



*Selections
from
Metamorphoses*

PUBLIUS OVIDIUS NASO (OVID)



Translation by R. A. Rushing



Juno & Semele (Book III)

Juno learns her husband has taken a lover, the girl Semele

It pains Juno to learn that Semele is pregnant
with the seed of great Jupiter;^o and so
she readies her tongue to insult and abuse her spouse:
“What does this abuse gain me, however?”
she said. “I have to do all the begging and pleading;
if I really am ‘the great Juno,’ I should destroy this girl—
if it befits me to hold the jeweled scepter in my right hand,
if I am Queen, wife and sister of Jove—sister indeed!^o
But I imagine she’s pleased at her deception, and their
brief marriage bed is an insult to us. Now she’s pregnant
(that’s all I needed!), an evident crime carried in a full womb,
and she hopes to be made by Jove into the mother of a god—
which happens to me all too seldom—that’s how much she
trusts in her beauty. I’ll have her trick him somehow;
I’m no daughter of mighty Saturn if her precious Jove himself
doesn’t bring her beneath the waves of the river Styx.^o

Jupiter, also known as Jove, is the Roman name for the kings of the gods, Zeus, the god of thunder.

“sister” was a common term of affection for a wife or lover—but Juno is also literally Jupiter’s sister!

The river Styx surrounded the underworld, and so represented death. It was also absolutely sacred to the gods.

She leaps up from her throne after this, and, hidden in a yellow cloud, goes right to Semele's doorstep. She does not remove the cloud until she's taken on the appearance of an old woman; she put grey hair at her temples, furrowed her skin with wrinkles, and carried her bent limbs with trembling gait. And she did an old woman's voice, too, just like Beroe had, Semele's nurse from Epidaurus.^o So, having captured her with her voice, after chatting all day, they came to the subject of Jove; she sighed and said, "I hope that it really is Jupiter—I'm frankly worried. Many men have entered chaste marriage beds using the name of the gods. It's not even enough that he be Jove. Have him give you a sign of love: ask that he embrace you the same way that he is received by lofty Juno, wearing his full regalia^o in front of you."

A small city in ancient Greece.

That is, appearing not as a mortal man, but as the god of thunder.

Semele is the daughter of Cadmus.

And so Cadmus' daughter,^o unaware, was shaped by Juno through such words: Semele asked Jove for a gift, without naming what it was, to which the god replied: "Choose! You will suffer no refusal. So you might truly believe it, I swear by the gods of the river Styx—a fearful oath even for the gods." Happy at her own misfortune, at her excessive power, at her lover's fatal compliance, Semele said: "Just as Saturn's daughter usually embraces you when you make love, give yourself to me in the same way!" The god tried to stop that mouth from speaking, but her voice had already slipped out into the breeze.

He groaned. She couldn't have *not* chosen this, however, and he couldn't have *not* sworn. And so he, most mighty, arose

into the high air, and with one glance, drew the clouds up after him. He added winds and lightning to those rainclouds, and thunder, and his infallible thunder-bolt.

As much as he could, however, he tried to soften its power, nor did he arm himself with the fire with which he had brought down the hundred-armed Typhon.^o Too much ferocity is in it. Another, lighter bolt, to which the Cyclops' arm had added less savagery, flame, and rage: 'The favorable one,' the gods called it. He takes it, and enters the house of Agenor^o. Her mortal body could not bear the ethereal assault, and she burned from his marriage gifts.^o Her unfinished baby was torn from the womb of its mother and was sewn into his father's thigh (if you can believe it) and so completed his maternal term. In his first infancy, his aunt Ino cared for him in secret, where the nymphs of Nysa^o concealed him in their caves, and fed him milk.

Typhon was the deadliest creature in Greek myth: a hundred heads that reached up into the stars.

Agenor is Semele's grandfather

^oin Ovid is frequently referred to via marriage, whether it is literally marriage or not.

The child is the god Dionysus, presumably from *dios* (divine) + Nysa.

