The Ovidian Inheritance: Transformation, Desire, and Literary Legacy

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When gods made love and mortals found their doomed fates,
You speak the age-old stories in a golden weight.
From Parnassus to the Helicon, your myths resist the urge to die -
They live on, as truths beneath a lie.

You sang of everything changing, yet your words endured,
Untamed desire, lust, loss in your verses lured
Others into your poetic flame and fame,
Each awaiting to get a glimpse of your indelible name.

———————— To Publius Ovidius Naso, in honor of *Metamorphoses*

The Ovidian Inheritance

Introduction:

"In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora" (translation: "my mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms")[1] – such a deceptively simple declaration opened Ovid's *magnum opus*, an epic masterpiece, as Ovid began to unravel the stories of bodies being changed into new forms. One may judge from the bulkiness of the work that Ovid is a poet for whom too much is never enough, as he stuffed his epic with flowery language and deliberate "playfulness and disorganization". Yet Ovid is aware of such style – "non ignoravit vitia sed amavit"[2] (He did not ignore his flaws but loved it) – but nonetheless treasures it. Such playfulness sees Ovid refusing the rigid architecture of epic poetry in favour of a fluid and digressive movement. Beneath this movement, however, lies not merely a compendium of myths, but a sustained meditation on change and the fundamental condition of existence. The transformations of the *Metamorphoses* operate on alternating planes: physical, moral, and narrative – gods dissolve into trees; girls into boys; humans into stones; desire into violence. In Ovid, metamorphosis becomes a conceptual tool, where change becomes the organizing principle of the cosmos. Through his work, Ovid offers an alternative poetics – one that resists closure, embraces ambiguity, and deliberately undermines the ideological certainties and reforms of the Augustan era.

The conflation of Ovid's apparent creative restlessness and the contrasting enduring nature of his tales explains Ovid's persona as one that refuses to adopt a fixed identity. This perhaps is one reason why Ovid continues to thrive far outside the confines of the Roman world. This essay focuses on how Ovid's influence can be seen in works spanning across centuries and geographies. His vitality can be seen in Shakespeare, who drew on Ovid's "dark philosophie of changed shapes",[3] as he talked about agency, artistic projection, and artistic ambiguity. Milton found too in Ovid's transmutable universe an imaginative internal energy capable of harboring both the grandeur yet the precariousness of creation. For Russian poets writing in exile, Ovid's own banishment to Tomis by Augustus due to his so-called "carmen et error"[4] (a song/poem - possibly a reference to Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* - and a mistake)serves as a beacon of hope during times of hopelessness and shows how resilient language can be during times of banishment – for language is a territory unbound by political borders.

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[1] Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. (The Project Gutenberg, 2025 edition). Translation taken from: https://transitionspostgradjournal.wordpress.com/2021/01/18/interpretationsoftransitions/
[2] Seneca the Elder. *Controversiae*. (Loeb Classical Library, 2025 edition)
[3] Arthur Golding. *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation of 1567* (Paul Dry Books, 1965).
[4] Ovid. *Tristia Book 2.207*. (Loeb Classical Library, 2025 edition)

Ovid's persistence exists not only in the great literary works – my own encounter with Ovid was also marked by dislocation. Moving from China to the United Kingdom when I was only thirteen years old, I came to a country where the food was unfamiliar, where the weather was hostile, and where the people were sometimes unwelcoming. I came to a place where my previous cultural identity became shattered and changed. Ovid's very own vision of transformation became a way for me to think about how mutable our world is and how changeable identities can be. Ovid's works about exile also resonated with me. As an outsider to the British world, I sometimes found myself emotionally "exiled" – away from my previous friends and family members. While I was stuck in the UK by myself due to COVID, Ovid's works in Tomis, such as the *Tristia,* helped me comprehend the universality of exile and nostalgia. On a personal level, Ovid is not just a figure of antiquity - his works remain a living framework for negotiating the fluidity of myself. Ovid is a companion in my own metamorphosis.

