**UNREALITY INTO REALITY:
HOW CHARACTERS OF OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES* RECEIVE AND (DON'T)
ACT ON MYTHS**

Introduction

In this paper, I would like to discuss the phenomenon of internal (that is, 'embedded') narration in Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* and specifically the characters who act as audiences for these narratives. In the poem*,* there are over 60 internal narratives, each with its own internal audience.[1] Given this large number two facts should be clear: first, that the phenomenon of internal narration in the *Metamorphoses* is one that deserves investigation, and second that it will not be possible to discuss every one of them in this paper. What this paper will examine is the narratological phenomenon of actions inspired by internal narratives. I will begin with an overview of types of action, followed by an exposition of a series of internal narratives from the poem's first pentad, in which internal audiences play a key role in progressing the plot through action. Through these, I hope to be able to introduce the importance of the dynamic of action between internal audiences and their narrators.

Before beginning, however, it is important to explain my methodology. According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 93f.), there are three types of embedded narrative function: *actional*, whose very telling progresses the plot; *explicative*, which explain the diegesis; and *thematic*, which function as *mise en abyme*, stories that reflect in some way the narrative around them.[2] This third type, which we shall call *mise en abyme*, will be the focus of my analysis. While types of *mise en abyme* differ in the *Metamorphoses*, here we will focus on those of the type described by Mieke Bal

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[1] Based on the calculations of Wheeler (1999: 119); cf. his Appendix A for a list of the major instances of vocal internal narration.
[2] For a detailed definition of embedded narrative, and the conditions necessary for it to occur, cf. Bal (1981: 43f.).

(1985: 63f.) in her work on narratology:[3] these are stories in which audiences of the *Metamorphoses* are presented that reflect their diegetic circumstances. Based on these myths, they have a chance to interpret their own situation and (re)act accordingly.

However, it has already been well documented that internal audiences do not always take this chance, most recently by Stephen Wheeler (1999). Wheeler sees the inaction, or contrary action of internal audiences as a dramatization of the dichotomy between belief and disbelief in the reality of the mythical narratives that function as *mise en abyme*.[4] I want to argue the contrary. The world of the *Metamorphoses* is one that is filled with surreal and unreal marvels. The audiences of the poem do not object to a perceived unreality in the narratives. The goal of this paper will thus be to demonstrate that their rejections are actually an attempt to reject moral interpretations of the myths they are presented; in this way, internal audiences stand to gain influence over the ways internal narratives reflect the poem's reality.

Audiences as Cooperative Actors

Before discussing uncooperative audiences, it is important to see what compels audiences to comply with internal narrators. We should begin with four episodes in which audiences unambiguously comply with internal narrators. In Book 1, the Council of the Gods, despite the reservations of some, responds to the story of the perfidy of Lycaon and assents to Jupiter's call to wipe out humanity. However, *Met.* 1.199-205 indicates that the gods are already in concert with Jupiter after his speech on the evils of humanity, which takes place before the narrative of Lycaon. Moreover, at the end of the Lycaon story (*Met.* 1.244ff.), Jupiter presents his plan to wipe out

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[3] Cf. Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 94).
[4] Cf. ibid, 165-72.

humanity as a non-negotiable decision (243). Thus, it should be understood that the gods were already baying for blood before Jupiter's narration. Nevertheless, this is an instance of compliance: the end of the episode and the progression of the poem's plot come about because the gods consent, and because some of those gods aid in the ensuing deluge.[5]

Similarly, the nymphs, who judge the contest of song in Book 5, side with one of the internal narrators, Calliope, and judge in her favour. In yet another case where judgement is the requested action, the Achaeans support Ulysses' bid to win the armour of Achilles (13.382f.). Finally, Pomona accepts the protean god Vertumnus as a lover in Book 14.