Tiresias (Book III)

And so all things are carried out according to fate, across the lands. The infancy of Dionysus, twice-born, passed safely. They say that Jove, warmed by nectar, set aside his weighty duties and took up casual play with idle Juno. "The pleasure in making love," he said, "is surely greater for you than that which falls to the men." She disagreed. They decided to ask learned Tiresias' opinion as to which it might be. Venus was known to him—from both sides. For once, in the green woods, he had beaten with a stick two huge, conjoined serpents; he spent seven years changed from a man—amazing—into a woman. In the eighth year,

he saw the same snakes again, and said to himself, “If there is so much power in one blow that it could convert its author’s fate into the opposite, now I should strike you again.” And having struck the same snakes again, his former shape returned, the image of what he was born with.

This arbiter took on the playful dispute, and endorsed Jove’s opinion on the matter.^o They say Saturn’s daughter took the dispute harder than she should have, all out of proportion: she damned her judge’s eyes to eternal night. The all-powerful father (although even he cannot undo the acts of the gods) gave Tiresias knowledge of the future in exchange for his lost sight, and lightened the burden of this penalty with honor and fame.

Echo & Narcissus (Book III)

Tiresias, now a celebrity throughout the Aonian cities, gave faultless answers to all those who asked. The first to put that trusted, faithful voice to the test was sea-green Liriope, who was once enveloped in the waters of the river-god Cephisus, who took her by force. This most beautiful nymph gave birth from her full womb to an infant, already then a lovable sort, named Narcissus. Tiresias was consulted about him: whether he would have a long life to a mature old age, and the fateful prophet said: “Only if he doesn’t get to know himself.” For a long time the words of the prophet appeared meaningless.

But the outcome proves the prophecy—the manner of his death, and the novelty of Narcissus’ passion.

When Cephisus’ son had added one year to three by five,^o i.e., when he was sixteen, the boy now appeared as a young man.

Many young men, many girls, desired him; but there was in that tender form such a hard pride that no young men, no young ladies, could touch him. Echo spied him driving a frightened stag into a net, Echo, who had never learned to speak first, nor how to stop talking once she had started, resonant Echo. At that time, Echo was a body, not just a voice; but the chatty ways she has now are no different than they were when she had a mouth, repeating many words back, and always getting the last word in.

Juno had done this to her: when Juno would try to catch Jove lying with nymphs on top of his mountain, Echo would detain the goddess by keeping her talking while the nymphs would flee. After Saturn’s daughter figured it out, she said, “May this tongue that tricked me give you little power, and briefest use of your voice.” Fact confirmed the threat, so Echo only mirrors the end of others’ speech, carries back words she’s heard.

Thus, when Echo saw Narcissus roaming the countryside she grew warm with desire, furtively followed his footsteps. The more she followed, the more desire’s flame grew, no different than how lively sulphur atop a torch can steal a nearby flame. Oh, how often she yearned to approach him

In many versions of the story, Tiresias—who speaks from experience—says women have 9/10 of the pleasure in sex. Saturn’s daughter is Juno.

with flattering words, sweetly entreat him! But her nature fights back. She can't begin, but it does allow her to prepare, awaiting sounds she could return as words of her own.

The boy, gone astray from his hunting companions, called out loudly, "Is anyone here?" and Echo responded "Here!" He was surprised, for he'd left his companions all about. He calls "Come!" in a great voice. She calls the caller back. He looks again, sees no one coming, and asks, "Why do you flee me?" and the words he's spoken, he receives in reply. He continues and, deceived by the image of the alternating voice, says, "Here, let us come together!" and never did Echo sound more willingly: "Let us come together!" she returned, and backing up her words, she emerged from the woods to throw her arms around that neck she so longed for. He flees, and fleeing, says, "Get your hands off me! I'd die before you'd be *my* lover!" She can only call back weakly, "Be my lover!"

Spurned, she hides in the forest, her face abashed and buried in the leaves, living only in lonely caves. But love holds fast, and even grows in the face of rejection. Sleepless nights of sad worry waste her body away, her thinness stretches skin tight over bones, and the vital juices of her body evaporate into the air. Her voice outlives even her bones: her voice remains, while her bones are wrought into the shape of stone. So she remains unseen in the mountains and the woods, but is heard by all. It is sound alone that lives in her.