Why Ovid:

Frequent readers of classical texts will know that the Roman world does not lack ingenuous poets. This is even more so in the "Golden Age of Latin literature" that Ovid is part of. Virgil, perhaps, is one the best recognized talents at the time, and his epics spoke volumes about the Roman world. His most famous one – the *Aeneid* – delineated the historic founding of Rome, starting with the fall of Troy and ending with Aeneas's victory on the Italian peninsula.[5] Putting aside the brilliance in the story, whilst *Aeneid*'s flattery of Augustus and its pageantry-like celebration of Rome's past and present glory conform to the ideals of the time, the work does not provide readers centuries later with a framework to question authority, identity, the complexities of desire, or the ambiguities of power.

Ovid, on the other hand, offers such a framework - this is one reason why I am interested in him. Ovid is a poet who is good to think with. For example, he understands that transformation is a worldview. Bodies, identities, and nature are unstable. In Book One of the *Metamorphoses,* Ovid explores the story of Daphne and Apollo. A story about love begins with a quarrel between Apollo and Cupid after Apollo mocks Cupid for playing with a bow – a weapon that Apollo thinks belongs to mighty gods like himself. Cupid, in revenge, shoots Apollo with a golden arrow, igniting the god's uncontrollable lust for the nymph Daphne. Cupid simultaneously shoots Daphne with a leaden arrow, fueling her aversion to love. From that moment on, the tragic ending of this unrequited love affair began to unfold. Apollo relentlessly pursues Daphne through the woods, proclaiming his

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[5] Sabine Grebe. "Augustus' Divine Authority and Vergil's 'Aeneid.'" Vergilius (1959-) 50 (2004): 35–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41587284.

admiration for the nymph. Daphne, however, is dedicated to chastity and flees with terror. Apollo's pursuit eventually exhausts Daphne, and hence she calls upon the River god Peneus to save her. Then the act of transformation occurs, when Peneus transforms her into a laurel tree, and the pursuit ends.[6] As Daphne escapes from male pursuit, she also loses her human form, prompting readers to wonder whether such a transformation acts as liberation or punishment. This dual, ambiguous result of transformation echoes in our 21st century, where everything is in flux – when humans constantly innovate, invent, discover, we wonder whether our actions will yield positive results.

Besides this, I also read Ovid because he takes a more radical approach to gender identity – he is one of the first poets to explore the fluidity of gender. During a time when ancient literature reinforces patriarchal structures, Ovid destabilizes it, as can be exemplified in the story of Iphis in Book Nine of the *Metamorphoses*.[7] Iphis is born in Crete to a poor couple, Telethusa and Ligdus. Before the birth, Ligdus (Iphis's father) tells Telethusa that he can only afford to raise a boy. He warns that if the child is a girl, she must be killed. During Telethusa's pregnancy, the goddess Isis tells her to disobey her husband and raise the child no matter the sex. When the baby turns out to be a girl, Telethusa hides her child's sex and raises her as a boy, giving her a gender-neutral name – Iphis. This successfully fools Ligdus, and the child is allowed to live. As Iphis grows up, she falls in love with a beautiful girl named Ianthe. The two become betrothed, but Iphis and Telethusa know that the marriage cannot be consummated without revealing Iphis's biological sex.[8] As Iphis becomes torn between the desire of love and the unlikeliness of that love, Telethusa prays desperately to Isis for help. The goddess appears and transforms Iphis into a male – "nam que femina nuper eras, puer es"[9] (for in the name of truth, Iphis, who was a girl, is now a man). The wedding thus proceeds without suspicion. This story is one of the first ever recorded examples of homosexual love. Ovid explores the conflict between social constraints and personal desire as Iphis becomes torn between identities. The ultimate triumph of personal desire, though seemingly appealing, nonetheless comes at a price of losing an original identity for another.

This radical approach to fluid gender identities echoes with Ovid's fluid approach to his narrative structure. His *Metamorphoses* differ from other epics in that there is no clear structure in the Ovidian piece, another reason why I read Ovid. The stories blend into each other, with a lack of central plot, mirroring the unpredictability of real life. Change often comes uninvited and unannounced – moving from creation myths to stories of heroes and Roman history without clear

[6] Nicoll, W. S. M. "Cupid, Apollo, and Daphne (Ovid, Met. 1. 452 Ff.)." *The Classical Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1980): 174–82. http://www.jstor.org/stable/638157.

[7] Walker, Jonathan. "Before the Name: Ovid's Deformulated Lesbianism." *Comparative Literature* 58, no. 3 (2006): 205–22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4125343.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ovid. *Metamorphoses Book 9.666-797.* (The Project Gutenberg, 2025 edition)

transitions. In an age thriving with literary greats, Ovid offers something different from the other epics that praise Rome and that celebrate war, empire, and duty. Ovid offers a lifestyle, a mode of life for the uber, pleasure-seeking elites interested in wit and eroticism.