These episodes, however, were resolved not by myth as *exemplum*, but by audiences making judgements that were disconnected from the unreal material presented to them. The gods support Jupiter because he is their king; the nymphs favour the Muses because of their poetic talent; and Achaeans respond to logical declamation, not the mythical content of the Iliadic stories that are incidental to the speeches of Ajax and Ulysses. Pomona is not persuaded by the

advice of Vertumnus' would-be *mise en abyme* of 'Iphis and Anaxarete, but instead falls in love when she sees his true form (770ff.). Their consensual love, as K.S. Myers (1994: 225f.) has shown, serves to break the cycle of rapes by gods in the poem.[6]

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[5] Aeolus and his winds (1.262-7), Iris (1.270f.), Neptune (274f.) and Triton (who calls the waters back at 330-5).
[6] Cf. Wheeler (2000: 110f.).

Audiences as Contrary Actors

However, despite a few clear examples of directly disobedient audiences, such as the Raven in Book 2, the majority of disobedient audiences act against speakers as a means of self-defence. Nymphs, mortal women and other characters who are targets of rape naturally have a stake in escaping their pursuers. Daphne, Coronea, Narcissus, Hermaphroditus, Arethusa, and Scylla all flee or repel their would-be rapists' attempts to speak to them, often while narrators are urging them to stay. The last example, Scylla from Books 13-14, whose story comes before Vertumnus and Pomona will break the cycle of rapes in Book 14, may offer some explanation for the use of myth in cases of attempted rape.

Ovid prefixes the would-be divine rapist Glaucus' internal narrative and pursuit with another internal narrative, from Galatea.[7] Responding to Scylla's account (in indirect discourse) of her escape from various suitors, Galatea offers up her own story of Polyphemus, who killed her lover Acis when she scorned his love song. She has no way of knowing that Scylla will be embroiled in a chase that will end in her own misfortune; she even begins by reassuring her:

> "nevertheless, o maiden, a hardly rough race of men courts you, and you can, as you do, refuse these with impunity"

> "te tamen, o uirgo, genus haud immite uirorum/ expetit, utque facis, potes his impune negare",
>
> (13.740f.)[8]

The reader, however, will witness everything, and can retrospectively understand the importance of Galatea's message: beware the advances of men who cannot take 'no' for an answer.[9] Glaucus' story of his own transformation into a god attempts to lull Scylla into a (false) sense of security. His speech is not a direct response to

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[7] Cf. Farrell (1992, 265) on the parallels that unite Scylla and Galatea.
[8] All text of Ovid *Metamorphoses* is from the Tarrant OCT; all translations are my own.
[9] *Ibid*, 266, 267.

Galatea, but Scylla's presence in the story bridges the two scenes. Scylla has evidently interpreted and accepted the *mise en abyme* of Galatea's story and flees before Glaucus finishes offering his own narrative ("talia dicentem, dicturum plura reliquit/ Scylla deum [...]", 966f.). Glaucus' story seems to have failed because it was not an adequate example of *mise en abyme.* Indeed, it only offered a personal account of his transformation, and did not make any attempt to override the dire warning encased in Galatea's narrative.

Scylla's flight leads to her demise at the beginning of Book 14; however, her fate is unlike that experienced by other fleeing virgins. Scylla is transformed by a jilted rival, Circe (14.51ff.).[10] Circe herself is another disobedient audience of Glaucus, who goes to her to ask for a love potion, addressing her at 14.12-24. Glaucus does not know that Circe herself desires him; she counters his profession of love with her own speech at 12.28-36. The sorceress tells the god to forget the one who spurned him, and implies that he should choose her instead. Glaucus' inflexible fixation on Scylla prompts Circe to transform the nymph into the famous monster that menaced the journeys of epic heroes.

From beginning to end, the episode is a cascade of reciprocal actions by narrators and audiences. Joseph Farrell (1992: 262) notes how Ovid expands and complicates his Theocritean model; the Idyllic story is delivered by Galatea's voice, instead of Polyphemus'.[11] Perhaps more importantly, Ovid also contextualises Galatea and Polyphemus, whose story stands alone in Theocritus, with the narrative of Scylla and Glaucus. Ovid's attention to expand his model should alert us to the poetic importance of his innovated structure. Scylla interprets Galatea's narrative as *mise en abyme*, and flees Glaucus' advances. Glaucus' attempts to address two

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[10] She thus meets a fate similar to that imposed on Callisto by Juno in Book 2, although without the rectifying catasterism (2.505-7).