As he'd played with Echo, and with young men before, so now he toyed with nymphs sprung from rivers and hills. One young man, rejected, lifting hand to the heavens, said "let him love, as I could not be loved!"

The Rhamnusian goddess^o heard this just prayer.

i.e., the goddess of vengeance, Nemesis (she had a temple in the city of Rhamnous)

The pool was clean, with clear silvery waters, untouched by shepherds or mountain-grazing sheep, unmuddied by bird or beast or branch fallen from bough. Grass was all around, fed by the nearby liquid, and the forest ensured no sun would ever heat the place.^o The boy, tired from his zealous hunting and the sun, lay down, drawn by the place's look and the spring.

Ovid describes ideal conditions for a pool to give back a perfect reflection.

But when he desired to slake his thirst, another thirst grew. When he drank, he froze at the sight of his own fair face; he loved a bodiless hope, believing shadow to be a body. Enthralled with himself, the motionless boy stared at his own face, as a statue is made from Parosian marble.^o Kneeling on the ground, he gazes at his twin—his eyes stars worthy of Bacchus, his hair worthy of Apollo, beardless cheeks and ivory neck, and the glory of his face, snow white mixed with ruby red. Unknowingly, he yearns for himself. He who approves, is approved by himself; while he courts, he is courted; in equal parts, he provokes fiery passion and is enflamed.

The island of Paros was famous for its high quality marble. Bacchus is the Roman name for Dionysus, the god of wine; Apollo, god of poetry.

How often he gave useless kisses to that false spring, how often he sank his yearning arms into the water's midst to wind about the neck he sought—but never caught!

What he thought he saw, he didn't understand; what he saw,
he was inflamed by; the one who deceived him spurred on
his error. O, naive boy, why grasp at fleeting appearances?
What you desire was never there; what you love is lost
if you but turn away! This shadow that you see is
a reflected image that has nothing of its own. It comes
and stays with you. It would leave with you, too—
if you were able to leave!

So neither need of sleep nor bread could
drag him away. Rather, stretched out on the shady grass,
he gazes at that deceitful shape with eye unfulfilled.
He was dying by means of his own eyes. Raised up a bit,
he asked, holding his arms out to the trees all around,
“Alas, did anyone ever love so cruelly, forest?
You've been a safe hiding place for many, you know.
Can you recall anyone, as so many generations of
your lives have passed by, who has wasted away like this?
I look and I love—but what I look at and love I cannot reach.
What pains me most is that no vast ocean separates us,
no road, no mountains, no walls with locked gates.
I'm blocked by thinnest water! And he, too, longs
to be held—how often has he offered me kisses through
the liquid water; so often he stretches out his upturned
mouth to me. He, too, thinks he can be touched.
It is such a small thing that stands between these lovers.
Whoever you are, come out of there! Why do you
disappoint me so, peerless boy? Why not come when
called? It's certainly not my looks or age that you flee,
for all the nymphs were in love with me. I don't know

what hope your friendly face promises me. When I reached
for you, you reached for me, willingly; when I smiled,
you smiled back; I often saw *your* tears when I was crying;
you give back a sign to every nod and, insofar as I see
your sweet lips in motion, you return words
that never reach my ears!

“It's me. I understand, my image doesn't deceive me.
I'm enflamed by love for myself; I suffer an ardor I cause.
What am I to do? Do I ask, or am I asked? Whom, then,
shall I ask? What desire is in me? It has used me cruelly.
O that I might withdraw from my own body!
A new lover's vow: to wish what was loved be gone.
Now we two will die, with one soul, in harmony.”