I also read Ovid because he tackles themes of violent sexual imagery. Once again, we see a sharp difference here between Ovid and the other epic poets at the time - while other poets refrain from the topic of rape, Ovid enjoys it, making him a controversial poet at that time and even now. He aestheticizes rape and silences female suffering, feeding into a tradition of violent beauty.

Thus, in these texts, we see themes that are uniquely Ovidian. Ovid deals with deeply human themes, and instead of offering readers with didactic moral lessons, Ovid values observation and irony more. This openness and his radical approach to many things (such as gender) prove useful in the 21st century. Yet Ovid's new, drastic approach also draws critics who despise his unconforming ways of writing – Quintilian, for example, criticizes Ovid for his "lack of seriousness".[10] Readers are left to wonder whether Ovid's *vitia* is a virtue or a flaw.

Shakespeare and Ovid

Shakespeare – one of the most influential and eminent English playwrights (arguably) in history – was an avid reader of Ovid. Churchman Francis Meres once remarked in 1958 that "as the soule of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras: so the sweete wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tounged Shakespeare".[11] Such a remark encapsulates the notion that Shakespeare not only was influenced by Ovid, Shakespeare *became* Ovid, as Ovid *lived* on in Shakespearean texts. Although the Elizabethan curriculum was ambivalent on its attitude towards the *Metamorphoses* and Ovid (since on the one hand, classical Latin was an essential part of Elizabethan life, yet on the other, *Metamorphoses* contains moral ambiguities deemed unethical by the English – some English even called the Ovidian content a bundle of "shameful filthiness"), that ambivalent attitude did not stop Shakespeare from reading Ovid. Shakespeare's ardent curiosity and his too unconforming attitudes to societal norms made him instantly fall in love with Ovid. Shakespeare realized that as he read Ovid and the "unconscious mind of the Roman world", he came "face to face with uncanny versions of themselves".[12]

[10] Quintilian. *Institution Oratoria 10.1.185.* (Loeb Classical Library edition, 1920)
[11] Sean Keilen. "Shakespeare and Ovid." *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* (2014). https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118876169.ch16
[12] Ibid.

Shakespeare seemed to be especially fascinated with the Ovidian idea of **projection and agency**. In Ovid, when a character tries to project their own thoughts, ambitions, and desire onto the world, more chaos usually ensues. Shakespeare's plays echo this theme. In Ovid, *Metamorphoses* is filled with characters who seek to reshape and interpret the world through the lens of their own desires. However, they are often met with ironic reversals, transformations, and unsettling ambiguity. The story of Echo and Narcissus is a great example of this. After Narcissus rejects Echo, he comes across a fountain. When he drinks the water from the fountain, upon seeing his own face on it, Narcissus falls in love with his reflection.[13] He projects his ideal of love onto his own reflection. However, this futile desire for love ultimately led to his own self-destruction as he wastes his life away staring at himself. Echo, too, tries to project her own desire of love onto Narcissus. However, both Echo's linguistic impotence and Narcissus's visual illusion show how forced projections of one's love onto another are, and how such projections lead to isolation and self-consumption. Readers are forced to question whether the love is even real – Echo is simply a voice with no agency: "tantum haec in fine loquendi ingeminat voces auditaque verba reportat"[14] (translation: "Echo only repeats the last of what is spoken and returns the words she hears."), whilst Narcissus falls in love with a reflection that has no thoughts. The lack of agency in these characters corroborates just how forced the projections of love are, and how futile these projections ultimately are.

The story of Pygmalion is similarly thought-provoking. After the sculptor Pygmalion crafts a statue of a perfect woman that no one could ever compare with, he adorns it with jewels and clothes, eventually falling deeply in love with his own creation. During the festival of Venus, after Pygmalion's prayer, Venus turned the statue into a real woman and blessed their union. This myth seemingly has a positive ending, but it in fact raises age-old unresolved questions about the relationship between art and the artist. Pygmalion projects his ideal of love onto his animate statue, and when the statue becomes real, the boundary between reality and illusion dissolves.[15] The projection of Pygmalion's ideals creates a human that is a product of desire without an agency of her own. Such a projection leads to more ambiguity and chaos surrounding the lovers' identity.