[11] Galatea's narrative is based on the love-song of Polyphemus in Theocritus, *Idyll* 11.

women are miscalculated and end in the wrath of one and destruction of the other. Finally, Glaucus rejects Circe's speech, which leads her to curse Scylla.[12]

The events are driven by the characters' changing roles between speaker and audience, a narrative technique that represents the most intricate kind of involvement internal audiences can have in the *Metamorphoses*. We can see various characters attempting to use discourse to redirect the poem's established patterns.[13] The confluence of different parties, each with different agendas, causes a catastrophic outcome. Nevertheless, the interplay between parallel narratives is an especially significant phenomenon for understanding the use of internal narrative in the *Metamorphoses*, and is the area I want to focus on for the remainder of this discussion*.*

Narrating Parallel Myths

The Pentheus episode, modelled on Euripides' *Bacchai* in Book 3 is the first clear instance of parallel narrative in the poem. Pentheus offers a speech against Bacchus, and is answered by Acoetes, an embellishment of Ovid's, who presents a mythological *mise en abyme* of the Lydian sailors transformed into dolphins, modelled on the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus. The structure of the episode is chiastic, being ordered in the form ABBA: first there are the preparations for the Bacchic rites (A); second, Pentheus addresses bacchantes (B); third, the bacchantes (represented by Acoetes) address Pentheus (B); fourth, Pentheus dies at the Bacchic rites (A).

After Pentheus, we see that three other episodes follow a similar parallel structure: the daughters of Minyas (Book 4), the Muses and Pierides (Book 5), and

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[12] Tarrant (1995: 70f.) points out how persuasive speech and love do not mix in Ovid. Cf. also Ovid's rejection of persuasion in love at *Ars.* 1.465.
[13] Farrell (1992: 267) calls the episode an *erotodidaxis*.

Minerva and Arachne (Book 6)[14]. The close succession of parallel narratives in Books 3-6 suggests that their positioning is programmatic. When read together in this light, we begin to see the narrative sequence they form together.

Pentheus

Although there are certainly similarities in terms of accepting Bacchus, there is an important disconnect between Pentheus and the Lydian sailors of Acoetes' narrative. The sailors are punished not for their disbelief, which is incidental, but for their greedy criminality as they attempt to kidnap Bacchus.[15] Pentheus' crime, on the other hand, was one of pure defiance.[16] It is important to emphasise Pentheus' dual role as both internal audience and internal speaker. He is not an agent of disbelief, but also a champion of his own personal ideology. The speech of Pentheus (3.531-563) comes just before the narrative of Acoetes, and together they offer two conflicting interpretations of the *Metamorphoses*.

Pentheus, in addressing the Theban people—bacchantes included[17]—and calling them *proles Mavortia* (531), offers, as an example of the Theban *beau ideal*, the Martian serpent which Cadmus had slain at the beginning of Book 3 (cf. 90ff.). Pentheus' speech (3.531-563) sets up a dichotomy between the bacchantes and the serpent. His speech explains his fear that Thebes is about to be conquered, and that Martian military resistance is the only hope. He emphasises that the audience is falling short of its duties as men of Thebes, with the serpent as a cultic counter

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[14] Here I follow Ellen Oliensis' view that Minerva and Arachne's portraits represent competing narratives, with each artist as receiving audience of the other's work. Cf. Oliensis (2004: 287)

[15] On the criminal nature of the sailors, or rather "pirates", see Barchiesi and Rosati (2007), *ad* 3.576.

[16] While he is also guilty of torturing Acoetes, this is incidental to his disbelief. As Janan (2004: 141) says, Bacchus never promised his followers safety.

[17] The opening of the speech at 531-7 come just as the Thebans are preparing the Bacchic rites, and address *furor* of their minds, indicating that Pentheus has intruded upon the bacchantes to chide them.

example. Therefore, Pentheus' words contradict the narrator's description of him as a *contemptor superum* (514). Pentheus does indeed argue in favour of a Martian cult of his own sort;[18] Ovid's character is not a *contemptor* of all the gods, just one.