So he spoke, and returned in a wretched state to that face;
he troubled the water with his tears, and his shape returned
only obscurely from the motion of the pool. When he saw
it vanish, he cried out: “Where do you go? Stay!
Don't abandon me, lover! If touching is not permitted,
at least let looking be, and misery be food for my madness.”
He grieves now. He tears his garment from the top edge,
and beats his bare breast with alabaster palms,
brings his breast to ruby red, not unlike apples which,
bruised, blush where they once were white, or like
certain grapes, which, not yet ripe, take on a purple hue.
Turning back to the clear water, he sees these bruises, and
carries on no longer. Just like yellow wax that melts from
light flame, or morning frost in the warming sun,
so he melts away, weakened by love, consumed by hidden fire.

His color is no longer ruby mixed with white,
nor is his figure and strength that which once pleased men,
nor does that body remain that Echo once loved.

Although still angry when she saw him, Echo grieved,
remembering. How often the lad had said, “Alas!” and she
had repeated with resonant voice “Alas!” And when he
beat his upper arms with fists, she gave back the same sound
of grief. The last voice was of him looking into the usual pool:
“Alas, in vain, beloved boy” (and the place gave back the same
number of words), and having said “Farewell,” “Farewell,”
said Echo, too. He put his weary head down
on the green grass, and death closed his weary eyes,
still admiring the form of his lord.^o Even after he was received
in the real of the underworld, he would gaze at himself
in the waters of the Styx. The Naiads, sisters, wept;
the Dryads, setting aside their new-shorn hair, wept;
Echo repeated the sounds of their grief. They prepared
the funeral pyre, both bier and torches to be lit—but
there was no body. They found a yellow flower in its place,
encircled by a ring of white leaves.



Escape from the Labyrinth (Book VIII)

*The wife of King Minos of Crete, Queen Pasiphäe, was cursed by
the god of the oceans, Poseidon, so that she conceived an
unnatural desire for a bull. The inventor Daedalus (prisoner of*

*Minos) built her an artificial cow that she could climb inside,
allowing her to have sexual relations with the animal, from
which she conceived a monster, half-man (Minos, after her
husband), half bull (taurus): the Minotaur, who then feasts on
human sacrifices from the city of Athens: seven boys and seven
girls selected by lottery, once every nine years.*

The shame of his family had grown, the reek of the mother’s
adultery was out in the open: the novelty of the monster’s
dual nature. Minos decided to remove this shame from his
marriage bed, enclose it in a complex building with
windowless walls. Daedalus, renowned for his skill in
the craftsman’s art, did the work: he confused all the signs,
led the eyes into error with the torturous twists and turns
of the winding ways, no different than how the Meander^o
river plays in its channel, winds and weaves in its uncertain
course until it turns back on itself and spies its own
future flows, keeps in motion its uncertain waters now
at the source, and now turned toward the open sea—
so Daedalus filled numberless routes with error, so that
he himself could hardly find his way back to the threshold.
The deception of the building is great.

After the twin figure of bull and youth was locked in,
and twice he had eaten his monstrous meal of Attic blood,^o
the third lottery came after another nine years. Then,
with the help of the virgin—as with none before—
the difficult exit was found again, by a string of thread,^o
the son of Aegeus, having taken Minos’ daughter, set sail
for Naxos, but cruelly stranded her on that shore. Bacchus

The Meander
river in Turkey
followed an
unusually winding
route, and gave
rise to the word
“meandering” in
English

“Attic” means
Athenian.

Ovid compresses
a long story about
Theseus (son of
Aegeus), the
Minotaur, the
thread and
Ariadne, into just
two lines!

Lord, *dominus*,
normally meant
the master of
slaves, but could
also mean the
master of one’s
heart in love.
Naiads were
female spirits of
water; dryads,
similar spirits
inhabiting trees.
Cutting hair was
a traditional sign
of mourning for
women. The
flower is, of
course, a
narcissus.