In the tale between Orpheus and Eurydice, Ovid provides us with a story which tests the limits of human will. After Orpheus loses his lover, he travels to the Underworld. After playing songs with his lyre, he softened the hearts of the Furies, brought a tear to Persephone's eye, and convinced Hades to return Eurydice to the living realm. However, this bargain comes with a condition – as Orpheus leads

[13] Gildenhard, Ingo, and Andrew Zissos. "Ovid's Narcissus (Met. 3.339-510): Echoes of Oedipus." *The American Journal of Philology* 121, no. 1 (2000): 129–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561650.

[14] Ovid. *Metamorphoses Book 3*. (The Latin Library). https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/ovid/ovid.met3.shtml

[15] Mugglestone, Lynda. "Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in Pygmalion." *The Review of English Studies* 44, no. 175 (1993): 373–85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/517281.

Eurydice back, he must not look back at her until they are fully in the sunlight. Orpheus originally resists his urge to look, but as the couple arrive at the threshold of the upper world, doubt and longing overwhelm him. He turns, wanting to see her face again. However, at that moment, she slips back into darkness.[16] Orpheus tries to gain her back, but fails. Ovid encapsulates this sentimental moment of loss in Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses:* "hic, ne deficeret, metuens avidusque videndi flexit amans oculos, et protinus illa relapsa est, bracchiaque intendens prendique et prendere certans nil nisi cedentes infelix arripit auras."[17] (Translated: "Instantly she slipped away. He stretched out to her his despairing arms, eager to rescue her, or feel her form, but could hold nothing save the yielding air."). This is a tale not just about love, but about art's limits. Orpheus's music can charm humans and gods – but it cannot change the fate that Orpheus has broken himself. Orpheus tries to project his power onto the world through language and art. His desire to keep Eurydice safe and alive eventually leads to loss and transgression, revealing the innate human weakness and inability to live in faith. Orpheus looking back at Eurydice is a desperate attempt to establish his control and agency over life and death – things that humans have little control over, yet such a projection of power ultimately results in tragic results.

From these three tales, we can see Ovid tackling grand themes of projection and agency. These themes live on in Shakespeare's tragic and comic plays. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is perhaps one of Shakespeare's most well-known comedies. The play is an entangled web of mistaken identities and projections of love. Desire and love in the play alter reality but not in a desired way. Just as Pygmalion from Ovid falls in love with a statue he made, lovers in *Dream* attempt to make the world conform to their fantasies. Oberon, for instance, uses a magical flower's juice to manipulate affections. He does so in an attempt to restore harmony through his own projection of controlled illusion. Meanwhile, the lovers, Helena and Hermia, project intense feelings of desire onto the enchanted forest.[18] The entangled webs of lovers and the many projections of love result in a dreamlike, shape-shifting forest, where identity, love, and perception are constantly transformed. Characters in *Dream* thus fall in and out of love under enchantment, and no one really knows what is real. Therefore, the lovers lose their agency and Oberon's attempt for harmony results in more ambiguity.

Similarly, in *The Tempest*, Prospero, who is the victim of a planned shipwreck, tries to orchestrate events and people to his will through his enchantment. He conjures a world through his art as he tries to project his power and impose order

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[16] Mugglestone, Lynda. "Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in Pygmalion." *The Review of English Studies* 44, no. 175 (1993): 373–85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/517281.

[17] Ovid. *Metamorphoses Book 10.* (The Latin Library). https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/ovid/ovid.met10.shtml

[18] Sean Keilen. "Shakespeare and Ovid." *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* (2014). https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118876169.ch16

on his enemies via the magical power of the island. He aims to create a world of justice and reconciliation. However, ultimately, the island resists his control. The angel Ariel wants freedom, the monster Caliban defies civility, and even his daughter's (Miranda) future depends on her own love (Miranda falls in love with one of Prospero's enemies), not Prospero's command.[19] Miranda famously exclaimed, "O Father … I have broke your hest to say so", showcasing her disobedience to Prospero. This disobedience made Prospero eventually realize the limit of his control and the need to let go. Similar to Pygmalion, Prospero also wants to shape the world to his ideals, yet both ultimately discover that their creations have a life of their own. Prospero tries to project power onto the world but is met with resistance and ambiguity.