When confronted with Acoetes' threat of Bacchic power, Pentheus' fear is not assuaged. Although the sailors may have deserved their fate, the tale confirms the threatening nature that Pentheus identified in Bacchus. Acoetes chose the wrong tale for a man already paranoid about external subjugation. It is exactly the justification Pentheus is looking for; in his own words (3.692f.), "we lend our ears to long-winded tales, […] that our anger might build its force in the delay" ("'praebuimus longis' Pentheus 'ambagibus aures'/ inquit, 'ut ira mora vires adsumere posset'", 3.692f.). The story spurs Pentheus to his final act, heading to Mt. Cithaeron, and to his death. His death ends the *Metamorphoses*' 'Theban saga'; no ruler of Thebes will appear again in the poem, and the city will not appear after the first episode of Book 4. Thus, the metapoetic significance of his death proves him right: Thebes was indeed on the brink of being wiped out.[19] In terms of the *Metamorphoses'* narrative, Thebes is actually destroyed by the arrival of Bacchus, just as Pentheus predicted. At the same time, Acoetes' *mise en abyme* of divine punishment was also very much proven true. Whether it pleases or not, both sides' narratives are shown to be correct in the conclusion of Book 3.

Daughters of Minyas

The Theban daughters of Minyas, at the very beginning of Book 4, are apparently loyal to their king's message. Indeed, they are the only citizens of Thebes not to be

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[18] Cf. Janan (2004: 132) who argues that Pentheus describes the serpent as the Theban "*beau ideal*".
[19] Cf. Hardie (1991: 234f.) who adds that Jupiter also abandons the city, which his sexual exploits had helped create.

frightened into participating in the Bacchic rites by their king's gruesome demise ("solae Minyeides", 4.32). [20] Additionally, like Pentheus, they are not full *contemptrices superum*, since they pledge to serve Minerva in place of Bacchus (cf. "Minerva", 4.33, "Pallas, melior dea", 38). They present a harmonious counter-model of parallel narration that comes as a relief after the aggressive rhetoric and gruesome violence at the end of Book 3. The narratives the sisters tell — Pyramus and Thisbe, Phoebus and Leucothoë, Salmacis and Hermaphroditus — are all linked by the elegiac theme of unrequited love. They do not urge action, or reflect the episode as *mise en abyme*, but are instead *actional* narrators (in Rimmon-Kenan's terms). Their story telling is polemical in itself. Bacchus reacts to the sisters' action, not their mythical content. He attacks, at first with terrible apparitions of foliage and beasts (4.391-404), akin to those that terrified the Lydian sailors in Acoetes' tale, then with metamorphosis into bats[21] (405ff.). The sisters' communal narration is cut short, and their model of passivity in the debate over narrative control is rejected.

Muses and Pierides

After an interlude with the adventures of Perseus, Minerva visits the Muses, and hears the story of their poetic showdown with the Pierides. The episode is complicated by the intricate levels of narrative-embedding present. An unnamed Muse tells most of the Pierides' song in indirect discourse, and then sings Calliope's song, on behalf of the Muses, in full. The Pierides sing an impious version of the Gigantomachy, and Calliope sings the story of Ceres and the rape of Persephone,

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[20] At *Met.* 3.732f., the last words in Book 3, Ovid states that Pentheus' death causes the Thebans to take up the cult of Bacchus. Cf. Leach (1974: 109), who points out that, by seeking escape from mundanity, the sisters mirror the bacchantes.
[21] Sharrock (2002) points out that screeching bats are as un-poetic an animal as one could imagine; in this way. Their transformation is akin to that which Arachne will undergo in Book 6, into a spider who still weaves, but not artistically.

based on the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. Her song is the stronger *mise en abyme*; Patricia Johnson and Martha Malamud (1988: 33) argue that the story of Ceres, whose trials are resolved by the arbitration of Jupiter, represents a counter argument to Pierides' attempt to undermine the foundation of Olympian authority with both their song and challenge to the Muses. Ceres, in the context of the contest, thus reflects the outer layers of the audience, principally Minerva, whose pious attention to the Muses, and approval of their victory,[22] reflect the Olympian order they have come into tacit concert to protect. The song of the Muse, which is in fact the story of the contest, in addition to the stories presented by the contestants, has a profound effect on the audience, Minerva. The goddess evidently interprets it as *mise en abyme*, and decides to act on her interpretation immediately afterwards, without the narrators' direct urging.

