

OVID'S AUDACITY

by Heather Helinsky

In the opening lines of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells us that the creation of the poem is just as powerful as the creation of the world. He is fascinated by the moment of transition—the poetry focuses on a fleeing beauty's hair as it transforms into leaves of a tree. As the author of the poem, he celebrates the stuff of life that normally brings one fear and anxiety: war, crisis, the unknown, the messy slop of transition, bad arising from the good, good arising from the bad.

Ovid was born at the dawn of change for the Greco-Roman world. Julius Caesar had met his early death at the hands of conspiring senators, dissolving the government into civil war. The Roman Republic, a system of government that had lasted for over 450 years to prevent a monarch from ruling the Mediterranean, transformed into the Roman Empire under the leadership of Augustus.

In 18 or 19 BC, Emperor Augustus devised morality laws to clamp down on the wealthy elite in Roman society. According to the new marriage laws, a man was required to prosecute his wife if he knew she was committing adultery, as well as permitting him to kill his wife and her lover if he caught them together. The Roman historian Seutonius chronicled: "Augustus redrafted laws and established some from scratch, about extravagance and adultery, bribery, and marriage in the upper class." As a result, Augustus could accuse anyone who displeased him for any reason with the charge of immoral behavior.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* challenges the spirit of this law, as distrust and doubt receive greater punishment than scandalous transgressions. And shortly after composing *Metamorphoses*, Ovid was ejected from the Empire in 8 AD for "a poem and a mistake." Banished to the cold, bleak Black Sea, Ovid

spent the rest of his life in exile for his verse that contained truths about the human heart that defied imperial legislation.



Alexandre Seon, *Lamentation of Orpheus*

With *Metamorphoses*, Ovid became the first and last Roman poet to combine a broad knowledge of Greek literature with an intimate awareness of the new Roman Empire. His theme is transformation, yet often this is a superficial link between myths, not the climax of the story. While he touches on all the stories of ancient mythology, he is more concerned with obscure characters rather than the major heroes celebrated by previous poets. He has an ability to turn a story upside down, like a good comedian he is able to surprise the audience with an unexpected punch line.

And it is Ovid's audacity that struck a chord with playwright Mary Zimmerman. A hallmark of Zimmerman's work is her ability to create a theatrical event on an operatic scale, fighting against naturalism in the theater. In Zimmerman's adaptation, she defies traditional storytelling devices to focus on the heart—a flawed organ that drives gods to extremes of passion and violence, or causes humans to perform acts of goodwill and selflessness. Zimmerman has chosen episodes from *Metamorphoses* that capture the essence of Ovid's eternal lesson—neither man nor gods nor regimes can control love.