A more macabre telling of this theme of projection can be seen in the tragedy *Macbeth*. When the witches hail Macbeth as the new King of Scotland in Act 1 Scene 3 - "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!", Macbeth becomes enslaved by his own thirst for power. Hence, he imposes this thirst for power upon his fate, interpreting the witches' prophecy as his destiny. He projects his own ambition and cupidity onto the world violently as he murders King Duncan.[20] Yet the projection of his desire does not achieve clarity or power, as Macbeth plunges himself deeper into more murders, hallucination, paranoia, and moral chaos.

It is thus not hard to confirm Francis Meres's claim of Ovid "liv[ing] on"[21] in Ovid from these examples. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid introduces his assertion of the dangers of the projection of one's own opinions onto the world, and in Shakespeare, this thought is corroborated as we see the characters who attempt projection suffer from chaos and ambivalence.

This warning comes timely in our own generation – with the rise of social media and news outlets, people rarely think before they speak. We jump to conclusions too quickly and try to express our conclusions - in other words, to project our ideas onto the world. We want to change how people think and act – we want them to act according to our ideals – however, we so often overestimate, just as in the case of Ovid's Pygmalion or Shakespeare's Oberon, our own ability to deliver the changes, and we underestimate others' attempt to resist the change. Even if these changes do occur, we cannot know whether our changes will in fact result in desired outcomes – as Macbeth seemingly got his desired kingship, he was plunged into a deeper moral abyss, as Orpheus's urge to protect Eurydice overtook

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[19] "The Tempest." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no. 5 (1997): 753–61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2871364.

[20] Favila, Marina. "'Mortal Thoughts' and Magical Thinking in 'Macbeth.'" *Modern Philology* 99, no. 1 (2001): 1–25. http://www.jstor.org/stable/439153.

[21] Sean Keilen. "Shakespeare and Ovid." *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* (2014). https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118876169.ch16

his rationality, Eurydice left her husband forever. Ovid's warnings, echoed in Shakespeare, serve as lessons we ought to study and learn from.

Milton and Ovid

The Manchester-born 19th century English critic Thomas De Quincey once described Milton's unique connection to Ovid as "[t]he wedding of male and female opposites", in which Ovid's "festal gaiety, and the brilliant elicits of his aurora borealis intellect form[ed] a deep, natural equipoise to the mighty gloom and solemn planetary movement in the mind of the other". Ovid's influence on Milton seems to be one of "most resembling unlikeness and most unlike resemblance".[22] Milton was a workaholic, but Ovid preferred a carefree, restful life. Yet despite the differences between Ovid and Milton's characters, their works share many similarities. Milton was a huge admirer of Ovid – when Milton was young, he avidly read the Ovidian texts and even constructed Latin elegies himself. Milton's interest in literature came despite his parents' thoughts of wanting Milton to enter Church service instead of wasting his efforts on writing. Despite not following his parents' advice, Milton defended poetry, saying how poems could "inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu".[23] Such a defense of poetry corroborates with the Ovidian defense of writing elegies instead of fulfilling his public duty in *Amores 1.15* – "poetry may seem idle, but is a higher pursuit", as poets can achieve "fama perennis" (everlasting fame).[24]

This similar outlook with Ovid is perhaps one reason that prompted Milton to write a book similar to the *Metamorphoses*. The Ovidian epic opened with the creation of the universe, and so Milton's poem also focused on the beginning. *Paradise Lost* is an epic about Genesis and the beginning of mankind – an epic which conflates the pagan myths of Ovid with the biblical stories of Christianity.

In *Paradise Lost* and *Metamorphoses*, Milton and Ovid focus on the rampant internal energies, the violent power of the untamed and the precariousness of such untamed energy. In Milton's epic, situated on the top of a high hill in the middle of the world, is a Garden of perfect harmony, where man, woman, nature, and God live peacefully together. This Garden of Eden is protected by a wilderness of

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[22] Mandy Green. "Joy and Harmless Pastime: Milton and the Ovidian Arts of Leisure." *A Handbook to the reception of Ovid.* https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118876169.ch22

[23] Ibid.

