shown in a sympathetic light, but it also evident that the reason why he is looking out across the sea is because he is anticipating the arrival of his human rations from Athens. Even though it may look as if the creature is yearning to be free from the confines of the Labyrinth. Watts manages to make people, when they view the painting, feel sorry for the Minotaur and wishing that they could some how help him but also feel that they would never want to be in the same room as the Minotaur and peace of mind of knowing that he is safely trapped in the Labyrinth.

Frederick Sandys', another artist who lived from 1829-1904, painting 'Medea' portrays Medea, in my view, as being one who is having conflicted views of whether or not she is doing the right thing.

Sandys' painting 'Medea' is depicting Medea performing a magical spell that will restore youth to Jason's father Aeson; this is taken from the story of Jason and Medea. The story

of Jason and Medea takes up a large portion of book VII from page 155 to page 163 and the story of Medea which lasts even longer from page 155 to page 166.

In the story of the rejuvenation of Aeson, Jason asks Medea if she can increase his father's life by taking some of Jason's life and giving it to him. Medea says that she can rejuvenate his father without taking some of Jason's life. So Medea goes and travels all over to get the herbs and other things that she needs to rejuvenate Aeson and creates a potion out of the herbs and then she uses the potion to rejuvenate Aeson. The only description of Medea we get is of her hair when she is performing the rejuvenation of Aeson on page 162:

“...while Medea herself, with streaming hair...”

Obviously this does not tell us very much about what she looks like, but we are also told that she meant to be very beautiful. Sandys had to use artistic licence in his painting. The way that Sandys finally chose to portray Medea is probably because he used Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as inspiration. Ovid portrays Medea as being a sorceress, so Sandys may have decided to bring the idea of her being a sorceress and what she would look more up-to-date to what she would look like in his time; thus the reason for why she very strongly resembles a gypsy. Medea's physical appearance in itself makes her look like a gypsy and the way Sandys has clothed her makes her look even more like a gypsy; especially how she is wearing so much jewellery. The way that she is touching the jewellery may be trying to convey that it has some sort of magical power. In the painting below Medea there's a frog, what looks like a piece of holly and some sort of Egyptian sarcophagus, Sandys is showing how Medea has been all around the world to get all the things she needs for the rejuvenation of Aeson.

The last painting I will be discussing is one that portrays the whole life of Theseus in the one painting; whereas the other two have just looked at a single event. 'Master of the Cassoni Campana' as he or she or it is known by, painting 'History of Theseus' is the life story of Theseus but the artist has painted it as if Theseus was alive in today's world, that's today's world for the artist who was alive in the early 6th century, another example of this technique of modernisation is the film 'O Brother Where Art Thou' which is *supposed* to be about Homer's *Odyssey*.

The Artist depicts Theseus as a chivalric knight throughout his life. The artist has depicted many of the events that Theseus is famous for. The artist most likely used Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for inspiration because it is very much stylised in an Ovid way by the manner in which it jumps about from story to story but somehow manages to link them together. Ovid describes Theseus' encounter with the Minotaur quite well, even though it is very brief on page 183

“...in there, Minos walled up the twin form of bull and man, and twice nourished it on Athenian blood, but the third repetition of the nine-year tribute by lot, caused the

monster's downfall. When, through the help of the virgin princess, Ariadne, by rewinding the thread, Theseus, son of Aegeus, won his way back to the elusive threshold..."

Though the Labyrinth has been transformed into a garden maze is quite clear that the Artist has been inspired by Ovid; the woman who looks like she is waiting outside the garden maze, i.e. the Labyrinth, is I think meant to be princess Ariadne who was Minos' daughter. In the top right hand corner you a ship sailing with black sails, this is representing the time when Theseus is sailing back to Athens from Crete, he forgot to replace the black sails, which meant that he had died, with white sails, which meant that he had succeeded in killing the Minotaur and that he was alive. When his father saw the ship returning with the black sails up he threw himself off a cliff, and fell to his death, not changing into a bird like some of the other people who had fallen off a cliff in Ovid's Metamorphoses.

In conclusion, I think that I could mention many more people that have been influenced by Ovid but due to the word limit I cannot. Everyone is inspired differently, for some only need a small passage others need a long detailed passage. I believe that I have displayed both of these qualities.

(Total: 1,244)

Bibliography:

Ovid's Metamorphoses