In some versions
of the myth,
Ariadne's crown
is placed into
heaven as a
constellation,
perhaps the
highest honor.

brought to her, so in need, both aid and his embrace;
her crown will be forever famous among the stars.^o

Meanwhile, Daedalus loathed Crete and his long exile there, and was touched by longing for his homeland, but was locked in by the sea. "Although he's blocked the lands and the seas," he thought, "surely the skies lie open; let us go that way! Minos may own everything, but not the air!" So he spoke, and immersed his mind in secret arts, and altered nature itself. He placed the feathers in order, first the small ones, with shorter following longer, as if they grew on a slope. Just so, a rustic panpipe grew from reeds of different lengths. He bound them together with linen in the middle and wax at the bottom, and, so composed, he bent them into a curve, mimicking real wings. His boy, Icarus, stood nearby and—unaware he held his own doom—smiled as he grabbed at the feathers stirred up by a light breeze. He softened the yellow wax with his thumb, but got in the way of his father's amazing work, playing. After a last touch, the craftsman lifted his own body with twin wings, hovered in the stirring breeze. He taught his son, too. "Run the middle course, Icarus," he said, "I warn you—if you go too low, moisture will weigh down the feathers; too high, fire will scorch them. Follow me, let's hit the road." As he gave this flying lesson, he fit the unfamiliar wings onto the boy's shoulders.

Amid work and warning, tears rolled down the elder's cheeks and the father's hands shook; he gave his son a kiss—never to be repeated. His feathers lifted him up, and he flew

ahead, fearing for his companion like a bird who leads its young chick out of the high nest and into the air. He urged him to follow, taught him those ruinous arts, and moved his own wings while looking back at his son. Someone fishing with a pliant reed, or a ploughman leaning on his plow, or a pastor on his crook, must have seen them and been amazed at those who could tread the ether, believing them to be gods. When the boy began to enjoy his daring flight, he abandoned his guide. Seized by heaven-lust, he set his path higher. His proximity to the scorching sun softens the perfumed wax that binds the feathers. The wax melts. He flaps his bare arms, but lacking purchase, he can grasp no air. His mouth, shouting his father's name, is greeted by the cerulean water that takes its name from him.^o His unhappy father—father no more—said "Icarus." He said, "Icarus, where are you? In what place shall I find you?" He kept saying "Icarus" until he spied feathers on the waves, and then he cursed his arts. He buried the body in a sepulcher, and the island was named after the one buried there.

The Icarian Sea, around the island of Icaria (mentioned below).



Orpheus (Book X-XI)

Orpheus, the greatest poet and singer in the world, gets married to Eurydice, but on the day of the wedding, the bride is bitten by a snake and dies. Orpheus goes to Hades to retrieve her.

The omens said the outcome would be worse,
for the new bride went wandering through
the grass accompanied by a crowd of Naiads;
with a serpent's tooth in her heel, however, she perished.
After the bard had mourned her enough
to the lofty skies, he tried even the shadows.
He dared descend to the river Styx, through
the Taenarian Gate; he passed through the faint denizens
and images to Persephone and the Lord who held
that cheerless realm of shadows. Striking the strings,
Orpheus so entered into song.

“O, Gods of the world below to which every mortal sinks,
if I may speak the truth rather than the deceptions
of false speech, I've not come to see dark Tartarus,
nor bind the triple throat of the monster, shaggy with snakes.
My wife is the reason for my journey. She tread on a viper,
who filled her with poison and carried away the flower
of her years.”

So spoke Orpheus, setting his strings to his words, and
the bloodless souls wept. Tantalus no longer grasped at
the sinking water, Ixion lay stunned on his wheel, the birds
lay off Tityos' liver, and you, Sisyphus, just sat on your stone.
The story goes that the cheeks of the Furies, vanquished
by poetry, grew wet with tears for the first time. Nor could
the queen of the realm bear this speech—not even he who
rules the deeps could deny him. They call Eurydice, amongst
the recent shades, and she limped forward with her recent

wound. The bard accepted both her and a rule—that he
could not turn his eyes back to her, until he should
exit the valley of Avernus; or his future gift would be in vain.

The sloping path was taken, through mute silence,
arduous, dark, dense with impenetrable fog.
They were not far from the edge of the cave's top.
He—fearing she might slip—and desperate to see her,
turns his eyes backwards in love. At once she falls back,
stretching out their arms, struggling to take and be taken.
But they grasp nothing, if not the yielding air.
In dying again, his spouse has no complaint (complain
about being loved too much?), and she utters a final farewell.
It scarcely reaches his ears. She turns around, and goes back.