[24] William Turpin. *Ovid: Amores Book 1*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Dickinson College Commentaries, 2012. https://dcc.dickinson.edu/ovid-amores/amores-1-15

sweets, and Adam and Eve – the two humans in the garden – are free to enjoy everything in the garden except the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.[25] However, their philosophies differ slightly: Adam treats his work in the garden as "irksome toil", yet Eve wants to improve the garden constantly. Eve is imbued with curiosity, agency, and emotions. Thus, when Eve separates from Adam to work the garden in her own ways, the Devil Satan shows up and tempts Eve by saying how she deserves to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. In Book 9 of *Paradise Lost,* Satan said to Eve, "Much pleasure we have lost, while we abstain'd from this delightful Fruit", trying to convince Eve to commit a sin. Eve initially resists, but her curiosity and own internal longing for knowledge eventually overcome her obedience to God.[26] Even though Eden is protected from the sins of the world, Eve invites herself to vulnerability when she is separated from Adam. Eve becomes a victim of her own choosing. She yearns for knowledge, and such knowledge is linked to desire, and desire is linked to energy. Thus, the fall of Eden becomes the unleashing of a wild and untamed force: the power to choose, feel, and assert. As Eve becomes torn between obedience and knowledge, Eden becomes violated – the threat coming not from without but from within.

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[25] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Garden of Eden" (2025)

[26] John Milton, *Paradise Lost.* (London: Samuel Simmons Edition, 1674)

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there is also a female who has a passion for gardening – Pomona. She prefers to tend her garden in solitude, as the garden is a part of her life: thus, she resists male attention, fearing that the attention can become a distraction. Pomona's power and agency lie in the energy of self-containment and not yielding to her desires. However, when Vertumnus, disguised in various forms, comes into the garden, he overcomes Pomona's resistance, not violently, but through persistence, storytelling, and his disguise as an old woman. Vertumnus wins Pomona's love, but his manipulation is an invasion of Pomona's selfhood.[27] Pomona's internal peace – her garden – is disrupted by another's will. Just like Eve, who is torn between knowledge and obedience, Pomona is torn between her garden (inner peace) and connection/desire. Vertumnus's persuasion disguises control and dominance, unleashing violent power. In Pomona's case, the shattering of the "self" again comes from within. While Vertumnus persuades Pomona, it is ultimately her own desire for connection that causes the violation of her once peaceful garden.[28]

The problems coming from internal energies and desire exist in not just Pomona, but in other Ovidian tales as well. The collapse of the Golden Age, according to Ovid, happens when humans grow desirous, violent, proud, and ambitious. The gods, of course, are also subject to desire and rage – Apollo pursuing Daphne, Mars and Venus being unfaithful. Both humans and the divine are unstable, resembling the collapse of Eden. The world – whether it's the Golden Age, Eden, or Pomona's garden – seems perfect, but can break within, usually due to an internal force. That force, more often than not – is desire. All of these perfect, stable worlds are in fact lying under a precarious balance or a fragile foundation, with desire and internal energy threatening to break through. Beneath the polished surface of restraint lies an undercurrent: the moment of disruption on the surface exposes the instability of a seemingly stable system.

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[27] Gentilcore, Roxanne. "The Landscape of Desire: The Tale of Pomona and Vertumnus in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses.'" *Phoenix* 49, no. 2 (1995): 110–20. https://doi.org/10.2307/1192628.

[28] Mandy Green. "Joy and Harmless Pastime: Milton and the Ovidian Arts of Leisure." *A Handbook to the reception of Ovid.* https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118876169.ch22

Such precariousness of stability and the dangers of internal energy can be seen profusely in the 21ˢᵗ century. We live in Eden and Pomona's garden, where violent and precarious forces wrestle beneath the supposed peace. We seemingly live in a quite peaceful world – although there are devastating wars in many places, luckily these wars are localized. In large parts of the world, peace prevails. Yet underneath this façade of peace lies undercurrents which threaten to destroy the whole system – for example, economic inequality creating resentment, political polarization and the rise of new, "radical" political thoughts undermining social cohesion, technological acceleration causing confusion over the future of humanity, climate crisis pressuring global resources … All of these forces can remain invisible before a metamorphic rupture. This balance would easily fall apart with a trigger, causing unprecedented and unforeseen consequences.

