

Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Tradition Roman Values

Romans held to some very strict values. These values were handed down generation to generation and became part of the culture and design of what it meant to *be* Roman. The three most important of these values, or the three that had the largest effect on Roman society as a whole are: 1) the cyclical belief in governing bodies, 2) family connections and kinship, and 3) self control. These traditional values are evident in numerous speeches, and personal histories of Rome. They also appear in many histories of Rome. One such history is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. His book explores the history of Rome itself as well as that of the Roman people. He also makes comparisons between the Romans and the Greeks. What does his writings reveal about his feelings on traditional Roman Values? Here are three very strong examples of his support of them.

Romans see things, especially government, as cyclical. The government cycle began, according to Roman belief with a perfect, or a near-perfect entity, and then degrading over time until at long last another nearly perfect start replaces the disjointed and corrupt end. An example of this is seen in Ovid's discussion on the Ages of the Earth. In fact, after a quick story on the creation of the earth, his first undertaking is to explain natural degradation.

The Ages of the Earth begin with the Golden Age, and its perfect harmony. The ages soon spiral downward with each Age giving way to a more "warlike" and "stubborn" one. Gold fades to Silver, Silver to Brazen (Bronze) and finally the Iron Age. These steps are evident in Roman views of governing bodies. A good king's monarchy

and peace, dies with him, and his children rule as tyrants. The noble class overthrows the tyranny, and, in turn, establishes an Aristocracy. Their children again turn the Aristocracy into oligarchy, and again are removed, usually by force, by the populace. This populace sets up a true democracy and rules well, until it naturally decomposes into mob rule. Mob rule reinstates the survival of the strongest mentality and the strongest emerges as the new tyrant. This new king may set up a very peaceful rule after gaining power and the whole cycle begins again.

Stronger than their ideas of anacyclosis was their ideals of family unity, kinship, and how it related to power. There are several examples that Ovid uses in his book that shows his support. The first example is the first story in the book; the creation story of the earth. He wrote about the earth, the air, the seas, and the heaven saying, "This disembroiled, they take their proper place; the next of kin, contiguously embrace" (2). If the heavens and all the aspects of the universe must behave as kinship, how much more important it must be for the Romans.

Another example of Ovid's view on the idea of kinship is the argument between Ajax and Ulysses. Both claim to be in the right, based on their genealogy. "Ajax is the third from Jove," he says. Ajax's family ties of power run even deeper, and he exclaims; "as next of kin, Achilles arms I claim"(364). Ulysses' replies, "From Jove like him I claim my pedigree," and his claim that "Ajax for a while his kin forgot,"(365) also insults. What kind of individual would forget his kin? Any Roman that would do so can surely never be trusted.

Self-control is probably one of the strongest aspects of the traditional Roman value system. Romans valued it as high it not higher than any other personal attribute.

Ovid shows how dangerous the lack of self-control can be with his story of Narcissus. After falling in love with his own reflection, Narcissus loses his self-control and drowns trying to obtain the physical impossibility. Ovid remarks, "Til death shuts up those self admiring eyes" (78).

Death is the only end for the loss of self-control according to Ovid. This quote however is more than a warning to maintain self-control, it also reveals Ovid's feelings on the relationship between the self, and Rome. Ovid's disdain for Narcissus shows that the Republic is more important than the "self." If one is to give up one's life for something, it should be in the service or for the good of Rome, not selfish reasons, such as drowning while trying to love one's reflection.

Nearly all of Book XV is riddled with remarks and asides to self-control. "Thus Fame," he says of Alemonides, "from time to time, delivers down The sure tradition of th' Italian town. Now, self-banished from his native shore, because he hated tyrants (424)." Alemonides had let fame (power) go to his head, lost his self-control, thus lost his traditions, and although had not died as a result, he had to leave his native land, and his kinsmen. Another instance Ovid writes with more subtlety, "Autumn succeeds a sober tepid age, not froze with fear, nor boiling into rage" (429). This "perfect" age does not tend extreme in either direction, but ambles peacefully on fulfilling the tradition Roman values of Ovid's time.

Ovid's *Metamorphosis* has been analyzed since it was first written. Scholars, Philosophers, and Historians all use his verses to explain some theory or another. Some results and explanations are easier to see and explain than others. The bulk of his work though shows that his thinking paralleled with that of the traditional Roman values.

Especially those values of self-control, Polybius' theory of the anacyclosis of political evolution, and that kinship and family ties were powerful. His work and ties to these values were also a call for Romans to remain Roman, and not give in to temptations to act like the Greeks. Such a change, Ovid believed, would not be beneficial to Rome. Ovid was conscious to the ever-changing nature of the world, even among such values. Near the end of the work he discusses landmasses that were once islands "adding to the continent," and how seas have hidden others from view.

Ovid ends his work showing this change in its accelerated form: people. "Tho' great his sire," Ovid decries, "him greater we proclaim: So Atreus yields to Agamemnon's fame; Achilles so superior honours won, and Peleus must submit to Peleus' son" (452). Traditional Roman values have either died or evolved into something that would be unrecognizable to Ovid. Would Ovid see this as the rebirth of the Golden Age long lost to man surviving under that of Iron? Had the Romans not lost the traditional values exemplified by Ovid's stories would Rome have live on? Would Ovid himself maintained his own traditional Roman values and handled Rome's changes with self-control?

No one can say for certain, but at the very end, maybe Ovid was only worried about himself. He did say that he hoped to "manage strength and spare his age" throughout the struggle of change. In this way, even though his body may die his works and words would make him immortal. "All climes and nations shall record my praise," he says in closing, and that "one half of round eternity is mine" (453). Maybe he did not care for traditional Roman values, or even Rome, at all.