*Orpheus renounces love for women, and wanders about singing
songs of grief and woe, until he is spotted by by Maenads (crazed
female followers of the god of wine, Dionysius). They attack.*

The Thracian bard leads the souls of the beasts
through the forest with such a song—even
the stones follow along—when lo, behold!
A Ciconian maiden, all afrenzy,
breasts covered by bestial pelts. The women
watch Orpheus from the top of a hill
as he joins poetry to the strumming
strings of his lyre. One of the women,
hair blown back in the light breeze, says: “Look, look!
Here is the one who spurned us once before!”
She sends a *thyrsus* spear at his singing

Tartarus is the
pit of hell;
the monster is
Cerberus, a
three-headed
dog

Famous souls in
Hades whose
tortures briefly
stop.

mouth, at Apollo's bard, a spear covered
in thick leaves; it left a mark but no wound.
The next weapon is a stone, which—even
hurtling through the air—is won over by
his harmony, his voice, and his lyre;
almost as if begging forgiveness for
the women's frenzied daring, the stone lay
at his feet.

But then the reckless women
escalate their war, and moderation
disappears while mad Fury reigns. All of
their weapons would have been likewise softened
by his song, but their enormous racket—
curved horns, Cybelian pipes, tambourines,
hand-clapping and Bacchan shrieking—drowned out
the sound of his *kithara*, so that the
rocks, finally heedless of his song,
made the bard blush with blood.

*Orpheus is killed, torn apart and thrown into the river. But his
head continues to sing as the body is carried out to sea.*



Pygmalion and Galatea (Book X)

*This story is one of the songs that Orpheus sings in his grief after
the second death of Eurydice.*

Pygmalion lived celibate, without a wife, and for a long time,
his bed lacked any partner. Meanwhile, with happy art,
he sculpted snow-white ivory and gave it a form
like no woman ever born; and so there arose, from his own
art, love. Her appearance was that of a true maiden. You
might have thought her alive and—if it's no obstacle to
modesty—wished her to move. True artistry hides its art.
Pygmalion adores that simulated body; his breast is aflame.

Often he moves his hands to feel his own work.
Is this a real body or an ivory one? He doesn't want to admit
it might be ivory. He gives it kisses, believes them returned!
He speaks, he holds, believes his fingers sink into the limbs
he touches, worries that he might bruise them.
Now he offers compliments, now he brings her gifts,
the kind girls like—shells and polishes stones, little birds,
flowers of a thousand colors, lilies, painted balls, and
the tears from the tree of the Heliads. He adorns her
with clothes, puts jewels on her fingers, a necklace around
her neck, bright pearls to her ears. She is no less beautiful
than when naked. He places her on a couch dyed indigo,
calls her his partner of the marriage-bed, and lays her
down on soft pillows as if she could feel.

“tears from
the tree” =
amber

The festival day of Venus, famous in Cyprus, had come.
The incense was smoldering when he lingered before
the altar and timidly said: “If, gods, you can indeed
grant all things, I wish that my wife might be—” but
Pygmalion did not say “my ivory maiden,” but rather,

“like my ivory girl.” Golden Venus, for she attended
her own festival, understood what this prayer really meant
and, sign of her agreement, the holy flame was lit thrice,
and three times bent its tip.

When Pygmalion returned, he sought out his maiden and,
leaning over the marriage-bed, gave her a kiss. She seemed
to grow warm. He moved his mouth to her again, and
felt her breasts with his hands. Ivory softened to the touch.
It gave way to firm pressure, relented to his fingers.

He is amazed and rejoices—dubiously, for he fears he is
deceived. The lover touches the object of his prayers
again and again. It was indeed flesh and blood! The veins
touched by his thumbs pulse. Then truly did he find words
with which to thank Venus. At length he covered that fair
mouth with his own, and felt himself kissed. Flushed,
she lifted up her timid eyes to his.