The Russian Exiles and Ovid

Ovid lived a life of fame and glory but died lonely in the edges of the Roman Empire. After being exiled to Tomis by Augustus in 8 CE, Ovid's style of writing changed from the previous recklessness and playfulness as seen in the *Amores* or the *Ars Amatoria* to a more solemn tone as he muses upon his own suffering in banishment.[29] The *Tristia* and the *Epistulae ex Ponto* are two of his well-known exile works – they serve as the poetic testament of a man who abandoned the glittering mythological tapestry of the *Metamorphoses* for a rather more austere version of personal lament. Yet though the glittering mythologies and the sexual innuendos are gone, one thing remains in Ovid's exile poems: brilliance.

Exile – suffered by Ovid, but even more profusely by the Russians in the 20ᵗʰ century. The Russian exiles lived during a time of regime change, from the reign of tsars to the rule of the Bolshevik Communists. At a time when political tension was heightened, paranoia and exile were not just threats, but political tools. One example of an exile is Osip Mandelstam. Educated in St. Petersburg, Heidelberg, and Paris, Mandelstam received a cosmopolitan education. This cosmopolitan intellectual heritage, along with his engagement with classical texts, made him understand the flaws and horrors of totalitarianism. After writing an epigram condemning the USSR leader Joseph Stalin, he was exiled to the outskirts of Russia. [30]

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[29] GOOLD, G. P. "The Cause of Ovid's Exile." *Illinois Classical Studies* 8, no. 1 (1983): 94–107. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23062565.
[30] The Editors of Osip Mandelstam. "Osip Mandelstam." https://www.nyrb.com/collections/osip-mandelstam

Ovid and Mandelstam's experiences also show that exile is a universal experience - people of different cultures all experience it, albeit to different degrees. Both Ovid and Mandelstam suffered exile due to their challenges of the ruling elites, showcasing the tension between artistic freedom and authoritarian control. This tension matters because it is more pertinent now than ever in a world surrounded by populist leaders and dictators. During Mandelstam's exile, although his political freedom was taken away, his intellect was not, reminding posterity of the ultimate triumph of artistic freedom over control. Mandelstam continued writing poems – a famous one is called "Tristia".[31]

In Mandelstam's poem (which non-coincidentally shares its name with its Ovidian counterpart), Osip treats Crimea as Ovid's Tomis. The poem is set in Acropolis, but readers are constantly reminded of Russian identities; the poem universalizes exile as a human condition brought about by historical forces that humans find helpless. Similar to the beginning of Ovid's *Tristia* when Ovid describes his sorrow of parting with his mistress, Mandelstam also expresses dread for inevitable partings. In Mandelstam's poem, the poets' eyes were reddened by weeping before he even "see[s] the future because the outcome is uncertain".[32] This fear of uncertainty during exile is expressed to a larger extent through the use of vocabulary. The vocabulary of knowledge, certainty, guessing, and anxiety are frequently used, begging readers to question humans' capacity of knowing the future. This inability leaves Mandelstam alienated as he becomes disconnected from his former life.

Mandelstam embraces the dual nature of time: time is described as both discrete and continuous. Time can both be compartmentalized into discrete activities, yet it can also be boundless. Such ambiguity shares resemblances with the Ovidian ambiguity in *Metamorphoses* – Ovid believes that time is fluid – constantly changing and metamorphosizing. Sometimes it is discrete, and sometimes, it is continuous. Similar to Mandelstam's argument, Ovid recognizes time as something that can be transformed and morphed, as shown through his chaotic narrative flow. While other factors can be ambivalent, Mandelstam believes in one certainty: that death is a part of our future – it is beyond individual control. Such a cynical ending which disregards the previous ambiguity for a complete certainty is reflective of Mandelstam's grieving emotions during exile.

[31] Andrew Kahn. "Ovid and Russia's Poets of Exile." *A Handbook to the reception of Ovid.* https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118876169.ch27
[32] Ibid.

Joseph Brodsky, another victim of his time – a Russian-American poet who grew up in the post-war era of the USSR. His defiance of Soviet literary orthodoxy and his refusal to join the sponsored writers' union culminated in a high-profile trial. He was sentenced to five years of exile in the Arctic village of Norenskaya.[33] Unlike Mandelstam, Brodsky took a more optimistic outlook on his exile. One of his most famous exile works – "Clutching one's daily ration of exile" – is a 24-line long poem written in present tense. In the poem, Brodsky spins metaphors with allusions: the poet's power of speech is compared to a lamp whose light produces a "protective shade".[34] During exile, Brodsky realized the importance of such a shade, and he understands that poetry is the essential tool of self-preservation. This ideal is similarly echoed in the Ovidian exile poems, where writing becomes Ovid's only connection with culture and identity. Ovid's multiple proclamation of his poetic immortality sheds light on the poet's resilience even in the face of exile. The power of language is thus something that can never be taken away – in both Ovid and Brodsky.