Minerva and Arachne

The goddess travels to Lydia at the very beginning of Book 6, and challenges the upstart Arachne to their own contest. This time, instead of song, the characters weave rival tapestries, depicting mythological scenes. Her words at 6.2f. — "it is right to be praised, and we shall be praised, nor shall we permit our godhead to be spurned without punishment" ("laudare parum est, laudemur et ipsae,/ numina nec sperni sine poena nostra sinamus") — demonstrate the mental connection she is forming between the story she has just heard and the actions she is about to take.

Ellen Oliensis (2004: 287) focuses on the "peculiarly local value" of the weavings as *mise en abyme*. Each side inscribes a different interpretation of the episode. Minerva creates a self-congratulatory piece that shows both divine benevolence (her

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[22] Cf. *Met.* 6.1-4.

gift of the olive tree to Athens: 6.80-2), and divine punishment (the *exempla* of mortals punished by gods for hubris: 6.83ff.). Arachne, on the other hand, depicts the cruel rapes of gods, who use their superior power to overcome and violate innocent mortals. She seems to suggest that the Olympians rule over a world where divine might makes right. Oliensis (2004: 291) writes that, "to read with Minerva is to produce moral judgments. To read with Arachne […] is to acknowledge the fundamental priority of the will to power." These two stances, offer two mythic figurations of the episode, and episodes of competing narrative in general, in which, so far, the gods have always won out against mortals, either by right, or might.

It is telling that the interplay between Arachne and Minerva as mutual narrators and audiences produces a result that both affirms and denies the previous chain of competing narratives. Minerva is fully aware that Arachne will (or at least ought to) scrutinize her narrative art, and thus explicitly intends the depictions of mortals punished for their hubris as *exempla* (6.83-5).[23] Yet, as Eleanor Leach (1971: 117) points out, Minerva's interpretation of Arachne's tapestry as depicting "heavenly crimes" ("caelestia crimina", 131) is her own subjective opinion. The goddess' subjectivity can help explain the final actions that determine the resolution of the episode.

Minerva is the interpreter of Arachne's tapestry's meaning, Minerva is the focalised audience in the primary narration, and Minerva is the actor whose actions lead to the episode's *dénouement*. She rips the tapestry, bludgeons Arachne's face (132f.), and turns the mortal into a spider (139-45). Arachne's only action after the contest is to attempt suicide because of the injustice of her beating (134f.). The sequence is thus a chain of events stemming from Minerva's violent tantrum after her (apparently self-admitted) defeat. The goddess' actions are the result of her decision

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[23] Cf. Oliensis (2004: 290).

to interpret Arachne's mythological *mise en abyme.* By accepting her rival's tapestry into her own reality, Minerva actualises its message; she becomes a 'heavenly criminal'. Thus, while seeking to claim a kind of victory, she further aggrandises her defeat, and breaks the pattern of competitive narratives between mortals and gods.

Conclusion

The sequence of parallel narratives in Book 3-6 marks the end of parallel narratives before the debate of Ajax and Achilles in Book 13. It also coincides with a significant drop in the use of divine narrators; indeed, we only find three divine narrators after Book 6, and none who narrate on the subject of divine supremacy, or attempt to use mythic *mise en abyme* to influence reality.[24] Jupiter began the poem on a strong footing for the primacy of heaven, and his *mise en abyme* of destructive retribution, whether or not it was the cause of action, ended up reflecting humanity's reality. However, eventually the audiences, beginning from Pentheus, fight back, by offering first rebutting rhetoric, then an alternative narrative genre, before Arachne finally won the battle of *mise en abyme* against Minerva. The fight was not a question of whether these myths were real or unreal, but over which ones would be allowed to reflect the reality of the poem. For many internal audiences, the rejection of these narrative realities ended bitter-sweetly, however the poem's shaky true allows human narrators to gain strength in the final two thirds of the poem, until Ovid arrives at the reality of his own present day.

C. NORTHROP II
St. Catharine's College, University of Cambridge
cin21@cam.ac.uk

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[24] Lelex, who narrates 'Baucis and Philemon' in favour of piety in Book 8, is a mortal.

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