However, despite the initial optimism, Brodsky was not able to escape the haunting thoughts of death and hopelessness that shrouded both Ovid and Mandelstam. Brodsky's letter "Fragment" is a direct address to Ovid. In the letter, Brodsky tried to superimpose real geography on the Ovidian landscape of exile. The landscape of exile is barren, and this letter becomes Brodsky's ultimate attempt to bring something meaningful to his exile. However, his vision never came into focus, as in the poem, his eyesight remained fixed on death. As Brodsky hovered between the physically remote and the conceptually abstract, he found himself isolated psychologically. He briefly held on to the idea that Rome may be a beacon of light and hope before finally surrendering to the idea that death is the only light ahead. Rome was replaced with Hades.

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[33] Nobel Prize Outreach 2025, "Joseph Brodsky – Biographical" (2025). https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1987/brodsky/biographical/
[34] Andrew Kahn. "Ovid and Russia's Poets of Exile." *A Handbook to the reception of Ovid*. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118876169.ch27

These thoughts bear many resemblances to the Ovidian thoughts during Ovid's exile. Ovid's exile poetry hovers between the hope of his recall and the unlikelihood of it happening. Ovid remained resilient at first, reminding himself of his poetic immortality, yet he finally gave way to this struggle as he described his physical and psychological deterioration. For Ovid, Brodsky, and Mandelstam, Rome is not just a place. It is an identity. An alternative route. A different destiny. All poets are torn between returning to Rome (and by implication, their hometown, where they have friends, family, fame) and how unlikely it is. Rome becomes an orgiastic past that year by year recedes before the poets. It eluded and tempted them first, but that beacon of light eventually faded out, replaced by eternal solitude.

The three poets' lamentations of their exile resonate not just with each other and the thousands of other exiles in the past and present, but they also resonate with me. Ovid writes from the margins. Banished to Tomis, he lost his friends, his family, and the glory and fame he once had. Similarly, I also felt "exiled" when I was stuck in the UK, thousands of miles from him, during COVID. Like the banished poets, I was far away from my home and my identity. Ovid made me understand this feeling of dislocation, and rather than something to simply suffer through passively, we can shape the experience of exile into words, emotions, memory, and something human. Ovid's poetry feels like a mirror. My displacement from China brought isolation and the challenge of forging a new identity between two worlds. Ovid's stories of transformations remind me that change is not an erasure of oneself, but simply a rebirth. As Ovid turned exile into poetry, I strive to turn my struggles into growth, using creativity to build a bridge between my past and my present.

Conclusion

Ovid is powerful not just because he resonates with the literary greats across time and space – he is powerful because his writing resonates with every single one of us in the 21st century. His themes of fluid identities, the precarious energy from within are all things that resonate with our society now, as we embrace people of different identities and endeavor to uphold this fragile peace. His themes of resilience in exile became a survival tool even for me, who centuries later, far from Rome, found in Ovid's verses a mirror for my own displacement and transformation. Ovid thrives not because his poem offers didactic certainty, but precisely because it does not – because it reveals the innate instability in our world.

Ovid once wrote, "vivam" – I shall live.[35] This bold declaration perhaps best summarizes the poet who rose to fame in the bustling city of Rome and died from the margins of empire. Ovid used his words to prove that he is not simply a poet, he is a style, a mode of living – when other poets of his time embraced the new Augustan order, Ovid brought something different. He reinvented the concept of change as an omnipotent, universal force, and he revolutionized the way people think about gender and identity. Centuries after his death, his boastful proclamation came into fruition as Shakespeare reshaped him and his theme of projection and agency into drama, Milton invoked his restless energy, and Mandelstam and Brodsky recast his exile in their own frozen landscapes.

In a world still riven by exile, identity shifts, and undercurrents of political and economic upheaval, Ovid remains a companion and a reminder that transformation and metamorphosis are the truest forms of survival.

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